THE ‘EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES’:

THE ROLE OF THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PRESS AND STATE GOVERNMENT IN SELLING THE STORY OF THE NORTHBRIDGE CURFEW

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2007.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_________________________________

Catriona (Karin) Mac Arthur
ABSTRACT

The Northbridge curfew is one of the stand-out success stories of Western Australia’s Labor Government. Introduced in June 2003 in an alleged bid to make the streets safer, the Northbridge curfew has enjoyed overwhelming popular support and consistently high recognition in public opinion polls. This is despite the fact that the curfew bypasses those known to be responsible for most of the crime in the precinct (white males aged 18 to 35 years), targeting instead young people aged under 18 and affecting indigenous girls in particular. The curfew did not introduce any legislative changes (the police already had the powers under the Child Welfare Act 1947 to apprehend young people); neither did it allocate any additional resources to the organisations working with young people in Northbridge. Yet the coverage of the curfew in the WA press implied that indigenous youth presented a serious problem in Perth’s premier entertainment district and that the State Government was doing something about it.

This thesis uses a framing analysis of the press coverage of the Northbridge curfew as well as interviews with the relevant journalists and government media advisers to demonstrate how news values, work routines and political imperatives encouraged the WA press and State Government to work together in creating a ‘fable’ about Northbridge that criminalised indigenous youth. I argue that the story of the Northbridge
curfew, like the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’, presents a deliberate distortion of reality and that the various stages of its development illuminate the processes by which media and government can collaborate to manipulate public opinion.

I draw on my research findings to present recommendations designed, first, to encourage media professionals to develop a range of sources beyond government and, second, to draw the attention of the State Government to the broader ramifications of the Northbridge curfew story for all members of the Western Australian community.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my father, who taught me from an early age to speak up for those less well equipped than I to speak up for themselves.

My heart-felt thanks to all the many people who participated in this project. I have been simply overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of members of the Western Australian news media, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Mission Australia, the Nyoongar Patrol and others who gave so willingly of their time to help me to understand how the fable of the Northbridge curfew came to be, even though many were themselves being held to account for the role that they had played in the telling of the story. I hope that the recommendations that I present in this paper, which their magnanimity made possible, will serve them as they continue in their respective professions. Thanks, too, to my family and friends who have patiently listened – sometimes even with enthusiasm – to all the minutiae that this project has involved over the last three years. I am particularly grateful to my mother who made it possible for me to take time off work while keeping my dog in the gourmet biscuits to which he is accustomed. I would also like to thank Dr Leela de Mel, former Executive Director of the Office of Multicultural Interests, for enabling me to take study leave and without whose support this project would never have got off the ground. I am also very grateful to have had the opportunity to work
directly with Dr Geoff Gallop, former Premier of Western Australia, who was steadfastly committed to combating racism during his time in office and who demonstrated the difficult and complex business that is politics. Finally, I am indebted to my wonderful supervisors, Associate Professor Gail Phillips and Dr Kathryn Trees, who have been a source of constant encouragement and support, always ready with a comb in hand to untangle my thoughts and send me off once more with renewed enthusiasm and vigour. Thank you to you all.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALS</td>
<td>Aboriginal Legal Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td><em>Child Welfare Act 1947</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>DCD</td>
<td>Department for Community Development (Government of Western Australia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPC</td>
<td>Department of the Premier and Cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMO</td>
<td>Government Media Office (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HREOC</td>
<td>Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAG</td>
<td>Juvenile Aid Group (WA Police Service)</td>
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<td>MA</td>
<td>Mission Australia (Western Australia)</td>
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<td>MEAA</td>
<td>Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCP</td>
<td>Office of Crime Prevention (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)</td>
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<td>PR</td>
<td>Public relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCIADIC</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
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<td>WA</td>
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INTRODUCTION

THE NORTHBRIDGE CURFEW – OR THE ‘EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES’¹

In this age of sophisticated media management, it is very difficult, even for a healthily sceptical media … to separate the legitimate, even desirable activities of politicians from the calculated exploitation, or even manufacturing, of events for political gain.

Kerry O’Brien, ABC TV current affairs presenter²

Having begun my career as a journalist and through my subsequent work on ‘the dark side’ of government public affairs, I used to believe that the business of political communication and the strategic use of news – popularly known as ‘spin’ – could hold no more surprises. Such confidence was misplaced. When I saw how the Northbridge curfew story developed, I realised that even the Western Australian (WA) press, whose members one might consider to be among the most sceptical in the community, could be ‘spun a yarn’.³ Given that the so-called curfew seemed to serve no purpose other than to perpetuate negative stereotyping and criminalise indigenous⁴ youth, I was compelled to find out how and why the WA press had been won.

¹ Coincidentally, Graber also refers to the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’ when, in her foreword to News: The Politics of Illusion, she describes how politicians may often convey particular messages that conceal “the cynical, possibly ugly, reality” of their policies and actions (Bennett 2005, viii-ix).
² From a speech delivered by Kerry O’Brien to the WA Media Club at the Hyatt Hotel, Perth, on 29 April 2004.
³ The WA press refers here to the two State-wide newspapers produced in WA, The West Australian (daily) and The Sunday Times (weekly).
⁴ I use ‘indigenous’ in preference to ‘Aboriginal’ in this thesis as it comprises both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I also use ‘Aboriginal’, as appropriate, where quoting secondary sources.
The curfew story has its origins in Northbridge, Perth’s premier
entertainment district. As is typical of capital cities around the world, its
main nightclub precinct is also its crime ‘hot spot’.\(^5\) According to the
Crime Research Centre at The University of Western Australia (CRC),
non-indigenous males aged between 18 and 35 perpetrate the vast
majority (71 per cent) of assaults and drug- and alcohol-related violence
in Northbridge.\(^6\) Yet, in June 2003, the State Government announced
the introduction of a curfew targeted at young people aged under 18.

The policy prohibits unsupervised children aged 13 to 15 from being in
Northbridge after 10pm and signals a ‘hard-line approach’ by police to
other teenagers engaged in anti-social behaviour or under the influence
of alcohol or other drugs.\(^7\) While the curfew officially applies to all young
people, according to figures from Mission Australia (MA) – the leading

\(^5\) As the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* (Government of Western Australia 2002)
report notes, it is difficult to rate the level of crime in Northbridge against other
comparable suburbs because of the number of variables involved, such as area,
resident and visiting populations, and number and type of entertainment venues. The
report states, however, that it is “not surprising” that there should be a higher incidence
of crime in Northbridge than other suburbs given the “significant influx of visitors to the
area” (30). While Northbridge is perceived to be Perth’s crime ‘hot spot’, a breakdown
of total reported offences by suburb showed that 26 suburbs in Perth joined
Northbridge in recording 1800 offences or more (the highest bracket rating) in 2004

\(^6\) I received this information from a Research Fellow with the CRC. The figure was
published in the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report (Government of Western
Australia 2002, 28) and relates to 1999/2000. While a more up-to-date figure is not
available for the age profile of offenders in Northbridge, the Office of Crime Prevention
advised in personal email correspondence (10 October 2006) that it is unlikely to have
changed in the intervening period. State-wide in 2004 the mean age of those arrested
for all offences was 29.4 years, and for females the mean age was slightly older (30.0
years) than for males (29.3 years). The mean age for indigenous people was
somewhat younger (28.5 years) (Crime Research Centre 2005, 42).

\(^7\) These restrictions are outlined in a media statement issued by the Premier on 26
June 2003 (see Appendix 9).
welfare agency in Northbridge – 75-85 per cent of those apprehended under the policy are indigenous; two-thirds are girls.\(^8\) As MA’s State Manager, explained:

> While we do see other young people brought in, it’s pretty fair to say that, if it’s after 10 o’clock, it’s unlikely that the police would approach a nice Caucasian group of young people who are behaving nicely and perhaps having a coffee in a coffee shop, even if they knew they were under 18; whereas a group of Aboriginal kids walking around, with no money to spend, perhaps linking arms and taking up most of the footpath, are going to draw a lot more attention to themselves.

A Research Fellow with the CRC\(^9\) agreed that the curfew policy targeted indigenous youth, contending that:

> Aboriginal kids get more focus when they are there, they get followed around, they are more likely to be observed and put under surveillance, tracked by the police. So you’re bound to find more if you look more, and I don’t think other groups get quite the same levels of monitoring and surveillance as Aboriginal children do when they’re there.\(^{10}\)

The Northbridge curfew was, in fact, a policy devoid of any substance. It did not have any legislative base, other than s138b of the *Child Welfare Act 1947 (CWA)* which already provided the police with the powers to take young people at risk into custody. As a senior official with the WA Police Service media department commented:

> [The curfew] was a highly politicised decision where the Government of the day wanted to be seen to be doing something about antisocial behaviour in Northbridge, whereas the police in summary took the view that, look, we’ve always apprehended people under the *Child Welfare Act* anyway, so call it a curfew, call it whatever you like, but we’re just going to keep on doing what we’ve always done. … Really it was business as usual for the police.\(^{11}\)

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\(^8\) Personal communication.

\(^9\) I refer to the Research Fellow from this point on as ‘the CRC researcher’.

\(^{10}\) Personal communication.

\(^{11}\) Personal communication.
Neither did the curfew involve the allocation of any additional resources to the organisations working with young people in Northbridge. They could see no merit in the curfew either. As the State Manager of MA commented:

Has there been anything positive out of announcing that children of this age group really can’t be left alone in the city and will be taken into custody? I’m still pretty much of the opinion that we had those powers under the Child Welfare Act.

The CRC researcher made a similar observation, saying:

We have s138b of the CWA and we have a lot of agencies in Northbridge whose job it is to try to identify and work with the families of small children and all that. It doesn’t seem to me to have needed to be dressed up in the way it has been.

Notwithstanding the empirical evidence regarding the profile of the perpetrators of crime in Northbridge, and the absence of any policy substance, the WA press overwhelmingly applauded the introduction of the curfew as a means of making Northbridge safer. The State Government’s marketing strategy, which involved nothing more than a re-branding of existing policy, was equally successful among the public with some 79 per cent of Western Australians welcoming the ‘initiative’. 12

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12 These were the findings of a Westpoll conducted in July 2003. The results of the survey were published in The West Australian (9 July 2003, 5). A survey of “Community Attitudes”, undertaken more than a year later by Market Equity on behalf of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (Government of Western Australia 2004) showed that 18 months after the curfew was introduced, some 75 per cent of Western Australians believed it would improve law and order in Northbridge.
The ingenious ‘tailor’ of WA’s version of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’ was a senior government media adviser who ‘stitched’ together the curfew policy without consulting any of the organisations working with indigenous youth in Northbridge. As the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Nyoongar13 Patrol and member of a committee set up by the State Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) expressly to address issues facing indigenous youth in Northbridge, commented, “The first we knew about the curfew was [when] we saw it on the front page of the newspaper”.14 The media adviser, however, had identified a political win in perpetuating the view that the problems in Northbridge were about indigenous youth and that removing them would make Northbridge safer. He said that he had known “straightaway” that the curfew would be very popular with the electorate; that it would be “a winner”.15 The WA press did not frustrate his plans. Both The West Australian and The Sunday Times constructed the story of the Northbridge curfew as they had been told it.

13 There are several ways of spelling ‘Nyoongar’, the indigenous people who live in the south-west of WA. In this paper, I adopt the spelling employed by the Nyoongar Patrol.
14 Personal communication. The committee of which the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol was a member was set up as part of the ‘priority project’ on Northbridge. In October 2001, the State Government and ATSIC (WA) signed a Statement of Commitment to a New and Just Relationship with Aboriginal Western Australians. The partners subsequently identified three ‘priority projects’, one of which related to Northbridge. The curfew pre-empted its recommendations.
15 Personal communication.
Project aim

As in the fable of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’, it seemed to me that the story that the State Government and WA press had constructed around the Northbridge curfew might conceal a different reality about the nature of media/government relations and the place of indigenous youth in public space. I was compelled to explore this question further in order to determine the extent to which the WA press had actually supported the State Government in selling the story of the Northbridge curfew and to identify the main influences that had shaped their narrative. While my research project has not focused on exploring the effects of the Northbridge curfew story on public opinion, the entire undertaking has been driven by an overriding concern that two nationwide inquiries that highlighted the damaging effects of negative stereotyping on the indigenous community – the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) National Inquiry into Racist Violence – have, some 15 years later, had little, if any impact on news reportage.16

Despite a plethora of codes of practice and guidelines that are designed to prevent “unnecessary”17 reference to race or racial18 stereotyping in

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16 Both presented recommendations to media in 1991 that were designed to encourage a more accurate representation of indigenous people. These recommendations are listed in Appendices 4 and 5.
17 For example, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Code of Ethics discourages journalists from placing “unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race”.
18 Throughout this thesis, I refer to ‘racial’ stereotypes, ‘racial’ reporting and so on to describe stereotypes, reporting and other practices that are based on an individual’s race. I avoid use of ‘racist’ as this is widely accepted as a judgemental label and is
news reporting, it is well documented that the Australian news media continue to over-report or focus disproportionately on the alleged criminal activity of indigenous youth (see, for example, Jakubowicz et al. 1994, Mickler 1996, Mickler & McHoul 1998, Hollinsworth 1998, Hartley & McKee 2000, Collins et al. 2000, and the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales (NSW) 2003). Reporters present such views as part of a shared ‘common sense’ whereby criminal behaviour is seen to be something inherent in the racial identity of indigenous people. Such ‘common sense’ reporting is of particular concern in a society such as WA where the majority of non-indigenous people ‘know’ indigenous Western Australians through the second-hand reality that the media construct for them rather than through personal experience.

In considering the story of the Northbridge curfew, therefore, I have been concerned as much with what the WA press excluded from its reportage as with what it included within it. I am reminded of Lec (1962, 27) who among his many aphorisms so succinctly wrote, “The window to the world can be covered by a newspaper”. In other words, I hope to establish whether the WA press may have presented a vision of reality that concealed other ways of seeing. Jewkes uses the window analogy to make a similar observation in Media and Crime (2004, 200), arguing, “The media is not a window on the world, but is a prism subtly bending therefore unhelpful to my discussion; however I do use it where I am directly quoting other sources or where I feel such value judgements are well placed.
and distorting our picture of reality”. I find these definitions most helpful in situating my research question within the context of the construction of reality by the WA press, because their depiction of indigenous youth in Northbridge would necessarily have been influenced by the sources they used.\textsuperscript{19} Given that the WA press must contend with an ever-more sophisticated media management industry dedicated to persuading journalists to publish their versions of reality of the world, I am particularly concerned in this study to explore the relationship between the WA press and the State Government in order to shed light on the influence that each party might have wielded over the other in ‘making sense’ of Northbridge.

\textbf{Thesis structure}

In undertaking the research for this thesis, I used data from two main sources:

1. Qualitative analysis of the press coverage of Northbridge and the curfew;

2. Interviews with the editors, journalists, government media advisers and representatives of organisations working with young people in Northbridge.

\textsuperscript{19} Tuchman (1978) also notes in \textit{Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality} that the use of a window frame to delineate a story is problematic. She argues, “The view through a window depends upon whether the window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street or a backyard. The unfolding scene also depends upon where one stands, far or near, craning one’s neck to the side, or gazing straight ahead, eyes parallel to the wall in which the window is encased” (1).
After describing the methodology I applied to the different components of this study, I begin my thesis by placing in historical context my core research question, which seeks to illuminate the extent to which the WA press and State Government worked together in selling the story of the Northbridge curfew to the Western Australian community. I recall in Chapter 1 the recommendations of the RCIADIC and of the HREOC’s *National Inquiry into Racist Violence* in 1991 and discuss their impact in addressing the negative stereotyping of indigenous people and racial ‘common sense’ reporting in the news media. In order to compare the representation of indigenous people in today’s print media with that presented some 15 years ago, I undertake a quantitative analysis of all articles in the news pages of *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* that made reference (direct or indirect) to indigenous people over a period of one month leading up to the election in 2005. I inform my discussion with an overview of the theoretical debate around the representation of ‘race’ and the use of this social construct to explain problems such as criminal behaviour, which may then be seen as intrinsic to an indigenous person’s racial identity. I find that the ubiquity of racial stereotypes and ‘common sense’ reporting simplifies understanding of social issues and perpetuates the construction of messages that are consistent with readers’ expectations.
I also present in this chapter the findings of my interviews with media professionals regarding the representation of indigenous people in the WA press, the impact of recommendations such as those presented by the RCIADIC, and the challenges that journalists identified in writing stories involving indigenous people. While the journalists overwhelmingly reject the RCIADIC guidelines on the grounds that the same principles should apply to all reporting, I argue that the particular challenges they face when writing stories involving indigenous people, such as lack of access to the indigenous community, a sense of mutual distrust and irreconcilable cultural differences (real or perceived), necessarily preclude reporters from applying the same principles as they do to stories about non-indigenous people. Although it was apparent from my interviews that journalists had no personal interest in demonising any particular ethnic group, I conclude that their “raced way of seeing” (Hunt 1997, 127) and the seemingly impenetrable divide that this creates between WA’s indigenous and non-indigenous communities help to explain why the WA press continues to negatively stereotype and routinely criminalise indigenous youth some 15 years after the deliberations of the RCIADIC.

Having provided an overview of the main theoretical and practical issues arising from the representation of indigenous people in the WA press, in Chapter 2 I examine the specific concerns raised during the RCIADIC
deliberations about the routine organisational practices of the news media that encourage racial discourse. The RCIADIC found that racial stereotyping and racism in the media arise from organisational work practices, notably news values, editorial policies and the routines of news gathering, rather than from the personal views of the individual journalist. I therefore explore the institutional pressures on journalism to which the RCIADIC drew attention in order to illuminate the influences that might lead normally sceptical journalists to support the State Government in its endeavours to sell the Northbridge curfew to the public. I find that the story of the Northbridge curfew was guaranteed a good run in both newspapers because it responded to key news values; it was a story about crime that fed readers’ racial stereotypes by presenting them with images that confirmed their expectations about criminal indigenous youth. The story of the Northbridge curfew also provided the WA press with the opportunity to sensationalise and dramatise by focusing on the presence of children as young as six in the precinct, even though very few children of that age were actually picked up.

I also find in this chapter that the influence of editorial policy on the reportage of indigenous affairs is significant and that this influence became particularly apparent to reporters when a new editor was appointed at The West Australian. I then explore how the routines of
news gathering affect the selection of stories and sources. I contend that these inevitably lead the WA press to use sources that cater to its needs, such as the State Government or certain identifiable Northbridge business people, rather than less ‘media savvy’ groups such as, for example, representatives of indigenous youth who may have no understanding of the needs of the WA press and arguably less interest in meeting them. Wherever pertinent, I present in this chapter the findings of my interviews with media professionals regarding the organisational influences that shape what, for them, makes for a ‘good story’ as well as their use of sources. I also draw on the findings of other interviews, as appropriate.

From the news routines of the WA press, I turn in Chapter 3 to the routine work practices in place at the State Government’s Media Office to promote its agenda to the media or, as this task is popularly described, ‘to feed the chooks’. I explore the relationship between the WA press and the State Government, and the increasingly strategic importance of the news media in the conduct of politics today. I go on to consider the political context in which the Northbridge curfew was introduced. This discussion helps to explain the unwavering confidence of the government media adviser in his product. He had no doubt that the curfew would reverse the Government’s flagging fortunes in the polls.

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20 Former Queensland Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen particularly liked to use the metaphor ‘feeding the chooks’ to describe giving information to the news media (Australian Broadcasting Association 2001, 85).
because it would demonstrate to Western Australians that the State Government was addressing their widely-held fears about indigenous youth.

In this chapter, I also present the findings of my interviews with the WA press and government media advisers who discuss how they view the relationship between the State Government and the WA press and how successful they believe they are in promoting their respective agendas. I find that even the most senior members of the WA press may be seduced by tactics designed to manipulate the media, such as a media adviser’s offer of an ‘exclusive’. I conclude that the State Government and the WA press jointly constructed a reality about Northbridge that reflects the unequal power relationships in the Western Australian community. Indigenous youth or their representatives did not enjoy equal voice in the telling of the Northbridge curfew story, thus their ‘version of reality’ remained unheard.

Having considered the routine work practices and objectives of the WA press and the State Government and explored the nature of their relationship vis-à-vis the rest of the community, in Chapters 4 to 8 I present a framing and content analysis of a sample of 50 press articles about Northbridge and the curfew, which were published in *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*. My framing analysis builds on the
theoretical framework proposed by Entman (1993) in particular. In these five chapters, I demonstrate how a frame, by highlighting some details and excluding others, is a powerful tool and determined how the WA press constructed its reality about Northbridge. My analysis of the reportage also draws on the work of critical discourse analysts, in particular van Dijk (1987; 1988; 1991), to explore the extent to which the WA press presented a familiar and predictable narrative, including language and images, to tell the story of indigenous youth in Northbridge. I am particularly attentive in my analysis to the use of sources as this demonstrates to whose voice – or version of reality – readers’ attention is drawn. The articles I sampled for analysis responded to five milestones in the media/government discourse around Perth’s premier entertainment district from January 2002 to January 2004 (these milestones are listed in Methodology, below).

Chapter 4 begins the analysis of the WA press coverage by focusing on Milestone 1 (January 2002), which examines how The West Australian interpreted and portrayed a comprehensive State Government report into the issues facing Perth’s premier entertainment district, entitled Northbridge: Shaping the Future. I find that the dominant frame in this first round of press coverage is one of fear and escalating violence in an entertainment district that is portrayed as being overwhelmed by criminal indigenous youth. I argue that this ‘common sense’ reporting had all
the ingredients of a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; Critcher 2003). The result, as occurs with any media-manufactured crime wave (Fishman 1980; 1981, Mickler & McHoul 1998) was to provide scapegoats and objects of indignation in the form of indigenous youth, to divert attention away from the real perpetrators of crime, and to rally support for the apparent introduction of a punitive ‘law and order’ initiative, the Northbridge curfew.

In this chapter, I present the findings of my interview with the author of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report and, in particular, his assessment of the press coverage it received. I also present the findings of my interview with the journalist from *The West Australian* who was ‘leaked’ the report as well as other findings as appropriate, such as the WA press editors who insist that their framing of the Northbridge report simply reflects the perceived concerns of their readership.

In Chapter 5, I explore the way in which the State Government and WA press framed the Premier’s proposal to introduce a curfew (Milestone 2, April 2003). My discussion in this and subsequent chapters draws, wherever relevant, on debates in State Parliament at the time, which help to shed light on the political backdrop against which the curfew was introduced. I also present the findings of my interview with a senior government media adviser, which illuminate how he crafted a moral
argument that could not fail to win universal support regarding the inappropriateness of children being out alone after dark. This was despite the fact that the argument was based on two false assumptions; first, that indigenous youth were responsible for most of the crime in Northbridge and, second, that certain unnamed people were encouraging children to be in Northbridge after dark. I find the WA press, in turn, perpetuated these misconceptions because it continued to focus its discourse around indigenous youth (rather than on non-indigenous, adult males who were responsible for most of the crime in Northbridge) and because it failed to point out that no-one in fact condoned children being out alone in Northbridge after dark. Both newspapers used a wide range of sources in telling the story of the proposed curfew in Northbridge and this introduced alternative frames into the debate. However, none of these frames exposed the 'Emperor’s new clothes' because they all implied that a new policy was actually being implemented, whatever its flaws may be. Further, none of the reporters challenged the Premier regarding his promised initiatives that apparently formed part of the curfew’s “broader package”. Thus, the Premier was always able to point with impunity to this nebulous concept of “a broader crime strategy” to silence any critics of the curfew ‘policy’.21

21 In his media statement of 26 June 2003 (see Appendix 9) and related discourse, the Premier makes repeated reference to the curfew being part of a “broader, more comprehensive strategy to make Northbridge safer for all users”.
In Chapter 6, I continue my framing analysis by examining the press reportage in response to the official introduction of the curfew (Milestone 3, June 2003). I also explore the continued effectiveness of the Premier’s moral argument, which was apparently so unassailable that it won the support of almost 80 per cent of Western Australians for the curfew. Although the discourse of both newspapers throughout the period under review focuses on indigenous youth in Northbridge, their framing of the curfew story is quite different in these early stages of the debate. While *The West Australian*, unlike *The Sunday Times*, is quite dismissive of the Government’s framing of the story, I argue that it was equally influential in selling the curfew to the public. I suggest that its reporters failed to challenge the central argument that the government media adviser had crafted, which was based on a false premise, and instead allowed Dr Gallop to maintain the moral high ground.

The framing analysis in Chapter 7, which concerns the press coverage arising from the State Government’s response to the latest round of criticism of the curfew (Milestone 4, October 2003), marks a dramatic shift in the position of *The West Australian*, which now joins *The Sunday Times* in adopting the Government’s framing of the curfew story. This change in approach coincides with the appointment of a new editor at the newspaper as well as a new reporter covering social affairs. This chapter explores how the framing of the curfew story, by both the
Government and WA press, attributes the blame for the problems in Northbridge to an apparently ‘irresponsible’ indigenous community and dismisses or misrepresents the concerns that other parties raise about the curfew. Alternative voices in the debate are silenced or, even, held to ridicule. The WA press, however, allows the Premier to continue to take the moral high ground and commends him for taking a firm stand in the face of this latest round of criticism.

Chapter 8 concludes my analysis of the WA press coverage with an examination of the reportage arising from the State Government’s declaration of the curfew’s success, despite the release of figures that showed that it had failed to deter a “hard core” of young people from visiting Northbridge (Milestone 5, January 2004).22 I demonstrate that the continued failure of both WA newspapers to challenge the moral argument crafted by a government media adviser to justify the so-called curfew perpetuated the narrative of criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ and failed to expose the curfew as a case of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the influence of individual editors and reporters on the different frames used to tell the Northbridge

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22 Following the release of its six-monthly figures on the curfew in January 2004, the Department for Community Development is quoted as referring to a “hard-core group of youths … caught repeatedly breaking the Northbridge curfew”. “Problem youths in sights”, The West Australian, 9 January 2004, 10.
curfew story and inform this discussion with the findings from my interviews. I also explore the influence of competing frames in the WA press narrative and argue that the Government’s dominant frame eclipsed them. I argue that as a result the WA press was complicit in winning popular support for the Northbridge curfew. The final section of this chapter is concerned with the relative lack of influence that ‘ordinary’ members of the community have in framing stories in the WA press. I find that, notwithstanding the undeniable power of the Government and WA press to influence and shape public debate while excluding other voices, the WA press adopted the Government’s framing of the Northbridge curfew primarily because both parties drew on the same values to construct their version of reality about what was happening in the entertainment precinct.

My final chapter is concerned with ‘the other side of the story’, that is the implications for the wider community of the reality that the WA press and State Government jointly constructed about Northbridge and the curfew. I explore how the Northbridge curfew story and attendant ‘common-sense reporting’ served to perpetuate stereotypes and reproduce racism within the WA community. I consider these influences within the contemporary political context and taking into account the very real problems that indigenous people were experiencing. While the findings of my interview with a senior official at the Office of Crime Prevention
(OCP) are of particular interest here, I also present the findings of my interviews with media professionals and other participants, as appropriate. Although it is beyond the scope of this research project to explore the impact of the curfew story on individual Western Australians (indigenous or non-indigenous), I endeavour to draw some broad conclusions as to its influence on public opinion in general. I also explore how the curfew story reinforced the boundaries between WA’s indigenous and non-indigenous communities, both in popular discourse and on the streets of Northbridge. I present here the findings of my interviews with the CRC researcher and the State Manager of MA. Both make important observations regarding the place of indigenous youth in public space.

Having explored the major effects of the story of the Northbridge curfew, I consider the major influences on the narrative itself, that is, the dynamics of media/public opinion and the impact this has on government policy. It is my contention that the WA press and the State Government framed the story of the Northbridge curfew around criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ because both parties (rightly) believed the story would appeal to their readership/electorate; not because they believed their audiences had driven them to this action.
Throughout this study, I have endeavoured to ensure that my findings will be of relevance in the workplace, rather than just an academic exercise, in order to move forward the debate about indigenous youth in Northbridge. In the Conclusion to my thesis, therefore, I draw on the combined wisdom of the participants in this research project to present recommendations that might serve to provide a circuit breaker that will disable the current dynamic of government/media/public opinion and ensure that a fable such as the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’ may no longer serve to generate anything but the ridicule it so rightly deserves.
METHODOLOGY

The methodology that I have used to analyse the role of the WA press and State Government in selling the story of the Northbridge curfew comprises two parts. The first is a framing and content analysis, which I have designed to determine the extent to which the WA press coverage of the Northbridge curfew perpetuated the negative stereotyping and criminalisation of indigenous youth. The second part comprises a series of interviews with the key players involved in the telling of the story of the Northbridge curfew, in order to gain greater insight into the influences that shape the reportage of the WA press.

Throughout this study I have sought, wherever possible, to present and discuss alternative hypotheses, as reflected in the academic literature used to inform this thesis and the data presented by the participants during the course of their interviews. My key findings, however, are based on the first-hand accounts of the personal experience of the individuals involved in the telling of the Northbridge curfew; while the

1 The methodology I use to explore the Northbridge curfew story could be applied to multiple case studies. My project is based on a single case study on the grounds of the “revelatory nature” of the curfew story (Yin 1989, 48). It is also worth noting that it was my interest in the Northbridge curfew that led me to explore the relationship between government and the news media, rather than the other way around.

2 While my study is confined to the WA press, it is clear that other news media, namely television and radio, also covered the development of the story of the Northbridge curfew and would have had an impact upon the public debate, alongside that of the press. However, time constraints and the difficulties of assembling a full record of all electronic reportage required me to limit my study to the WA press. It is worth noting that newspapers, and in particular the morning daily, generally lead and set the ‘news agenda’, which other news media follow. The West Australian specifically is understood to perform the important role of ‘media of record’ in Western Australia.
experiences of other individuals (media professionals or government media advisers) may be different in similar situations, the purpose of my study is to consider only the experiences of those directly involved in telling the story of the Northbridge curfew.

Justification of press articles

In order to provide a representative sample of the WA press coverage of Northbridge and the curfew, I identified five milestones that reflect the major turning points in the State Government/WA press debate on the curfew, from its conception through to its effective consolidation six months after its official introduction. These milestones are as follows:

- Milestone 1: “Setting the Scene”, January 2002 (Leaking of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report to The West Australian);
- Milestone 2: “Testing the Waters”, April 2003 (Government media adviser leaks curfew proposal to The West Australian);
- Milestone 3: “Curfew introduced in Northbridge”, June 2003 (Premier officially unveils curfew policy);
- Milestone 4: “Curfew in Crisis?”, October 2003 (Children’s Court Judge triggers new wave of criticism of the curfew); and
I am concerned only with the reportage of the WA press, that is *The West Australian* (WA’s only daily newspaper) and *The Sunday Times*, as these two newspapers enjoy the largest readerships in WA. The sample of press coverage I selected includes all articles (stories, features, editorials and opinion pieces) published in both newspapers in response to each of the five milestones for a period of up to one month. All the articles have been published in the front news pages, up to and including the OpEd page of *The West Australian* (typically page 14) and *The Sunday Times* (normally after page 50), as these pages feature those stories that the editors consider to be most newsworthy. I obtained all the press clippings through the database of the Government Media Office (GMO), which is arguably the most authoritative monitoring body of the Western Australian media. I used two field search words, ‘Northbridge’ and ‘curfew’. I found 50 press articles that met the above selection criteria, as follows (in chronological order):

- “Nightlife area loses shine as fears rise”, *The West Australian*, 8 January 2002, 8;
- “Northbridge a victim of rising tide of violence”, *The West Australian*, 8 January 2002, 8;
- “Aboriginal link to late unrest”, *The West Australian*, 9 January 2002, 10;
- “Competitors leap to profit from problems”, *The West Australian*, 9 January 2002, 10;

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3 The analysis in Chapter 1 of Milestone 1, however, contains articles only from *The West Australian* as *The Sunday Times* did not publish any reportage on the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, which is the focus of that chapter.
• “Aboriginal families must help”, *The West Australian*, 10 January 2002, 11;
• “Aborigines need society stake”, *The West Australian*, 15 January 2002, 14;
• “Children face ban from city streets”, *The West Australian*, 15 April 2003, 1;
• “Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 6 & 7;
• “Dreamer reaches out to help Perth’s youth”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 6;
• “History of Northbridge curfews”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 6;
• “Barnett opposes Gallop’s plan”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 6;
• “Traders back clamp plans”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 7;
• “Nyoongar girls just want to have fun”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 7;
• “Rural MPs demand action”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 7;
• “Curfew plan lacks substance”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 24;
• “Police say curfew is unworkable”, *The Sunday Times*, 20 April 2003, 8;
• “Mixed reception on the streets”, *The Sunday Times*, 20 April 2003, 8;
• “Curfew a racial cop-out”, *The Sunday Times*, 20 April 2003, 32;
• “Curfew plan earns State racism tag”, *The West Australian*, 22 April 2003, 11;
• “Parental sanctions ‘could be the key’”, *The West Australian*, 22 April 2003, 11;
• “Children banned under new curfew”, *The West Australian*, 27 June 2003, 6;
• “Changes bring a mixed reaction”, *The West Australian*, 27 June 2003, 6;
• “Tough love or a hard time?”, *The West Australian*, 28 June 2003, 5;
• “Curfew won’t work, says former street kid”, *The West Australian*, 28 June 2003, 5;
• “Curfew bites”, *The Sunday Times*, 29 June 2003, 1;
• “Curfew success claimed”, *The West Australian*, 30 June 2003, 9;
• “All quiet on Northbridge front line”, *The West Australian*, 30 June 2003, 9;
• “Youth curfew is only the start”, *The West Australian*, 1 July 2003, 14;
Theoretical framework

Frames of interpretation

In seeking to identify the most useful theoretical framework to inform the analysis of the above articles, my aim has been to ensure that the
eventual findings will be of practical relevance to the media profession, rather than just an academic exercise. I have been particularly conscious of an important comment made to me by one former editor of *The West Australian* whereby “one can read anything one wants into a text”, given the time and the inclination. Indeed, different people assign different meaning and significance to the same text. As Ericson et al. (1991, 52) note, “We know nothing of things beyond their significance to us as judged from where we sit in space and time”.

Similarly, there are many different schools of thought as regards the most effective theoretical framework for analysis of media texts; indeed, the wide-ranging views on this issue have themselves been the subject of much theoretical debate (McQuail 1994, 236). There is no such divergence of opinion, however, regarding the narrative format in which the media present texts and the established “frameworks of interpretation” (Ward 1995, 101) – or story angles – in operation (see, for example, Hall et al. 1978, van Dijk 1988; 1991). It is these frameworks of interpretation that enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely. An understanding of the preferred frameworks of interpretation used to tell the story of the Northbridge curfew is essential for the purposes of my research. I have therefore chosen the critical tool of framing analysis (Tuchman 1978, Gitlin 1980, Pan & Kosicki 1993, Entman 1993; 2004, Jasperson et al.
1998, Scheufele 1999, Reese et al. 2003) as the main framework through which to explore the role of the WA press in selling the story of the Northbridge curfew. Framing analysis also enables me to infer the dominant meanings that readers might derive from the press articles on Northbridge. For, just as news stories are ‘framed’ for easier understanding, it is reasonable to suggest that the readers of these stories use some of the same frames in their interpretation of the news text, particularly where they have no first-hand knowledge of the information being relayed. As Mc Quail (1994) argues:

Despite the undeniable personal ‘power of the reader’, there is also plenty of evidence that audience ‘readings’ do often follow conventional and predictable lines of interpretation and that familiar media genres such as news and television series are probably read, as often as not, more or less as intended. The meanings of media content and of the acts of media use are multiple – alternative interpretative communities do exist – but many media genres are understood by most of their receivers most of the time in predictable ways and much meaning is denotational and unambiguous. There is a power of the text which it is foolish to ignore (379).

Thus, through the application of framing analysis, I am able to explore the extent to which the frames used by the WA press in telling the Northbridge story maintained or perpetuated negative stereotyping and the criminalisation of the indigenous community among the readership.4

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4 This thesis is nonetheless primarily concerned with the production of news frames as a function of power relations within the community (the focus of political communication research; see for example Paletz & Entman 1981, Gamson 1992, Graber 2000, Bennett & Entman 2001, Entman 2004, Bennett 2005) rather than on the effects of framing (the focus of mass communications scholars, see for example Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Kinder & Sanders 1990, Pan & Kosicki 1993, McCombs 2004).
An increasing body of research has contributed to scholarly understanding of frames and framing effects since Goffman first coined the concept in 1974. Framing analysis and agenda-setting research focus on the relationship between public policy issues in the news and the public perceptions of these issues. However, framing analysis “expands beyond [agenda-setting research] into what people talk or think about by examining how they think and talk about issues in the news” (Pan & Kosicki 1993, 70, emphasis added). Variously called a theory, paradigm, model, or perspective, the concept of ‘framing’ is growing in its appeal as a means of understanding the power of the media. The essence of framing, then, is sizing; magnifying or

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5 Goffman (1974, 21) talks about frames as “principles of organisation”, which work to “make sense” of “a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences”.
6 The term 'agenda-setting' was coined by McCombs & Shaw in 1972. This field of research has focused primarily on which issues are given salience in the news, while McCombs (2004) conceptualises framing as dealing more with how an issue or event is portrayed in the news.
7 Reese (2003), for example, notes that in the last several years the concept of framing has become increasingly attractive in media research and has found its way into a number of related fields – including communication, sociology, and political science.
8 Just as a photographer ‘frames’ a photograph, journalists routinely ‘frame’ a story. As Tankard (2003, 98) points out, one of the functions of a picture frame is to “isolate certain material and draw attention to it”, in other words to make some information more salient than others. Goffman (1974, 10-11) first proposed framing as a means of organizing everyday life, presenting the concept of a ‘strip’, which he described as “any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity”. A frame placed around a picture cuts one such strip from that picture and excludes other possible strips. Tuchman (1978, 192) discusses media framing in terms similar to those introduced by Goffman. She states that, “Frames organize ‘strips’ of the everyday world”. Gitlin’s (1980, 7) definition of framing also draws on the picture frame metaphor with its emphasis on “selection, emphasis, and exclusion”. Tankard (2003, 98) proposes two other functions for the picture frame; the first can be to suggest a tone for viewing a picture. He contends that an elaborately cared for, wooden frame provides a different feeling from a mass-produced, metal one. Similarly, the news media can set a tone for an event or issue by the choice of frames. Graber (1989, 7) highlighted this aspect of framing when she stated that story frames “supply the interpretive background by which the story is judged”. Gitlin (1980, 7) also appears to be talking about this function when he says that frames are patterns of “interpretation and presentation”. The second function of the frame, Tankard recalls, is in architecture, where the frame
shrinking elements of the depicted reality to make them more or less salient (Entman 1991, 19). The story’s frame sets limits on the information available to readers. In this way, journalists and editors create a particular context for the newspaper reader, which, in turn, creates an event that “takes shape as real in the minds of news consumers” (Phalen & Algan 2001, 302). This is particularly important in relation to the reporting of stories involving indigenous people whom, as I discuss in Chapter 1, many non-indigenous Western Australians may ‘know’ only through the WA press and other news media.

While there are many different definitions of framing, I find Entman’s (1993) definition the most useful for my analysis of the Northbridge story.⁹ According to this, frames define problems (“determining what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values”); to diagnose causes (“identifying the forces creating the problem”); to make moral judgements (“evaluating causal agents and their effects”); and to suggest remedies (“offering and justifying treatments for the problems and predicting their likely effects”) (52). Like Goffman (1974), Tuchman (1978), Gitlin (1980) and Tankard...
(2003) discussed above, Entman (1993) underscores the selection and emphasis (or salience) function of the frame:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (52).

By making some ideas more salient in a text, frames necessarily make other ideas less salient and others “entirely invisible” (Entman 1991, 7). The salience given to information results from its prominence in the story or from its repetition or association with culturally familiar language and symbols (Entman 1993, Phalen & Algan 2001). Those details, which cannot be accommodated within the selected news frame, are downplayed or even dispensed with in the resultant news story “because the catalogue of past story-frames does not include a particular frame that can be made to apply to them” (Tuchman 1976, 96). Information that is excluded is usually what audiences might find ambiguous, unpredictable, or culturally unfamiliar (Entman 1993, Phalen & Algan 2001, Gitlin 1980). Studies of news content such as those by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976; 1980; 1985) and Golding & Elliott (1979) have identified some significant patterns of omission. Frames, therefore, are important “discriminatory devices” (Ward 1995, 112). While it is not possible, of course, to identify with empirical

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10 A study by Breed (1958) found that US newspapers “screened out” news that might offend such values as religion, family, community, business and patriotism. He concluded from his research that “media performance” protects “power” and “class” (114).
certainty what information the press has excluded from its coverage of Northbridge and the curfew, I nonetheless endeavour in my analysis to identify where one might infer that particular information has been ignored or omitted.

**Power of language**

In considering the way in which journalists and editors frame news stories, I am also mindful of the important observation by McQuail (1994) who contends that the media construct social reality by “framing images of reality … in a predictable and patterned way” (331). This was a key finding of Epstein who, in his classic study *News from Nowhere* (1973), found that:

> The first assumption made by (TV) news executives and producers is that viewers’ interest is most likely to be maintained through easily recognizable and palpable images. … Stories tend to fit into a limited repertory of images (262).

Through my application of framing analysis, I also explore the extent to which the WA press coverage “tends to conform to a set of readily identifiable framing strategies that draw on standard and predictable narratives, discourses, and preferred images” (Blood 2002, 8). In so doing, I draw on critical discourse analysis (primarily informed by van Dijk 1987; 1988; 1991, Fairclough 1995, and Fowler 1991), which explores the values and beliefs reflected in language and the power of language in mediating reality. As Ericson et al. (1987, 9) point out, journalists’ “words are also deeds, enacting a view of the world partial to
particular sources and their versions of reality”. Van Dijk (1991), the first scholar to explore prejudice and racism in the press from the perspective of discourse analysis, for example, draws attention to the importance of considering, among others, whether a particular word, label or expression challenges or maintains stereotypes or prejudices about ethnic minorities. He argues:

There are many structures and strategies that are used to deny, mitigate, excuse, or otherwise conceal prejudice, discrimination, or racism, to blame the victims, and to accuse the left, anti-racists, or other opponents. These are typically described in a negative way, sometimes subtly by irrelevant side remarks, and their accusations of racism doubted or otherwise discredited. This need not always be done in an explicit way. … Implications, suggestions, presuppositions and other implicit, indirect or vague means of expressing underlying meanings or opinions may be used to persuade readers to the point of view of the newspaper (198).

I have also found the work of Fowler (1991) useful. He argues that the press uses a form of “cultural shorthand” that is instantly recognizable to its readership so that “stereotypes are the currency of negotiation” (17). Fowler contends:

Language provides names for categories, and so helps to set their boundaries and relationships; and discourse allows these names to be spoken and written frequently, so contributing to the apparent reality and currency of these categories (94).\footnote{11}

Schwartz (1995, 47) makes a similar point when she notes that language can imply a norm by which groups and peoples are measured,

\footnote{11} Fowler’s (1991) analysis of the salmonella in eggs affair in the UK in late 1988 and early 1989 is particularly indicative in this context. Fowler suggests that over five months there developed “an hysterical episode of massive proportions built up in the British media” (146). He argues that the massive scale of reportage, its emotive nature and its eventual exaggeration into a generalised threat of poisoned food represented a form of hysteria.
for example non-white or non-Christian. She draws attention, for example, to the “default assumption”, an unspecified, often unconscious, norm (for example white) that is sometimes manifested in asymmetrical pairings, such as “two men and a black woman”. She also recalls that first-person plural pronouns and adjectives (we/us, ours, our) may in some media texts convey the assumption that all readers share the author’s racial or ethnic identity (see also Fowler 1991, van Dijk 1991). According to Blood et al. (2002, 77-78), the process of labelling or stereotyping is primarily determined by the way events or issues are framed by the media. In other words, depending upon the framing devices used, news stories that tap into people’s worst fears about indigenous youth can stigmatise an entire community and generate fear of the members of that community. Hence, Blood (2002, 6) argues that the labelling of people is a socio-cultural process, “which may have profound influence on the way [they are] perceived and [issues] acted upon by audiences, policy makers and government”.

**Power of images**

My analysis of the WA press coverage of the Northbridge story also takes into account the images used in an article, wherever relevant, given their role in reinforcing (or contradicting) a particular news frame.

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12 Similarly, Gamson (1992) contends that a frame can exert great social power when encoded in specific terms or labels. Once a term or label becomes established, he says that, “It is difficult even for those with a different frame to avoid it. To do so runs the risk that the listener won’t know what one is talking about” (9). He argues, therefore, that a frame can be as powerful as language itself.
Ward (1995, 121), for example, cites a photographer from the Melbourne Age who said that about 80 per cent of news photographs he takes are “set up or contrived”. As Epstein (1973, 21) contends, “Proverbial wisdom notwithstanding, pictures do lie in the sense that they depict spurious realities”. Images also serve to communicate the ‘race’ of an individual or group where this may not have been identified in the text. In their analysis of news stories, Messaris & Abraham (2003) for example, explored the ways in which visual imagery is used to associate African Americans with a variety of negative concepts and social problems. They found that the framing of social problems in terms of African Americans is a product of the images, not the words.  

The remaining elements that I focus upon in my analysis are as follows:

**Role of headline**

The headline or ‘stand first’ in an article often directs the reader to the story frame. As van Dijk (1991) has demonstrated, headlines, sub-heads, stand firsts and leading paragraphs are the most frequently remembered parts of news articles and can shape the entire story’s framework of interpretation. Further, headlines may play an ideological role.

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13 Messaris & Abraham (2003, 244) conclude, “We take this disparity to be a demonstration of … images’ ability to convey controversial messages with greater impunity. We assume that a verbal reference to African Americans would have come under tighter scrutiny by the news organisation itself, whereas the images may have more readily been taken for granted”.
14 The stand first is a brief one-line introduction to a story, which may follow the headline.
15 The sub-head is a smaller one-line headline for a story.
role when an editor or sub-editor assigns a headline that does not match the primary focus of the story. The ability of the headline either to ‘promote’ or to ‘downgrade’ the central issues of a story thus allows an editor to influence the ways in which readers will understand the information contained in the article.

Use of sources

It is clear that the WA press does not act alone in the production of news articles; it jointly constructs the news with the State Government and other sources that are able to provide it with the ‘raw material’ to create a story. Thus, the State Government and other ‘media savvy’ sources have a much greater ability to frame a news story than other, less experienced and more marginalised groups such as indigenous youth. Hence, in his foreword to Reese et al.’s Framing Public Life (2003, ix), Gamson talks about “frame contests” which, he says “highlight the central importance of the relationship between journalists and sources and the process of selecting sources to quote”. He further notes that attention to frames also “alerts us to less visible uses of power, those that exclude certain sponsors or marginalize their preferred frames” (ix).

I am particularly concerned, therefore, to explore the diversity in the sources used to tell the Northbridge story, especially among the indigenous community.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Hegemony theorists suggest that the persistent use of sources representing the dominant perspective is one of the ways in which contesting voices are silenced.
References to ‘race’

My analysis also notes all references to ‘race’. While the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance’s (MEAA) *Code of Ethics* discourages journalists from placing “unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race”, press articles may contain references – direct or coded – to ‘race’ or cultural or ethnic background as an explanation or justification for behaviour or conflict, and in turn for government policy.

References to age

I also note where a journalist refers to the age of young people in Northbridge as this may influence readers’ interpretation of the story. For example, one might expect readers to view differently the presence of a 17-year-old in the entertainment district from that of a seven-year-old.

References to antisocial behaviour/crime

In order to identify the journalists’ understanding of the issues facing Northbridge and the effectiveness of the curfew in addressing these, I note all references to antisocial behaviour and crime. I also note where

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(Noakes & Wilkins 2002, 660). Similarly, Entman (2004, 4) notes that information made available to the public may be kept within such narrow ideological boundaries that “democratic deliberation and influence are all but impossible”.

17 *Code of Ethics*, MEAA.
Northbridge is defined, notably where it is referred to as a place for families or where it is described as an adult entertainment district only.

**Additional references relating to the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’**

Finally, in order to ensure my findings provide a comprehensive analysis of the journalists’ understanding of the so-called curfew policy in Northbridge and related issues, I also note references that indicate whether the journalist is aware that:

- The curfew has been developed single-handedly by a government media adviser;
- The police already have powers under the CWA to remove youth at risk;
- The policy does not provide any additional resources to people working in Northbridge;
- It fails to address any of the issues raised in the Northbridge report, especially the provision of alternative activities for young people; and,
- It fails to target the real perpetrators of crime in the precinct, namely 18- to 35-year-old, non-indigenous males.\(^\text{18}\)

I therefore note all references to:

\[^{18}\text{See Introduction, footnote 6.}\]
• The lack of consultation on the curfew;
• The fact that the curfew is existing policy with another name;
• The fact that powers already exist under the CWA to remove youth at risk;
• The lack of additional resources for people working with young people in Northbridge;
• The acknowledgement that young people may be in Northbridge just to have harmless fun; and
• The lack of alternative activities for young people.

**Presentation of data**

In summary, I explore the WA press coverage of Northbridge and related issues primarily through the application of framing analysis. According to Entman's (1993) approach, I consider:

• The dominant story frame;
• How the problem has been defined (that is, what is newsworthy about the story);
• What caused the problem;
• The moral evaluation of the problem (where applicable);
• The course of action recommended to address the problem (where applicable).

In addition, for the reasons outlined above, I note:
• The headline of the article under review;
• The sub-head or stand first (where appropriate); and
• Lead source, secondary source, and indigenous source where applicable.

Wherever it is reasonable to infer from the article, I also include:
• Excluded information; and
• Questions not asked of sources.

Further, I note wherever pertinent:
• Value- or commentary-laden language;
• Labels; and
• Images.

Finally, in order to ensure my findings provide a comprehensive analysis of the journalists’ overall interpretation and understanding of Northbridge and the curfew, I include all references to:
• Race;
• Age;
• Antisocial behaviour or crime;
• Definitions of Northbridge;
• The lack of consultation on the curfew;
• The fact that the curfew is existing policy with another name;
• The fact that powers already exist under the CWA to remove youth at risk;
• The lack of additional resources for people working with young people in Northbridge;
• The acknowledgement that young people may be in Northbridge just to have harmless fun; and
• The lack of alternative activities for young people.

I present my findings in both written and tabular form. I confine my written analysis of the selected press articles to the reportage that relates directly to the Northbridge curfew. I therefore do not refer to other issues that may be raised in the selected articles if I do not believe these to have any significant bearing on the story of the Northbridge curfew. I present the data findings in tables in Appendices 6, 7, 10, 12 and 13.

Semi-structured interviews

The second part of my methodology involved 29 semi-structured interviews with the people who told and sold the story of the Northbridge curfew, in other words the relevant media professionals and government media advisers. I also interviewed a Minister who had first-hand knowledge of the political manoeuvrings behind the curfew story, as well as the author of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report (2002), the coverage of which triggered a ‘moral panic’ and set the scene for the introduction of the curfew. In addition, I interviewed the key people
involved in working with youth in Northbridge as well as the CRC researcher, who has conducted extensive research into issues of community safety in the precinct. I chose the format of the semi-structured interview as this would allow me to gain information on the basis of a series of key questions that I could then compare and contrast with the information gained in other interviews. These key questions were all designed to encourage the participants to describe their involvement in the telling of the Northbridge curfew story and to present their personal assessment of the story and its development. At the same time, the semi-structured format allowed me the flexibility to follow up any interesting leads that emerged during the discussions (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Silverman 1993; 1997, Dawson 2002) and ensured no important questions (from the participant’s as well as the author’s perspective) were overlooked.

I held interviews with the 13 print journalists who wrote the 50 sample articles about the curfew (including one former leading columnist with *The West Australian* who wrote a particularly interesting opinion piece applauding the curfew but which did not fall within the sample).¹⁹ ²⁰ I

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²⁰ Where more than one reporter’s by-line appeared on an article, I interviewed only the lead reporter. Three reporters who were named as lead journalists on articles that formed part of my framing analysis sample did not participate in my research project. One was no longer working with *The West Australian* and believed that it was “not appropriate” for her to participate (as advised in a telephone conversation). The remaining two reporters each wrote only one short article while on weekend roster at
also conducted interviews with the Editor of The Sunday Times, the three most recent editors of The West Australian and a political reporter with ABC News who is one of WA’s most experienced journalists and who kindly agreed to participate in the study and share his insights. Eighteen media professionals took part in this research project. Only the current editor of The West Australian, Paul Armstrong, declined to participate. Fortunately, Armstrong took over the reins of the newspaper after the introduction of the curfew so my research was not dependent upon his input.

Questions

Media professionals

Each of the print journalists was asked to describe their news gathering routines and the main influences – organisational, editorial, sources (especially government) and so on – that guide their approach to a story. I also asked them whether the RCIADIC’s recommendations to media influenced their reporting practices and whether reporting on indigenous affairs posed any particular journalistic challenges for them.21 I then asked specific questions relating to their individual articles about Northbridge and/or the curfew. Finally, I asked them to describe their day-to-day dealings with the GMO. Each interview

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21 The RCIADIC presented a number of recommendations to the news media in 1991 (see Appendix 4). I discuss these in Chapter 1.
concluded with an invitation to the journalist to comment upon State Government/media relations in general and the Northbridge curfew in particular.

Each of the editors’ interviews began with a broad question relating to their role, objectives and performance measures. I asked them to describe the role they believe the newspaper plays in the community, the influence of public opinion on news content, and the factors that might shape the newspaper’s viewpoint on a given issue. I then invited the editors to describe their relations with the State Government and to assess the performance of both parties in promoting their respective agendas. Like the reporters, they were also asked whether they believed that reporting on indigenous affairs presented any particular challenges and to assess the impact of the RCIADIC recommendations to media. I asked them why their reportage on Northbridge had positioned indigenous youth at the forefront of their debate. I concluded each interview with an invitation to the editors to comment upon State Government/media relations in general and the Northbridge curfew in particular. I asked the political reporter with ABC News the same broad questions relating to the influences on news reporting, the news media’s focus on indigenous youth, the challenges in reporting on indigenous affairs, State Government/media relations and the performance of both
parties in promoting their respective agendas. (See Appendix 1 for the full list of questions to media professionals.)

**Government media advisers and officials**

I also held semi-structured interviews with the government media advisers most likely to have been involved in the telling of the curfew story, notably a senior government media adviser, the media adviser to the Minister for Police, a senior official in the WA Police Service media department and a senior official with the GMO. I also interviewed a senior official with the OCP, whom one would expect to have been closely involved with the development and implementation of the curfew policy. I asked the media advisers to describe their main responsibilities and objectives, the routine practices they follow to promote their Minister’s agenda and the main challenges they face in the execution of their day-to-day tasks. I asked for their views as to the influence of the media and public opinion on government policy and to describe any involvement they had had in policy development. I then turned the discussion specifically to the Northbridge curfew, asking the media advisers to describe the political context in which the policy had been introduced. I also asked them for their views as to why the State Government had focused on indigenous youth when the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report had raised many other important issues facing the precinct. In the final part of the interview, I asked them to
describe the role they had played in developing and implementing the curfew and the accompanying media strategy, what this strategy had entailed and how successful they felt it had been. In addition to answering the same questions asked of the media advisers, I asked a senior official with the GMO broader questions about the role and mission of the GMO and the challenges the State Government faces in promoting its agenda to the news media. The interview with a senior official with the OCP was primarily concerned with the Government’s response to the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report and its focus on indigenous youth. I asked him to describe his role in the development of the curfew and the accompanying media strategy, and to assess the subsequent media coverage. The interview with the author of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report was concerned with his assessment of the media coverage of the report and of the Government’s response to its recommendations. I asked him about his involvement in the development of the curfew policy and invited him to give his assessment of the curfew and the accompanying media coverage. My final interview with a government representative was with a Minister who I asked to describe the political manoeuvrings around the Northbridge curfew. I also asked for his assessment of the curfew policy as regards its effects on public opinion and community relations generally in WA. I held this last interview off the record. Seven
government officials participated in this study. (See Appendix 2 for the full list of questions to these officials.)

Other

The final three participants in my study were the State Manager of MA, the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol, and the CRC researcher. I asked all three to describe their involvement in the development of the 
Northbridge: Shaping the Future report and invited them to assess the Government's response to the report’s recommendations. I asked them about their involvement in developing the curfew policy and to assess the media’s reportage of it. In addition, I asked the heads of MA and the Nyoongar Patrol to describe the main issues they deal with on a day-to-day basis in Northbridge and to comment on whether the curfew assisted them in their work. (See Appendix 3 for the full list of questions to these individuals.)

I invited all the participants, in writing, to participate in the study and provided them with the questions at least one week before I held the interview. At the conclusion of the interview, the participants signed a consent form authorising me to use the information they had provided. I conducted all the interviews one-on-one in locations chosen by the participants (typically the workplace). The interviews lasted from one to one and a half hours. With the exception of the interviews with the
senior government media adviser, the senior official with the GMO and
the Minister, I taped and then transcribed all the interviews.

Use of names

I do not provide the names of any of the people who participated in this
project when presenting comments from their interviews. Instead, I
provide their approximate job titles, which were current at the time of the
publication of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report (January
2002). Hence, I refer to the different participants as follows:

Media professionals

The West Australian
• Former Editor (A);
• Former Editor (B);
• Former Acting Editor;
• State Political Editor;
• Columnist (A);
• Columnist (B);
• Reporter (A), who covered social affairs, among others;
• Reporter (B), who covered social affairs, among others;
• Reporter (C), who covered indigenous affairs, among others;
• A police reporter;
• General News Reporter.

The Sunday Times
• Editor;
• A senior political reporter;
• Columnist;
• A police reporter;
• General News Reporter (A);
• General News Reporter (B);

ABC News
• A senior political reporter.
Government media advisers
- Senior official, Government Media Office;
- Senior government media adviser;
- Media adviser to the Minister for Police.

Other government officials
- Minister;
- Senior official, Office of Crime Prevention;
- Senior official, WA Police Service media department;
- Author of *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report.

Key individuals working with indigenous youth in Northbridge
- State Manager, Mission Australia;
- Chief Executive Officer, Nyoongar Patrol;
- Research Fellow, Crime Research Centre, the University of Western Australia (referred to as ‘the CRC researcher’).

I may name some media professionals as part of my framing analysis of the WA press coverage, when I refer to a published article that carries a journalist’s by-line.
TIMELINE

1991

January

- Former Editor (A) at helm of The West Australian (until March 2000).

March

- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody presents recommendations to media.

August

- 20,000 Western Australians attend ‘Rally for Justice’.

2000

April

- Former Editor (B) appointed editor of The West Australian.

2002

January

- Milestone 1 ‘Setting the Scene’: Northbridge: Shaping the Future report leaked to The West Australian.
2003

April

• Juvenile Aid Group releases quarterly report on apprehensions in Northbridge.

• Milestone 2 ‘Testing the Waters’: Government media adviser tells The West Australian’s State Political Editor about plan to introduce a curfew in Northbridge.

June

• Milestone 3 ‘Curfew introduced in Northbridge’: Premier officially unveils curfew policy.

June-July

• Former Acting Editor appointed at The West Australian.

August

• Paul Armstrong appointed Editor of The West Australian.

• Reporter (B) appointed at The West Australian.

October

• Milestone 4 ‘Curfew in Crisis?’: Children’s Court Judge Kate O’Brien criticises curfew policy.

2004

January

• Milestone 5 ‘Curfew Consolidated’: Government declares curfew a success following release of six-monthly figures.
CHAPTER 1

THE OLD STORY

On 28 February 1990, *The West Australian*’s now infamous front-page headline, “Aboriginal gangs terrorise suburbs”, mobilised what sociologists term a “moral panic” (Cohen 1972, Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, Critcher 2003) or a media-manufactured crime wave in Perth. The headline marked the beginning of a campaign on behalf of the “victims of crime”, led by popular radio talkback host Howard Sattler. The campaign culminated in a “Rally for Justice”, which brought 20,000 Western Australians to the steps of State Parliament on 17 August 1991 and led the State Labor Government, just a few months later, to enact unprecedented crime laws that were seen overwhelmingly to target indigenous youth (Mickler 1996, 7).

More than 10 years later, in 2003, another State Labor Government was again seen to implement punitive measures against indigenous youth, this time with the introduction of the so-called Northbridge curfew. Once again, this policy was introduced on the heels of sensationalist media headlines, such as “Crime Hot Spot: Police vow action on Northbridge thugs”, followed by “Aboriginal link to late unrest: Northbridge at
breaking point, says ATSIC”.¹ As was the case in 1990, the empirical evidence once again failed to support the headlines.

Was this simply a repeat of the same old story, a case of plus ça change? Had the painstaking work during the intervening 10 years and more of the RCIADIC and the HREOC – and all the attendant debate and deliberations – come to naught? Both federal government agencies had presented recommendations in 1991 designed to address their concerns about the news media’s propensity to criminalise indigenous people. (See Appendices 4 and 5 for the full text of these recommendations.) I also knew from my own experience working as a media adviser for the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs that journalists were not personally driven to demonise indigenous youth.² So why did the sustained efforts of such agencies as the RCIADIC and HREOC to raise awareness of both the existence and consequences of negative media stereotyping appear to have had little or no impact on news reporting in the intervening period?

I begin to explore these questions in this chapter by first discussing the theoretical debate surrounding the representation of race in the news

² Having worked for almost a decade with indigenous and ethnic community groups and their advocates, I am aware that this is, nonetheless, a popular view among certain circles who routinely malign the media.
media, the (mis)use of ‘race’ to explain social phenomena, the ubiquity of racial stereotypes and ‘common sense’ reporting. I go on to examine the RCIADIC and similar recommendations to media, which are designed to encourage a more accurate representation of indigenous Australians, and the journalists’ overwhelmingly negative response to these. While the journalists interviewed for this project rejected the RCIADIC recommendations on the grounds that the same principles should apply to all reporting, they also said they faced particular challenges when writing stories involving indigenous people, such as having few, if any, contacts among the indigenous community, a sense of mutual distrust between the two communities, and irreconcilable cultural differences. I contend that these obstacles (whether perceived or real) necessarily preclude reporters from applying the same principles to stories about indigenous and non-indigenous people. I further argue that because the news media invariably categorise indigenous people in terms of their race rather than simply as Western Australians, journalists do not think to include them in routine, everyday reporting about ‘ordinary’ members of the community. My findings are informed by a quantitative analysis of press reportage over one month spanning the 2005 State election campaign, which does not suggest that there has been any improvement in the representation of indigenous people since the reportage that gave rise to the RCIADIC recommendations. I conclude that the journalists’ “raced way of seeing” (Hunt 1997, 127)
helps to explain why the WA press continues to negatively stereotype and routinely criminalise the indigenous community some 15 years after the deliberations of the RCIADIC.

Indigenous/ non-indigenous divide based on false premise of ‘race’

It is well documented that race is neither a meaningful biological entity nor a scientific category (see, for example, Hartman & Husband 1974, Omi & Winant 1986, Pettman 1992, McCarthy & Crichlow 1993, Cunneen 1997 and Hollinsworth 1998). As Banton and Harwood (1975, 8) point out:

As a way of categorising people, race is based upon a delusion because popular ideas about racial classification lack scientific validity and are moulded by political pressures rather than by the evidence from biology.

Race is, instead, a social construct, or a “delusion” to use Banton and Harwood’s terminology, which is perpetuated by the news media, among others (Gandy 1998). Indeed, the RCIADIC criticised the WA news media’s practice of “superficially treating Aboriginal social problems so as to leave readers with the impression that they are caused by something innate to Aboriginal people themselves” (Dodson 1991). According to Allan in his comprehensive work News Culture (2004, 143), ‘race’ is one of the “most politically charged” words in the journalistic vocabulary and is considered to be one of modern society’s “rawest nerves”. Notwithstanding this, he agrees with US journalist Sig
Gissler, who contends that, “From birth to death, race is with us, defining, dividing, distorting”.3

Race is a social construct that reflects the unequal power relations in the community (Pettman 1992, 3). The media sustain and reproduce these power relations through their representation of race (Cohen & Young 1981, 32). Cunneen (1997) also finds that the media play a key role in drawing the boundaries of inclusion (and exclusion) within the community. He examines the shifting boundaries between what constitutes “racist behaviour” and what is “acceptable social comment”, highlighting the important role played by politicians and media commentators in determining what constitutes legitimate discourse (150). Cunneen is particularly concerned with the vilification of indigenous people and the growing support within the “imagined homogenous community of white Australians” for “symbolic violence” against minority groups (138). In their study of the media’s treatment of indigenous affairs, Jakubowicz et al. (1994) attribute the media’s propensity to racialise deviant behaviour to an ideology of cultural dominance, which the mainstream media organisations share. According to this approach, the establishment of ‘them’ and ‘us’, or of the racialised ‘other’, represents the dominant white culture as the norm and the indigenous community as being deviant from it. Mickler (1996,

3 Cited in Allan 2004, 143.
14-19), however, finds such framing of the media’s treatment of indigenous affairs in terms of the white dominant culture or of ‘the other’ to be too narrow an approach. He argues instead that the media’s representation and interpretation of Aboriginality and race relations in the Australian media is the result of ‘intersubjectivity’, in other words that it is posited on the shared meanings constructed by both indigenous and non-indigenous people. That is also the thesis presented by Langton (1993) who contends:

‘Aboriginality’ … is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’ (34).

Although indigenous people undoubtedly play a role in the media’s representation and interpretation of Aboriginality, this does not negate the fact that the boundaries between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities still exist and that these are drawn based on a social construct – race – rather than on socio-economic, cultural or other factual points of difference between individual Western Australians. This means that the WA press, for example, invites readers to notice and identify differences that relate to race and to ignore other factors. The diversity between indigenous Western Australians is also overlooked (Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW 2003, 42). This leads on to what Langton (1993) refers to as the “ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other”. She writes:
The assumption is that all Indigenous people are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on. … This thinking is as much based on fear of difference as is white Australian racism. If we only look at that which makes us feel safe, that which tells us that we are what we would like to imagine ourselves to be, we will become naked emperors and empresses … (27).

The essentialisation of indigenous people – that is, the tendency to treat them as one homogenous entity – denies any difference between them. Hence, the news media, among others, discuss indigenous people as though they all possess a set of innate characteristics that distinguishes them from non-indigenous people (McCarthy & Crichlow 1993, xviii).

Indeed, according to Hartley (1992, 207), the media categorize indigenous people and their behaviour as “foreign” to the mainstream community’s values. He argues that indigenous people have habitually resided outside the community of the addressed readership of the mainstream media. He describes this exclusion as the media boundaries of “Wedom” and “Theydom”.4 In terms of media reporting, as Hartley (1992) points out, this means that the indigenous community is:

exempted from the established systems of balance which apply to Wedom’s own adversarial politics; there are not ‘two sides’ to an Aboriginal story – not two Aboriginal sides, that is, only an Aboriginal side and a ‘balance’ supplied by, for instance, police, welfare, legal or government authorities (210).

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4 Hartley’s findings were submitted to the RCIADIC and, according to Mickler (1996, 15), “assisted Commissioner Patrick Dodson in making a crucial observation about the discursive status of indigenous people in much newspaper reporting, before even the ‘content’ of stories is considered – this was that press reporting failed to ‘include Aboriginal people within the community of readers that is addressed by the paper’ (Dodson 1991)”.

58
My own research supports Hartley’s findings. For example, Former Editor (A) of *The West Australian* condemned what he considered the standard media practice of presenting one individual’s perspective as representative of the entire indigenous community. He commented:

> The Aboriginal community normally has as many diverse points of view as we do, and that’s one of the problems that the media has, they think that they can just get one Aboriginal spokesperson and they will speak for the Aboriginal community, and what you find out later is that … there is a wide range of opinions about these issues in the Aboriginal community.

Most importantly, many of the journalists I interviewed did not include indigenous Western Australians among their perceived readership. One reporter, for example, told me, “They [indigenous people] don’t buy *The Sunday Times*”, however he thought there was a possibility that “they might read the sports pages”. Indeed, Reporter (C) who covered indigenous affairs, among others, at *The West Australian* told me that the indigenous affairs round was reduced from full-time to part-time in 2003 because the new editor, Paul Armstrong, believed indigenous people “neither buy nor read” the newspaper. In criticizing Armstrong’s position, she said that her experience was that indigenous people read the newspaper more than some other sections of the community.

The categorisation of people according to their race, therefore, may be expedient but it is unhelpful in explaining social problems, such as crime, in the community. It serves only to legitimise racial discourse, creating an impenetrable divide in the community between ‘us’ and
‘them’. This divide ignores the myriad other factual points of difference between individual Western Australians, marginalising those on the other side of the racial boundary, dismissing them as ‘all the same’ and, even, excluding them from the WA press’ community of readers.

**Racial discourse encourages stereotyping**

The racialised understanding of difference – the very language of race or ‘race thinking’ – makes the rigid categorisation of indigenous people seem reasonable and facilitates the routine use of stereotypes. In *Visualising Aboriginality: Image Campaigns and News Routines in the Western Australian Media*, Mickler (1996) traces the representation of Aboriginal people during the period from 1960 to 1990. He finds that during this period the media defined Aboriginal people by “a series of transformations”, from “marginal problem to public threat; from powerless objects to powerful subjects; and from oppressed sub-proletarians to privileged elites” (178). Mickler’s important work on the representation of indigenous people draws on the research findings of Hamilton (1990). She identifies “two ‘circuits of meaning’ concerning Aborigines” emerging from the period up to the Second World War (21).

She describes these as follows:

> On the one hand, there was the ‘real’ Aborigine, a good figure whose wisdom could be tapped by whites (explorers, settlers, policemen). … He was polite to whites, did what he was told within their sphere, and in return was offered the preservation of his own sphere. … On the other hand, a second circuit of meaning constructed an utterly negative picture of Aborigines, derived from their ‘detribalisation’, the loss of their essential cultural attributes and their desire to ‘ape’ whites by attempting
to improve themselves. This negative image was applied to ‘Mission blacks’ and ‘educated blacks’ who didn’t know their place, as well as to half-castes and fringe-dwellers, who seemed to embody the worst fantasies of white Australians – drunkenness, vagrancy, despair and disorganisation (21).

According to Goodall (1993, 71), many of the media images of indigenous people involve “the construction of meaning over time”. As is apparent from Hamilton’s research, which goes back to settlement days, “time” is clearly not at issue. The stereotyping of indigenous people – either as the positive, full-blood ‘noble savage’ or the negative, irresponsible town-dwelling half caste – has had literally decades in which to become accepted as reality. According to Hartley & McKee (2000), the latter, negative stereotype is the most prevalent, with the news media typically presenting Aboriginal people as “an underclass, a problem to be addressed and commented upon via discourses of anomaly, correction, and protection” (340). Jakubowicz et al. (1994, 139) reach a similar conclusion, finding that:

The media repeatedly (even if unselfconsciously) present Aborigines as incapable, degenerate and primitive. Their differences are always signs of inferiority – at best ‘natural’ rather than ‘civilised’.

It is clear that the portrayal of the indigenous person as the racialised, homogenised ‘other’, someone whom the non-indigenous person may ‘know’ only through the media, makes him or her an easy target for stereotyping. Langton (1993) is useful in considering why and how stereotypes work. She argues that the “extreme difference” between indigenous people and the “Anglo-Australian norm” is “a problem that
has bedevilled the most brilliant commentators” (39). In her analysis of the racial stereotypes and mythologies that inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people, Langton argues that “the most dense relationship” is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors (33). In other words, white Australians do not actually engage with Aboriginal people but with safe images of people who are set within a middle class context. She says that individuals such as Senator Neville Bonner, Governor Doug Nicholls and Charles Perkins are “figures of the imagination generated by Australian image producers” (33).\(^5\) She suggests that only when non-indigenous Australians analyse the images can they begin to unpack their use of stereotypes of indigenous people.

In his seminal work, *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann (1922, 63) rightly discusses the comfort and security people find in stereotypes. Stereotypes, he argues, serve to defend our own particular “universe”; they are familiar and dependable, they fit “as snugly as an old shoe” and, most importantly, they fail to challenge. He acknowledges that while stereotypes may not provide a complete picture of the world, they nonetheless offer a picture of a “possible world” with which we are familiar (63). He writes:

\[^5\] It is pertinent to recall here the finding of Goodall (1993, 75) who notes that Charles Perkins was the only Aboriginal person interviewed by the news media about the Brewarrina (NSW) riot in August 1987, even though he was not present at the time and had no connection to the area. The news media did not interview any of the Aboriginal people who had actually been present.
In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. … No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe (63).

My research will show that the WA press, like other news media, understands the comfort of stereotypes and uses them to encourage its readers to accept the realities that it constructs. As I will now discuss, the use of racial stereotypes also serves to ‘keep things simple’ by providing easy answers to difficult questions.

**Racial stereotyping facilitates ‘common sense’ reporting**

The translation of racial stereotyping into the ‘common sense’ is borne out by Ericson et al. (1987, 350) who argue in their study of print and broadcast news organisations in Canada that news discourse does not require complexity but the “simple transformation into the common sense”. In his authoritative work *Race and Racism in Australia*, Hollinsworth (1998) also asserts that racialised discourse “naturalises itself” so that it appears inevitable rather than socially constructed and historically specific (33). In other words, social constructions become social facts (Hollinsworth 1998, 33). Thus, we saw in 1991 how the idea of indigenous youth on the rampage became social fact even though the official statistics showed that there had actually been a decline in youth crime during that period (Mickler & McHoul 1998, 126). Non-indigenous people simply assume that deviant or criminal behaviour is inherent in
the racial identity of indigenous people (as Commissioner Dodson himself remarked, above). By extending this thinking, it is easy to see how a leap is made from stereotype to common sense to social fact and then to what Rizvi (1993, 130) calls “new racism”. He argues that overt forms of marginalisation and exclusion are being replaced by “new racism”, that is ideological expressions that are not recognised as racist because they are “couch in the language of social cohesion, nationalism and patriotism” (130). He contends that this “new racism” is part of a shared ‘common sense’ created and circulated by the media. For the translation from stereotype to social fact to occur, the race of the group in question does not need to be specified, it is understood. For example, the ongoing debates about public drinking and street fighting are often conducted without acknowledging that many of those who drink and fight in public are Aboriginal. It is understood. Similarly, as I discuss in later chapters, the WA press did not have to refer explicitly to indigenous youth in the articles relating to the Northbridge curfew, it was understood. The curfew officially applied to all young people aged under 18, yet the inferences that were made in all the press reportage and images left no doubt that the policy was targeted at indigenous youth.7

6 It is interesting to note in this regard Hollinsworth’s (1998, 34) observation that when non-Aboriginal drunkenness and fighting occur, they are viewed as individual lapses, not as a community problem.
7 This recalls the phenomenon known as ‘dog whistle politics’, whereby a message is sent to and clearly heard by the intended audience, but is unheard by the rest (Poynting & Noble 2003). In the case of the Northbridge curfew, both the State
I digress briefly to acknowledge that in an age when sociologists are writing about the social construction of reality and postmodernists challenge the very existence of a ‘knowable reality’, it is clear – as Croteau & Hoynes (2003, 197) point out – that “the concept of a ‘real world’ may seem like a quaint artefact from the past”. Indeed, communications scholars, sociologists and political scientists alike (for example Molotch & Lester 1974; 75, Schlesinger 1978, Tuchman 1978, Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Fishman 1980; 1981, Cohen & Young 1981, Mickler & McHoul 1998; Gandy 1998, Graber 1988, Bennett & Entman 2001, Bennett 2005) concur with Ericson et al.’s contention (1987, 347) that, “News is not a veridical account of reality, but a social and cultural construction of journalists and their sources”. I agree with the social constructionist perspective that no representation of reality can ever be totally ‘true’ or ‘real’ since it must inevitably frame an issue and include or exclude certain aspects of a complex reality. Notwithstanding this, as Croteau & Hoynes (2003, 197) argue, “Some social facts seem solid enough to be used as a measure of reality”. Their comment resonates with that of Lippmann (1922, 54), who noted more than 80 years ago, “The facts we see depend on where we are placed, and the habits of our eyes”. He argues, “The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes” (59).

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Government and the WA press used ‘youth’ to imply ‘indigenous youth’ to the audience. In this way, neither party appeared to be racist but their message was understood.
In attempting to elucidate the extent to which the media construct and reproduce ideologies of racism, Hall (1990) asserts that the question of race is routinely defined on the basis of what may be described as ‘racial common sense’. The media, according to Hall, help us “not simply to know more about ‘the world’, but to make sense of it” (9). He contends that, because race appears to be ‘given’ by Nature, racism is the most profoundly “‘naturalised’ of existing ideologies”. In an earlier paper, Hall et al. (1981) further contend that journalists cannot make sense of events for their audiences without applying stereotypical images or what they call “known social and cultural identifications”.

They write:

If newsmen did not have available … such cultural ‘maps’ of the social world, they could not ‘make sense’ for their audiences of the unusual, unexpected and unpredicted events which form the basic content of what is ‘newsworthy’… (S)Such events cannot be allowed to remain in the limbo of the ‘random’ – they must be brought within the horizon of the ‘meaningful’ (337).

It is my contention, then, that the process of “racialisation” (Omi & Winant 1986, 64) – or the use of ‘race’ to explain or “make sense” of social phenomena – necessarily distorts understanding and simplifies analysis. As Hartmann & Husband (1981) find in relation to race relations in the UK, for example, the idea that “coloured people” constitute some kind of social threat is taken for granted and has become “one of the unspoken assumptions of the news framework” (297). They argue, therefore, that such racialised thinking necessarily simplifies debate:
Blacks come to be seen as conflict-generating per se and the chances that people will think about the situation in more productive ways – in terms of the issues involved or of social problems generally – are reduced (301).

In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1967, 31), Edelman draws the alarming conclusion that “large numbers of people” can see and think only “in terms of stereotypes, personalisations and over simplifications” because they “cannot tolerate ambiguous and complex situations”. As a result they “respond chiefly to symbols that over simplify and distort” (31). Edelman may be overstating his case; however, it is clear that the media’s practice of translating information into ‘common sense’ places them in an extremely powerful and influential position. As the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW (2003, 42) puts it, “The overwhelming force of racialisation of the media makes resistance to common sense explanations difficult”. Ericson et al. (1987, 350) go so far as to state that it is not in a journalist’s interests to understand the complexities of a story. They contend, “Specialised knowledge can even be counterproductive, leading the reporter to look for complexity and to qualify his knowledge when what news discourse requires is a simple transformation into the common sense”. They explain:

> When a member of the public picks up a newspaper or turns on broadcast news, he is not after the genre of the legal case report or law-journal article. He is after the common sense about law that is offered by the genre of news. To the journalist, this is only common sense (128).
Curran & Seaton (1997, 277) echo this point, arguing that journalists are “better seen as bureaucrats than as buccaneers” and that part of their job is to “translate untidy reality into neat stories with beginnings, middles, and denouements”.

My research of the WA press supports these findings. For example, Former Editor (B) of The West Australian agreed that journalists tended towards simplification of issues rather than painting the ‘true’ picture in all its complexities. He commented:

One thing the media is very bad at describing is the grey because it's too easy for journalists to put in a black or a white answer; it's easy, but when you try to get down to complexities and understand the background behind issues you find there aren’t easy answers.

By actively eschewing complexity or controversy, Jewkes (2004, 23) maintains that the media preserve the status quo. In his discussion of the “mythological role of journalism”, Lule (2001, 36) agrees that news “most often tells stories that support and sustain the current state of things”. Jewkes takes the argument further, contending that in this way the media perpetuate ignorance among audiences and the continued racial stereotyping of certain groups. This brings me back to my discussion above regarding the role that ‘race’ plays in sustaining unequal power relations in the community and marginalising those who fall on the ‘other’ side of the racial divide. I have discussed how the use of racial stereotypes translates into racial ‘common sense’ reporting, which the news media reflect in their propensity, for example, to
criminalise indigenous youth. Croteau & Hoynes (2003, 166) take this discussion further, pointing to the role that ‘common sense’ reporting also plays in sustaining and reproducing unequal power relations. As they ask, what is common sense if not those things that we think are so obvious that we need not critically evaluate them? Drawing on Gramsci’s (1971)8 findings, Croteau & Hoynes recall, “One of the most effective ways of ruling is through the shaping of commonsense assumptions”. They note:

Hegemony theorists remind us that commonsense assumptions, the taken for granted, are social constructions. They imply a particular understanding of the social world, and such visions have consequences (166).

Applying this argument to my analysis of the media’s racialised reporting of the curfew, my research demonstrates in later chapters that the WA State Government’s and the WA press’ socially constructed “vision” of Northbridge did indeed have significant “consequences”. As Haralambos et al. (1996, 666) point out, racism in the media is important not only “because it can offend and upset people [but], as the RCIADIC found, it can have very real consequences in contributing to a climate of distrust and racial oppression”. My interview with a police reporter with The West Australian confirmed the ‘common sense’ assumptions that informed his articles about Northbridge. He said that these stories had focused on indigenous youth to explain crime in the precinct, not

8 Although he does not actually define ‘hegemony’, Gramsci’s leitmotiv is that the dominant classes rule through ideology (or ideas and assumptions).
because they were necessarily the cause of the problems but because his readers thought they were. He defended his position saying, “Even if [indigenous young people] are not a real fundamental cause of problems, but people think they are, that still affects the public debate”.

Or, as his colleague, the State Political Editor with *The West Australian*, put it, “Rightly or wrongly, Northbridge is always going to come down in the media or in the public mind to indigenous kids”. For these reporters, at least, it is only common sense.

Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* acknowledged the need for the media to “augment rather than burrow into the abundance, to search rather than to illuminate” to paraphrase Smith (1981, 326). He told me:

> The challenge is for journalists to actually understand the issue, not only understand it but then actually translate it to the community in its complexity and hopefully produce a better outcome. In terms of Aborigines, the outcome is not to bag Aborigines or report negatively about it. We actually actively constantly look for positives and when we were on the negatives, a lot of negatives were actually followed through to do the follow up, the why; rather than seeing the action, we wanted to see the causes, not always reporting the symptom.

While I appreciate what he says, this practice still results in racialised representations of indigenous youth. As Mickler (1996, 281) argues, the routine media practice of ‘common sense’ reporting leaves readers with little means of understanding what he terms the “structurally-maintained social crisis” other than “to inferiorise Aborigines, or (leave) them prey to

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9 The original reads, “Turning information into knowledge … involves discovering ways to burrow into the abundance rather than augment it, to illuminate rather than search” (Smith 1981, 326).
popular racial mythologies”. Commissioner Dodson (1991) himself commented in his RCIADIC regional report into the underlying issues in WA that ‘common sense’ reporting fails to elucidate understanding because it fails to “background readers in the historical and social issues” arising in indigenous communities.

The RCIADIC’s four recommendations were designed precisely to address racial ‘common sense’ reporting in the news media (see Appendix 4). I was therefore keen to ask the print journalists I interviewed for this project what impact these recommendations had had on their reporting. I discuss my findings below.

**Journalistic ‘common sense’ rejects RCIADIC guidelines**

While the RCIADIC was established in 1987 to investigate a relatively small number of Aboriginal deaths in custody, it rapidly became a much more comprehensive and deeper inquiry. The result, as McDonald (1999, 283-284) writes in his account of the RCIADIC, was “voluminous sets of reports” that placed a spotlight not only on the custodial deaths and the criminal justice system within which they occurred, but also on the broader social context within which Aboriginal people live their lives.10 The RCIADIC found that Aboriginal communities were unhappy with the uninformed, stereotyped reporting they receive and it criticised

10 In this thesis I draw on only two of these RCIADIC reports; Commissioner Dodson’s *Regional Report of Inquiry into Underlying Issues in Western Australia* and the *National Report Vol. 4*. 
the media focus on crime, destitution, violence, and incarceration without sufficient discussion of underlying causes. In the same year, another federal government agency, the HREOC, expressed its concerns in its *National Inquiry into Racist Violence* (HREOC 1991, 355) about the “significant” role played by the media “in communicating and soliciting the ideas, fears and resentments of racism and in informing and educating Australians about each other”. While the HREOC’s *Inquiry* was a much smaller scale investigation than the RCIAIDIC, it nonetheless also included several recommendations relating specifically to media (see Appendix 5).

Academics, government and indigenous representatives appear to have placed much store in the RCIADIC and HREOC recommendations, organising numerous workshops involving media professionals and designed to address negative stereotyping and racial reporting. Indeed, McDonald (1999, 300) contends that, notwithstanding some difficulties in the implementation of its recommendations, “the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody let the genie out of the bottle and it will not return”. My research findings, however, did not support this optimistic outlook, at least as far as the media-related

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11 The HREOC *National Inquiry into Racist Violence* was told by youth worker Shane Phillips, for example, that, “[Indigenous youth’s] number one enemy is the media because media are the ones that create all the negative thoughts in people’s heads out there” (HREOC 1991, 358).

12 For example, Hartley & McKee (2000, 12) went so far as to state that the *Telling Both Stories* Media Forum series (held at Murdoch University in August 1992 and in February 1994 and at Edith Cowan University in February 1996) implemented all of the RCIADIC recommendations over a seven-year period.
recommendations are concerned. On the contrary, my interviews with journalists indicated that the genie is firmly entrapped back in its bottle. Only a minority of the media professionals were even aware of the recommendations. Reporter (A) with The West Australian, for example, was not aware of the recommendations to media but this did not preclude her from judging their effectiveness. She said:

Honestly, I don't think they've had any impact. I am aware there was a Royal Commission, but I don't recollect ever seeing the recommendations relating to the media before. I've never seen a code or policy relating to the reporting of indigenous affairs issues at The West Australian.

The Sunday Times’ columnist was aware of the RCIADIC recommendations to media but questioned their impact:

I think there are a few basic rules that people follow now … I think there has been a real change in the flagrant mention of people’s race in crime stories and that kind of thing – you don’t usually find ‘An Aboriginal man was convicted of rape’ in the first para as you used to. And I think there is some care – depending on where you work – about mentioning names of Aboriginal people who are deceased, but that depends very much from place to place. But I don’t know that it makes a great deal of difference, to tell you the truth.

The State Political Editor with The West Australian was aware of the RCIADIC recommendations but pointed to the MEAA’s Code of Ethics13 to demonstrate that such guidelines are necessarily ineffective in a news environment that is characterised by ‘pack journalism’ and where there is no mechanism for enforcement. He explained:

I’d argue that a lot of journalists don't bother with that [the Code of Ethics], … Every day you’ll find breaches of it everywhere. It's sad, but ultimately people just want to chase a story. And then you don't have

13 See Introduction, footnote 17.
any control over the headlines, or how the story runs, sometimes the story appears in the paper and it's got a different headline and a different focus than you intended it to have. And that could be shaped by the news that night or what’s been happening, if the story twists and turns, and by how other organisations cover it. … You hop on and take the same line.

My findings would come as little surprise to scholars such as Meadows & Oldham (1991) who argue that guidelines on ‘race relations’ serve little purpose. They contend, “Journalists simply don’t abide by them – and [they] are difficult to construct so as to have any real guiding effect” (38). Academic research has also found that even industry codes of conduct are seldom enforced and complaints are usually dismissed (Stockwell & Scott 2000). For example, Jakubowicz et al. (1994, 8) found evidence that the regulatory mechanisms put in place over the previous decade had been “ineffectual” in influencing media practices, stating that these “neither encouraged good practice, nor really prevented poor practice”. The most they did was to “provide an outlet for public outrage over overt racism” (8). Hartley & McKee (2000, 338) make the important point that regulatory bodies and their complaints processes “presume that racism occurs in isolated incidents”. As a result, they argue, media organisations and individual journalists are not challenged or required to have “an understanding of human rights issues or racism beyond the threat of potential complaints” (338). They conclude:

The lack of understanding of institutional racism, reflected in the regulatory framework and the work of many within the media, has been
described as a discourse of ‘indifference’ that is ‘the problem of contemporary journalism’ (338).

For me, the fact that neither *The West Australian* nor *The Sunday Times* provide training in the reporting of indigenous affairs and have no house protocols in operation is an indication of how little impact the RCIADIC has had. Indeed, Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* said that he did not believe there was any need for special training in relation to the indigenous community. He explained:

The cadets get a lot of exposure to different groups (including Aboriginal groups) in a very intense three weeks. But no, we didn’t sit down and say, look, here’s a series of problems with indigenous reporting. We would think the checks and balances, and the knowledge within the office and the guidelines for our operations *per se* should lead us to a reasonable outcome, regardless of race, colour or creed.

The Editor of *The Sunday Times* takes a similar view, believing the issue is for journalists “to think through” the consequences of their writing. He explained:

If you’ve spent some time thinking about the consequences of what you do, that’s the point where I think the media can either get itself in a lot of trouble or not get itself in strife and offend the community and offend our readers and their sensibilities. It’s the actual thought process that goes into producing the paper … I think that’s something that I encourage, particularly the senior staff [to think] about how and what we put in the paper, it’s very important for them to think carefully about all the things that we’re publishing.

There was, however, a unanimous view among the media professionals I interviewed that the same principles should apply to all reporting and that the RCIADIC guidelines were, if anything biased precisely because
they focused on one particular section of the community. Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* summed up this position by saying that:

> My view of all reporting, across every group, any person, whether they’re the Premier or the pauper, is to be informed, to be accurate and to be fair. And if you do that, and you should, that’s I think the pretty basic elements of journalism, then you don’t need special protocols. We operated basically in line with Press Council guidelines because I much prefer their guidelines than, say, those that HREOC might put out or the RCIADIC might put out because they start with a view that they have, which I don’t necessarily agree with and not many people do. The Press Council guidelines are fair; ethnicity and race are only reported if they are germane to the story and we may or may not get it right.

All the media professionals I interviewed for this project echoed his views, arguing on the grounds of journalistic objectivity and, even, ‘common sense’. For example, a senior political reporter with *The Sunday Times* said, “I treat every story the same, the same sensitivities I’d apply to any story” while the State Political Editor with *The West Australian* said, “It’s more [about] common sense, any reporter covering these issues would be working through sensitivities and these things”. If their practices were to result in equal outcomes, I would commend the journalists’ insistence on the need to treat stories all the same and I return to this point below. However, it is of concern that both former Editors of *The West Australian* believed that recommendations such as those presented by the RCIADIC smacked of “political correctness”. Former Editor (B), for example, considered, “It would be moral cowardice to bow and scrape to the political correctness that says you can’t report this because you know it’s just going to damage the public perception of these people”. There was also a suggestion that such
guidelines undermined the independence of the media, with *The West Australian*’s Columnist (A), for example, saying:

> You can’t impose them on papers, newspapers will resist them. … You’re never going to be able to regulate because people are going to write what they want to. I would never like to work in a newspaper where they tried to impose a social conscience.

*The Sunday Times*’ columnist agreed, saying: “I think the media does what the media wants. … It’s because of the culture we’re free, we’re independent, we do what we like, so long as it’s not defamatory and we end up in court!”

My research findings demonstrate, therefore, that the RCIADIC guidelines have had little, if any impact and similar initiatives will inevitably meet the same fate. Other incentives are required to encourage journalists to uphold the RCIADIC principles and I return to this important issue in the Conclusion to my thesis.

**Race makes some citizens more equal than others**

The easiest and most natural form of racism in media representation is the act of making ‘the other’ invisible (Langton 1993, 24). In their research of the mainstream press in Australia, Hartley & McKee (2000) found that indigenous people were habitually ‘invisible’ in the lifestyle and finance pages of mainstream newspapers. They contrast the exclusion of indigenous people from such routine, everyday reporting with their massive over-representation in stories about crime and anti-
social behaviour. This invisibility or exclusion of indigenous people suggests that they are not seen as ordinary, taxpaying members of the public. Hartley & McKee (2000) found:

The most familiar expression … was the dichotomy that was often set up between ‘taxpayers’ (who contributed to, and were part of the economy) and ‘Aborigines’ (who were, by definition apparently, not taxpayers, not contributing to the economy, somehow outside of it and relying on gifts from it) (295).

Trigger (1995) undertook similar research to Hartley & McKee. He found that *The West Australian*’s coverage dealing with Aboriginal people contained more than twice as many items with “negative content” (crime, disorder, alcohol abuse) as items with “positive content” (achievement, solutions, co-operation) (107). Across the urban and rural press, he found items depicting conflicts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were 22 times more frequent than stories depicting co-operation (108). Trigger submitted these findings to the RCIADIC, which gave Commissioner Dodson “cause for serious concern”.14 As further evidence of the news media’s failure to view indigenous people through any prism other than that of their ‘race’, Mickler (1996) tells of the distressing experience of the Nannup family whose child had been killed in a car crash. When the family complained about police harassment, they became the objects of sustained media attack. As Mickler points out, the family were not seen as ‘ordinary’ people grieving for their loved ones but, through “techniques of

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inference and chains of verbal association”, their claims of police
harassment became “the unlimited and extraordinary claims of a political
and cultural movement – [and] their Aboriginality was made exceptional
and objectionable” (384).

The question is whether 10 years after Mickler’s and Trigger’s studies
anything has changed. In order to answer this question, I undertook a
quantitative analysis during a full month of all items (including images)
appearing in The West Australian and The Sunday Times news pages
that made reference (direct or indirect) to indigenous people. I selected
the period 13 February to 12 March 2005 as this spanned the 2005
State election campaign. The news items were divided into the
following three categories: negative (crime and anti-social behaviour);
positive (achievement, success, cooperation); and neutral (where
indigenous people are mentioned as ordinary citizens without focus on
their race).
Table 1: News Articles Referring to Indigenous Western Australians 13 February – 12 March 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News (Negative)</th>
<th>News (Positive)</th>
<th>News (Neutral)</th>
<th>News (Other)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Car chase (parental responsibility/family dysfunction): 3</td>
<td>School-based apprenticeship: 1</td>
<td>Ernie Dingo (re Great Outdoors program): 1</td>
<td>Goldfields Aboriginal delegation want to meet Prime Minister re abolition of ATSIC: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health conditions in remote communities: 1</td>
<td>Feature of David Wirrpunda, sports role model mentoring young indigenous kids: 1</td>
<td>Aboriginal girl included in picture of group of people applying for a job with &quot;My Restaurant Rules&quot;: 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home invasion: 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths in custody: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous youth assaults tourist: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Herbert Bropho’s refusal to pay fines: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel Pearson to advise Prime Minister on ‘mutual obligation’ in Aboriginal communities: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Land rights claim would follow Colin Barnett’s canal plan: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total: 12</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total: 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total: 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total: 1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I found that the routine reporting of everyday life in *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* still fails to apply “the same principles” to the treatment of indigenous people and continues to view indigenous people through the prism of ‘race’. As can be seen from Table 1, the news items demonstrated an even greater dichotomy than Trigger’s findings more than a decade earlier, with negative stories outnumbering positive stories by six to one. Most importantly, only two out of 17 news stories included text or image relating to an indigenous person without reference to their race.

As is customary during election campaigns, both newspapers conducted *vox pops* or ‘voice of the people’ during the month under review to try to gauge voting intentions. I was curious to see whether journalists approached any indigenous citizens for their views on the big issues of the day. In the event, the two newspapers carried out five *vox pops* during the period, which they designed to identify voting intentions. Three of these surveys were published in *The Sunday Times* and featured groups of residents from Hope Street, White Gum Valley (seven adults, mix of ages and gender; all non-indigenous); Victory Terrace, East Perth (six people, mix of ages and gender; all non-indigenous); and Waterway Court, Churchlands (seven adults, one child, mix of ages and gender; all non-indigenous). *The West Australian*’s survey, entitled *Voice of the People*, involved five people (one double
income, one single parent, one young single, one retired couple and one family; all non-indigenous). *The West Australian* featured a further *vox pop* in the run up to the election, in which respondents were asked their opinion of ‘Labor’s plan to ban heavy haulage vehicles from the Riverton stretch of the Leach Highway’. The respondent group included 10 people (mix of ages and gender; all non-indigenous).

Given that indigenous people represent only three per cent of the Western Australian population, I am not suggesting that representatives should have been included in every group. However, I believe that it is symptomatic of the pattern of race relations in WA that they are not considered *at all* among the State’s taxpayers, professionals, consumers, service recipients and so on. Because the WA press fail to include indigenous people in everyday, routine reporting, they deny them the opportunity to be anonymous or, simply, ‘ordinary’.15 When I queried the continued absence of indigenous respondents in such coverage as *vox pops*, both Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* and the Editor of *The Sunday Times* were clearly interested in the question, which they did not appear to have considered before.

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15 Mickler & McHoul (1998, 144) make the important observation, of course, that “Aboriginal sources have few clearly available resources (material or discursive) for making their particular problems, claims and concerns … into ‘everybody’s’. That’s why, structurally, they can never easily command a status as a popular and positive source of news”. This does not detract from the fact that there are concerns that affect all Western Australians, such as who is in government and what tax rates/concessions are in operation.
According to Former Editor (B), journalists do not consciously exclude indigenous people from such surveys. He explained:

I don't think [indigenous people] are ever excluded or included. [With] vox pops, it’s a reporter going down Hay Street Mall or some other location and picking up passers by. … What you’re seeking, more than the person, is the diversity of opinion on the issue. You are also seeking a representation. For example with the budget, if they are a married couple with two kids or whatever, they fit in that category. It’s not about a black, pink, or white family.

The Editor of The Sunday Times shared this view, saying it was a matter of who happened to be out in the street, but conceded the newspaper could take a more proactive approach to include indigenous people among the respondents. He said:

If I say, let’s for our budget coverage find a family with two kids and the reporter comes back with an Aboriginal couple with two kids, I wouldn’t have a problem with that. Do we actively go out looking for an Aboriginal family? Probably not. But if they were the ones that we found, then I suppose that would be fine, I wouldn’t have an issue. Why don’t we look for them? It’s probably because it’s what is out there and we don’t have people who would know where to look necessarily and I think that probably is an issue.

His comments raise the very important issue of the media’s access to the indigenous community. I found during the course of my research that non-indigenous reporters have relatively little access to members of the indigenous community and this must necessarily be a major contributing factor to the absence of indigenous people in routine, everyday reporting. The issue of access is, indeed, one of several specific challenges that journalists identified when writing stories involving indigenous people. I turn now to a discussion of these challenges.
Journalistic challenges in reporting on indigenous affairs

The issue of access between the mainstream media and the indigenous community was, indeed, central to my research in order to understand why the WA press continued to criminalise indigenous youth. In his insightful paper *People Power: Reporting or Racism?*, Meadows (1987, 111) contends that journalists’ inability to talk to indigenous people about indigenous issues explains their “perceived abysmal lack of understanding of Aboriginal issues”. As Hooks (1992, 341) points out, “Stereotypes abound when there is distance”. My interviews found that most journalists felt there was a considerable “distance” between them and the indigenous community. For example, Columnist (A) with *The West Australian* told me that writing stories about indigenous people was “almost like dealing with foreigners” because journalists had no real contact with them. He explained:

I wonder how many Australians go through life without having any real contact with Aboriginal people at all? How many people would ever have had Aborigines in their homes? If all you’ve seen is drunks and drug addicts, you’d say, well, that’s Aboriginal people.

*The Sunday Times*’ Editor agreed that good communications between the media and the ‘outside world’ were essential, but insisted that it worked both ways. He stressed that attempts to address misrepresentation of the indigenous community in the news media would be successful only if both parties have a better understanding of each other’s needs. He said:
I always think one of the greatest problems is how the media is perceived externally, that people don’t understand the media at all, it’s such a closed thing and people don’t get what we do. And that’s just one little group (the indigenous community) which says give us a go, but on the other side we say how can we give you a go if we don’t know where you are or how to contact you?

I found that reporters generally considered it difficult to access the indigenous community. The Sunday Times’ columnist, for example, spoke about the difficulty in finding indigenous people who are representative and said the indigenous community had a role to play in this. She commented:

A lot of journos don’t know who to speak to and there are very few Aboriginal people who will put themselves up and say I am the spokesman, because they always get pulled down by the people around them, ‘you’re not my mob, you’re not the Elder’…. So it’s a real difficulty, it’s a problem for people … and it is not a problem of the media’s making.

When I asked why the WA press continually uses controversial figures like Nyoongar Elder Robert Bropho as representatives of the indigenous community, The West Australian’s Columnist (B) said simply, “because no-one else puts their hands up”. Other journalists spoke about the indigenous community being particularly wary of the media and the difficulties that this presents when they are trying to get the ‘indigenous side of the story’. The State Political Editor with The West Australian attributes what he calls the “long-running distrust between the media and the Aboriginal community” to “the stories about dole bludgers and

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16 Nyoongar Elder Robert Bropho, former leader of the Swan Valley Nyoongar Camp, is one of the State’s most prominent Aboriginal leaders and has long been a controversial figure in the politics of the Nyoongar people in WA. For several years he has faced allegations of rape and was jailed in early 2006 after being convicted of sexually assaulting a minor.
all that sort of stuff which is always out there”. A senior political reporter with *The Sunday Times* spoke of his experience with Robert Bropho to illustrate this point.\(^ {17} \) He explained:

> I have found the people you have to talk to are very defensive basically, even though in your heart you’re on their side and I find that frustrating when you can’t get [their story]. … I remember I did do a story on Swan Valley and the closure. I remember getting hold of Robert Bropho, it was extremely hard and when I did, all I got was a string of abuse. And I was trying to explain, ‘look, I really want to balance this story and give you a fair say, can you just give me something?’ And he’d say ‘that white bastard Gallop, he’s a bloody … ’ I’d say, ‘that’s fine Robert, I understand why you’re saying that, but you know I can’t put that in the paper. Let’s skip to the issue and really work on it together here…’ It’s difficult, yes.

The police reporter with *The West Australian* who participated in this project believes indigenous people’s distrust of the media reflects a lack of understanding of how the media work. His frustration was apparent when he discussed his experiences, suggesting that indigenous people’s distrust of the media was not justified and merely showed little understanding of how the media work, compared to other sources such as the police. He explained:

> If you piss the cops off, you know that they’re not going to speak to you for a few days or whatever, but ultimately they are going to come around, because they want to get more crime stories out there. They’re very experienced with journalists, so they know the cut and thrust and they understand that it’s just par for the course, that’s just how it goes. … But with the indigenous people, the issue was more naïveté when it came to the media … maybe ‘naïveté’ isn’t the right word, but it’s certainly inexperience, and it’s more a case that they just didn’t realise that just because a bad story’s written one day doesn’t mean that the journalist has a personal vendetta against anyone, it’s just the way the media work;

\(^ {17} \) As is evident from footnote 16, Robert Bropho is probably not the best example for the reporter to have used as anyone who follows indigenous affairs in WA would know that his view is unlikely to be representative of a majority opinion. Given that the reporter’s story referred to the closure of the Swan Valley Camp, he could not, however, have omitted to use Bropho as a source.
you get your good stories and your bad stories. So that was the most challenging thing, convincing people that just because there is a story coming out that they might consider negative, it’s not the last word, it’s not the end of the story.

A political reporter with ABC News spoke about the difficulty in speaking to ‘ordinary’ indigenous people who are not official spokespeople. He commented:

I find them very awkward and you’ve just got to show an enormous amount of sensitivity and respect for their position and to try and get the story. Because if you don’t have their cooperation, to some extent trust I suppose, you’ll never find out what’s going on ... when dealing with those Aboriginal people who are on the fringe. I think that is an enormous challenge for the media and I’m not sure that we do it all that well, but it’s certainly something I try to be very careful about.

Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* stressed the importance of having dedicated rounds people to develop relationships with indigenous people, build trust and ‘balance’ the reportage. He said:

There are people in all groupings who feel they’ve had a bad run... There aren’t too many people who perceive newspapers to be doing them any favours. … So that tends to preset the disposition of a lot of people. … Where you hope to overcome that is by finding a balance between people who are reporting in that area constantly and hope they build relationships … since they are your main providers of material or reportage from those areas, so therefore the information should be reasonably balanced, they have the awareness, you ask them to be aware of issues relevant to their engagement in that area.

Asked about her experience in building relationships with members of the indigenous community, Reporter (C) stressed that her success in this area was due to the time she was able to invest in developing relations and in writing ‘positive stories’. The management of *The West Australian* at the time made both endeavours possible. She explained:
It took probably the better part of six or eight months before I felt like I had good contacts, but I also had a lot of freedom when I first started the round to just go and meet people, not necessarily for a story, and that was Karen Brown [then chief of staff] who gave me that flexibility. So that always made a huge difference. Once I’d met people, sat down and had a chat with them, they were always happy to talk to me whenever I rang about a news story and they often rang to tell me when things were going on. … It took time (to build relationships) – it takes the more positive stories as well, you have to write them, you have to get the goodwill through those stories which sometimes would get a run in the paper because they’ve got a lovely picture attached or it’s just a bit of light relief from the other news that is around, but if you’re writing about people’s efforts, about community-based efforts to make good out of whatever problems they’ve got, they will really value that.

Journalists identified many other challenges in reporting on indigenous affairs, including:

- “Indigenous issues are complex”

For example, Columnist (B) with *The West Australian*, speaking about his two years covering indigenous affairs while in the press gallery in Canberra, told me:

> It is just mind-blowing how difficult it is for a white man or a white woman to wrap their heads around disputes and conflict in the Aboriginal community that goes back to when they were chiselling out things on walls in caves. It’s impossible.

- “Lack of interest in indigenous stories”

Reporters talked about the lack of incentive to pursue non-sensationalist stories relating to the indigenous community, given the perceived lack of interest among the readership in such stories. The State Political Editor at *The West Australian*, for example, commented:

> It’s difficult to get interest in an Aboriginal story because they aren’t considered a huge interest to the readership. I don’t know why that is, possibly because it’s a very small percentage of the population and to a lot of people out there, they don’t come into contact with Aboriginal
people, the issues don’t resonate for them, they’re more concerned with their mortgage and that kind of thing.

His colleague, Columnist (B), was less circumspect, saying:

When there’s not a car crash and there’s not an Aboriginal kid wrapping himself around a telegraph pole, the world goes on. Indigenous affairs receives minimal amount of coverage.

- “Indigenous stories require more time”

A number of reporters spoke about the need to devote more time to stories involving indigenous people, in order to understand the issue and build trust. As *The West Australian*’s Reporter (A) pointed out, this is “not always possible” given the demands of a daily newspaper with deadlines.

- “Values perceived to be irreconcilably different”

During the interviews, journalists frequently cited cultural differences between white middle-class journalists and the indigenous community. *The West Australian*’s Columnist (A) felt that while “any professional journalist” should be able to overcome the particular challenges that reporting on indigenous affairs present, the cultural gap that exists “is so vast that it takes a lot of sensitivity … you need to be pretty smart to establish contact and to understand what people are trying to say to you”. The State Political Editor with *The West Australian* recalled that their environment conditions journalists, like everyone else. He explained:

There are a lot of prejudices in society. You get young reporters who are a product of their upbringing in society and they may come in with these
prejudices or a lack of awareness of the issues [relating to the indigenous community] and they’re probably too scared to tackle them.

Columnist (B) with *The West Australian* was particularly forceful on the point of cultural difference, even contending that indigenous people are anaesthetised, if not indifferent to unnecessary loss of life. He said:

Where [indigenous reportage] doesn’t go down well is with issues like car chases and issues which, to the white man, are totally alien, such as why these people aren’t looking after their kids, having some sort of responsibility about their children. Now that’s the way they are and that’s not going to change because we want it to change, it’s going to change because they want it to change. … As a race they’ve been through so much shit that a lot of this stuff just doesn’t register. It concerns us because we’ve been in this white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon world where everything’s comfortable. If one of our kids had been in an accident we’d be … I think they’ve become so desensitised to tragedy basically that they just think it’s another thing they’ve got to deal with.

It is clear from the above summary of the key challenges that journalists face in writing stories involving indigenous people that they cannot apply the same principles as those used when reporting about the non-indigenous community. Issues surrounding access, mutual distrust, and cultural difference will all necessarily affect a journalist’s approach to a story.

**Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that because the boundary between WA’s indigenous and non-indigenous communities is drawn on the basis of ‘race’, journalists are more inclined to consider indigenous people as an homogenous group and draw on racial ‘common sense’ reporting that focuses disproportionately on the criminality of indigenous youth. These routine practices inevitably discourage journalists from
including indigenous people in their routine reporting about everyday life in WA.

Notwithstanding the journalists' “raced way of seeing” (Hunt 1997, 127), my interviews with representatives of the WA press did not find that either the newspaper editors or their staff have any interest in stigmatising the indigenous community. However, as I demonstrate in later chapters, this did not prevent the WA press from criminalising indigenous youth in Northbridge. In order to understand this apparent anomaly, it is helpful to consider the preamble to the Western Australian Charter of Multiculturalism (2004), which makes the important observation that individuals may unknowingly discriminate as a result of “the unthinking continuation of routine organisational practices that in their effect can be discriminatory”. Hartmann & Husband (1981, 301) draw a similar conclusion from their study The mass media and racial conflict when they state that:

The media do not need to try to define the situation in terms of conflict. They need merely unreflectingly to follow their normal procedures of news-gathering and selection and to apply their normal criteria of news value.

I therefore turn to an examination of the news routines and practices of the WA press in the next chapter in order to gain further insight into their telling of the Northbridge curfew story.

18 The Western Australian Charter of Multiculturalism, Government of Western Australia, November 2004.
CHAPTER 2

GETTING THE STORY

According to the RCIADIC, racial stereotyping and ‘common sense’ reporting say more about a news organisation than they do about the individual journalist. Patrick Dodson, the Commissioner investigating the underlying issues relevant to Aboriginal deaths in custody in WA, found that news content does not necessarily reflect the personal views of journalists. He contended instead that systemic racism, as opposed to individual prejudice, determines what is published in the WA press.

Thus, Commissioner Dodson’s *Regional Report of Inquiry into Underlying Issues in Western Australia* notes that:

Racial stereotyping and racism in the media is institutional, not individual … it results from news values, editorial policies, from routines of news gathering that are not in themselves racist or consciously prejudicial. It results from the fact that most news stories are already written before the individual journalist is assigned to them, even before the event takes place. A story featuring Aboriginals is simply more likely to be covered, or more likely to survive sub-editorial revision or spiking, if it fits existing definitions of the situation (Dodson, 1991).¹

My research among WA print journalists similarly suggests that news content is not necessarily determined by the reporter’s personal views. The overwhelming majority of journalists I interviewed, for example, rejected the Northbridge curfew as “populist politics in its purist form”, a

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“stunt”, a “clayton's curfew”, or as mere “window dressing”. The State Political Editor with The West Australian, for instance, summed up the story of the Northbridge curfew as “pure politics”. He said that indigenous youth were politics’ victims, “written off as casualties… because they weren’t rated as highly as other people might be”.

Similarly, The West Australian’s Columnist (B) contended that the State Government was anxious to court those non-indigenous Australians who, he said, find it “unsettling” to “confront” young Aboriginals in Northbridge. He argued that:

> It was a cynical political exercise … Aboriginal youth don’t vote for (Premier) Geoff Gallop, middle class white Australians do. And if they can remove the problem from in front of their eyes, hey presto, well, it’s going to be a tick in Gallop’s box, isn’t it?

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2 The comments of the media professionals interviewed with regard to the Northbridge curfew were overwhelmingly negative and included:

- “It was a quick fix, knee jerk reaction that wouldn’t fix anything”. (A police reporter, The West Australian)
- “It was just a populist, political decision. That’s all it was”. (A senior political reporter, The Sunday Times)
- “The Premier [was] only doing it because they [were] down in the polls, he was trying to do things that are popular, to lift themselves up because they [were] in trouble”. (A senior political reporter, The Sunday Times)
- “It was a political stunt – absolutely – and really the Government was quite happy to get any stories it could in any media because they felt they were onto a winner. It’s as simple as that”. (A police reporter, The Sunday Times)
- “The curfew was a ‘clayton's curfew’ – that is, ‘the curfew you have when you’re not having a curfew’. It was simply a reaffirmation of existing government policy, dressed up like new policy”. (Reporter (A), The West Australian)
- “It was a typical Gallop exercise, it was just to manipulate public opinion, it did absolutely nothing to help the issue”. (Former Editor (A), The West Australian)
- “The whole thing looked like a complete beat up to me”. (General News Reporter (2), The Sunday Times)
- “It was just window dressing: it felt like the Government trying to look like it was dealing with an issue, but it didn’t feel like it was actually dealing with the issue … it just seemed to me like a crazy idea”. (Reporter (B), The West Australian)
Yet their articles, as I demonstrate in later chapters, do not betray any sense of such sentiments. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to discuss how institutional practices within the WA press may have led leading (and sceptical) journalists such as *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor and Columnist (B) to support the State Government in its endeavours to sell the Northbridge curfew to the public. I begin my discussion by acknowledging the consensus among mass communications scholars as to the pre-eminence of organisational values and work practices over the personal judgements of individual journalists. I go on to explore the institutional pressures on journalism that are the central focus of this chapter, namely the "news values, editorial policies and routines of news gathering" to which the RCIADIC refers. I consider each of these three work practices within the theoretical framework of current academic debate as well as the findings of my own interviews with members of the WA press. I contend that the story of the Northbridge curfew was guaranteed a good run in both newspapers because it responded to key news values. It was a story about crime, Perth’s no. 1 news staple; it took place in Northbridge, which is notoriously popular with the media because of its ‘entertainment’ value; and, most importantly, it fed people’s racial stereotypes by presenting them with images that tapped into their pre-existing fears about criminal indigenous youth. I also argue that the

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3 It is clear that a reporter writing a news story cannot voice his or her opinions; however, the sources used would indicate whether or not the reporter was seeking to provide a variety of viewpoints.
influence of editorial policy, while impossible to define, is significant. Although rounds people and columnists insist they enjoy considerably more autonomy than their colleagues who are more likely to work under direct supervision, all *The West Australian* journalists I interviewed for this project noticed the change in policy towards indigenous affairs, for example, when a new editor was appointed. I go on to discuss the extensive body of academic literature that provides insights into the routines of news gathering and demonstrates how these practices necessarily affect the selection of stories and sources. I argue that these work routines illustrate why the WA press will always prefer sources that cater to its needs, such as the State Government or certain Northbridge business people, to less ‘media savvy’ groups such as, for example, representatives of indigenous youth who may have no understanding of the needs of the WA press and still less interest in meeting them.

**Journalists may be cynical but the news is gullible**

finds that journalists are “not necessarily racists”, but that they are “merely … doing the jobs that they have been selected, trained, and socialized to perform”. In similar vein, Hall (1982, 82) argues that in the UK journalists may “unwittingly” produce racist reportage because they “unconsciously” support “the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field”. This point is taken up by Lule (1995, 191) who contends that journalists reproduce racist stereotypes because they are “embedded in the narrative conventions and journalistic canon” that are instilled during academic and on-the-job training. For their part, US journalists-turned-academics Merritt & McCombs (2004, 72) refer to “a grab bag of professional routines and traditions largely inherited from the past” that define how journalists view the world around them. Here in Australia, Tiffen (1989, 67) contends, simply, that, “Journalists are cynical but the news is gullible”. He bemoans the fact that commercial imperatives take precedence over the media’s role as government watchdog; that superficial reportage prevails over the search for truth. Tiffen suggests:

Perhaps no other social institution occasions such romantic idealising about their democratic indispensability, but simultaneously, has such an arsenal of arguments for deflating utopian hopes for its improvement. Its daily operations are bounded by organisational deadlines and production demands plus limited access to the world on which it is seeking to report. Its economic logic is governed by marketing orientations which decree that more probing and deeper reporting are rarely rewarded by larger audiences, while in terms of sensationalism and gimmicks some see an inverse relation between quality and marketing success (198).
There appears, therefore, to be significant consensus among the world’s leading mass communications researchers as to the influence of organisational imperatives over news content. With this scholarly endorsement of the RCIADIC findings in mind, it is useful now to explore in turn each of the specific organisational imperatives to which the RCIADIC report referred, namely news values, editorial policies and news gathering routines.

**News values**

Just what did Commissioner Dodson’s *Regional Report* mean when it referred to “news values”? In seeking to answer that question, I share Hall’s (1981, 234) frustration when he says that news values are “one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society” because they are indeed difficult to encapsulate in any definitive, empirical form. They are not to be found listed in any media guide or induction kit, nor do media professionals themselves appear to be able to readily and conclusively say what the elements that constitute a good story are. As Hall (1981, 234) points out, while all “true journalists” are supposed to possess and implement news values, “few can or are willing to identify and define” them. He goes on:

> Journalists speak of ‘the news’ as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the ‘most significant’ news story, and which ‘news angles’ are most salient are divinely inspired (234).
While they may not consider news values to be “divinely inspired”,
Jakubowicz et al. (1994, 159) nonetheless hold them in high esteem,
referring to them as “a highly complex set of codes by which
newsworthiness is judged”. Indeed, an extensive research literature is
devoted to identifying news values (see, for example, Galtung & Ruge
& Patching’s (1997) research into news values to be among the most
helpful. They undertook a study among journalists in 69 countries and
found that they all agreed on three basic elements of news. These were
that the information must be “new”, that it must interest a large number
of people, and that it must be understandable to all (15). They found
that when these core elements are present, there are six additional
criteria that determine newsworthiness. These are consequence (that
is, significance or importance), proximity, conflict, human interest,
novelty and prominence of the person or people involved (16-18).

Nonetheless, I agree with Tiffen (1989, 66) who argues that attempts to
enumerate news values are “lacking” and do little more than provide “a
list of vaguely preferred story attributes”.\footnote{Tiffen (1989) makes the important point that a topic also becomes newsworthy when
the significance of associated events is magnified. Thus, he points to the fact that
after Aboriginal deaths in custody became acknowledged as a major issue in 1987,
any subsequent death became headline news, while earlier ones had been given little}
that editors generally agree upon what is likely to interest an audience and that there is significant consensus within the same social-cultural settings (Hetherington 1985). In other words, news values transcend organisations and national borders. As Trigger (1995) observes, an assessment of whether the news media reproduce dominant views cannot rely solely on finding direct expressions of “racist sentiment” but should pay attention to:

those unwritten guidelines … [such as the] ‘news value’, by which sensational, extraordinary and negative events are distinguished from among the plethora of everyday occurrences as newsworthy, with the result that journalists are oriented toward topics in which ‘black’ people, if they are present at all, are likely to appear for negative reasons (104-105).

The “net effect” of these shared values, as Epstein (1973, 199) argues, is that “the news selected is the news expected”. It is not surprising, therefore, that many researchers have expressed concern that common news values contribute to the production of “homogenous news” (Crigler 1996, 4). Cultural theorists, such as Ericson et al. (1987; 1989; 1991), Hall et al. (1978; 1981), Herman & Chomsky (1988), and Critcher (2003), are among those who are concerned with the ideological implications of news values. They believe that journalists select the news according to the values of the dominant culture. Jakubowicz et al. (1994, 159), for example, contend that:

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attention. He contends, “Such changes in sensitisation distort perspectives, however, if changed news priorities, rather than changes in the events reported, lead to misperceptions of prevalence and trends” (181).

5 For example, Ward (1995, 213) finds that news content tends to follow the same general pattern and that different organisations behave in a similar way when confronted by the same events and under equivalent conditions.
Internalised by news workers, these values ensure that the interests and values of the dominant culture are constantly repackaged and reproduced in news stories, and ‘other’ perspectives are screened out or rejected as non-newsworthy or marginal.

My research in the newsrooms of *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* provides no evidence to corroborate the view that such ideological considerations actively inform news values.\(^6\) Although it is apparent that news values play a crucial role in determining story selection,\(^7\) I believe that these judgements are intuitive and are considerably more pedestrian, pragmatic and parochial than, for example, Hall or Jakubowicz et al. would suggest. I return to my research findings below.

**Telling tales**

It has been extensively documented that the media ‘structure reality’ in a way that is guided by their own needs and interests (see, for example, Glasgow University Media Group 1976; 1980; 1985, Hall et al. 1978;1981, Ericson et al. 1989, McQuail 1994, Critcher 2003). Drawing on her study of media professionals in the United States, Tuchman (1978) insists that journalists present a reality based on the priorities of newsworthiness, which in turn are determined by news values. In this

\(^6\) However, as discussed in Chapter 1, these newspapers do indeed exclude “other” perspectives by failing to include indigenous people in their routine, everyday reporting.

\(^7\) For example, a study of the media coverage of the 1991 British election (Nossiter et al. 1992) underscores the importance of news values in political communication. This found that, “News values, rather than broader considerations of public interest” had determined editorial selection (86).
way, reporters “construct and reconstruct social reality by establishing the context in which social phenomena are perceived and defined” (184). Gitlin (1980) and van Zoonen (1992) found, for example, that drama, conflict and celebrities are all criteria used to judge a story’s newsworthiness.8 Epstein’s (1973) description of a memo to staff from the executive producer of NBC News eloquently reflects this finding. They were told that, “every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama” and that stories were to be organised around the triad of “conflict, problem, and dénouement”, with “rising action” building “to a climax” (emphasis in original) (241).

Hence, as Lule (2001, 37) points out, “News tells stories”. US political communication theorist Gamson (1992) argues that the use of storytelling or the ‘narrative form’ in news media encourages simplification of issues (or the ‘common sense’ reporting discussed in Chapter 1).9 He

8 Gitlin’s (1980) study of the coverage of the US student movement, Students for a Democratic Society, in the late 1960s demonstrates the role the media played in shaping the movement’s public image in order to meet their own needs (for action, conflict, flamboyant personalities, and so on) and shows how the movement, in turn, played out “the demonic role” in which it had been cast (191). Gitlin concludes, “In the late twentieth century, political movements feel called upon to rely on large-scale communications in order to matter, to say who they are and what they intend” (3). Van Zoonen’s (1992) study of the media’s construction of the women’s movement in the Netherlands describes a similar process at work. Looking back more than a decade later on his reflections on the “strategy of social protest”, Gamson (1989) finds that, in order to gain media attention, “The moral for challengers remains the same: be ready to use disruptive, extrainstitutional means of influence since you may well need them to succeed, but do not be surprised if you become the target of covert and disruptive means of social control” (466).

9 ‘Common sense’ reporting has led such authorities as the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW (2003, 62) to assert, “Many politicians, media commentators and editors are
contends that the narrative form draws attention to “motivated actors rather than structural causes of events” and involves “human agents … typically identified as causal agents in a morality play about good and evil or honesty and corruption” (34). Indeed, the story format, according to Tiffen (1989, 65), “favours resolution over doubt, the concrete over the abstract, the narrative recounting of recent, finite events over the analytical account of continuing conditions”. It is useful to consider here McQuail’s (1994, 362-363) observation that such story-telling reflects a “hidden dimension of media bias”, which stems from adapting ‘real-life’ events to what Altheide & Snow (1979) refer to as “media logic”.10

In her foreword to Bennett’s (2005) News: The Politics of Illusion, Graber, however, rightly points to the challenge the news media face in exciting the attention of their readership. She asks rhetorically whether people would allow themselves to be “force-fed ‘spinach news’ – stories that are good for their civic health but only rarely palatable” – noting that, concerned with making simplistic and unhelpful links between race and criminality, rather than investigating or representing the more complex causes of crime”.

10 Gamson (1992, 34) further contends that the media’s emphasis on narrative form “tends to concretize targets in ways that would appear to abet injustice frames”. He says that, “Far from serving the social control needs of authorities … media coverage frequently gives people reasons to get angry at somebody. Of course, that ‘somebody’ need not be the real source of grievance at all but merely some convenient surrogate” (34). He argues, “Nevertheless, however righteous indignation may get channeled, media discourse on many issues inadvertently helps to generate it by providing concrete targets. Hence, it is an obstacle to social control strategies that diffuse a sense of injustice by moving the causes of undeserved hardship beyond human agency” (34). Gamson’s point recalls a comment by The West Australian’s Columnist (B), who told me that the media always need “to find a culprit”. He said, “The media always need to find somebody to blame … the media need to say, ‘right, whose fault is it?’ and go on a witch hunt. I think that’s one of the very average things the media do, quite frankly”.

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“When people have many other options for occupying their spare time, they are unlikely to attend to news that they find irrelevant or unpleasant” (ix). Chaffee (1975, 102) makes a similar point, contending that “audience interest” is the main “definition of newsworthiness”; without it news organisations could not survive. It is interesting to note here the findings of a survey of media professionals and audiences that the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA 2001) undertook. The ABA found some criticism of news producers “eager” to give audiences what (market research tells them) they want because this practice was undermining the quality of journalism (7).

According to Entman (1997, 29) the increasing importance of entertainment values in the US is resulting in sensationalist forms of news coverage which “feed racial stereotypes” and are “encouraging white hostility toward minority groups such as African Americans”. He finds that pressures to make the news entertaining are making it even more difficult for social issues, such as urban poverty and its causes, to be covered in sufficient depth. Gandy (1998, 163) echoes this sentiment, noting, “If the public depended upon the press to inform them accurately about the risks they faced, they would be ill served”. Thus, Ericson et al. (1991, 268) find that crime stories rarely address the

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11 Curran & Seaton (1997, 277) reach a similar conclusion, contending that because the media need to secure “instant attention,” this “creates a strong prejudice in favour of familiar stories and themes, and a slowness of response when reality breaks the conventions”.

12 Cited in Allan 2004, 149.
causes of crime. Graber’s (1980, 70) research in *Crime News and the Public* supports this observation. She found that only four per cent of the news items she analysed about crime mentioned its causes. Ericson et al. (1991, 268) go so far as to argue that, “News imperatives work against explanation” and the result is often that, “What ought to be explained is treated as fact or assumption” (Tuchman 1978, 180). Chibnall (1977, xii) agrees, contending, “In law-and-order news, complex and ambiguous reality is constantly reduced to its simplest forms”.¹³ The ABA’s (2001) survey findings are again pertinent here. According to these, sensationalist reporting is “perceived as occurring more frequently than bias, intrusion and inaccuracy” and is “of most concern to Australians” (373). The ABA notes that this “sensationalised reporting” in news and current affairs is, however, recognised as an effective tool in drawing audience attention (373).

**What ‘grabs’ the WA press**

I was not surprised by my own research findings which confirmed that the key news value for any journalist or editor in the WA press is whether or not a story will draw their readers’ attention, whether that be with a view to “educating, entertaining or informing’ them”.¹⁴ While the

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¹³ Gitlin (1980, 28) makes a similar point, asserting that news framing "can be attributed to traditional assumptions in news treatment: news concerns the *event*, not the underlying condition; the *person*, not the group; *conflict*, not consensus; the fact that ‘*advances the story*’, not the one that explains it”.

¹⁴ Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* said that the newspaper’s key objectives were to “educate, entertain or inform” its readership.
media professionals I interviewed had difficulty in definitively identifying other criteria that make for an interesting news story, they agreed upon such general overriding considerations as whether or not a story is ‘sexy’, controversial, involves good ‘talent’ and, above all, whether it affects the perceived interests of the readership.\textsuperscript{15} The West Australian’s Columnist (B), for example, said that although “a whole stack” of senior staff at the newspaper was very aware of the need for sensitivity in portraying indigenous people, “at the end of the day you’ve still got to report an issue that’s affecting West Australians because that’s what your job is”. He explained:

[The story] might be negative … but it’s also realistic, it’s a realistic aspect of a negative story. And it’s not (about) constantly bagging and belting and ridiculing and criticising something; it’s looking at an issue that’s affecting West Australians, and it’s reporting it, analysing it and commenting on it. And if it’s negative, well unfortunately it’s negative, but these are the decisions you make on a day-to-day basis, on an hour-to-hour basis and quite often on a minute-to-minute basis. That’s what you’ve got to do, sometimes you’ve got to make decisions and you’ve got seconds to make them.\textsuperscript{16}

My research also found that any consideration of ethics would always take second place to a story’s newsworthiness. The West Australian’s Columnist (A) told me, for example, that the newspaper’s disproportionate focus on indigenous youth when reporting on the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report (discussed in Chapter 4) would

\textsuperscript{15} These are the main news selection criteria listed by The West Australian’s Columnist (B). This does not mean, of course, that his assumptions – or those of other journalists – about what the news audience is interested in knowing are necessarily correct.

\textsuperscript{16} To illustrate his belief that, generally, good news does not sell, Former Editor (B) spoke of the “salutary lesson” he got when trying to buck the trend. He told how The West Australian dropped 10,000 sales when the newspaper ran a positive front-page story one Saturday about a girl who had donated a kidney to her sister.
not have stemmed from any ill will on the part of the journalist, but would have simply been seen as the ‘sexy’ angle to take. He explained:

You know what the issue is that’s going to get people engaged and perhaps without realising what the consequences might be, that it might further marginalise Aborigines. The first question would be, ‘Is it a good story’? Not, ‘what are the consequences’?

In light of the above discussion, it is useful now to consider how the ‘story’ of indigenous youth crime in Northbridge met the key news values of the WA press. First, it is important to note, as I discuss in Chapter 4, that the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, which triggered the curfew, only became a story about crime because it was leaked to a crime reporter at *The West Australian*. Had it reached a journalist from any other news round, it could just as easily have come under any number of different headings, such as urban planning, welfare or, even, liquor licensing legislation. The focus on crime immediately enhanced its news appeal; indeed, according to Ericson et al. (1991, 239), “deviance and control” is the defining characteristic of newsworthiness.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) The news appeal of crime was, indeed, one of the key determinants of the ‘moral panic’ of 1991, discussed in Chapter 1. Seeking to explain the discrepancy between actual crime rates and the disproportionate level of media attention they received, Mickler (1998, 15-16) concluded that this was to be attributed to the newsworthiness of deviance and the “re-reportability” of the story of Aboriginal juvenile crime or the fact that the story “had legs”. He argued, “[The media-manufactured crime wave] is certainly not a ‘conspiracy’, not does it appear to be the effect of any one sector of the polity ‘gunning’ for others (youths and Aboriginal people). Still less does it appear to be something clearly ‘willed’ by senior journalists or newspaper owners. Instead, it appears to be a complex effect-and-return-effect process by which news is, firstly, reported … and then, secondly, responded to by other news sources to harness, mobilise and enlist the events’ newsworthy effects for their own (related and quasi-related) agendas; these second-order reports then have the potential for further effectivity of the same kind (though not all of them will be taken up this way) – and so on”.

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Secondly, as a police reporter at *The West Australian* and a senior official with the WA Police Service media department point out, crime is the number one news staple in Perth. The latter told me that Perth residents are believed to fear crime more than do residents in any other Australian city. Third, the story fed racial stereotypes, presenting readers with images guaranteed to tap into their worst fears and consistent with their widely-held expectations about indigenous youth. Finally, the story unfolded in Perth’s premier entertainment district, which alwaysexcites media interest. According to the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol (which is based in Northbridge), crime in Northbridge is of greater interest than crime anywhere else because people believe the precinct to be a dangerous place. She said:

The media love issues in Northbridge … If two people get stabbed, one in Northbridge and one in Scarborough, you’ll get Northbridge on the front page and you’ll get something on page 10 about Scarborough. The media know the perception of the general population of Northbridge is not good so they just like to maintain it at that level; they’ll just keep on reinforcing people’s views about how unsafe Northbridge is, even though it’s the only stabbing that they’ve had in six months.

A police reporter with *The West Australian* confirmed her views when asked how he had approached stories about Northbridge, explaining:

When I was writing those stories [about Northbridge], I was thinking what do readers want to know about? When you look at the issue in their

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18 A study by Hartley & McKee (2000) into the media coverage of indigenous juvenile crime also underscored the importance of crime as a news value. According to their survey findings, “The way in which two people made the news … may … demonstrate that Indigeneity in crime stories was determined by genre rather than gene” (301).
19 A senior official with the WA Police Service media department told me, “Perth is pretty obsessed with police news coverage as far as other places go”.
eyes, you realise that what they’re most worried about and, consistently every poll shows, is safety. And it’s not just the actual crime, it’s the fear of crime. And the perception of Northbridge is not very good.

*The West Australian*’s story about indigenous youth on the rampage in Northbridge then took hold as it got ‘legs’ (or increased news appeal) when other media picked it up. As I discuss in later chapters, the Northbridge curfew also provided the WA press with the opportunity to sensationalise and dramatise by focusing on the presence of children as young as six in Northbridge, even though very few children of that age had ever been picked up. It is clear, therefore, that a story about indigenous youth crime in Northbridge had all the necessary ingredients of a good ‘yarn’ and was guaranteed a run in the front news pages.

**Editorial policies**

Editorial policies were the second element the RCIADIC report listed among the institutional pressures on journalism; however, a definition of “editorial policies” is arguably even more elusive than the news values discussed above. In my view, the RCIADIC was referring here to a newspaper’s ‘unwritten rules’ deriving from its own organisational culture. These “informal lines of communication” (Sigal 1973, 8) are key

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20 A story’s potential appeal to other media outlets will in itself influence whether or not the newspaper will select it for publication, the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* said in her interview for this study.

21 The State Manager of MA, for example, told me, “I reckon you could probably count on one hand and maybe three fingers the number of children that age [7- to 8-year-olds] that have been taken into our service. … It gets reported as if we’re dealing with the whole suite of ages from birth to 18, and the truth is that we’re dealing with 14, 15 and 16 year olds – that’s what the bulk of them are”.

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determinants in the way in which news is presented. In fact, according to Breed’s (1955) much-cited study, *Social Control in the Newsroom*, reporters are never told what the editorial policies are. Editorial policies are implicit rather than explicit and are communicated through “socialisation” on the job. Breed finds that the reporter learns “what is expected of him so as to win rewards and avoid punishments” through a series of informal mechanisms, such as reading the newspaper he or she works for, sitting in on news conferences, listening to office gossip and so on, and fashioning their stories accordingly (328-329). Thus, Ward (1995) finds with reference to election campaign reportage, for example, that journalists learn intuitively on the job what is expected of them. He contends that:

> Reporters … need not be officially instructed on the political line they should take in reporting election stories. They will quickly learn what is appropriate from the way in which sub-editors run, cut, rewrite or ‘spike’ their copy (104).

Soloski (1989, 212) makes the interesting observation that written editorial policies are not required because the very “professionalism of journalism extends the workplace control which management exercises over journalists”. He says that common professional standards and norms of conduct alleviate the need “for individual news organisations to arbitrarily establish elaborate rules and regulations for staff members” (212). Soloski, however, does not take into account the capacity for

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individual editors to influence policy, which I believe they do (as discussed below).

In considering the influence of editorial policies on news content, it is important also to acknowledge the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of news organisations. According to the ABA (2001, 11 & 143), while editors on newspapers “appear to have a carte blanche control over the selection and placement of items in their products”, a news story at a metropolitan newspaper is “typically reviewed” by at least six people before it is published: reporter, chief of staff, news editor, chief sub-editor, sub-editor and proof sub-editor. Further, as Ward (1995, 102-103) points out, journalists do not necessarily get to dig out stories themselves. He notes that:

Much of the work of journalists is supervised and directed … journalists are seldom left to sniff the winds and to follow their ‘nose for news’. They may see themselves as independent and independently-minded professionals, but the great majority in fact work in highly bureaucratic organisations, where their superiors will have the final say in whether (and how) their stories appear.

Thus, it is clear that the hierarchical nature of newsrooms, like all corporate concerns, limits the discretion that reporters may have in their news gathering and news reporting activities.

**Journalists read the mood**

Several of the journalists I interviewed described how editorial policy had changed at *The West Australian* with the appointment of a new
editor, Paul Armstrong, in August 2003. They believed his policy required “a less considered, more sensationalist approach to reporting”. This necessarily implies that the previous editorial policy required a more considered, less sensationalist approach to reporting but, in the absence of any written policy, it is not possible to measure the difference in the editors’ approaches. However, as I demonstrate in later chapters, the approaches to the story of the Northbridge curfew under the various editors at *The West Australian* were very different and confirm their respective influence on news content. One reporter who covered social affairs told how she actually left her position at *The West Australian* because she believed the new editor was interested only in stories about “rorting the system” rather than those with a social welfare focus. Another reporter spoke of her inability to write indigenous stories the way she believed the new editor wanted, which, she said, required an overwhelmingly negative, sensationalist approach. In the absence of written editorial policies, as one leading columnist at the newspaper told me, journalists learn to “read the mood”. He explained:

If you have a strong, very vocal editor, and people want to win his favour, they write stuff that they think will appeal to him; they try to sense what his views are on things. … For many years *The West* attempted to be a paper of record, a serious paper of record. I think if you look at the reportage of, say, Skull Creek Royal Commission, you will find it was actually quite dispassionate, deliberately dispassionate, so as not to stir up strong feelings one way or the other. Now I think if you reported an event like that … there’d be a lot more controversies stirred up.

Former Editor (A) of *The West Australian* made a similar point. He told me he saw “no interest in the issue of indigenous affairs” at the
newspaper and suggested that the new editor’s sensationalist approach to reporting explained why the newspaper had ended up in court over naming a young indigenous boy who was a ward of the State.23 The editor’s defence that the boy had been named out of concern for the child was, this former editor contended, simply “laughable”. Former Editor (A) further insisted that the newspaper’s simplification of stories was more indicative of editorial policy than ‘news value’.

In explaining his relative powerlessness once he has submitted his copy, The West Australian’s General News Reporter told me how he had once written a story about a group of mentally handicapped people who were being denied the possibility of vocational work because of government cut backs. Senior staff incorporated his story (including his by-line) into a completely different one about “dole bludgers”. The resultant story became the subject of a complaint and an unfavourable ruling from the Press Council.24 The reporter noted somewhat whimsically that this was an example of “editing outside [his] control that had an unfavourable outcome”. The reporter went on to say that “one of the first things” he learned on the job was that stories are edited when

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23 In August 2005, The West Australian’s editor, Paul Armstrong, and its publisher WA Newspapers Limited were fined $20,000 after admitting to contempt of court for identifying a nine-year-old ward of the State.

24 In October 2004, The West Australian lost an appeal against a headline, “The true cost of bludgers”, which targeted an unemployed Aboriginal family by linking three unrelated stories. The complainant, former WA Chief Justice Henry Wallwork, described the page three report as “cowardly in the extreme as it attacks a relatively defenceless family, including innocent children” (Australian Press Council, Adjudication 1247, adjudicated July 2004; reheard and reissued October 2004).
they need to be cut back and they may be substantially revised as a result. He explained:

Stories are cut down so that they do not say what was originally written or they only give one part of what was originally written. So there may be a balanced story but the story gets cut and gets put in a space where only one side of the story is given and people go away and they say it’s bias.

My research found that general news reporters, in particular, receive strong direction in both selecting their stories and determining how they should approach them. *The Sunday Times’* General News Reporter (2), for example, told me that he took his instructions from the chief of staff, who would also suggest the appropriate frame or ‘line’ to adopt. He explained:

With the Northbridge curfew story, for example, he’d say I need you to go out to find Aboriginal kids, have a talk to them, see what they think about it. Straightaway, without him even thinking about it, their Aboriginality had come into play, just through his direction of what he was looking for … It was very difficult to do anything but follow the chief of staff’s line and direction.

The journalists with specific news rounds and columnists that I spoke to, however, believe they enjoy considerably more autonomy than their other colleagues do.25 *The West Australian’s* State Political Editor, for example, appears to enjoy complete freedom to write what he wants. He said the editor gives him “a big space in the paper with nothing

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25 Weaver & Wilhoit (1991, 76) reported that 60 per cent of the journalists they surveyed believed they had almost complete freedom in selecting stories. Gans (1980, 101) found that “star” writers are almost completely autonomous. He said, “They are treated as respectfully as bestselling or prestigious novelists, discussing the story with the senior editor only if they want guidance. Most of the time, senior writers are equally free, except when they are writing lead or cover stories; on the other hand, junior writers must earn individual autonomy by their performance” (101). Gans cited a writer who had spent nearly 20 years at *Time* and who said that “if people around here started giving orders, the whole system would collapse” (101).
dictated as to what to fill it with”. The newspaper’s Reporter (A) said she does not recall any editorial influences in relation to the stories she wrote about Northbridge other than one article that examined the view of young people on the streets. She had chosen this frame, she said, because “their voices had until that point not been heard during the debate”. She believed her story was revised due to pragmatic organisational imperatives rather than any ideological motives. She explained:

We had done quite a lot of stories from the perspective of crime statistics and Northbridge business owners. … I had spent time with Delphine [a former ‘street kid’] and was going to do a series with her about life for youth in Northbridge, but I think that editorial managers were keen to run a short picture story to coincide with the so-called start to the curfew that evening … I understood [this] was more because they needed something to run that evening and did not want to wait to run a feature.

It is clear, however, that both the above journalists would have “read the mood” of their editor and know intuitively the limits of their autonomy.

According to the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian*, for example, the editor and senior management of the newspaper have a “scarily subjective” influence on news content. She notes that while the editor will always have the final say, the “maturity and calibre” of the other senior staff should, however, temper the editor’s influence. She explained:

What should define the maturity of a newsroom is the ability to have a very robust discussion and to take on somebody about a view that they think is right or wrong. At the end of the day, the editor is where the buck stops and the editor will make the final decision about the front page story, … You can argue the toss until the cows come home but, at the end of the day, it’s their call.
The Editor of *The Sunday Times* says he believes in giving free rein to his columnists in order to ensure the newspaper provides a range of views. He said he had “never, ever” said to one of his columnists that he could not publish what they had written because he thinks, “It’s healthy for the paper to have opposing views”. Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* agreed, saying that it was a newspaper’s role “not to limit a reader’s understanding to one particular side of the argument”. The Former Acting Editor shared this view, speaking of the need for *The West Australian*, in particular, to publish the full range of views on a given issue when it is the only daily newspaper produced in WA. She said:

> If the newspaper has made its mind up and the editor has a position, then there’s no problem with that as long as the pages of the newspaper are allowed to reflect the entirety of the debate. The ability to have that scope is essential, especially in a town like this where there is a very dominant newspaper.

As I demonstrate in later chapters, however, *The West Australian* did not reflect the “entirety of the debate” on the curfew. Further, the different editors who held the reins during the period under review heavily influenced the reportage. The influence of the Editor of *The Sunday Times* was also apparent in the newspaper’s editorials, which applauded the curfew despite the opinions of his senior columnists, particularly a political reporter who had first-hand knowledge of the political manoeuvrings behind the curfew.
Routines of news gathering

The routines of news gathering, the third institutional element that the RCIADIC *Regional Report* refers to, are a key determinant in the selection of stories and their subsequent framing. Journalists dismiss claims that news is routinised because it is unpredictable and, consequently, defies organisation (Ward 1995). However, I agree with Ward when he argues, “When the mythology of the news is stripped away, it is apparent that newswork is necessarily routinised” (101). Ward explains:

> If the actual content of the daily news is not, the way in which journalists gather it is *predictable*. Many of the routine methods they employ to decide and produce the news are determined by the structure, division of labour, requirements, rules, and news practices of the commercially driven organisations for which they work (101).

Routines are necessary in order to undertake the “enormous organisational feat” that the regular production of news entails (Tiffen 1993, 171). Indeed, according to ABC TV’s leading current affairs presenter, Kerry O’Brien, that organisational feat is rapidly growing. In a speech delivered to the WA Media Club in April 2004, O’Brien described how journalists today must cover a greater range of stories that are often far more complex than ever before (or, at least, that journalists are under greater pressure to “try to grapple with that complexity”). Further, journalists are working with fewer human resources, to tighter deadlines and with less space in which to write their stories. These developments,
O’Brien believed, would inevitably adversely affect news content. He concluded:

There’s an insatiable beast out there consuming stories as fast as they can be churned out, and it’s in a commercial environment where the processing of news has increasingly become just another item to be manufactured like baked beans.

Indeed, even Lippmann (1922, 123) recognised – at a time when today’s technology would have been simply inconceivable – that “without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgements, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would soon die of excitement”. Paletz & Entman (1981, 19) present a more prosaic explanation whereby news organisations are, simply, “bureaucracies that are characterised by hierarchy, division of labour, and routinisation of working operations through relatively standardised rules and procedures”.

News, as Tiffen (1993, 174) points out, is produced against two primary constraints: the deadline and the news hole. The deadlines relate to the tight schedules that govern daily production.26 Similarly, news organisations need a regular supply of copy to fill the ‘news hole’. A news story cannot be delayed until all the facts are gathered; neither can a newspaper simply declare “nothing newsworthy happened today!” (Ward 1995, 102). As Tuchman (1978, 16) puts it, “all news media must

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26 Gans (1980, 109) contends, “Ultimately, the divisions of power in news organizations are over-shadowed, and the divisions of labor determined, by the deadline”.
still provide stories, if only to have material to sandwich between money-producing ads”. It is important to consider in this context the size of the ‘news hole’. Complex stories cannot be adequately told unless there is sufficient space in the newspaper to tell them. Thus, Graber (1988, 265) contends that:

Newspaper space is too constrained to satisfy the requirements of adequate explanations without undue sacrifice of variety in coverage. Space and time pressures are magnified by the need to repeat background material in every story because audiences are in constant flux. … Given current news-production conventions … news must be produced quickly, leaving little opportunity for research and reflection. Speed and ‘the scoop,’ unfortunately, are prized more than depth and insight.

For his part, Tiffen (1989, 28) insists, “Covering the news is an infinite, impossible task”. He refers to it as “an exercise in imperfection, the product of a series of compromises” and is not surprised, therefore, when “errors and misjudgements occur”.

My research found that time pressures and the deadline were the main influences militating against considered analysis of issues and in favour of ‘common sense’ reporting. The Former Acting Editor of The West Australian described the pressures as follows:

One of the things that everyone has fallen prey to is the pressure of time, trying to keep pace with all those demands and trying to do things in a measured way while still getting tomorrow’s paper out. That's a huge challenge for everyone because resources are not getting any better.

An illustration of the possibly unintended but nevertheless damaging consequences of rushed news gathering is afforded by an article written
by The West Australian’s Columnist (B) at the time of the curfew. In his interview with me two years after the piece was published, the columnist condemned the curfew as a “cynical political exercise” and dismissed it as a mere “band-aid”. He explained his opinion about the issue of indigenous youth in Northbridge as follows:

The problem is not kids hanging around Northbridge; it’s a broader, wider, more complex issue. It all goes back to broad brush problems that these poor people have faced for bloody generations; you can’t just say, ‘let’s remove them from Northbridge’ and all of a sudden the problem’s fixed. They’ll just go into the city or somewhere else.

He was very surprised when I drew his attention to his column on this subject in which he had, in fact, applauded the Premier for “leading the way in Aboriginal affairs”. As can be seen in the following extract from our interview, Columnist (B) was at a loss to explain the views he had expressed in the column. It is probable that the pressures of daily news gathering did not afford him the luxury of deeper reflection on the issue.

Is that what I said, did I? Well, ok, did I mention anything further than that? (Reads it) Yeah, well there you go. The point I’m trying to make though is that if you remove the kids from Northbridge, it’s not going to fix the problem, it’s only transporting the problem somewhere else, isn’t it? … As I say, things change. If I look at this [column] now and see whether I would have agreed with it, yeah there’s lot of things I’ve written in the past and looked at further down the line and thought, something must have affected you in some way to actually say that but … it’s not something I completely disagree with now but I can see what you’re saying, I’m probably giving you a bit of contradictory views here … Yes, well there you go.

The RCIADIC was correct in recognising and highlighting the importance of the routines of news gathering in influencing news content. Indeed, as I will argue below, it is my contention that these
make sources such as the State Government particularly attractive to
the WA press because they have the necessary expertise and
resources to provide newsworthy material in the most efficient and
expedient manner.

**Story selection and use of sources**

No discussion of the routines of news gathering would be complete
without consideration of how news stories are selected in the first
instance. Lippmann’s (1922, 214) long-ago observation that, “All the
reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness
all the happenings in the world” is still frequently cited to demonstrate
the inevitability of and necessity for selection criteria in the news
gathering process. (It also explains, of course, journalists’ dependence
on secondary sources, discussed below.) Further, a journalist must tell
a story in order for an issue or event to become news. As Molotch &
Lester (1975) put it:

> Occurrences on any given day are infinite in number, limited only by the range
> of conceptual imagination of the total population of the earth … ‘public events’
> [are] those occurrences which are somehow attended to as important enough to
> become a part of a public’s experience as news (236).

To these “public events”, I add the pseudo-events, which the media
sometimes select as newsworthy (and to which I refer in Chapter 3).27

The important point that Molotch & Lester are making here is that the

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27 The term ‘pseudo-event’ has been used to refer to an event designed to gain
attention or create a particular impression (McQuail 1994, 364).
media do not simply report events, which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. Mayer (cited in Tiffen 1994, 133) makes a related point when he says, “News is not some kind of natural thing, like stones, found out there”. News stories, rather, are in the telling. Mayer argues:

(News) is socially produced and socially discovered. The element of creativity and shaping inherent in its production and presentation is inescapable. The same point can be made – as any one working on social indicators will know – about ‘hard’ statistics: what is recorded, what counts as a record, the way it is organised – all these are socially contentious (133).

There are many different theories relating to the selection of stories, aside from the application of news values discussed above. The most well-known theories consider, for example, the news organisations themselves and look at how their structures and division of labour affect story selection (see, for example, Breed 1955, Sigal 1973, Epstein 1973). Another organisational theory is David Manning White’s “gatekeeper theory” which sees the editor opening and closing the newspaper’s ‘gate’ to stories he or she selects and rejects.28 There is also the ‘mirror theory’, which proposes that events determine story selection, with journalists simply holding a mirror to them and reflecting

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28 The gatekeeping concept arose from research undertaken by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) into how families decide upon their food purchases. He noted that information has to flow along certain channels which contain “gate areas”, where decisions are made, under the influence of various favourable or unfavourable forces. David Manning White (1950) conceived this idea when examining the selection decisions of the telegraph-wire editor of a local newspaper (the controller of these particular gates). “Mr Gate’ decides what is news, and what is not” (McQuail 1994, 213).
their image back to the audience. Tuchman’s (1978) concept of a “news net” is also widely cited, whereby the bureaucratic threads of the news net are knitted together to select certain preferred types of occurrences as “news events” while, at the same time, ensuring that others slip through the net unremarked. Another theory suggests that the journalists’ sources shape the news or, as Molotch & Lester (1974, 101) put it, those groups in society powerful enough to gain access to journalists and to create the “public events” I referred to above.

I believe that all these theories have some merit and contend that a combination of different organisational, professional and external factors shape the news. However, I found theories concerned with the influence of elite sources on story selection particularly useful for my research (for example, Molotch & Lester 1974; 1975, Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Fishman 1980, Gans 1980, Graber 1988; 2000, Ericson et al. 1987; 1989, Tiffen 1989, Paletz & Entman 1981, Bennett & Entman 2001, Bennett 2005). The most important issue, I believe, in considering the selection and framing of a story is whose opinions are given a voice therein. As Tiffen (1989, 51) points out, news is a “parasitic institution”, which is dependent upon information generated by others. Given what he (1989, 32) refers to as the “soberingly small proportion of news” that journalists can directly observe for themselves,

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29 As Gans (1980, 78) explains, mirror theory began to weaken in the 1960s, as media critics pointed out what journalists did to and with events when transforming them into news, and called attention to events that failed to become news.
they must necessarily look beyond their own limited resources. This requires them to make choices. As Croteau & Hoynes (2003, 135) point out:

> News is the product of a social process through which media personnel make decisions about what is newsworthy and what is not, about who is important and who is not, about what views are to be included and what views can be dismissed.

Sigal (1973) puts it more succinctly, saying simply that because “most news is not what has happened, but what someone says has happened … the choice of sources [is] crucial” (69). Thus, as Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, 114) point out, accepting some sources while ignoring others “is an important part of journalistic routine”. They note that those inside the “charmed circle of access will expect its existing boundaries to be maintained more or less intact”. It is interesting to consider here Ward's (1995, 108) contention that routine news gathering practices do not “entirely constrain” journalists because he believes that their individual professionalism will always come to the fore, notably the requirement upon them to provide an impartial, objective and accurate portrayal of events. The MEAA’s Code of Ethics obliges journalists “to report and interpret [the news] honestly” by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or “distorting emphasis”. It also requires journalists “not to place unnecessary

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30 Code of Ethics, MEAA.
emphasis” on a series of personal characteristics, including ‘race’.  

Most generally, the normal standard of impartiality calls for balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation of news; separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language or pictures (McQuail 1994, 255).  

Ericson et al. (1991) describe the typical application of objectivity in relation to sources as follows:

An allegation is quoted from one source, a counterpoint is made by a spokesperson for the organisation subject to the allegation, and the truth is held to reside somewhere in between. This approach has increased the expectation of impartiality in all media and has made the bias of newspapers appear increasingly improper (39).

While two opinions may not be as diametrically and simplistically opposed as Ericson et al. suggest, it is clear that the key issue is in fact what sources are used. In News: The Politics of Illusion, Bennett (2005, 203) rightly contends that claims about objective reporting “rest on very shaky foundations” because of the choices involved in choosing sources, as well as story themes and language. He points out that:

For every source included, another is excluded. With each tightening of the plot line, meaningful connections to other issues and events become weakened. Every familiar theme or metaphor used in writing about an event obscures a potentially unique feature of the event (203).

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31 Hartley & McKee (2000, 338) argue, however, that the failure to “mention race for ethical reasons could deny precisely the ‘background’ and ‘context’ that would explain an event”. Whilst this is an interesting observation, my research has not identified any example to support it.

32 In Methodology, I discuss the research literature that has sought to demonstrate how the choice of words and images can reflect and imply value judgements in reporting on race (see, for example, Hartmann & Husband 1974, Tuchman 1978, van Dijk 1987; 1988; 1991, Fowler 1991, Fairclough 1995). However, I am concerned here just with the use of sources.
In addition to newsworthiness, efficiency and expedience will play a key role in determining the choice of sources a journalist uses. As Tiffen (1989, 32) points out, such considerations make government a most attractive source because of its ability to speedily provide a steady, reliable supply of copy. Indeed, Ward (1995, 175) refers to material from official sources as “information subsidies”, given that news organisations can obtain it at considerably less cost than they would expend in gathering it themselves. Tiffen (1989, 32) explains the relative attraction of government as a news source as follows:

News gathering routines should offer the best news in greatest volume in the least time-consuming way, with some protection against the competitive danger of being ‘scooped’, and against the risks of unreliability and uncertainty in controversial areas. This all contrives towards reliance on the routine channels of official institutions.

Gans (1980, 116) and others (such as Rivers et al. 1975, 227) have also found that government officials “simplify” the task of news gathering and reduce the amount of time and effort a journalist has to expend on the exercise. Gans contends (1980, 116) that this makes other sources that are unable to respond in similar fashion less attractive:

Staff and time being in short supply, journalists actively pursue only a small number of regular sources who have been available and suitable in the past, and are passive toward other news sources.

Further, Meadow (1980, 148-49) asserts that economic imperatives have driven news organisations to assign journalists to rounds “where news is likely to be generated”. Government officials, in turn, release information where it is most likely to reach reporters. Journalists from
competing news organisations assemble where this information is distributed. This practice has become routine for journalists covering federal and State politics. Hamilton (2006, 48) is particularly condemnatory in his description of this practice, referring to the “herd mentality” of the parliamentary press gallery which, he contends, “makes fools of otherwise intelligent people”. In WA, *The West Australian* leads the pack given its virtual monopoly status; indeed, it is popularly known as ‘the bible’ for other news organisations in Perth.33

In his study of various media outlets in the US, Gans (1980, 130) notes that, "all other things being equal", journalists prefer to resort to sources in official positions of authority and responsibility who they consider to be “competent knowers” (Fishman 1980, 96). These sources, Gans argues, are assumed to be more trustworthy, “if only because they

33 Paletz & Entman (1981, 201-203) attributed the propagation of a ‘conservative myth’ by US media during the 1970s mainly to ‘pack journalism’, the tendency of journalists to work together, arrive at a consensus, cover the same stories and use the same news sources. In contrast, Tiffen (1989, 61) believes that ‘pack journalism’ can protect reporters from being manipulated by their sources because the practice encourages them to compete among themselves. He argues, “Competition plays a critical role in news judgment. At any given moment the vague prescriptions of newsworthiness receive force and direction from what other news organisations are producing. ... The forces for consensual judgment are heightened by the close proximity which competing reporters share on some rounds. Their subsequent ‘shop talk’ helps form common news judgment. This tendency is typically decried. Although sometimes the news consensus that so develops may be out of touch with key aspects of the situation, it can also help inoculate reporters against source manipulation, while collective problem-solving is often superior to individual efforts amid general ignorance and uncertainty” (60-61). The influence of ‘pack journalism’ on news content is reflected in an ABA (2001, 90) survey that found, “Newspapers, news wires and public radio were seen by news producers as significantly more influential on the news products of other media”. They were all seen as between "somewhat influential" and "very influential". Free to air television was next, rated as "somewhat influential", while commercial radio, magazines, the Internet and pay TV were positioned beneath "somewhat influential" but above "not very influential".
cannot afford to lie openly; they are also more persuasive because their facts and opinions are official” (130). Thus, as Tiffen (1989, 198) puts it, “News is a set of routines plugged into a power structure” or, as Croteau & Hoynes (2003:128-129) argue:

The standard practices for gathering news and the corresponding definition of where news is likely to happen help explain why so much of our daily news focuses on the activities of official institutions … the news we get needs to be understood as the end result of these professional routines, which generally focus on the activities of legitimate, bureaucratic institutions.

Ward (1995, 164) makes the compelling argument that the capacity of government and other sources with vested interests successfully to

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34 In his study of CBS evening news, NBC nightly news, Newsweek and Time, Gans (1980, 129-131) identified six “major source considerations” as follows:
1. Past suitability. If sources have provided information leading to suitable stories in the past, they are apt to be chosen again, until they eventually become regular sources.
2. Productivity. Sources are judged by their ability to supply a lot of information without undue expenditure of staff time and effort.
3. Reliability. Story selectors want reliable sources whose information requires the least amount of checking. However, if a story or a fact is controversial or not readily believed, reporters are then expected to gather proof from at least two separate and independent sources.
4. Trustworthiness. When reliability cannot be checked quickly enough, story selectors look for trustworthy sources: those who do not limit themselves to self-serving information, try to be accurate, and, above all, are honest.
5. Authoritativeness. All other things being equal, journalists prefer to resort to sources in official positions of authority and responsibility. They are assumed to be more trustworthy if only because they cannot afford to lie openly; they are also more persuasive because their facts and opinions are official.
6. Articulateness: When sources are interviewees, they must be able to make their point as concisely, and preferably as dramatically, as possible.

More recently, McQuail (1994, 225-226) proposed that the following five criteria determined source access to the news media:
1. Efficient supply of suitable material.
2. Power and influence of source.
3. Good PR.
4. Dependency of media on limited source.
5. Mutual self-interest in news coverage.

Ward (1995, 165) makes the important point, “Politicians and others who are aware of the routine practices of newsworkers are well placed to successfully promote their particular versions of what is happening – and what can be done about it”. Clearly access to the news media is at least partly dictated by the efficiency with which a source is able to package and supply suitable material.
peddle their particular versions of events “flows from routine news practices which bind newsworkers to their sources of information and which encourage them to report their sources’ accounts not as versions of reality but as the facts”. Alternative sources, as Herman & Chomsky (1988, 19) point out, can prove much more time-consuming:

Taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investigative expense, whereas material from sources that are not *prima facie* credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful checking and costly research.

In light of the choices that have to be made in relation to the use of sources and *the basis upon which they are made*, I agree with Cunningham & Turner (1993, 6) who contend that the pursuit of objectivity is, in fact, illusory. For example, my research found that the sources who are most successful in gaining access to the news media are likely to be powerful, well resourced and well organised for supplying journalists with the kind of news they want, when they want it. Such sources are both “authoritative” and “efficient” and they often enjoy “habitual access” to the news media (McQuail 1994, 225). I found, for example, that, apart from government, journalists are much more likely to use representatives of the Northbridge business community than representatives of the indigenous community (with whom, as discussed in Chapter 1, journalists find it difficult to engage).³⁵ This is not to deny

³⁵ This point is made well by McCarthy & Crichlow (1993, xvi-xvii) who state that who has the power to define whom, when, and how directly impacts upon issues of identity and representation, arguing that minority groups in the US do not enjoy equal access to the media: “Often minorities do not have central control over the production of
Mickler & McHoul’s (1998) important finding that indigenous people may have more authority, access and resources than some other minority groups.36 As Tuchman (1978, 4) points out:

The secretary of state can float an idea in the news media. The ‘average’ man or woman does not have such access to the media. Nor does an average citizen have the same power, held by legitimated politicians and bureaucrats, to convert his or her reactions to the news into public policies and programs.

Indeed, one news reporter who had spent a lot of time in Northbridge believed that it was more likely that business people had “pushed for action” from the State Government via the media than the ‘white, middle-class Australian’ visitors referred to above. A senior political reporter with The Sunday Times agreed that the business representatives were ‘media savvy’ enough to do this, noting that they images about themselves in this society. So that when events like the Los Angeles riots and Howard Beach and the Bensonhurst attacks on black people occur, minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans, do not have ‘equal access’ to the media to ‘tell their side of the story’. Gandy (1998, 17) makes a similar point when he finds, also in the US, that, “Minority group members are quoted less often and less extensively. When they do get to speak, their time on the stage is brief, and they are usually ‘allowed’ only to speak as victims, rather than as critics or accusers”. Ericson et al. (1987, 9) further argue that, “It is extremely difficult for anyone outside the deviance-defining elite to penetrate its inner circle and sustain competing or alternative accounts”. They therefore contend that the news media “contribute to structured inequality in relation to the spokespersons they do or do not allow to make imprints on versions of reality … the news media are a competitive resource differentially available to different sources” (16). Peter Manning, writing in the Walkley Magazine (2004, 19), draws attention to the implications of typecasting Arabs for democratic debate and society at large, saying, “If you suppress the narrative of a people … you are locking them into a world where one segment of our society has no voice. They are not therefore part of the debate. By imprisoning a people … we invite people to find other ways of expressing their frustration. And then the blame game can start again”.

36 In the same study, Mickler & McHoul (1998, 141) find that Aboriginal sources “appear to be the second most consulted source” (after official sources) in stories about indigenous youth crime. They do not say, however, who those sources are and whether they are, in fact, appropriate representatives of indigenous youth. As discussed in Chapter 1, for example, Charles Perkins was ill placed to comment on a riot that he did not witness and that took place in an area with which he had no connection.
would certainly “fan the problem; they had their ideas on what the problem was and they’re the sort of people who’ll get on the phone and talk to a journalist”. The Northbridge business community is, indeed, a powerful and vocal lobby group that clearly has a vested interest in attributing the problems in Northbridge to indigenous youth. The CRC researcher, for example, believes that the Northbridge business community focuses on indigenous youth in order to divert attention away from the problem of drink-related violence, which is, he says, “always a major issue in Northbridge”. He explained:

If [drink-related violence] was really given prominence, that would terrify people, but it would also terrify a lot of business owners that they wouldn’t go to the pubs anymore. Aboriginal people are a very convenient scapegoat.

Personalities such as well-known Northbridge nightclub owner Neil Scott, who uses colourful and explosive language in his condemnation of all things indigenous, provides better ‘copy’ than, for example, the problem of WA’s liquor licensing legislation. According to the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol, the media turned the problems in Northbridge into “an indigenous issue” because “they love Neil Scott”. She explained:

The media will run his unsavoury racist comments, because he says things like ‘(indigenous people) are not dressed properly’ and this and that. They’ll have him on the front page and they’ll do all sorts of things with him. So you go and talk to Neil Scott and he’ll feed you lots of unsavoury racist comments, and then you move to the next one who supports his view, and so at the end of the day you are targeting the people that have expressed their unhappiness about the situation. They go to see the same businesses and then they go.
The Sunday Times’ columnist agreed that this simply reflected routine news gathering practice:

There is a group of Northbridge business people who are pretty vocal and would have made themselves available for interview on this issue. I would have thought that that would have made a big difference. It’s a matter … of what talent you get and what they say. If you get this report, but you go to the Northbridge business association and they say a couple of really boring things about liquor licensing and what we reckon the real problem is these kids who are running amok and why aren’t their parents looking after them, then that’s the line that going to go. I wish it was more complex and smarter than that, but I don’t think it is.

Indeed, journalists and government representatives alike frequently cited the concerns of the business community to explain why “something had to be done”.37 The CRC researcher believes the business community to be responsible, paradoxically, for the media focus on the precinct’s troubles generally:

A lot of the so-called concern (about Northbridge) has come from the Northbridge business community itself. The business community has created a lot of the anxiety, the moral panic and they’re not going to turn around and point to each other, are they? I think were it not for that so-called business community there, I don’t think we would have a lot of the media beat up that we’ve had.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the business representatives on the State Government’s Northbridge Priority Project Committee might have leaked the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report to The West Australian, which triggered a ‘moral panic’.38 The reporter who received the report confirmed he had a strong network of contacts among

37 For example, The West Australian’s General News Reporter told me, “This (curfew) policy … was to protect the businesses and the businesses did need protecting. They were trying to put tables on the street and have people eating and dining al fresco and it was rough going”.

38 See Introduction, footnote 14.
Northbridge’s business community. While the report’s author was not prepared to comment upon who might have leaked his report to the media, he acknowledged that people in Northbridge were “probably too willing to say things to the media because they wanted to generate media pressure, to generate political pressure”. I return to this issue in detail in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the significant influence of news values, editorial policies and news gathering routines on news content. I have demonstrated why the story of the Northbridge curfew would appeal to the WA press’ news values, how editors can play a key role in perpetuating a racial discourse based on stereotypes and ‘common sense’ reporting and, above all, why the WA press is necessarily dependent upon the State Government as an expedient source of news copy. In the next chapter, I discuss the routine work practices the State Government employs to maintain its position as preferred news source and consider its influence over how the WA press tells ‘the news’.
CHAPTER 3
SELLING THE STORY

The close relations that exist between government and the news media have been variously described as a “tango” (Gans 1980, 116), a “coupling” (Sigal 1973, 4) or, even, a union so strong that both parties sometimes “overlap and … become part of each other” (Ericson et al. 1987, 23).¹ My research certainly found that WA print journalists and government sources enjoy what one reporter called “an extremely close relationship”.² I also found that journalists were generally pragmatic about their relationship with government.³ As Former Editor (B) of The

¹ This “coupling” or “overlapping” of interests results from the relationships journalists and government media advisers develop with each other and the fact that they may “even occupy space within the walls of the organizations they report on” (Ericson et al. 1987, 23). The media’s offices in WA’s Parliament House are a case in point.
² A police reporter at The West Australian said of journalists’ relations with government, “It’s a very close relationship – extremely close”, while a political reporter with ABC News said, “contact is constant”. The State Political Editor with The West Australian said he would ring the media advisers every day and they would ring him “all the time”. They also came to his office at Parliament House. He said the senior government media adviser “would come in all the time and speak very openly and very candidly about a lot of issues. Often you’d find those opinions appear verbatim in the press”. The West Australian’s Reporter (A) was one of several non political reporters who told me she instigated many of her contacts with government sources, for example when she was looking for “facts and figures for a story, checking information and always trying to get ‘the heads up’ … on government policy”.
³ The Sunday Times’ General News Reporter (A), for example, said that, “[The media advisers] might call me and ask me if I’m interested in this [story] – as they do to everybody – or I’ll contact them. It works both ways. They’re doing their job. They are there to put forward the party line. They’ve got to sell their stories”. His colleague, General News Reporter (B), agreed, saying, “I think each party recognises the need for the other, not as a necessary evil but I look at it in terms of political adversaries who go at it hammer and tongs in Parliament, and then afterwards they can have coffee or a beer. I think with journalists it’s fairly similar. You’re adversaries in that one wants to keep the lines of information and communication open, while the other one doesn’t want to cut them off, but wants to put a few little kinks in the hose so the same information doesn’t come through as freely. They are … doing what they are paid to do, which is to put a favourable spin on it. And you respect that, you appreciate that they have to do their job, and that you have to do everything that you can to get round that, which is your job”.

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West Australian pointed out, the issue is to understand the nature of the relationship and how it “works”. He explained:

I’ve had a Premier come out and give me a document saying, ‘these are a loan, read them and then give them back’. That’s great, that’s part of the relationship. It suited him and there was a story there. You understand that when people do things they do them for their own motivations, very few people in the power elite are doing things for you; they do it because you can assist them.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between the WA press and the State Government and consider the impact of these relations on news content. While in the previous chapter, I demonstrated the importance of the State Government to the WA press as a source of ‘newsworthy’ information, in this chapter I begin by demonstrating the importance of the WA press to the State Government as an important means of communication with the electorate. I explore the effort that the State Government expends in crafting its messages to the news media and consider the routine practices in place that enable it to ‘feed the chooks’. I go on to discuss the political context in which the story of the Northbridge curfew was introduced. This helps to explain why the government media adviser was so confident from the outset that the curfew would be a “winner”; that it would reverse the Government’s flagging fortunes in the polls by demonstrating to Western Australians that it was addressing their widely-held fears about indigenous youth. I then consider the impact of sources on news content within the framework of the extensive scholarly debate that surrounds this issue. While social scientists generally agree that governments wield
tremendous influence over what we read in the newspapers (and how we read it), the media themselves reject this suggestion. Many of the journalists I interviewed said that the State Government’s sophisticated media management tactics did not influence the content of their news stories and insisted that they see through the ‘spin’. Those journalists who conceded some ‘wins’ for the Government said they “got them back” on other occasions. The government media advisers similarly claimed to be relatively ineffective in influencing news content.

Notwithstanding their protests to the contrary, I find that tactics designed to manipulate the media, such as the offer of an ‘exclusive’, may seduce even the most senior members of the WA press. I conclude that both the State Government and the WA press are engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship that, on balance, results in ‘wins’ on both sides. The exclusive nature of their relationship, however, necessarily means that there are losers in their elitist game. As Molotch & Lester (1975, 237) point out, “a crucial dimension of power” is the ability not only to create “public events”, but to make one person’s version of a story become another’s perceived reality.

The strategic use of news

In Australia, as in the US, Cook (1996, 22) rightly contends, it is “inconceivable to imagine governing … without the strategic use of news”. Certainly it is clear, as Bennett & Entman (2001, 117) point out,
that politics is no longer a game for “low budget amateurs”. Indeed, Tiffen (1989, 37) goes so far as to assert, “Politics is the only sphere where publicity is the *sine qua non* of successful role performance”. It is well documented that journalists are now dealing with the “great spin doctors” in numbers that they have never had to before and whose sole job it is to sell them the government message. According to a study undertaken in 2002, some 4,000 journalists work for State or federal government in a public relations (PR) capacity (Ward 2003, 38). It has reached the point where, according to one TV executive, “everyone

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4 Paul Ramadge, Executive Editor of *The Age*, cited in ABA (2001, 87). He talks about the “increasing bureaucracy of public relations and government minders and others who are the great spin doctors of the 1990s and into 2000. We know that they exist in numbers that we’ve never had to deal with before and the federal government and State government employ a huge raft of journalists, mainly former journalists, mainly quality journalists, to put the spin on it”.

5 Throughout the world, governments’ public-information operations are vast and ensure special access to the media (Herman & Chomsky 1988, 19). However, it was not always so. *The West Australian*’s Columnist (A) spoke wistfully of his relations with the State Government when he worked in the newsroom in the 1970s. He told how if he wanted to talk to the then Premier Sir Charles Court, he would simply ring him at his office or at his home and speak directly to him. While the columnist conceded that he “might get a blast” if he interrupted the Premier at dinner, at least “it was straight from the horse’s mouth”. Today, however, he has to ring the ‘spin doctor’ and thinks it unlikely he would consult the Premier, “He’ll simply tell you what he thinks the Premier thinks”. According to this columnist, the resources the State Government invests in media management have multiplied at a rapid rate since that time. He explained, “There was one press officer (in the 1970s). His name was Flynn – and you’d occasionally deal with him, and it seemed odd, why have they got this bloody press officer? What’s his role? And, boy, did they multiply like rabbits, not only did all the Ministers demand to have press secretaries, all the government departments had to have armies of press secretaries … They’re bloody devious these people. They’re political animals who know how to deceive, how to fudge meaning”.

6 Although many government media initiatives involve “the innocent provision of legitimate information about policy decisions and other matters of public interest”, the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS – also popularly known as aNiMLS) wields considerable influence over the ways in which press gallery members report federal politics (Ward 1995, 169). Prime Minister Bob Hawke set up the NMLS to replace Malcolm Fraser’s Government Information Unit. Tiffen (1989) found in his research that journalists following state politics were at even greater risk of manipulation than those reporting at federal level. He said “several reporters” believed that because the state press galleries are smaller and that senior correspondents have to cover nearly all aspects themselves, they are “more easily snowed” by government, and it is therefore easier for State government to “pull down the shutters” (36).
accepts now that stage management is normality”.\textsuperscript{7} \textsuperscript{8} Pointing to the “manipulative fancy footwork” of former Prime Minister Menzies, ABC TV’s current affairs reporter Kerry O’Brien noted in a speech to the WA Media Club in April 2004 that the management “or even manipulation” of news is not a new concept.\textsuperscript{9} He contends, however, that the media is more important to politicians than ever before and that it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to see through the spin:

There’s always been a natural contest – those in power and those who want to know what’s going on behind the scenes. But what is different today … is that image and marketing have never been so central, so constant in politics.\textsuperscript{10} In this age of sophisticated media management, it is very difficult, even for a healthily sceptical media … to separate the legitimate, even desirable activities of politicians from the calculated exploitation, or even manufacturing, of events for political gain.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{7} Channel 4 executive cited in Nossiter et al. (1995, 98).
\textsuperscript{8} Ward (2003, 29) tells of one journalist who joined the Canberra press gallery in 1951. Four decades on, this journalist says, “The big difference is the manipulation of news”.
\textsuperscript{9} Kerry O’Brien addressed the WA Media Club at the Hyatt Hotel, Perth, on 29 April 2004. Tiffen (1989) makes a related point, albeit more disparagingly. He contends, “In considering how public relations manoeuvres have affected political practice, it is easy to stereotype the past as an age of innocence and honour. Politicians didn’t need highly paid consultants to teach them hypocrisy and expedience. Dexterity at handling the media favours the glib over the thoughtful, but politics always has. Affecting the media coverage of developments is a new and different dimension from affecting the developments themselves; indeed the necessity for handling news coverage may be greatest when there is no scope for affecting actual developments. This favours the cynical over the earnest, but again politics always has” (93-94).
\textsuperscript{10} The West Australian’s State Political Editor made a similar point in his interview, “Maybe it’s a reflection of the way society is moving, it’s more about sound bites and grabs than it ever has been before – they need a story, they need a hook, they need to be very simplistic and it’s become more and more so as time has gone on. Maybe this Government is a reflection of the times. There’s no doubt that the Blair Government is very similar, [the senior government media adviser] is modelled on Alistair Campbell”.
\textsuperscript{11} Eric Beecher, former newspaper editor and current owner of Independent Media, spoke eloquently on this issue at the ABC’s Andrew Olle lecture (November 2000). Beecher spoke of “the remarkable rise and rise of public relations as not only an influence, but almost as a kind of partner, in the whole journalistic enterprise of this country”. He explained also that journalistic talent was being attracted to PR by higher salaries and that the enterprise of journalism had come to rely on PR handouts to keep up production. He told this story to illustrate the ease with which ‘spin doctors’ appear to be plying their trade, “A senior figure in PR recently told me how easy the game of ‘spinning’ has become over the past few years – that is the business of nudging journalists in a particular direction, stage-managing news, creating newsworthy events, even drafting news releases in story form that appear in the media virtually intact. But
Thus, O’Brien concludes that the days of the media as government watchdog are numbered, saying, “Romantic notions of news as an important craft – in the mosaic of checks and balances, as one of the fundamental cornerstones of any working democracy – are unfortunately becoming jaded”. Indeed, according to Jewkes (2004, 58), author of Media and Crime, we now live in a society where “political process and media discourse are indistinguishable and mutually constitutive”. Although she is writing of the UK, there is a striking similarity with what is occurring in WA, not least the introduction of punitive measures, such as curfews, which have been developed with an eye to the headlines to demonstrate the Government’s tough ‘law and order’ credentials. She argues:

The symbiotic relationship between the mass media and politicians is illustrated by the support given by the former to the latter in matters of law and order. For two decades a version of ‘populist punitiveness’ has characterized British governments’ attitudes to penal policy, a stance which is replicated in the US and in many other countries around the world. There seems little opposition from any political party in the UK to proposals to incarcerate ever younger children, to introduce curfews, to bring in legislation to prevent large ‘unauthorized’ gatherings, and to introduce new and harsher measures against immigrants, protesters, demonstrators, the homeless and the young unemployed. All these

as a former journalist himself, he wasn’t boasting about this trend; he was more like a fisherman talking about his catches in a well-stocked trout farm”.

12 Cook (1996) believes that governments’ attempts to manage the media are leading to growing public cynicism and distrust of the information contained in news reports. He suggests that such practices “may be undermining the legitimacy of government itself” (22). Bennett & Entman (2001, 23-25) make the related point that “the uneasy distinction between media politics and substance inhibits more complex interpretations of political trends within the policy sphere”. They contend, for example, that while people may continue to vote on much the same basis as ever, decreasing numbers of people are voting. Moreover, many of those who continue to vote profess to be disgusted by the choices they are offered and by the ways in which candidates communicate in the electoral process. A contemporary political dilemma, they argue, is how to stop powerful groups and political actors from using communication in ways that undermine public interest and faith in government itself.
issues are most directly conveyed to the public at large by the mass media (58-59).

My research supports Jewkes’ findings. The Minister who took part in this project underscored the importance of law and order in determining a party’s political fortunes and made clear that the State Government was reluctant to take the lead in debating such matters as the fundamental right of indigenous youth to be in Northbridge, provided they are behaving in accordance with the law. Further, a senior government media adviser told me that there are “few matters before Government where media is not an overwhelming consideration”. He added, “Parliamentary tactics, for example, are essentially about the media. Winning parliamentary debates have to be covered in the media otherwise it’s a hollow victory”. Senior public servants, such as a senior official in the OCP who told me, “media and marketing are critical in dealing with crime”, recognise this thinking. He explained:

In this day and age, the way politics is conducted, you’ve actually got to conduct a lot of public policy in a way that politicians can get political mileage out of it. … It’s how I run this office, it’s with an eye on media all the time, we’re always looking for a way to interest both the politicians and the media in what we’re doing.

13 According to The Sunday Times’ columnist, politicians always have an eye to the media but some are more successful in their endeavours than others. She explained, “You watch somebody like [Attorney General] Jim McGinty, the way he operates. … You can bet he has one eye on the media at every turn, or at most turns anyway, and that doesn’t mean he doesn’t do things that are not policy based. … [But] he does things like balancing gay reform with something really populist, ‘three strikes, you’re out’, that kind of stuff which he thinks probably won’t make much of a difference on the ground but it would make a good difference in the press. He’s very, very media savvy. Whereas you look at others and they may not be. [Deputy Premier] Eric Ripper, for example … look at the premium property tax [a high profile proposed tax on premium properties that the Government was forced to abandon in the face of overwhelming media criticism] – he didn’t have the idea of the media and didn’t want to react to it because that’s not who he is basically”.
His view of ‘media-managed politics’ is pragmatic, noting simply “You’ve got to crack an egg to make an omelette”. Thus, a senior official with the OCP suggests that the issue of young people at risk in Northbridge would not have been addressed had it not presented an opportunity for the Government to obtain positive media coverage.14

The WA State Government Media Office

The WA State Government is not bucking the national or global trend in terms of the increasing number of journalists it is employing to sell its message. In February 2006, the WA GMO employed a total of 47 staff, including 19 media advisers.15 According to a senior official with the GMO, 17 of these media advisers are former journalists.16 The GMO official said they were keen to employ former journalists because media advisers need to have a “good understanding of how the media works”. As Former Editor (A) of The West Australian commented, “The Gallop

14 According to the State Manager of MA, some good did come of the curfew even if it was designed only as a media stunt to win votes. She said that the controversy surrounding the curfew compelled the State Government eventually to facilitate greater coordination between the agencies working with young people at risk in Northbridge, allowing them to provide better follow-up services. I return to this point in Chapter 9.
15 All the Government Ministers have one media adviser, except for the Premier and the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure who each have two advisers. The figure of 47 staff includes media monitoring, community liaison and related staff. (Source: Personal communication with GMO.)
16 It is useful to note in this context Ericson et al.’s (1989, 7) finding from their study of news organisations in Canada that, “It is often the case that the newsroom is staffed with reporters less experienced in the craft than those in the public relations unit of the source bureaucracy”. My research found that government media advisers earned considerably more as GMO employees than as news reporters. They earn $80,000 per annum plus car while a TV reporter, for example, would, at the highest grade, earn approximately $53,000 per annum. (Source: Personal communication with GMO.)
Government saw the need from the time they came into power to get the media spin right and to have control, and they have had some pretty skilful operators”.

The media adviser’s principal responsibility, the GMO official explained, is to advise their Minister on how to present an issue to the public. A senior government media adviser added some other essential selection criteria, including:

- Cynicism (“to match that of the media and understand where media are coming from”);
- Ability to anticipate the media response to an issue; and
- Ability to judge what is newsworthy.

A senior government media adviser contends, “Good media advice is good political advice”. Government needs to know how media will respond to an issue, before they take a decision. A media adviser must

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17 During the course of my research, I found that the government media advisers were reluctant to talk on the record about their work. While a senior official with the WA Police Service media department was happy to be interviewed and was generally forthcoming, in contrast, the government media advisers only reluctantly agreed to participate in this project. By way of explanation, the senior government media adviser said, simply, that he was “paranoid”, while the media adviser to the Minister for Police said he was “just a shadow figure, the shadow boxer”. A senior official with the GMO agreed only to what he called the “bland” part of the interview being recorded. One of the most senior journalists I interviewed insisted that the influence wielded by the senior government media adviser at the time the curfew was introduced should be exposed. He argued, “They don’t like to be exposed, they don’t like to go public, they are the faceless people … but I think if you’ve got somebody [the government media adviser] who has got as much power as a government Minister and shapes government policy, then people should know about it".
therefore be able to speak frankly and honestly to his or her Minister.

He explained:

They should be able to say to their Minister, ‘that is bullshit, you will get crucified’. They must be able to give advice without fear or favour; to replicate the attitude of the media, which go at it like a sledgehammer.

Another important requirement of media advisers, he said, is to serve as “canaries in the goldmine” and “smell out” any hint of complacency or arrogance in Ministerial offices before it comes to the attention of the media.18

**Feeding the chooks**

According to Tiffen (1989, 94), successful political leaders relate to the media “as do parents to controlling an excitable two-year-old”, contending that the “surest means of control is to make it look as if the child is getting its own way”.19 While it is clear that we may best manage many relationships in the way Tiffen describes, my research found that his assessment was compelling as far as the WA press/State Government relations were concerned. When I asked the GMO official

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18 By way of example, the government media adviser described how (when he was a media adviser in Opposition) he had exposed, through Freedom of Information, the purchase by former Family Services Minister Rhonda Parker of a tea set for her Ministerial office at a cost of $5,500. This exposure is believed to have cost Parker her seat.

19 Tiffen (1989, 94) sums up the *modus operandi* of successful political leaders as follows: “They know that children get grumpy if not fed regularly, and that they are more keen on sweets than savouries. They know that their attention span is short, and the constant appearance of novelty is necessary to maintain interest. They know that confrontations can be noisy, but are usually brief, are best solved by diversion rather than persuasion, and that memories are short and forgiving. They know that the shininess of new toys is more important than their durability, and that how something is done is more important than what it is”.

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to describe how the office goes about selling the Government’s message, for example, he insisted, “You cannot force media to present stories in the way you want, you can only present information.” A senior official with the WA Police Service media department agreed, saying, “Controlling journalists is like herding cats”. This does not stop the GMO, however, from trying. Reporter (A) with The West Australian, for example, told how the GMO tried “very hard to sell the curfew” and to “persuade (her) not to pursue a line of inquiry in relation to police reluctance to enforce the curfew as strictly as the Government would have liked”. Indeed, my research found that the GMO has a number of routine practices in place to sell the Government message. I outline some of these below.

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20 The government media adviser made apparent his conviction that he has no influence over the State’s daily newspaper, telling me that he refers to the Liberal Party as “the political wing of The West Australian”. A senior official with the GMO also said he was concerned about the alleged ‘imbalance’ of WA’s daily newspaper. The West Australian’s State Political Editor is amused at the suggestion that the newspaper is biased, saying, “Whenever we’re accused now of being anti-government I laugh, because I remember the days of the Court [Liberal] Government and the same things were written about them and the criticism of the paper was the same … I was called both a Liberal and Labor stooge on a daily basis. … You can’t win”.

21 The government media advisers claimed to be much less persuaded of their own influence than the media was of theirs. A senior official with the WA Police Service media department, for example, said that media liaison is “a percentages game”. He explained, “You cannot afford to fixate on the occasions that you don’t win. You need to say, right, we’re going to lose 20 per cent, we’re going to win 60 per cent of the time and the other 20 per cent of the time will be about equal”. The media adviser to the Minister for Police was even less optimistic. While he did not believe it was possible to set targets, when pressed to give an estimate he said he would expect only a 25 per cent success rate.
**Applying PR to politics**

I agree with Ward (1995, 171-172) who argues that the stratagems politicians and their media advisers use to impart a particular ‘spin’ to the news media’s interpretation of events “amount to little more than the application of PR methods to politics”. As Kopenhaver et al. (1984, 865) found during their extensive research into the PR industry and news media, PR practitioners “agree remarkably” with journalists about what makes a good news story. Hence, a senior official with the WA Police Service media department confirmed that the ongoing challenge for his team (which comprises 14 PR/media officers) is to translate their message into “a newsworthy story opportunity”. He said the need for the WA Police Service to “stay in control of the agenda” rather than have journalists telling the police “what the law and order issues should be” underpinned this objective.

**Wooing ‘the chosen’ or playing favourites**

While a senior official with the GMO insists they never play favourites and a senior official with the WA Police Service media department says that his “rule of thumb” is to treat all journalists “fairly”, my research suggests otherwise. Like Tiffen (1989, 96), I found that, “While journalists often complained of press secretaries indulging in selective leaking, all to whom I spoke denied ever doing so”. However, a political

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22 According to Ericson et al. (1989, 231) “Political sources simply fit their desired effects with the news genre”.

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reporter for ABC News and a veteran of WA’s corridors of power said
that the GMO would play favourites where possible. He explained:

They’ll make stories available – leaked stories is perhaps the word – to
some outlets where they think they’ll perhaps get prominent coverage of
that particular story so, that’s what governments try to do – and some
media organisations cooperate with it unfortunately, but I can see why
they do it. … They don’t do me any favours, I must hasten to point out.

One senior journalist told me, for example, that it was “absolute rubbish”
to suggest that the GMO did not play favourites and that the GMO
officials “would not be doing their jobs” if they did not do so. According
to The West Australian’s State Political Editor, leaks are “the bread and
butter of some journalists … that’s how they do their job”. The risk with
leaks, as Sigal (1973, 56) points out, is that reporters may play along
with their sources in order to get an exclusive, rather than question why
a particular piece of information is being leaked in the first place (which
may make for a more interesting story in itself).23 In his study of various
newsrooms in the US, Gans (1980) found that junior general news
reporters were at particular risk of manipulation. He contended that:

Experienced beat reporters seem to be able to escape co-optation, even
while they enjoy being flattered with invitations and unpublishable
secrets; and they learn to endure a politician’s wrath when his or her
flattery does not stave off a critical story (134).

The West Australian’s State Political Editor confirms Gans’ finding. He
told me how politicians would target recent recruits to his politics team

23 Tiffen (1989, 122) makes a related point, rightly noting that journalists “may be
seduced by the appearance of access and intimacy or the lure of an ‘exclusive’, and so
not fully explore others’ perspectives”. He believes that the wish to obtain exclusives
and enjoy favoured status “can induce selectivity, limited search and the possibility of
manipulation”.

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for some “wining and dining”. He said Ministers might summon junior reporters for a “private chat”, leaving them “in awe” and “star struck” because the Minister has summoned them personally. He explained:

When I had new members in my politics team, you’d find all the Ministers who had issues with other journalists would befriend the new ones and try to induct them into their way of thinking. And then all of a sudden I’d see the back pages of the newspaper and I’d see stories that were just press releases. I hadn’t seen them, if [I had] I wouldn’t have run them or at least I’d have run them differently. The politicians know this as well and they use it to their advantage.24

This same journalist told of his experience of “flattery” as a tactic to secure more high-profile coverage of an issue because the recipient believes he or she has hold of an exclusive. He described how one government media adviser would come into his office at Parliament House and “bag other journos”. On one occasion, the media adviser told him he was giving him a story but not anyone else, “because they’re all a bunch of idiots”. The reporter then chanced to walk past the office where some TV reporters were based and heard the same media adviser telling them, “Guys, I’m not giving this to The West, they’re all a bunch of idiots at The West”.25

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24 Former Editor (A) of The West Australian said during his time at the helm he “could set some ground rules” against people rewriting press releases and could insist reporters “ring people and ask questions”. He said that now he could only “sit there with growing horror about what they’re doing, particularly the younger journalists”.

25 As Tiffen (1989, 121) notes, this practice means that the media adviser will get better coverage of a story because the recipients all think they are getting an exclusive, “elevating its potential importance to a higher level”. By the same token, Tiffen points out, “More substantially important information may be revealed through routine channels, but is competitively devalued”. As Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, 110) note, “Politicians are … in a position, especially when newsworthy, to ‘ration the goodies’, use them as bargaining counters, and direct reporters’ attention to their pet themes”. My research found this to be the case, with government media advisers actively putting out information during the ‘silly season’, for example, precisely to
As I discuss in later chapters, both the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report and the plan to introduce a curfew in Northbridge were leaked to *The West Australian*; neither reporter questioned why they were given these ‘exclusives’, nor did they seek alternative perspectives, appearing instead to have been more interested in enhancing the newspaper’s (and their own) reputation for ‘digging up’ news.

**Punishment tactics**

Just as some reporters may be rewarded with an ‘exclusive’, so others might be punished by being kept out of the loop.\(^{26}\) My research found that WA journalists did indeed believe that they risked being “punished” by the GMO if they failed to present a story in the intended way. *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, for example, told how “all of a sudden” he would be punished if he had written a “bad” story. He said this might involve the GMO giving an exclusive to another paper, not inviting him to a particular press conference or just not giving him the ‘drop’ on a story. The reporter pointed out that being “taken off the drip” prevent the media – as one media adviser put it – from “poking around”. As Ericson et al. (1989, 391) find, “Each device established to accommodate journalists within public bureaucracies is also directed at controlling them”.

\(^{26}\) As Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, 110) rightly assert, “Nobody who intends to supply the masses with their daily ration of news can afford to be out on a limb too often. … Competitiveness thus entails snuggling up to news sources”. Ward (1995, 116-117) makes a similar point, saying that a reporter might avoid taking a critical line “for fear of being denied future access to information”. However, he recognises the power also wielded by the journalist, citing Sigal’s (1973, 5) finding that, “News is an outcome of the bargaining interplay of newsmen and their sources” who have “mixed motives as well as a tacit agreement to co-operate”.

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could do a journalist “a lot of damage” as it gave the impression the journalist had missed a good story.27 28

The importance of strategic timing

The timing of any announcement is always a key consideration for the GMO. As Mickler & McHoul (1998, 144) point out in relation to the difference in the print media’s coverage of indigenous issues during the 1991 Rally for Justice compared with its coverage during the RCIADIC, “the odds of a favourable uptake by the press can alter considerably” depending on the public mood at the time. Thus, when feelings of hostility were running high during the period of the Rally for Justice, the WA press provided very negative coverage of indigenous people. In contrast, its coverage was much more favourable when reporting on RCIADIC during which time the climate was more sympathetic. Similarly, if the Government has a negative issue running that it has to put out to the news media, then the GMO does so at a time when

27 Former Prime Minister Paul Keating used the “drip” metaphor – that is, taking journalists on and off the drip – to describe how government distributes information to the news media (ABA 2001, 85).
28 The West Australian's State Political Editor told how he had pulled a story that he “knew was fact” because a “senior media adviser” had told him, “he would be humiliated by the story [if he ran it] because it was not true”. He said that the story was a high-profile political piece that was due to go on the front page. He explained how he decided with the editor to pull the story because there was an element of doubt as to its credibility. The next morning, however, talkback radio host Paul Murray broke the story. When asked where the story had come from, Murray answered that the media adviser had provided him with the information. The West Australian’s State Political Editor commented, “By then it was old news and too late for me. So basically I had been punished for something”. Another reporter told of one occasion when the ABC had run a story that the government media adviser had not liked. He allegedly took the ABC off the fax list for a week, meaning they did not receive any media releases or announcements during that time.
journalists are close to deadlines and most stretched, or just past the
deadline. Former Editor (B) of The West Australian said these late news
drops were effective in preventing, or at least delaying, evaluation of a
story. The GMO also uses ‘doorstop’ conferences to prevent detailed
questioning by the news media.

As I discuss in Chapter 5, the timing of the announcement of the
planned curfew was also strategic and was designed in all probability to
divert attention from debate that had been bogged down in Parliament
on the proposed legalisation of cannabis. A senior official with the OCP
believed that the curfew had provided “a circuit breaker”, thereby
agreeing with the Leader of the Opposition who had accused the
Government of using diversionary tactics.²⁹

**Dressing up old stories as new**

Another popular GMO practice is to present old stories as new. This is
made possible thanks, in particular, to the high turnover of journalists in
Perth. As I demonstrate in later chapters, the telling of the story of the
Northbridge curfew reflected significant differences in the historical
knowledge of the individual reporters concerned. For example, while

²⁹ The then Leader of the Opposition, Colin Barnett, accused the Government of using
the curfew to divert attention from the cannabis debate in an interview with Grahame
Armstrong (The Sunday Times, 20 April 2003, 8). Columnist Colleen Egan also raised
the possibility of the Government using the curfew to divert attention away from the
cannabis debate (The Sunday Times, 20 April 2003, 32). Steve Pennells referred to
the curfew as “a handy distraction when the Government was under attack during the
debate on cannabis law reform” (The West Australian, 11 July 2003, 20).
the more experienced reporters were aware that police already had the powers under the CWA to apprehend youth at risk, others did not question even this most basic information. As a senior official with the WA Police Service media department himself commented in relation to the curfew:

Everyone was talking about ‘the curfew’, and I think most people in the public would think the police had got some kind of new powers; well, really the world hadn’t changed, we were doing what we had always done. It was just that the Government had rebranded it.

**Making the problem in order to present the solution**

My research findings tend to support Ericson et al.’s (1987, 35) somewhat scathing comment whereby “the modern political temper redefines all existential questions”, turning them into “problems and then presenting their solution”. *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, for example, described how politicians are “so focused on the public perception that they tend to create sometimes … a false environment in which to introduce something”. He illustrated this practice by describing the political manoeuvring that preceded the closure in June 2003 of the

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30 According to *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, politicians take advantage of journalists who lack historical knowledge or, as he put it, are “a bit green”. He told the following by way of example, “The Government announced it was opening a Korean Trade Office. There was a big fanfare, press releases and all that. I thought, hang on, a year and a half earlier they’d closed the Korean Trade Office. I looked it up in Hansard and, sure enough, they’d closed it because they said there was no point keeping it open. So they didn’t say they were reopening it, they didn’t say they’d made a mistake, but they were saying we recognise these trade opportunities in Korea and we’re going to open a Trade Office and it’s going to be wonderful for the State, etc, so it was like a new announcement. But the story should have been, hang on, they closed this and were criticised for it, they said we don’t need it, it’s a waste of money, and now they’re re-opening it at vast expense".
Swan Valley Nyoongar Camp, which Nyoongar Elder Robert Bropho managed.31 He explained:

The media advisers would be in Parliament House, walking between the offices of all the journalists, saying, ‘this is terrible, Bropho this and Bropho that’, and, of course, in a day or two they would have sown some seeds, almost created an opinion amongst journalists, and then they come and say, ‘we’re going to do this, we’re going to shut down the camp’. They’ve primed the angle that people are going to take; they’ve created it.

Similarly, as I discuss in Chapter 5, although there was no increase in youth crime in early 2003 and there were organisations working effectively with young people in Northbridge, the State Government implied that the problem was escalating and that it required immediate action through the implementation of a high-profile curfew.

**Keeping things simple and predictable**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the simplification of issues facilitates the routine use of stereotypes and ‘common sense’ reporting. Collins et al. (2000, 18) contend that the ‘common sense’ racialisation of crime in the media serves governments well because it diverts attention from the inadequacies of their policies in addressing the underlying causes of criminal behaviour.32 Tiffen’s (1989, 89) finding that PR politics

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31 See Chapter 1, footnote 16.
32 Jewkes (2004, 59) also rightly points out that the focus of the news media on minority groups as the perpetrators of crime “serves to perpetuate a sense of a stratified, deeply divided and mutually hostile population”. She notes, “Some politicians have been quick to galvanise the support of an anxious and fearful public” and believes that they have “undoubtedly contributed to negative reporting which has agitated social tensions” (59). She concludes that by simultaneously focusing attention on “hapless victims of serious crime and calling for tougher, more retributive
trivialises debate, giving precedence to style over substance, is also compelling.\textsuperscript{33} He believes that communication strategies have become more simplistic and, even, are increasingly unrelated to subsequent action.\textsuperscript{34} Tiffen argues:

As the problems with which governments must deal have become more intractable, the media’s dramatic skills have progressed more than their forensic ones. The pressing economic and social problems are merely the backdrop for the panorama of passing personal dramas, the elevation and destruction of heroes, the apparently endless rhythm of raising expectations and the subsequent personalising of blame for their failure (197).

As I demonstrate in later chapters, indigenous youth made easy villains in the story of the Northbridge curfew, which unfolded according to a narrative long familiar to readers of the WA press. My research also found that the Government might sometimes need to keep things simple for its own benefit. For example, a senior official with the OCP told me that the Premier’s Office found the \textit{Northbridge: Shaping the Future} report\textsuperscript{35}, which presented comprehensive analysis of the many complex

\textsuperscript{33} In his characteristically colourful style, Tiffen (1989, 89) contends, “The [public] distaste for [PR politics’] confected flummery stems partly from the view that serious pursuits like government should not be subjected to the same marketing techniques as deodorants or hamburgers”. Bennett (2005, xv) makes a similar point when he argues that, “Filled with growing volumes of political spin, sensation, and insider buzz, the daily news sometimes provides, but increasingly does not offer, citizens a solid basis for critical thinking or effective action”. Ericson et al. (1991, 218) also find, “The news is more concerned with the politics of the image than with the polity and its truths”.

\textsuperscript{34} Ericson et al. (1989, 17) also make the important observation that sources must develop “a common stock of rationales (reasons and rationalizations)” to gain the media’s attention. They argue that this task is made easier when there are key words in the culture that sources can recite with “legitimation effect”. They suggest that, “‘democracy’, ‘community’, ‘national security’ and similar ‘hurrah words’ make readily apparent that the organization is doing good and thus create a sense of self-evident legitimacy” (17).

\textsuperscript{35} I discuss this report in Chapter 4.
issues facing the entertainment precinct, “too problematic” in terms of
the “political capital” they could gain. He explained:

They couldn’t get their heads around the big solution … all the different
aspects of it that needed to be addressed … I just don’t think they knew
– or saw any value in dealing with it in that comprehensive fashion. They
understood ‘the curfew’ and so that’s why they focused on that.

Having discussed some of the most popular tactics that the State
Government typically employs to sell a story such as the Northbridge
curfew to the WA press, it is helpful now to consider the political context
in which the curfew was introduced.

The political backdrop
The government media adviser never doubted his success in selling the
story of the Northbridge curfew to the WA press and the political capital
that the Government would gain as a result. He told me, “I knew
straightaway that the curfew would be very popular with the electorate;
that it would be a winner”.

The time was indeed ripe for such an initiative. The public was very
familiar with the problems in Northbridge, which the WA press reinforced
the previous year with *The West Australian*, for example, referring to
Perth’s premier entertainment district as the city’s “crime hot spot” in a
front-page story.36 *The West Australian* had also clearly attributed these
problems to the indigenous community with such headlines as

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36 “Crime Hot Spot: Police vow action on Northbridge thugs”, *The West Australian*, 8
“Aboriginal link to late unrest: Northbridge at breaking point”\(^{37}\) (I discuss these articles in more detail in Chapter 4.) In early 2003, four months before the Government announced the curfew plan, it was down in the polls. An employee in the Premier’s Office described to me how a colleague had first raised the idea of a curfew to lift the Government’s ratings in the polls. The Premier had not initially agreed to the proposal, even though he was at a loss to explain the community’s poor assessment of his Government’s record. The employee explained:

> The Premier would shake his head and he’d say, ‘What are we doing? Why don’t they like us? We’re down in the polls, what are we going to do?’ And a certain person would say, ‘Curfew, Geoff, in Northbridge’, and the Premier would shake his head ‘no’, and walk out. … The Premier didn’t believe in it. They did it purely because it was going to be a popular thing and they were down in the polls.

The OCP official corroborated this assessment of events. He told me that there was very definitely a “hankering to announce some kind of curfew, [but] … they needed a platform to get it up”. This they later found in the form of the Juvenile Aid Group (JAG) quarterly report, which details the number of young people apprehended in Northbridge (I return to this report in Chapter 5). The OCP official said that the government media adviser, “who had the radar to see that this [was] a story, a political opportunity”, dropped the report on his desk and said,

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\(^{37}\) “Aboriginal link to late unrest: Northbridge at breaking point, says ATSIC”, The West Australian, 10 January 2002, 10.
“Here’s the platform”. Thus, it is clear that the curfew ‘solution’ came before the alleged problem, rather than the other way around.

As I discuss in Chapter 6, the curfew proposal was so politically alluring that the Premier’s Office even ignored dissent from within Australian Labor Party (ALP) ranks who were concerned about its potential spuriously to target indigenous youth. Law and order, however, is always a “political anomaly”, according to the Minister who participated in this study. He explained:

> Law and order is always a special case politically. The Government must be seen to protect the community from lawlessness. Law and order is where there are tensions in government. … It is full of shallow stuff, ‘shock horror’. Politically what we need to do is soak up the oxygen – keep media attention on what we’re doing on this issue – in order to stifle [then Opposition Leader] Matt Birney.

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38 This report from the WA Police Service’s JAG revealed that police had apprehended more than 450 juveniles in Northbridge during the first three months of 2003. Sources working in Northbridge who participated in this study said that these figures are not unusual and simply reflect the increased attention of police on young people in the entertainment precinct at that time.

39 It is clear that the curfew as proposed could not easily be reconciled with the ALP’s platform on social justice. At the ALP (WA) State Conference (5 and 6 July 2003), for example, the Left faction said that the Northbridge curfew was “aimed at winning media coverage”. *The West Australian* (7 July 2003, 8) reported that Robert Corr, a delegate for the Metal Workers Union, told the Conference that the curfew policy was “couched in a law and order framework which treated young people as criminals and could alienate them”.

40 Law and order issues are, of course, believed to influence political fortunes beyond WA. Hollinsworth (1998, 58) finds that the RCIADIC’s recommendation that incarceration be the “last resort” has not been followed. He also notes that, “In some cases, state and local politics has seen a rise in simplistic law ‘n’ order campaigns, mandatory sentencing and other measures which, while not necessarily aimed at indigenous people, impact heavily on them”. Ericson et al. (1987, 58) indicate that this is the case overseas also, arguing that “‘lawandorder’ is a preferred solution to problems for a variety of political causes, but it gains no favour as a cause of problems”.

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A former employee of the Premier’s Office said the decision-making process on the curfew would have involved looking at what votes were at stake. He said it would have been a matter of balancing, on the one hand, the votes of the general public, “who would love the curfew”, as against the indigenous community “who – however valid their criticisms – counted for nothing in the polls”. The fact that the ‘initiative’ might make scapegoats of the indigenous community was also an anomaly, according to the Minister. He commented that, “[The Premier’s] incursions into the Aboriginal area were unusual. There was no coherence about what we were doing; they were inconsistent with policies elsewhere”. He also advised there had been no discussion in Cabinet regarding the proposal to introduce the curfew.

My research found, in fact, that the government media adviser appears to have single-handedly developed the curfew policy without consultation with anyone. Neither the Office of the Minister for Police, nor the WA Police Service, nor a senior official with the GMO nor, as I discuss in Chapter 5, any of the organisations working with young people in Northbridge were involved in the development of the curfew policy and accompanying media strategy.\(^4\) It seems only a senior official with the OCP was kept informed of developments, even though

\(^4\) The Minister hinted that the senior media adviser had unusually free rein in dealing with law and order issues, saying, “Law and order is an exception as regards media management and [the senior media adviser’s] power. I rein him in on other things”.
his approval does not appear to have been required.\textsuperscript{42} The government media adviser felt justified in excluding both government and non-government policy-makers from the development of the curfew ‘policy’ on the grounds that they would take much longer to respond and that, when they eventually did respond, it would be a relatively weak response, a “social worker response”.\textsuperscript{43} He explained:

   If the agencies had been involved at the start, they’d still be talking about it but nothing would have been done. If we’d waited for the policy first, it would have been a social worker response to the problem rather than a hard-edged law and order response.

According to the government media adviser, the key to winning government is financial responsibility and law and order. Therefore, what he termed the Gallop Government “brand” was “a record of sound financial management” and being “tough on crime”.\textsuperscript{44} The curfew had all the right ingredients:

\textsuperscript{42} It was apparent in my interview with a senior official with the OCP that he was not in agreement with the curfew. He said that he “thought they went too far at the time” but added, “Let’s face it; you have to live with the way the political masters want to go in the end”.

\textsuperscript{43} It is pertinent to consider here Bennett & Entman’s (2001) finding that the news media work at a much faster pace than government. They contend, “The rhythms of the media and government … may be increasingly out of synch as the news cycle speeds up and the concentration of information fills individuals with alarm, while the policy process plods slowly and seemingly ineffectually on its own institutional clock” (23).

\textsuperscript{44} It is useful to recall Ericson et al.’s (1989, 12) finding that the news media are important “not only to the authority of [politicians’] office, but also to their ability to stay in office”. Indeed, the power of the media, Cook (2001, 195) argues, “owes much to the calculations of political actors who, seeking to get something done in an ever more complex … political system, turn to the news media to help them accomplish their goals”. This turns the media into an intermediary political institution or, as Tiffen (1989, 178) puts it, “The central nervous system of the body politic”. Cook contends, therefore, that the news media’s power is not because “the people are in thrall to them. On the contrary, if political elites acted differently, the power of the news media might well be drastically diminished” (2001, 195). Further, Tiffen (1989, 178) considers the media to be “institutionally under-equipped for this overwhelming responsibility. Their
• It was decisive (the Government was going to do something about ‘the problem’);
• It was morally unassailable (nobody could argue that young children should be out alone after dark on the streets of Northbridge);\(^4^5\)
• It was tough (the Government would not apologise for its actions);
• It was sincere (the Premier was seen to be [and was] genuinely concerned about the fate of the young people);
• It was putting the bureaucrats to work;
• It was progress.

Above all, according to a senior official with the OCP, it was “what the pundits wanted to hear”. He explained:

> There was a sort of political appetite to do something like this and it was as much about the look of it as it was about the policy need for it. I don’t think it would be unreasonable to suggest that there was a sort of confluence of events, a desire on the part of some of the political apparatchiks to do something that was tough on an issue that was demonstrably a problem; people were expressing concern; the public didn’t like the way Northbridge was going, they didn’t feel safe. Not that pivotal political role emerges obliquely from their own peculiar concerns”. Gans (1980, 121) makes a similar observation when he cynically asserts that, “Sources which are able to supply suitable news to slate journalists’ insatiable appetite for story ideas and stories … can overcome the deficiencies of power”. Drawing on his study of a press campaign conducted by the White House to win popular support for reform in the Postal Service, Linsky (2000) argues that policy-makers cannot achieve their policy goals unless they capture the media’s attention. Or, as Bennett (2005, 114) puts it, “Leaders who disillusion their followers live shorter political lives than leaders who learn to represent situations to their best political advantage”.

\(^4^5\) According to one former senior employee of the Premier’s Office, the Premier himself had been opposed to the idea of a curfew, but “convinced himself that it was a good thing by focusing on the young children at risk".
the youngsters were necessarily the people who made it unsafe but they were part of that, what it looked like, Northbridge at the time.

The OCP official hinted he was unhappy with the negative stereotyping of indigenous youth but implied the ends justified the means, saying, “There’s definitely that sense of demonisation of those youngsters [but] we were well motivated about what we were trying to achieve. OK, some may say you’re supping with the devil a bit and the political apparatchiks, but if you are aware of what’s going on, you can get a good balance”. In light of these findings, I digress briefly to consider Hamilton’s (2006, 17) observation in What’s Left? The Death of Social Democracy that politics in Australia, as in Britain, “has made the transition from ideas to personalities”. He contends that:

The spin doctor has replaced the policy analyst; the party platform can be found buried beneath the media strategy; image management has been substituted for bold reform; and choosing words has become more important than choosing actions (17-18).

I believe that the seemingly growing trend to communicate government policy in terms of media ‘grabs’ is reflected in the involvement of media advisers in the development of government policy and this phenomenon is critical to understanding how the curfew policy came to be. As discussed above, the background of the government media advisers is, if not in journalism, in PR. They have no qualifications or experience in

46 Even the media adviser to the Minister for Police told me, “I would have a say in the development of policy, we’d all sit down and have a ‘think tank’ about how we can progress something. I’d … throw in my two bobs worth about what I believe would be the right way of doing it”. My research findings therefore contradict Ward (2003, 30) who contends that government media advisers in Australia do not, as yet, have responsibilities beyond “getting the message across”.

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the formulation of government policy. Notwithstanding this, my research found that government media advisers were heavily involved in policy development and that the curfew was not an exception. What is more, a senior official with the WA Police Service media department suggested that, in the case of the curfew, media advice had taken precedence over other considerations. He explained:

Often, there’s a strong political imperative to do something, and you can send up briefing note after briefing note explaining the various options, and giving advice, but often the politicians are fairly forceful in the outcome that they want, and a lot of the importance of it is about how you present it to the public and how it is perceived, rather than the actual substance of it.

When asked about the appropriateness of media advisers developing government policy, the government media adviser insisted they should be involved on the grounds that, “It all comes down to the same thing; parliamentary strategy is media strategy is political strategy”. He explained:

The Premier expected my advice on anything. It doesn’t matter if you’re a media adviser, if you have a policy suggestion to make, you should make it and not hold back because you are not officially a policy adviser. The line between a media adviser and a policy adviser is blurred. Just look at the number of politicians with media skills. They need to have media skills and a good nose for news. If anyone can make a suggestion to improve policy, then they should be listened to.47

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47 While Tiffen (1989, 93-94) insists, “PR strategies are an extension of other political skills, not a substitute for them”, he considers them a necessary skill. He contends, “The increase in the scale and intensity of modern public relations politics is an inevitable outcome of the democratic struggle for power in a society where the news media are the central forum of political communication. It is illusory to think that it can be abolished … or to think that ‘only the other side’ practises it, or to wish they would play public relations games in a less professional way”.
Despite the fact that the government media adviser developed the curfew and despite its extraordinary public appeal, the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* said she did not believe this meant that the Government could get away with developing policy in terms of populist hits. She said that there were some hard issues that could not simply be “spinned away” and, further, that the public would see through it. She explained:

> There’s a whole raft of things that are never going to be good news media stories. If public policy was determined by being able to sell the story, well, you’d never sell Telstra. You’d never introduce the GST. You’d never do a whole raft of things. And I don’t think the Australian public are really that shallow. I don’t think that you can simply be fed this diet of ‘this is what the people want to hear’ and pretend that that’s going to deliver good policy. Sometimes governments have to actually make hard decisions.

While the Former Acting Editor may well be correct in her assertions, it is difficult to compare the Northbridge curfew with the GST or the sale of Telstra as both her examples have a significant impact on all Australians. The curfew policy, however, affects only those targeted, namely indigenous youth, and is therefore inevitably only a minority concern.48

I have demonstrated that, for a government struggling to prove its law and order credentials to the white, conservative electorate, the political mileage to be gained from the curfew was significant. As the

48 This recalls the point I raised in Chapter 1 (footnote 15), where a problem is presented in such a way that it affects only certain members of the Western Australian community, the indigenous community, rather than being presented as “everybody’s” problem.
government media adviser rightly predicted, the story of the Northbridge curfew would prove to be a "barbecue stopper".

Who is winning the game of ‘spin’?

Having considered the efforts the State Government expends in crafting its messages to meet the needs of the WA press and the political imperatives driving the story of the Northbridge curfew, it is useful to explore now the extent to which the State Government is successful in influencing news content. There is an extensive body of scholarly literature around this issue (see, for example, Fishman 1980, Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Paletz & Entman 1981, Ericson et al. 1987, Herman & Chomsky 1988, Ward 1991; 1995, Cook 1996, Graber 2000, Bennett & Entman 2001, Bennett 2005). Manheim (2000, 416) sums up the prevailing view among these scholars when he states simply that, "systematic efforts at manipulating news images work".49

As mentioned above, Gans (1980) likens the relationship between journalists and their sources to a tango. He points out that, even though it takes two to tango – with either source or journalist able to lead – "more often than not, sources do the leading" (116).50 Drawing on Gans’

49 Thus, Ward (1991, 52), for example, refers to journalists being described as "mere farmers engaged in [the] … mundane cultivating and harvesting of sources who provide them with a staple diet of stories … [as] all too often recipients rather than hunters of news”.

50 In their essay Politicians and the Press, Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, 109) describe the relationship between the two players as a "transaction" where "each side … is in a
findings, Tiffen (1989, 75) argues that because sources are able to create suitable news stories, they have more of the “immediate initiative”. Indeed, a survey by the ABA (2001, 7) found that several factors influence news producers in their work beyond the basic ‘newsworthiness’ of an item, including “politicians and government”. The ABA also noted that, “news producers expressed concern about the ‘cosy’ relationships between media owners and politicians” (8). As McQuail (1994, 224) points out, there are “obvious examples” when political leaders want to reach large publics, but less obvious collusion arises in routine news coverage where reporters depend on sources likely to have both inside information and an interest in the way it is published. This applies to sources such as politicians, officials and the police who are all too happy to ‘feed the chooks’. 51 McQuail (1994, 224) also believes that journalists may be compromised and uses Chibnall (1977) and Fishman (1980) to support his argument that:

Although this type of relationship may be justified by its success in meeting the needs of the public as well as those of the media organizations, it also conflicts with expectations of critical independence and professional norms, and can lend itself to suppression or manipulation in the interest of certain actors or institutions.

51 Ward (1995, 117) makes the important point that the routines of news gathering advantage incumbent candidates and governments regardless of their party affiliation because “politicians in power are the best equipped to feed reporters with news material”.

position to offer the other access to a resource it values”. They summarise the bargaining chips as follows: “The mass media offer politicians access to an audience through a credible outlet, while politicians offer journalists information about a theatre of presumed relevance, significance, impact, and spectacle for audience consumption”.

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Tiffen (1989, 198) makes a similar point, arguing, “Nothing in news production or journalistic ideals offers any certain protection against either external manipulation or internal suppression”. In this context, it is not surprising that compliant reporters often readily accept their official sources’ versions of reality as Sigal (1973, 22) suggests. In a similar vein, others have noted that journalists working rounds will “find it expedient to see the world from the perspective of their sources” (Paletz & Entman 1981, 20). Since journalists see news gathering as a matter of bringing events and issues of significance to public notice, it is almost inevitable that the perspectives of official sources permeate the stories that they tell. As Steve Isaacs, former editor of the Minneapolis Star, pointed out, “If you send a reporter to Washington, that reporter tends to be co-opted by the elitist values and nincompoop news sense there”.

Schudson (1995, 141) concedes that Isaacs’ may be too cruel a judgment, but it is “one for which … (his) own research provides support”. Gans (1980) is of the view that journalists are influenced by powerful sources such as government but convince themselves that they are not by believing they have independently judged a given story to be newsworthy. He contends therefore, “Journalists cope with the

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52 As Ward (1995, 177) points out, it would be surprising if an industry that is devoted to influencing and even to dictating the ways in which newsworkers select and frame the news that they report, had no influence on newswork. Thus, much of the research into reporter-source relations has suggested that journalists are readily captured by the official or bureaucratic sources upon whom they routinely rely for the information they can speedily fashion into news stories. Government and corporate sources are hence able to shape the media agenda; they become “primary definers” of the news (Hall et al. 1978, 58).

realities of power by incorporating it into news judgements” (284).

Indeed, according to Sigal (1973, 52), even though it may be reliable
and relevant, little of the news is the outcome of enterprise and
investigation on the part of journalists.

In considering the influence of government on media, I believe it is
indicative to consider the take up by journalists of the press releases
sent to them. Tiffen (1989, 34) says in relation to the Canberra press
gallery, “It’s easy for journalists to live off the boxes” and that “the
problem in Canberra is not scarcity of information but quality control. It
is easy to get ‘a story’ but very difficult to get the ‘real story’.” A study
by Ward (1991, 54) found that one in four stories about Queensland
State politics was initiated by a news release issued to the Brisbane
media. However, in light of the “arsenal of overt and covert manipulative
strategies that enable [government] to influence the way news is
reported” and the fact that it is not possible to determine whether
journalists initiated other news stories or not, Ward rightly concludes that
it is “quite likely that the 25 percent of stories which can be traced to
press releases represent the tip of a larger iceberg” (56). A later study
by Tymson & Sherman (1996, 150) credits the PR industry with

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54 In the late 1980s, the federal secretary of the Australian Journalists’ Association
complained of “almost an information overload” coming from government media
advisers and expressed regret that often inexperienced journalists, working to tight
deadlines in under-resourced news bureaux were unable to question handouts given
them (Coddington 1991, 41).
providing “at least half of the news stories covered today”. In her study, Butler (1998) finds that 20 to 30 per cent of all political news stories are derived from press releases, press conferences, and other events staged by sources in order to maximise media coverage. The danger for journalism, according to Butler, is an over-reliance upon PR people, who are “instrumental in building a prime-time news agenda” (41). She concludes that journalists have become “too dependent upon politicians and their press secretaries for their daily bread between elections and too dependent upon the major political parties for news during election campaigns” (41). As I demonstrate in Chapters 4 to 8, four of the five rounds of WA press coverage about Northbridge and the curfew were instigated by leaks, media statements, door stops and staged events.

**Journalists claim victory**

Notwithstanding the evidence to the contrary, the majority of journalists I interviewed for this study rejected the suggestion that press releases are rewritten and published as news. For example, *The West Australian’s*

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55 Tymson & Sherman (1996, 150) argue that, “As the media simply don’t have the staff needed to seek out news, undertake major research on a topic, and locate the relevant people, professional public relations practitioners have been able to provide a real service by alerting media staff to possible story angles, providing background information, lining up interviews with, say, the chief executive or key industry representatives, and even assisting with the provision of photographic material”.

56 According to Butler (1998, 41), journalists are “more out of touch with the community than politicians”.

57 Not surprisingly, Ward (1995), for example, met the same response as I did from journalists. Ward (1995, 166) cites Tony Koch who says that in his Brisbane newsroom 90 percent of releases are discarded (*Courier Mail*, 28 March 1992). Koch implies that there is a substantial gap between what PR practitioners proffer and what journalists consider to be news. He insists that press releases are used simply to assist the collection and corroboration of information, since no journalist “would be so
State Political Editor said that journalists “normally find that if things get written verbatim [they] get found out”. He believed the problem would arise only with junior reporters, saying that he would be “very surprised and upset” if he saw senior journalists participate in such practices.

Some journalists I interviewed were, however, concerned that government media advisers “overstep the mark”. The Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian*, for example, spoke of her concern about media advisers deciding what issues are or are not newsworthy and “forgetting they’re the press secretary, not the Minister”. She explained:

> I’m very happy for the reporters to engage with the Minister, but I don’t see that they should be set upon by a press secretary giving them their ideological view of the world. I don’t think that’s their job, it’s not their role. I think sometimes the desire for press secs to protect their Minister plays itself out that they say to you as a reporter, ‘Well, what do you want to talk to him about? What? That’s not a story’. We’ll be the judge [of what makes a good story].

The journalists I interviewed were not concerned about the Government’s increasingly sophisticated media management machine. They believed that they themselves saw the game for what it was and saw through the spin.58 The Former Acting Editor of *The West*

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58 While journalists were confident of their own ability to detect spin, they were concerned about other journalists falling for the GMO’s various diversionary tactics. Former Editor (B), for example, said, “A lot of people get caught up; a lot of journalists become players rather than the reporters of the argument and that bothers me immensely”. He believed that the challenge was always to put government perspectives in context, saying, “It really comes down to having checks and balances; people asking certain questions. We hope that within the organisation there is experience, they can read it and see the flags as they come up. So what you don’t become is a mouthpiece for government. … Distortion is an element of political strategy and I’m sure when you sit there you know it, but because it’s an opposition or
Australian, for example, believed that however adroit the Government might have become in managing the media, “It still comes down to the same thing: the politicians seducing the media and the media seeing [the spin] for what it is.”59 She explained:

The mechanism has got much bigger and sophisticated but, at the end of the day, 40 years ago people who were trying to get a story in the paper were doing so for a reason and those things don’t change. People still engage with the media, people still actually go out to seek the media. Part of our job is to find out why and to be conscious of the fact that if a Minister rings and wants to have a chat about something, it might not just be because you’re a nice bloke.60

a government spokesman saying it, that’s their view, that’s what they want to hang their colours to on the mast, so you report their view, creating an understanding of it, you have to put it in its context and, yes, it’s a challenge, it’s a challenge for journalism to give things a context and understanding so that when people reading it say, yes I understand why they’re saying that and they would say that but I may discount that view because I have a better understanding of the broad subject”.

59 The confidence of reporters generally about this issue is reflected in a comment by one Sunday Times’ reporter. He said that, “The West tends to do the government announcements and things that are happening on a day-to-day basis. With the curfew, we try to get out there and see what’s happening”. However, in the event, that newspaper did not use any source other than the Premier when reporting on his walkabout in Northbridge to announce the success of the curfew (to be discussed in Chapter 6). Such practices led Former Editor (A) to remark dryly that, “One way not to find out what is happening is to be walking with the Premier and the attendant police presence that goes with him”.

60 The West Australian’s State Political Editor also warned of the perils of forgetting the number one “operative norm”, namely that the government media advisers have their own agenda. If they forget this, reporters will be unable to perform their roles in the ‘game’. He explained, “You have a great relationship, they are all your best mates, they buy you drinks, but they are only doing it because of your position, not because you’re a good bloke. They don’t like you. And I think that’s what a lot of journalists forget; they get in these cosy relationships with press secretaries and people from government”. As State Political Editor, he had particularly close contact with the GMO and said that while he did manage to maintain good relations, it was a challenge given the adversarial nature of the relationship. He described the importance of maintaining a distance while remaining cordial, “You don’t trust them, but you have to continue working with them. It’s difficult if you know you’ve been lied to and shafted, it’s very difficult, but it happens a lot to reporters. … And as far as [the GMO official] is concerned, the press secretary did a good job. Sometimes you get so frustrated when you’re dealing with these people every day. … It’s difficult, they’ll be friendly to you but they don’t like you. And you don’t want them to like you. You don’t want a politician to like you at all. … It’s a terrible thing to say but ultimately you need to upset both sides on a regular basis to do your job, that means you’re actually doing a balanced job than if just one side constantly harasses you. … The thing in politics is if someone sends a thank you card to a jorno, or someone says I liked so and so, jornos actually don’t like that, that’s quite a worry. It means, hold on, if they like you it’s because you’re reading from their script or doing their bidding in a sense”. A senior political reporter
The West Australian’s Columnist (B) summed up the journalists’ view that they hold the upper hand, saying:

At the end of the day, the spin comes and goes, the technology comes and goes, it comes down to the relationship between the journalist and the Minister, and if they can communicate in a sensible form, the rest of it is neither here nor there. If you’ve got a Minister or a press secretary who’s just going to give you bullshit, you’re just going to go the opposite way and there’s only one person who’s going to win, and it’s going to be you. They’re not going to win, they can’t win. It’s up to them to see if ... they continue the bullshit or continue to put the spin on it, at the end of the day, we’re going to incinerate them. Incinerate is probably a tough word, but we’re in control of what goes in the paper, they’re not in control. They should understand that and wrap their heads around that and be open and tell us what’s going on. The more that they put a spin on it, the more that they lie, the more bullshit, the harder we are going to go. It’s a pretty simple equation and I’m still shocked sometimes and surprised that press secretaries don’t understand it.61

with The Sunday Times said that it was important to recognise that all parties were just trying to do their jobs. He accepted that the GMO or the relevant Minister would criticise him if he failed to write a story they liked as part of the ongoing relationship. He believed it all came down to “dialogue”. He explained, “If they don’t like the way we’ve presented something, they’ll ring and complain ... I’ve experienced friction. I think people haven’t spoken to me for a few weeks but then they come around, ... That’s par for the course, we’re here to do a job; they would obviously like a particular slant on their announcements or whatever; and we question things and if they don’t like it, well. .... Inevitably you will write a story that the Government won’t like”.

61 Allan (2004, 47) found that most journalists maintain that the news media represent a fourth estate (as distinguished, in historical terms, from the Church, the Judiciary and the Commons). My research supports his finding. Former Editor (B), for example, stressed the importance of the newspaper’s role as the ‘fourth estate’ saying, “You’re there to hold accountable those who have the power and, in doing so, you represent the public voice and you’re supposed to be in the broad public interest. ... But at the same time you’re not going to hold your position in the power elites very well if you don’t actually hold people to account in the areas of politics, law, and business”. The Editor of The Sunday Times also believes his newspaper plays the role of government ‘ watchdog’, saying, “I think there are various roles that the media play but the most important one is to hold government to account and to shine light on areas that they don’t necessarily want the light shone on. I think that governments are happy to have their point of view out there, but there are a lot of things that they don’t want people necessarily to know about. And I think it’s our job and our role to find those things and examine them and do it in a way that does hold them to account”. According to a survey undertaken by Phillips (1977, 67), the overwhelming majority of journalists consider the news media to be “a powerful force in the community”. The ABA (2001, 86) cited an ABC radio producer who spoke of one metropolitan newspaper’s “seemingly intimate relationship” with a State government, and Phillip Adams told of direct pressure from a Senator upon the Sydney Morning Herald to take one journalist’s work out of the paper. The ABC producer ranked the proximity of large media organisations to politics as one of the key challenges facing journalism: “The
Former Editor (B) was more circumspect. While he rejected the idea that the WA press was “captive” to the Government, he did not believe that the newspaper was immune to spin. He took a philosophical approach to the ‘game’:

You’re going to be used from time to time. I’m a realist. They’re going to get a few over us from time to time, and we’re going to get a few over them. … It would be naïve to say they don’t get some over the newspaper. But, equally, when you look across the long spectrum of time, is there a balance there where The West has belted them back? I think yes.

The West Australian’s Columnist (A) allowed for some government wins, acknowledging the newspaper “sometimes get(s) taken for a ride without knowing it,” while a political reporter with ABC News believed the GMO gets “mixed results”.

In order to counteract spin, the Former Acting Editor of The West Australian said it was crucial that news organisations support their reporters and provide an environment in which they feel confident to discuss any doubts they might have about a given story. Former Editor (A) agreed, saying that journalists felt less pressured into toeing the government line during his time as editor of the newspaper “because he supported them”. He explained:

Kerry Packers and the Rupert Murdochs and the Kerry Stokes and so on, have such a seemingly intimate relationship with government or with opposition or with whomever and such enormous power. Enormous power and influence would appear to be the antithesis of what the media should be. It’s supposed to be the fourth estate, it’s supposed to be separate from that. But all the time we’re given evidence and images of the way that big media are so closely involved with government, which is a really bad message".

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A lot of the journalists feel like they’re going to war every day, political reporters that is. They actually have to go in there and battle the Government’s spin, trying to actually find out what’s going on and trying not to get diverted away from what’s going on or to allow themselves to become a consumer of the Government’s spin. … The journalists are worried and they’re powerless; they’re worried that if they get a bad name with whomever the press secretary is … that they might get backed up and they’re going to be exposed. I don’t know if that sort of editorial direction is now available … in the absence of it, they feel exposed and in the absence of it, it’s very, very hard to counter the Government’s spin because the journalist won’t, because in the end it pays them a wage and they’ll fall into line. … The older journalists who might have contacts elsewhere or who can read the tea leaves better [are less vulnerable] than the younger ones, who really don’t know what’s going on. So it’s only the more experienced ones that can do anything about it.

The Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* believes that media advisers who use spin pay the penalty, saying that the ones who try to “politically frustrate” the media, who “seek to obfuscate and perhaps not be fulsome in their answers” are heading down a very destructive path.

Former Editor (B) made a similar point, saying that the practice of spin was proving counterproductive as it was leading to greater cynicism among journalists. He explained:

Unfortunately, what I think it’s led to is cynicism … I think that one of the biggest dangers for journalists is where they lose scepticism and take up cynicism. And when sceptics become cynics, you actually cross a line where you perhaps look at the world with a distorted view and I think unfortunately that’s what … the adversarial system tends to bring out in people: ‘Well, they lied to us today, they’ll lie to us tomorrow, so, bugger, we won’t trust them now and we’ll do this to them’.  

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62 This recalls Tiffen’s (1989, 85) observation that, “The most heartening feature of public relations is how often it fails … public relations tactics are a self-diminishing resource. Short-term success produces long-term cynicism”. 

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The Former Acting Editor insists that “healthy” journalists see through the sophisticated media management, saying simply, “We’re not silly”.\(^{63}\) The media, she argues, still manage to debate issues that the Government would like to disappear from the public agenda.\(^{64}\) She explained:

> There are very obvious indicators that the media – the healthy media – still have the ability to probe and to pick at things that they don’t want us to touch. Tax is a good (example) in the sense that *The Australian* is having a good hard shake of the tax tree in terms of the debate that we should have. And that’s a role that the media can play that politicians and their press secretaries can’t control; they can shake down an issue and look at it from all sides – tax is a good example. [Federal Treasurer] Costello would like it just to go away.

Indeed, according to *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, it is “the very nature of being a journo to be an unofficial Opposition”, to

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\(^{63}\) Tiffen (1989, 122) makes the interesting observation that some journalists “seem to make the quaint distinction that for a politician to lie publicly is a political necessity, but to mislead a journalist privately is a sin”. *The Sunday Times*’ columnist who took part in my study, however, believed there was an important distinction between being misled and being lied to. She said she saw the game for what it was, she expected the government media adviser to “spin her like a top” but not to be lied to. She did not appear to be concerned about attempts to mislead her, explaining, “I fully expect to be misled, and I’m not surprised when I am, but I hope that I won’t get lied to. I think most of us who are reasonably experienced in the political field have that kind of expectation at best! It is a pretty adversarial relationship and you know that they’re going to drop the government line, you know that they’re going to try to get the best coverage they can”.

\(^{64}\) The Editor of *The Sunday Times* made a similar point. He accepted that the Government would try to shape the news, but that it was incumbent upon the media “to see it for what it is” and to balance the stories “by encouraging [journalists] to look elsewhere ... to get the reporters and everyone looking outside of what they’re handed”. He also said it was important to hunt out stories the Government may not wish to see published: “I think it comes back to us, to say that’s fine, that’s how they want to operate, that’s their right. How do we get around that? What do we do to make sure we aren’t just getting handed a view? I think certain people in various media organisations over the years get a bit lazy in that they rely on the PR person or the government media adviser to spoon feed them information and without having properly thought through ... that the Government is giving us the drop on this story. Well, that’s fine, there’s a role for that, but you have to be smart enough to realise that you’re only getting it because they want to get it out there and there must be other things that we can be looking for within government that they don’t want us to get out there. I think if you’ve got that balance, it’s a lot better.”
“constantly question”. However, as I discuss in Chapter 5, my research found that he failed to question the Government when he was leaked the curfew story. His ‘exclusive’ story announcing the curfew plan did not include comment from any party other than the Premier. As a result, the government media adviser was able successfully to generate positive press coverage about the introduction of the policy in Northbridge. As I also discuss in Chapter 5, while The Sunday Times’ columnist condemned the curfew and despite her considerable experience in dealing with the GMO, she failed to realise that in fact there was no new policy, seeing only the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’. She was not aware that the curfew was the brainchild of the government media adviser whom she knew well and whom, she said, she “fully expected” to “spin her into the ground”. I therefore agree with Tiffen (1989, 74) when he says that, “Neither press secretaries’ nor journalists’ comments give an adequate guide to the influence of PR manoeuvres on news”. I found only one journalist, Former Editor (A), who believed that the Government had any major influence over their work and who accused the WA media of being “complicit”. He argued:

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65 The leaking of this particular story was to signal the end of what, I am given to understand, had been a good working relationship between The West Australian’s State Political Editor and the senior government media adviser. The reporter contends he was misled over the curfew story regarding the issue of consultation; he believed there had been consultation when in fact there had been none.

66 One journalist at The West Australian told me that “a key challenge” in journalism is when a reporter is leaked information subject to certain conditions and “how to present a well-rounded story”. She believed that although The West Australian had toed the government line initially, “(it) endeavoured to pursue the issues related to the curfew policy in subsequent stories”.

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[The media] don’t take a sceptical view of anything these days, they take what they’re given … they don’t question. Only *The West* has a) the resources and b) the willpower through the editor’s mindset to go up against the Government. If [then Leader of the Opposition Matt] Birney’s smart, and he appears to be reasonably smart, he’ll be sitting back and looking at how this Government has a tame and pliant media and making sure he has something that looked a bit like it.67

This, however, was a lone voice.

**Both sides win the game, but exclude other important players**

While I do not believe that the Government’s endeavours to spin the media will see journalists become mere “house organs for the political elite” (Sigal 1973, 47), I do not agree with the claims of the WA press and others68 that the State Government has little influence over how it tells the news. As I discuss in Chapters 4 to 8, the State Government was able to create a “pseudo-event”69 out of a policy that was devoid of any substance and then provided the WA press with the frame with

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67 Tiffen (1989, 94), citing one press secretary who told him that, “It used to amuse me how often press releases went in without change”, makes a similar point. He argues that, “If press releases are reproduced verbatim, the problem is not PR activity so much as news media passivity”.

68 For example, Ward (1995) believes that journalists’ professional norms protect them from being influenced by the Government. He argued that journalists, in order to meet the requirement on them to be objective, are compelled to “seek to balance information supplied by one source with material from another – counterbalancing, for example, a statement from the Premier with a response from the leader of the Opposition”. I do not agree with Ward’s argument because the practice of quoting a counter point of view does not necessarily mean that the journalist has conveyed to readers the entirety of the debate nor that he or she has given voice to the key parties involved. It is useful also to consider here Ericson et al.’s (1989, 14) finding that, “The journalist … has considerable control over what he decides to attend to, how much attention it deserves, how it should be reconstructed, and so on”. In a later study, Ericson et al. (1991, 170) found, remarkably, that, “within the vast majority of news items (70 per cent of total sample), there is not a presentation of two or more sides”. They suggest that one explanation for this is that, “News operatives are not committed to impartiality and balance within a given item, but only across items presented on the same day or over time” (170).

69 McQuail (1994, 224).
which to structure the story of the Northbridge curfew (Paletz & Entman 1981, 20). It is hard to imagine any other source that would have had sufficient credibility with the media to construct such a fiction.

That is not to say that the State Government always wins the game of ‘spin’. The winner will depend on a variety of factors, not least the experience and skill of both the media adviser and the reporter concerned, the reporter’s knowledge of the issue in question and the bargaining ‘stakes’ that each party has to hand. In the case of the Northbridge curfew, an extremely skilled media adviser gave the story as an ‘exclusive’ to a very experienced journalist. This journalist, on the basis of their long-standing professional relationship, trusted the media adviser and it is not unreasonable to suggest that this may well have been one reason why the reporter failed to seek alternative viewpoints to verify the information he had been given. At the same time, however, the appeal of the story that he had been handed on a plate was evident

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70 Tiffen (1989, 197) does, however, make the important observation that, “The greater intensity of public relations politics creates a maze of rationalisations and cover stories which make it difficult to distinguish the facades from the facts”. Such practices help to explain why so many in the WA press embraced the curfew at face value.

71 It is useful to recall here Mickler’s (1996, 69) finding that information given to the RCIADIC by a number of Western Australian journalists suggested that the influence of the police on the reporting of incidents and issues involving the indigenous community was “extraordinary to say the least”.

72 Marginalised groups simply do not have that level of influence with the news media. It is interesting to consider in this context Tuchman’s (1978, 83) observation that, “In news, verification of facts is both a political and a professional accomplishment”. She cites the case of the Santa Barbara oil spill presented by Molotch & Lester (1975) where reporters repeated officials’ insistence that the beach was clean despite all the evidence to the contrary. Explaining the discrepancy, Molotch & Lester contend that newsmaking is a “social and political activity” (236) that supports political interests (247).
as it showed the Government taking decisive action to address the readership’s perceived fears about indigenous youth and was almost guaranteed a run on the front page. As a senior political reporter with *The Sunday Times* pointed out, that newspaper “supported the curfew because it was popular (among the public), not because it had any merit necessarily.”

In light of my interviews with both government media advisers and members of the WA press, I find Tiffen’s (1989, 74) description of their relationship as one “marked by both mutual discontent and mutual dependence” to be most apposite. Their “mutual dependence” is, in turn, aptly described by Herman & Chomsky (1988, 18) who talk of the media’s “symbiotic relationship” with powerful sources of information because of “economic necessity and reciprocity of interest”. This is not

73 In its comprehensive study, *Race for the Headlines*, the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW (2003, 40) finds that there has been “an often unquestioning acceptance” of government agenda by “many” in the media. However, as the Board points out, “It is virtually impossible to isolate the ways in which media coverage of current events, political commentary and rhetoric, and community attitudes interact. There is no clear linear causality to the creation of news and political discourses. … Events, such as the ‘children overboard affair’ demonstrate the ways meaning produced in the media is often interdependent and interwoven with political agendas and community perceptions”. Ericson et al. (1989, 5) also stress the difficulties in seeking to determine the degree of influence of either party. They contend, “It is extremely difficult to document precisely how the values of elite culture filter down and influence decisions in the particular newsroom. Values do not operate in a deterministic manner, but shape perceptions and the recognition of how things ought to be done. Moreover, human organizations are obdurate, with any system of values being subject to translation, and at least partial transformation, into the values and social practices of the particular organization. Hence, it is not possible to sustain empirically an instrumentalist view of the media elite and their governmental and corporate allies by pulling the strings attached to being a journalist in a news organization whose interests are ultimately bound at the elite level to those source organizations being reported on. There are also many strings attached to being a source spokesperson who must represent simultaneously the authority of his office and the authoritative apparatus of the elite culture”.

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to suggest that the relationship is straightforward. On the contrary, I agree with Cook (1996, 19) who draws attention to the difficulties inherent in the relationship between government and media. He says that while one might expect journalists and their sources to “have an interest in cooperation and collaboration … such exchanges are fragile, because [they are] at least partially counter-balanced by the ongoing tension between what the sources and journalists each wish to get out of the news”. Similarly, Tiffen (1989, 44) draws attention to the difficulty in balancing this relationship, drawing attention to “a more subtle aspect of source-journalist relations”, namely the psychological need that some journalists may have for acceptance, which has “more far-reaching consequences”. He explains:

Consider the potential role strains in journalists’ relations with sources – dependence combined with a mandate to be ‘watchdogs’. Kudos results from a steady stream of stories based upon access but cultivating such closeness is in tension with the need for an adversary scepticism. Journalists’ proximity to power and intimate knowledge of its exercise and yet their own relative importance and marginal status may heighten the psychological importance of their acceptance by sources (44).

The parties will always find a way out however, redrawing boundaries as relations evolve. As Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, 113) put it:

In any continuing relationship based on mutual dependence and need, a culture … tends to emerge. … This does not mean that all participants will embrace the operative norms equally enthusiastically or without reservation. Cultural differences will persist and be voiced as well. But a shared culture is continually re-established, even in the face of disagreement, because it is indispensable to undergird the relationship.

I believe that this “shared culture” or what Gitlin (1980, 70) refers to as the “general community of interest” is central to understanding why the
WA press and the State Government both constructed a reality about Northbridge that was based on a false premise. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the news media generally adopt dominant assumptions and draw on the commonsensical views of the world that everyone knows. As Hall (1982, 69) asserts, “The media have the power to signify events in a particular way”. This suggests that the WA press may be seen as a forum in which certain ideas – about indigenous youth for example – are circulated as ‘the truth’, effectively marginalising or dismissing competing ‘truths’. In short, “News privileges the privileged” (Ward 1995, 114); less privileged members of the community are excluded. As Elliott (1972, 164) puts it, audiences are mere “spectators [who] sit outside … and watch the game” (Elliott 1972, 164). The game, then, involved only the State Government and the WA press who constructed a reality on behalf of the rest of the community. Hence, political communication scholars Bennett & Entman (2001, 17) go so far as to argue that our mass-mediated democracy is in danger of becoming “a democracy without citizens”.

Concern as to the exclusive power enjoyed by the press and politicians is not a contemporary phenomenon, however. More than 150 years

74 It is interesting to digress briefly here to consider in this context the finding by Jakubowicz et al. (1994, 133) that “despite government and community concern about the practices that reproduce racially and ethnically differentiated media products, [the media] continue to do so in ways that systematically disadvantage, stigmatise or marginalise minorities”. This does not allow for the fact that there are very clearly two parties involved in media discourse about government policy vis-à-vis minority groups. While the influence of government and other sources will depend upon the newsworthiness of a given story as I discussed in Chapter 2, governments are far from innocent bystanders in the criminalisation of race.
ago, in 1852, US abolitionist and orator Wendell Phillips declared, “We live under a government of men and morning newspapers”. Of course, as Schlesinger (1990, 71) has pointed out, official or powerful sources do not have a monopoly on the news. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the indigenous community features disproportionately as a source of negative stereotypical news reporting, while remaining absent from routine, everyday reporting.

In this chapter, I have explored the relationship between the State Government and the WA press. I have demonstrated that the dependence of the WA press on the State Government as an important source of news copy (discussed in Chapter 2) is matched by the increasing dependence of the State Government on the WA press to sell its message to the electorate. The growing involvement of media advisers in government policy and in particular in the way that a government media adviser was able to develop the curfew policy without consultation with any of the relevant government or non-government agencies reflects this dependence. I have also demonstrated, however, that neither the State Government nor the WA press always comes out on top in the ‘bargaining’ for news stories. Less experienced journalists are clearly more vulnerable to the State Government’s “arsenal of

76 Cook (1996, 34) also wonders whether the public are simply “out of the loop”, with “officials and journalists working so hard to anticipate each other’s reactions in crafting their own”.
manipulative strategies”; however, in certain circumstances, as in the story of the Northbridge curfew, senior journalists may also fail to see through the ‘spin’. In concluding my examination of the relationship between the WA press and the State Government, I find an observation by Tiffen (1989) to be particularly helpful. He argues that issues with a “community consensus” and “moral simplicity” offer fertile ground for both government and the news media to “affirm their virtue” (185). He asserts:

Governments are most likely to escalate a problem when they will enjoy consensual support for doing so, to dramatise an evil or an enemy when they know the overwhelming majority will share their views. News organisations similarly are likely to be most outraged on those issues where they know the audience will endorse their attitude.

In my analysis of the WA press reportage of Northbridge and the curfew in the next five chapters, I demonstrate how the issue of indigenous youth in Northbridge provided a story of such moral simplicity that it offered the State Government and the WA press the “fertile ground” to which Tiffen refers, resulting in a ‘win-win’ for both partners in this exclusive and most powerful relationship.
CHAPTER 4

TELLING THE STORY

MILESTONE 1: SETTING THE SCENE (JANUARY 2002)

In the preceding chapters, I have discussed why and how journalists and their sources, in particular the State Government, together routinely construct the news produced in the WA press. I have further illustrated why a story about crime perpetrated by indigenous youth in Northbridge would necessarily have news (and political) appeal. The next five chapters are concerned with how the WA State Government told this story and how the WA press wrote it.

The way in which a journalist or editor interprets and reports an issue or story – or the story ‘frame’ they employ (known in the profession as the story pitch or angle) – is the “essence of news judgement” (Tiffen 1989, 65). Hence, news is less a matter of what happens and more about how a journalist approaches a story. Ward (1995, 112), for example, points to the “mental library of news frames or story themes” that journalists carry with them, “each with inbuilt expectations about who the key characters will be and how the plot will develop”. Story frames enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely or, as Gitlin (1980, 7) puts it, “To assign [the information] to cognitive

1 As I discussed in Chapter 3, the story had political appeal at a time when the State Government was down in the polls and the Northbridge story provided it with the opportunity to demonstrate its tough ‘law and order’ credentials.
categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences”.

Although described in less technical terms, Tiffen (1989, 65) makes a similar point, arguing that journalists approach the world as a subject for stories “whose final format and most salient news points are frequently pre-determined”. Thus, the story frame can be the “driving force” behind the construction of news (Critcher 2003, 133) or the underlying construct that ties the information together into a meaningful, newsworthy “package” (Gamson & Modigliani 1989).

In this chapter, I begin my framing analysis of the WA press coverage of Northbridge and the curfew by examining the story frames The West Australian used to interpret a comprehensive State Government report into the issues facing Perth’s premier entertainment district entitled Northbridge: Shaping the Future, which was to pave the way for the introduction of the curfew.² I argue that the dominant frame in this first round of reportage is one of fear and escalating violence in what the WA press portrays as an entertainment district overwhelmed by criminal indigenous youth. I present the observations made by the author of the Northbridge report in response to this press coverage and for whom the news frame chosen came as little surprise. I also present the findings of my interviews with people working with youth in Northbridge as well as with members of the WA press who insist that their framing of the

² Published by the Government of Western Australia, March 2002. Unless otherwise indicated, page references in this chapter refer to this report.
Northbridge report reflected the perceived concerns of their readership. I find that the WA press coverage provided all the ingredients of a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1972, Hall et al. 1978, Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, Critcher 2003). The result, as occurs with any media-manufactured crime wave (Fishman 1980; 1981, Mickler & McHoul 1998), was to provide scapegoats and objects of indignation in the form of indigenous youth, to divert attention away from the real perpetrators of crime, and to rally support for the apparent introduction of a punitive ‘law and order’ initiative, the Northbridge curfew.

**The Northbridge: Shaping the Future report**

The WA press reportage around Northbridge and the curfew that I explore in this thesis began with the leaking in January 2002 of a State Government report entitled *Northbridge: Shaping the Future*. The report, which was the most comprehensive study of its kind undertaken by the State Government to address crime and community safety and the “associated adverse [community and media] perceptions” (3) of “Perth’s premier entertainment district”(1), was formally published by the Government of Western Australia in March 2002. I provide below a brief background to the report and an overview of its key findings as a preamble to the analysis of the WA press coverage arising from Milestone 1.
Background

In 2000, the State Government, the City of Perth and Town of Vincent charged a senior public servant in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet with the task of drawing up recommendations for the development and implementation of “a partnered strategy” to shape the future of Northbridge (1). The ensuing 80-page report highlighted the important role that “perceptions” – necessarily fuelled by the media – had played in the decline of Northbridge. The report found that, notwithstanding the many positive developments and initiatives that had occurred in Northbridge, there had been “growing concerns, valid or otherwise, that community safety [was] deteriorating, and this negative perception ha[d], in turn, been impacting on Northbridge’s vibrancy and viability” (3). It noted:

Whilst there are crime and community safety issues which can and should be addressed, it is also considered that the associated adverse perceptions are not balanced by an understanding of the nature of the issues, and Northbridge’s attractions (3).

The report was drawn up following extensive consultations that its author held with various parties over an 18-month period, including:

- State government agencies;
- City of Perth, Town of Vincent and two other local government authorities (Cities of Fremantle and Gosnells);
- Northbridge business owners and managers (restaurant, nightclub/tavern, retail), and residents (long-term and more recent);
• Ethnic community representatives;
• Indigenous community representatives;
• Community support agencies; and
• Other interested parties, eg real estate, Taxi Council, security industry, and academic.

In its introductory paragraphs, the report notes Northbridge’s “colourful and rich history” (3). By the late 1980s/early 1990s, Northbridge had become established as “a vibrant, cosmopolitan hospitality and entertainment district” that was “popular with the people of Perth and tourists” (19). In 2000, however, there was “a feeling” that Northbridge was deteriorating, with growing public concerns that it was unsafe, lacked a strong day economy and diversity of business, and that it was looking “tired and run down”. Further, “indications” were that businesses, including those in the night entertainment field, were “finding it difficult”. It refers to “an associated feeling” among “many in Northbridge” that the precinct was not seen as a priority, that it was being neglected, and there was a lack of confidence about the future, “particularly when they look at the increasing number of other successful, competing hospitality and entertainment precincts” (19). Countering such notions, the report points out that:

This view does not however recognise the many capital works of the City of Perth such as the relocation of the City depot and the development of the St James Estate for residential and commercial uses ($1.8m), the progressive undergrounding of power (60% complete), the upgrade of Russell Square (stage 1 over $1 million,
stage 2 $340,000), installation of security surveillance cameras, introduction of CATS buses, Roe Street car park upgrade ($11.5m) etc.

Nor does it recognise the intensive efforts of the WAPS [WA Police Service], the establishment of the Noongar Patrol and its work, the endeavours of the various support agencies in Northbridge and many other initiatives.

Nor that there are some businesses which have specifically opened in Northbridge because they consider it the premier hospitality and entertainment precinct in Perth (19).

Importantly, in relation to crime and community safety, the report notes:

> It is considered important to analyse the trends over a number of years as well as the current situation. Among other things, it is pertinent to test the view held by some that there has been a serious deterioration in the situation over recent years (23).

Drawing on the experiences of entertainment precincts elsewhere, the report recognizes the importance of “strong, involved communities” and the need for all stakeholders to work in partnership in order to reduce crime “in a sustainable way” (21). It states:

> Effective leadership and productive partnerships between local government, State government and the community – business and residential – are all needed to seize the opportunity to shape the future of Northbridge. If this occurs, Northbridge should see a reduction in crime, improved community safety, and a change in the current adverse public perceptions (22).

The base data collected to inform the report’s recommendations covers a wide range of issues: commencing with a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis and including a demographic profile of Northbridge; a map detailing planning control areas in the precinct; an overview of the many capital works under way; a series of crime statistics covering the previous decade; an overview of licensed premises and legislative developments in liquor licensing;
background information on the number of visitors to Northbridge; as well as analysis of a number of other issues such as transport (especially taxis), parking, traffic flows and congestion, noise, lighting, and street cleaning.

The report also discusses initiatives to increase a “sense of community” in Northbridge, business development opportunities, and marketing strategies to promote the precinct to potential visitors from Perth and beyond (59). Importantly, this includes attracting young people to the precinct, noting, for example, that, “Young people are part of the vibrancy of Northbridge, and sustaining the positive aspects of that and making them welcome are important” (40). The report insists again on the importance of young people visiting the precinct by repeating later in its deliberations that, “Northbridge is an area which is attractive to young people, and it is important that this continues to be the case, and that young people are welcomed as important contributors to a vital and vibrant Northbridge” (60).

Specifically as far as indigenous young people are concerned, the report notes in its introductory overview of crime and community safety issues in Northbridge the problem of antisocial behaviour, “primarily by young people, in part resulting from enjoying the attractions of licensed premises, but others, particularly earlier in the evening, not related” (3).
It notes that, "More recently, there has been a particular focus on the issues relating to Aboriginal youth" (3). The report recommends:

It is considered further strategies should be put in place to work with Indigenous youth while they are in Northbridge, to better understand their needs and interests, and develop subsequent strategies for them as individuals or as a group. Such strategies could include employment options in Northbridge (funds and expertise are available), peer leadership development, art options, expanded alternatives and where relevant case management in home areas etc.

In doing so, it should be recognised that Northbridge has had historical and still has ongoing links for the Indigenous community (41).

Thus, the report found that decisions “on a wide range of matters” would influence “crime and community safety, and perceptions” of Northbridge (37).

**Key findings**

The report proposes eight different policy areas that would each address crime prevention and community safety “as a priority” (given that this is “a key issue driving perceptions of Northbridge”), but that some of the policies would have “other very important objectives” (37). The policies would provide the framework for “targeted and consistent decisions and actions” (37). The report’s recommendations cover the following policy areas:

- Safety and Security;
- Liquor Licensing;
- Urban Planning and Design;
• Accessibility;
• Precinct Management;
• Community Development;
• Business Development;
• Marketing and Promotion.

These present 35 recommendations and 45 "key immediate actions" (5).

In light of the subsequent press coverage of the report, it is interesting to note that of the 35 recommendations and the 45 "key immediate actions", only two refer to young people, as follows:

**Safety and Security Policy, recommendation 9:**
The project by the State Government, ATSIC and the City of Perth to address the needs of Indigenous people in the inner city, with a focus on Indigenous youth in Northbridge, should be pursued as a priority (6).³

**Community Development Policy, recommendation 21:**
The Community Development Policy should incorporate as priorities relevant components of the Youth Forum Action Plan developed in 1998 by the City of Perth after extensive consultation (10).

Both these recommendations are presented in the context of needing to address the needs of young people coming to Northbridge.

It is noteworthy that the report makes no mention of young people at risk, other than on page 41 (half-way through) when it makes the following comments:

³ See Introduction, footnote 14.
Among the young people visiting Northbridge, Indigenous youth have become the subject of concern. The concerns centre on their antisocial behaviour, sometimes involvement in substance abuse, and the fact that, due to their young age, many are at risk.

It should also be recognised that many such youth visit Northbridge to share in its vibrancy and interact with their friends and are not involved in antisocial behaviour (41).

It goes on to refer to the organisations working to assist these young people (including the Nyoongar Patrol) and the need to support them in their work. It does not recommend any additional measures.

**Northbridge report leaked to *The West Australian***

In January 2002, two months before its official publication, the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report was leaked to *The West Australian*. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the fact that the report was leaked exclusively to this newspaper necessarily enhanced the story’s appeal (while at the same time enhancing the reporter’s and *The West Australian*’s reputation as a diligent digger for news in the public interest). It is not clear who leaked it, however the report’s author said he was concerned that negative media coverage was sometimes “fuelled by people in Northbridge”.

The leaking of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report triggered the first round of press coverage that this thesis examines, under “Milestone

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4 The State Government officially released the report in March 2002, without any media statement.
1: Setting the Scene”. *The West Australian* published a total of eight articles following the leaking of the report, in accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Methodology (page 24). These articles are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Milestone 1 Press Articles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Journalist/s</th>
<th>Headline/s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/1/02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ben Harvey/Peta Rasdien</td>
<td>Crime Hot Spot: Police vow action on Northbridge thugs;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nightlife area loses shine as fears rise;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ben Harvey/Peta Rasdien</td>
<td>Northbridge a victim of rising tide of violence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ben Harvey</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/1/02</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ben Harvey/Kate Gauntlett</td>
<td>Aboriginal link to late unrest: Northbridge at breaking point,</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>says ATSIC; Competitors leap to profit from problems</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Ben Harvey/Peta Rasdien</td>
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<td>10/1/02</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ben Harvey</td>
<td>Traders’ camera for Northbridge</td>
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<td>10/1/02</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Aboriginal families must help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/1/02</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Andre Malan</td>
<td>Aborigines need society stake</td>
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I set out below the main findings of my analysis of these texts, supported by data that I present in tables in Appendix 6.
CRIME HOT SPOT

Police vow action on Northbridge thugs

By Ben Harvey and Peta Rasden

CRIMES in Northbridge would attract tougher penalties under an aggressive police plan to clean up the troubled nightlife area.

Police will ask the Department of Justice to declare Northbridge a special precinct where offenders will get harsher punishment.

The planned crackdown comes on the back of a leaked government-commissioned report which shows crime in the area has blown out more than 50 per cent since 1991.

The report, Northbridge - Shaping the Future, shows offences have risen from 1548 in 1991-92 to 2361 last financial year.

Sex crimes are at a 10-year high, assaults have more than doubled and incidents of police have increased four-fold, the report shows.

Perth District Supt Alan McCagh said police had already started the get-tough approach. Arrest rates were up significantly in recent weeks.

The police plan also would involve rounding up unaccompanied juveniles.

They would be detained for up to four hours before being driven home in buses.

The families of young people found in Northbridge would be counselled, with the involvement of the Department of Community Development where necessary.

The report - commissioned by the previous government and endorsed by the present one - was compiled by senior government officer Jack Busch.

Its recommendations will be adopted in the next few months.

The owner of Valezzino cafe, Robert Smalley, said lawless groups of Aboriginals and violent nightclubs had pushed Northbridge to the brink.

There had been a 30 per cent drop in trade in recent years as diners and drinkers headed to other areas, he said.

Supt McCagh and other senior police agreed young Aboriginals caused much of the trouble. The report showed 46 per cent of people charged with assault in 1999-2000 in Northbridge were Aboriginal.

But Perth City councillor Bert Tudor said he was disappointed the report paid little attention to antisocial behaviour by Aboriginals.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission said it was working on culturally appropriate strategies to address the issue.

Acting Premier Eric Ripper conceded Northbridge had problems. The Government was committed to attracting families back. Long-term solutions were needed, he said.

More reports, page 8.

Alston, page 13.
“Crime hot spot: Police vow action on Northbridge thugs”
(see page 192)

Despite the many different issues raised in the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report, this headline frames the story as one about escalating crime in Northbridge and the proposed police crackdown. It is the only news frame presented in this article, which is overflowing with colourful and dramatic language to depict fear and violence on the rampage in the entertainment district (see Table 7, Appendix 6).

The lead source for the article is the police who outline their own plan for Northbridge, with Perth District Supt Alan McCagh implying that arrests are a solution to any problems in the precinct. In a move that could arguably have foreshadowed the curfew, reporters Harvey and Rasdien note that the police plan would also involve “rounding up” unaccompanied juveniles and counselling families. In this way, readers are invited to make a clear link between “crime” in Northbridge and unaccompanied juveniles and their families. Although readers are told that the “planned crackdown” comes on the back of the “leaked” report, Northbridge: Shaping the Future does not mention any of these police proposals. Readers are not told that the police actually provided the figures for the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report and could, therefore, have developed this “aggressive plan” at any time and did not need to await the leaking of this report to do so. Harvey and Rasdien do
tell readers, however, that “crime” (unspecified) in the area has “blown out” and provide selected statistics to illustrate this. For example, the reporters note that “sex crimes” are at a “10-year high”; however, 10 years earlier there had been no such offences reported. Harvey and Rasdien fail to mention, when citing their figures, that “assaults” and “bashings of police” have fluctuated during the period and assaults have actually fallen in the previous two years. Neither do they tell readers that during the period under review there has been an increase in the number of approvals for extended trading hours and an increase in the potential number of patrons that nightclubs can cater for, a point that is highlighted in the report (29) and which would clearly have an impact upon the number of offences committed. Indeed, the only information that Harvey and Rasdien use from the report concerns the statistics relating to crime, which account for only one tenth of its analysis of Northbridge. Further, they ignore the report’s very important finding that assaults predominantly occur on Friday and Saturday evenings, between 10.00pm and 5.00am, and especially between 11.00pm and 3.00am (28). In other words, as the report notes, “Over the remaining 17 hours” there is little risk of an offence being committed (28).

Harvey and Rasdien do not challenge the claim by their second source, restaurateur Robert Smales, that there has been a “30 per cent drop” in trade, because of trouble caused primarily by “young Aborigines”.
Neither do they question the mistaken (apparent) focus of the police on “unaccompanied juveniles” as the main perpetrators of “crimes” in Northbridge. The Northbridge report made clear that the majority (71 per cent in 1999/2000) of people charged with serious and common assaults were in the 18- to 34-year-old age group.\(^5\)

Their third source, Perth City Councillor Bert Tudori, reinforces the focus on indigenous youth when he is said to have expressed disappointment that the report paid “little attention” to “antisocial behaviour by Aborigines”.

While ATSIC is used as a source, unlike the other sources it is not represented by an individual but is quoted as an organisation. Readers might be expected to be unclear about ATSIC’s plan to introduce “culturally appropriate strategies to address the issue”, however Harvey and Rasdien do not elaborate on what these strategies might entail. Further, they do not say whether “the issue” refers to serious crime or antisocial behaviour, which is a very important distinction made in the report. Given the focus of the article, readers might understand “the issue” refers to serious crime.

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It is interesting that the article concludes with a reference to Acting Premier Eric Ripper, who “conceded” (presumably with the reporter) that Northbridge “had problems”. Readers are not told that it was, in fact, the State Government who, together with the City of Perth and the Town of Vincent, had commissioned the report precisely because it recognised the need to address these “problems”, among others, in Northbridge. In other words, the Acting Premier represented the authority responsible for producing the report in the first place and there was nothing for him to “concede” to the readership. In this way, The West Australian may be seen to be ‘pushing the agenda’ on Northbridge to the Government rather than the other way around.

Although the opening paragraph refers to Northbridge as a “nightlife area”, Harvey and Rasdien do not question the apparent contradiction in the Government’s commitment – as articulated by Acting Premier Eric Ripper in the final paragraph – “to attracting families” back to Northbridge. Readers might understand that families would include young children.

I reproduce on page 197 the Alston cartoon that readers of this front-page article are directed to. This provides a pictorial representation of
the news frame of Northbridge out of control, featuring stereotypical dark-skinned “thugs”.  

*The West Australian*, 8 January 2002, 13

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6 Dean Alston is the regular cartoonist with *The West Australian*. 
ROUGHLY area loses shine as fears rise

THE Northbridge — Sharing the future report took a year to compile and contains 24 recommendations on how to make the area more appealing and safer for visitors.

But on the second, Northbridge traders believe it says little that was already known and has few tangible recommendations.

The report, by senior public servant Jim Cotter, was originally due in October last year but has been continuously pushed back.

The committee was restructured by public documents about safety, a weak police presence, and a subsection of the area that was tired and run down.

But some time people associated with Northbridge but had yet to be engaged and there was a lack of confidence that the strategies would be implemented.

Recommendations include:

- Developing a new $10,000-a-year Northbridge coordinator.
- The coordinator would be employed for two years and responsible for improving Northbridge.
- Support for the Town of Vis. uits' Arts Town proposed by the north end of William Street into a Chinatown.
- Establishment of a Northbridge visitor information group.
- Increased lighting.

Northbridge Business and Community Association president, supported the report.

Mr Cotter said the report had four core recommendations and failed to address the key problems of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal behaviour.

"The biggest problem is the Aboriginal community," Mr Cotter said. "If there wasn't the police work with Aboriginals then Northbridge would fail.

"I know the report would go around to the real issues. It's a shame no one yet to take the burl by the horns on this.

"Mr Cotter said the idea of a co-ordinator for the area was a good idea but it was not a sale that will be paid for.

"Perth councillor Vincent Tan, who is Northbridge Business and Community Association president, supported the report.

"We need to start somewhere," he said. "This is the beginning of a journey of a thousand miles."
“Nightlife area loses shine as fears rise”
(see page 198)

The West Australian’s front-page article is followed by two further stories on page 8, also written by Harvey and Rasdien, which repeat the news frame that crime is overwhelming Northbridge. The headlines of both these articles – and accompanying graphic inset carrying the headline “Mean Streets” – are framed around fear and escalating violence.

The first of these stories, “Nightlife area loses shine as fears rise”, leads with the Northbridge report which, it says, has divided opinion. However, it quotes the opinions of only two people, both of whom are Councillors at the Perth City Council, which was one of the joint commissioners of the report. The difference of opinion is not, in fact, significant. One councillor believes the report does not go far enough, while the other says the report is only the beginning of “a thousand-mile journey”.

Harvey and Rasdien tell readers that the report took a year to complete and contains 34 recommendations to make Northbridge “more appealing and safer for visitors”. Their lead sources are unnamed “Northbridge traders” who complain that the report contains “few

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7 The report in fact took 18 months to complete and contained 35 recommendations and 45 “key immediate actions”. This is only a small detail, however combined with other omissions identified, it suggests the reporters were careless in their examination of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report.
tangible recommendations”. Harvey and Rasdien select as the most important recommendation number 33, which relates to the appointment of a $150,000-a-year Northbridge coordinator, who would report to a “working group” responsible for improving Northbridge.\(^8\) They provide this information out of context, not explaining why a coordinator is required.\(^9\) Neither do they draw readers’ attention to the report’s observation that in Perth, as in any other city, a hospitality and entertainment precinct “will always have to be ‘managed’”. Readers are not told about any of the report’s other 34 recommendations, but instead are advised of eight of its 45 “key immediate actions”. It is not possible to suggest the reasons why these eight actions were selected and not others. Certainly, they were not selected according to policy area. For example, the first two relate to the “Safety and Security Policy”; three come under the “Accessibility Policy”; one under “Business Development Policy”, one under “Partnerships for Results” and one under “Precinct Management Policy”. The recommendations or “key immediate actions” of the three other policy areas are not mentioned at all. It is interesting to note that three of the above eight “key immediate actions” were not supported by the City of Perth (relating to designated parking, buses, and the establishment of a Chinatown). Given that the City of Perth opposed only five out of the report’s 80 recommendations

\(^8\) The salary figure given is incorrect; the report cites $120,000, which includes the cost of office and other expenses.

\(^9\) This person would have the role of coordinating the work of the proposed partnership – State and local government, business community and so forth – which is the basic foundation upon which the report’s recommendations are built.
and key immediate actions, it is a matter of conjecture whether these were selected with a view to stirring controversy.

Harvey and Rasdien once again quote Bert Tudori indirectly on “the key problem of Aboriginal groups and antisocial behaviour”. They then reinforce the point by quoting him, this time directly, saying, “Aboriginal troublemakers” are the “biggest problem” and that, “If there wasn’t the trouble with Aborigines then Northbridge would flourish”.

“Northbridge a victim of rising tide of violence”
(see page 198)

This article, written by Ben Harvey, is again replete with dramatic language. Harvey focuses exclusively on selected statistics from the report to demonstrate that Northbridge is “more violent now” and points to the “massive” over-representation of Aboriginal people in assault cases.

The article draws on only one source, who is quoted indirectly and once again comes under the “business owners” label. This source “agree(s)” that the number of people visiting Northbridge has “dropped dramatically”, which, Harvey says, means that more crimes are being committed against fewer people. The Northbridge report does not ever suggest that there has been a reduction in the number of visitors to
Northbridge; on the contrary, it highlights the increased licensing hours and potential for more customers in the precinct. Harvey goes on to note the profile of the perpetrators and victims of assaults. The last three paragraphs of his story are devoted to the “massive over representation” of Aboriginal people in assault cases.
Aboriginal link to late unrest

Northbridge at breaking point, says ATSIC

By Ben Harvey and Kate Gauntlett

MOST of the youths referred to an after-hours Northbridge service for substance abuse, welfare concerns and antisocial behaviour were Aboriginal, according to Mission Australia.

The agency's figures show Aboriginal youths made up 34 per cent of 146 referrals to the CARAS service for January-June 2001, compared with 68 per cent of 194 referrals for the previous six months.

Police refer youths in Perth and Northbridge to the service, at Perth central stations, as an alternative to custody.

Yesterday, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission conceded the problem of young Aboriginals in Northbridge had reached breaking point.

ATSIC South-West commissioner Eric Wynne unveiled a plan the organisation had been working on to address the problems faced in Northbridge.

The announcement of the Northbridge priority project was brought forward to coincide with latest media coverage of violence in the area.

"These problems have been ongoing," Mr Wynne said. "It has built up over a long period. It is not only ATSIC which has acknowledged that the problem is huge, it is the community as a whole."

Mr Wynne said ATSIC did not condone having children as young as seven or eight out on the streets unsupervised late at night.

"But you would not want a 13-year-old going back to a home where the mother is drugged up or drunk," he said.

The issue of family dysfunction was an enormous problem for the Aboriginal community and it was a noncon to suggest it could be solved quickly, he said.

Mr Wynne suggested many Aboriginals in Northbridge, particularly in Russell Square, were originally from country towns and were in Perth for medical procedures. Big groups like that would not be an issue if appropriate medical services were available in the country.

Perth District Supt Alan McCagh said yesterday that troublemakers in Northbridge had got the upper hand over police because young and inexperienced officers were often on the beat, with little idea of how to react in real-life situations.

"There are 72 probationary officers in the Perth District (last) most of those officers are exposed to Northbridge," he said.

"They come straight out of the academy and some of them for the first time."

Mission Australia regional manager Anne Russell-Brown said police proposals, particularly rounding up unaccompanied juveniles and detaining them for up to four hours, were misguided.

"Young people have the same rights as everybody else to access public spaces, including Northbridge, and they should not receive undue attention simply because of their age," she said.

Safer Northbridge chairman Robert Smiles said his organisation fully supported the efforts of Aboriginal groups and government agencies to stop the rot in Northbridge. He welcomed the police service's low tolerance approach to policing Northbridge.

Flashpoint: Supt Alan McCagh, Safer Northbridge chairman Robert Smiles and ATSIC's Eric Wynne. Mr Wynne says the problem of young Aboriginals in Northbridge is at breaking point. Picture: Neil Elton

The West Australian, 9 January 2002, 10
“Aboriginal link to late unrest”
(see page 203)

The following day, the story switches news frame to focus on Aboriginal people as being responsible for the problems in Northbridge. Harvey is again the lead journalist; however, Kate Gauntlett, who specialises in social welfare and youth affairs, also contributes to the article. Consequently, the sources shift from the police and business community used the previous day to predominantly welfare organisations and ATSIC representatives. The language, however, is no less sensationalist.

The image caption refers to Eric Wynne, South-West commissioner for ATSIC, who says, “The problem of young Aborigines in Northbridge is at breaking point”. In this way, readers learn that it is not Northbridge but “the problem of young Aborigines” that is “at breaking point”. The article leads with figures from MA indicating that “most” of the youths referred to its On-Track program are Aboriginal. Readers are then told that Mr Wynne has unveiled ATSIC’s plan “to address the problems faced in Northbridge”. Hence, the link is reinforced about crime and indigenous people and readers may infer that it is ATSIC’s responsibility to address the various problems facing Northbridge (and within its power to do so).
The article quotes Wynne as saying that not only ATSIC but also the (Aboriginal) “community as a whole” have acknowledged the problem is “huge”. He appears to be asked to defend his position, saying that he does “not condone having children as young as seven or eight on the streets unsupervised late at night”. This is the first time such ages are mentioned; there is no reference to them in the Northbridge report. However, as my framing analysis demonstrates, the question of age is a recurring issue in the reportage about Northbridge.

The ATSIC representative highlights to readers the problem of simply sending young people to homes where one or other parent may be “drugged up or drunk”. This introduces the issue of family dysfunction, which becomes another important news frame in the press coverage.

Harvey and Gauntlett then quote the State Manager of MA, who reminds readers, in the article’s penultimate paragraph, that young people have “the same rights as everyone else” to access public spaces.

The article concludes with an indirect quote from Robert Smales, chairman of Safer Northbridge, who expresses his “full support” for the efforts of Aboriginal groups and government agencies to “stop the rot” in Northbridge. In this way, indigenous people are singled out to take responsibility for the issues facing Northbridge.
"Competitors leap to profit from problems"

The story switches news frame in this article, which focuses on Perth’s other nightlife areas that will profit, readers are given to understand, from a Northbridge pushed “to the brink”. The article presents these districts as being a “safe and fun alternative to Northbridge”; however, an indirect quote from Bradley Woods, head of the Australian Hotels’ Association, advises readers that crime in Northbridge is “no worse than entertainment districts in other States”. Woods blames “ethnic gangs and unruly youths for [the] problems".

The West Australian, 9 January 2002, 10
Traders’ camera for Northbridge

Business owners say they are tired of holiday violence.

By Ben Harvey

RENAUROUERS in Northbridge will set up their own security camera in James Street on Australia Day because the City of Perth is restricted in what it can release from council cameras.

Northbridge traders are fed up with anti-social behaviour by young Aborigines and violence by drunken nightclubs.

The traders plan to use the video film to support their campaign to clean up Northbridge.

Safer WA Northbridge chairman Robert Smart said James Street usually became extremely rowdy after midnight. But problems began earlier when people flooded into Northbridge after the Australia Day fireworks.

Police had assured traders that adequate numbers of officers would be on hand for the celebrations.

It is understood traders previously have tried to get footage from council security cameras but their request was rejected.

Councillor chief executive Garry Hunt said original security video recordings and still photographs could not be released to any person or organisation unless requested under Section 711 of the WA Criminal Code or by other legal instrument. Under normal circumstances, tapes were erased and still photographs shredded after seven days. Digital cameras self-erased within 72 hours.

A report on the future of Northbridge has revealed that offences have risen from 1548 in 1991-92 to 2361 last financial year. Sex crimes were at a 10-year high, assaults had more than doubled and bashings of police had increased four-fold.

Supt Alan McCagh pointed the finger at young Aborigines as the cause of much violence in Northbridge. But in a move which has surprised many police, the tough-talking former tactical response group head will go to another section. It is understood that Supt McCagh will be replaced in six weeks by police academy chief Supt Chris Dawson.

Editorial, page 14

"Traders’ camera for Northbridge"

Harvey continues the story the following day with a very different but related news frame, around the notion of Northbridge business being left to fend for themselves in their campaign to "clean up" the precinct; with no support from authorities whose hands are tied with red tape. To demonstrate the problems facing the traders, Harvey repeats the figures cited in earlier articles from the Northbridge report, including the fact that "sex crimes" are "at a 10-year high", and that assaults have "more than doubled" and "bashings of police" have "increased four-fold".
The article concludes with the announcement that Supt Alan McCagh, the "tough talking former tactical response group head" who had "pointed the finger at young Aborigines as the cause of much of the violence in Northbridge", is being transferred in a move that has "surprised many police". Readers might infer from this, as Northbridge traders and some councillors have said, that the authorities are 'soft' on indigenous youth and people who stand up against them are sidelined.

The West Australian, 10 January 2002, 14
“Aboriginal families must help”
(see page 208)

The editorial of the same issue of The West Australian reverts to the familiar news frame of blame attribution. The use of the word “must” in the headline is noteworthy; it conveys a sense of urgency and is accusatory, giving the impression that Aboriginal families are not helping.

The editorial begins by telling readers that the first step to finding the solution to Northbridge is to identify the problem. The problem, it is now understood, has been identified to mean “young Aborigines”. The West Australian says the Northbridge report was the result of the growing fears of traders that “antisocial behaviour in the area was on the rise and was having a correspondingly greater effect on their businesses”. As I have already noted, the focus of the report was not on antisocial behaviour, which it clearly states is but one dimension of the problems facing Northbridge. Further, the report said only that there was a “feeling” that business was deteriorating in Northbridge, not that it was. The editorial then says that, according to the report, “the source of many of the problems is groups of young Aborigines”. The report never said this.

Readers are told that many people, particularly families, are no longer visiting the area because of “fears about their safety”. Readers may be
expected to understand that the editorial is referring here to non-
Aboriginal families, as Aboriginal families are the ones who “must help”
and who, by implication, have the power to solve the problem under
discussion. (The reference to families being deterred from visiting what
has been consistently referred to as a nightlife area is also worthy of
note.) The editorial cites the MA figures showing that the overwhelming
majority of youth taken into their care are Aboriginal. It does not say,
however, that police have arrested these young people for any criminal
offence. The editorial also refers to unsupervised “children as young as
seven” in Northbridge late at night.

*The West Australian* then goes to its core argument, namely that the
Aboriginal community should accept the *Northbridge: Shaping the
Future* report as “an illustration of how some families are failing their
children and try to find ways of tackling what is a difficult and sensitive
issue”. As I have noted above, the report does not refer to “families
failing their children”; rather it emphasises the important work of ATSIC,
the Nyoongar Patrol and other organisations in assisting young people
in Northbridge and the need for government to support them in this
work.

The editorial goes on to dismiss the police proposal to declare
Northbridge a special precinct with greater penalties for crimes
committed there. It also dismisses the police recommendation to “round up unaccompanied juveniles” because there is no reason not to welcome “well-behaved young people” who behave “appropriately” and are “not in danger themselves”. (This position will change with the change of editor, which I discuss in Chapter 7.) The editorial then reverts to the discourse of crime and fear, saying that Northbridge traders have “long lamented” rising crime rates and “increasing violent behaviour” which, it says, have turned what should be a “magnet for Perth people” into “a place many fear to visit”.

In conclusion, *The West Australian* tells readers that the Northbridge report has “put the spotlight very firmly on those responsible for much of the bad behaviour”. The report itself, in fact, did not put the spotlight on any one group in relation to crime. Further, the editorial’s flippant suggestion that serious assaults and sex offences, which are mentioned in the preceding sentence, are merely a matter of “bad behaviour” arises from the newspaper’s consistent conflation of antisocial behaviour and crime, which has been apparent in the preceding articles and the editorial itself. The final paragraph states that traders and prospective visitors to Northbridge have reason to “feel confident” that there is “at least a blueprint to tackle the future”. It does not shed any light, however, on what the report’s recommendations for Northbridge are and just what the “blueprint” might entail.
Aborigines need society stake

ANDRÉ MALAN

LAST Friday, a public-spirited citizen in the middle-class neighborhood where I live noticed four teenage boys on bicycles behaving suspiciously and decided to keep an eye on them.

He followed them at a distance and concluded that they were looking for temporarily unoccupied houses to break into.

After a while the boys apparently realized that they were being watched and rode off, so the man called police and the council security people to report his suspicions.

A council official turned up about 35 minutes later but there was no sign of the police.

The man then went a step further. He wrote a short note reporting what he had seen and put copies in mailboxes in nearby streets to warn people to be on the lookout.

It was the sort of community-minded action that can make a big difference in the fight against crime, and the man deserves to be congratulated both for his vigilance and perseverance.

But the question arises: what prompted his suspicions in the first place? There are always dozens of youngsters riding around the neighborhood on bikes during the school holidays, and nobody usually gives them a second thought.

You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that at least three of the four youngsters were Aborigines — a detail the man pointed out in the note to his neighbors.

Sad though it is, that by itself was reasonable grounds for his distrust. It is undoubtedly true that young Aboriginal males are by far and away the most crime-prone group in WA. If you see a group of them together, there is, statistically at least, a fair chance that they're up to no good.

Although Aborigines represent only 3 per cent of this State's population, 55 of every 100 juveniles detained in WA are Aborigines, as are 43 of every 100 adults in jail.

Every time there is a police chase or some other wild crime shown on television, the immediate assumption is that Aborigines are involved — and too often that assumption is right.

Think for a moment how these statistics must be by now routine. It is all too easy to routinely attract that sort of suspicion even if you are a law-abiding young Aboriginal trying to make a life for yourself in spite of the obstacles that already stand in your way.

There must be times when you feel like giving up and just playing the role that society expects of you.

Unfortunately, some young Aboriginals seem to have embraced the outlaw role and go out of their way to antagonize other members of the community.

Recently, the teenage son of a colleague of mine found himself the only other passenger on a bus with a big group of Aboriginal teenagers who proceeded to threat and harass him.

The boy has been brought up not to make judgments based on race, but his experience is going to make it harder to uphold that principle.

What to do about Aboriginal juvenile crime is one of the most intractable social problems facing our community. The instinctive reaction of many people is to throw the book at them but although that may be tempting, and may make their victims feel better, it is only likely to alienate them further and make the problem worse.

The reasons behind the problem are relatively easy to understand. Young Aboriginals do not become criminals by choice. Most of them are born in this State immediately enter a cycle of disadvantage brought about by alcohol, drugs and violent abuse and absent fathers.

Even with a lot of support it is very hard to break out of that cycle. Without help it is virtually impossible.

It is going to take a long time, and it may turn out to be costly, but the only way is to try to break the cycle of disadvantage and give them a stake in the community.

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“Aborigines need society stake”
(see page 212)

An opinion piece five days later by Andre Malan presents a very
different frame. Malan invites readers to consider what it must be like to
belong to a group that is continually suspected of wrong-doing and how
social exclusion might lead young people to crime. He argues that the
only way to address it is to try to break the cycle of disadvantage that
indigenous children are born into by giving them a stake in the
community. Thus, Malan shifts the responsibility for indigenous youth
crime from Aboriginal families to the Western Australian community as a
whole. Notwithstanding this considered piece, Malan still maintains the
focus of the discourse on indigenous youth crime and fails to shed any
light on the actual findings of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report.

Concluding remarks on press coverage

I have demonstrated that, over a period of just one week, a report that
sought to highlight the complex and many-faceted issues to be
addressed in relation to Northbridge resulted in a wave of press
coverage framed around fear and escalating violence. None of Ben
Harvey’s three articles on the Northbridge report indicates the breadth
and complexity of issues covered in the report. Most importantly, he
does not seek to reassure his readers by dispelling the “perceptions”

10 The narrative is predictable. As I discussed in Chapter 2, news stories framed
around conflict arise from the “perceived need to seek market share by highlighting or
exaggerating dramatic confrontation” (Nelson & Willey 2003, 247).
that are distorting the precinct’s image and exaggerating the incidence of crime in the area. On the contrary, his articles serve to further perpetuate these perceptions and, what is more, lead readers to believe that indigenous young people are the primary cause of crime in Northbridge in accordance with the claims of his main sources – the WA Police Service and Northbridge business people. Competing frames may be identified in the press coverage, however. MA recalls that young people have the same rights as everyone else to visit Northbridge and the Australian Hotels’ Association contends that crime is no worse in Northbridge than in any other nightlife area in Australia. Nonetheless, the dominant frame is clearly that of an entertainment district overwhelmed by crime perpetrated by indigenous youth. As Entman (1991, 7) points out, the frame does not eliminate all “incongruent data”, but “through repetition, placement and reinforcing associations with each other, the words and images that comprise the frame render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others”.

*The West Australian’s coverage of Northbridge: Shaping the Future* did not surprise the report’s author. He believes that simplistic or ‘common sense’ reporting on Northbridge will always be the preferred option. He explains:

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11 This is not to suggest that Harvey’s role is to reassure readers. As Blood et al. (2002, 71) point out, the choice of story frame employed by a journalist is “often guided” by the wish to dramatise or maximise a story’s news value.
I think some people might have expected, when I was asked to do the report, a more simplistic approach to crime in Northbridge and cutting back on antisocial behaviour. … I wrote the report from [the] entirely different perspective [that] unless you shift the fundamentals you are never going to get on top of the issues in Northbridge. That was really the message, and it was meant to be a positive message. … But that wasn’t something at the end of the day … that was newsworthy so it never had major media coverage.

As regards the failure of the press to try to reassure the public and dispel negative perceptions about the entertainment precinct, which had been one of the report’s main intentions, the report’s author said that the media were always “very quick to give major negative headlines to Northbridge”. He said:

One of the things about Northbridge is that it has been and continues to be a high profile media target. I think certainly [Northbridge] is over sensationalised. … The figures are in the report; the later you go there at night, the more likely you are to be at risk. Depending upon which section of the population you come from, you’re more likely to be at risk. But that’s never portrayed in the media. It’s never conveyed in a way that will reassure the public.

The report’s author said that while the focus of the report had not been on Aboriginal young people, he was not surprised that The West Australian should have targeted this particular group. He explained, “Unfortunately, many people go back to the Aboriginal issue, many people have negative perceptions of Aboriginals and essentially they either see them through the media or in antisocial situations in a place like Northbridge”. He said he had purposely downplayed the issue of Aboriginal youth at risk and antisocial behaviour in the report and appeared disappointed that the business community – and possibly the
police – had drawn attention to it.\textsuperscript{12} He believed that the traders were simply giving the media what they wanted and what they believed their readership wanted. He explained:

\begin{quote}
Media judge their readership … know the high community concern about crime. They know they get a resonance with the community when they report on it. … Northbridge can provide material for that, particularly when you’ve got people who are able to stand up and say some of those things in a sometimes colourful way.
\end{quote}

\section*{“Something had to be done”}

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that framing is indeed an “exercise in power”, as Reese (2003) and others (for example Tuchman 1978, Gandy 1998, Gamson 1992, Entman 1991; 1993; 2004 and Nelson et al. 1997) contend. By framing \textit{Northbridge: Shaping the Future} around criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’, rather than around the myriad other issues raised in the report, \textit{The West Australian} drew on a familiar and predictable narrative that might be expected to perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotyping and prejudices. At the same time, it elicited moral evaluation and provoked moral outrage among those readers who have no alternative sources of information.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} The author of the \textit{Northbridge: Shaping the Future} report expressed concern about the willingness of some Northbridge traders to talk to the media to draw attention to the precinct because he believed that this was having an adverse impact upon their business. He said he had advised people “to think carefully about what they say to media which might be very counterproductive to their own business”. He added, “I think some people at times talk to the media with not necessarily the right facts or something second-hand … so the information that was made available to the media wasn’t always substantive. … Sometimes I think they were quite happy to talk emotionally”.

\textsuperscript{13} Blood et al.\textit{(2002)} reach a similar conclusion regarding the Australian media coverage of people with mental illness. They find that this tends to conform to a set of readily identifiable framing strategies. They argue that these dominant framing devices may lead audiences into certain interpretations of mental health and mental illness.
As Scheufele (1999, 116) argues, “The frames that are most accessible are the ones that are most easily available and retrievable from memory”.

Chibnall concludes from his study of crime reportage that, “The columns of law-and-order news are peopled by heroes and villains, personifications of good and evil acting roles in a symbolic drama” (1977, xi). Entman (1989, 49) makes a similar observation when he says that the media use “simplification, personalization and symbolization” in order to appeal to a broad audience. In the unfolding drama of Northbridge, indigenous youth are easily placed in the villains’ role. It is my contention that through its framing of the Northbridge report, *The West Australian* created a ‘moral panic’, according to the defining criteria set out by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994, 33-39) or, put simply, that the newspaper ‘beat up’ the criminal activity of indigenous youth in the precinct.  

14 Tiffen (1989, 66) takes this observation further to point out that such “active winnowing is ripe for the reproduction of stereotypes”.  
15 According to these distinguishing attributes, Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994, 33-39) argue that moral panics involve:
   i. A “heightened level of concern over the behaviour of a certain group or category and the consequences that the behaviour presumably cause for the rest of society”;
   ii. “An increased level of hostility toward the groups or category regarded as engaging in the behaviour in question”;

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issues such as, for example, seeing people with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses as ‘dangerous others’. They contend, “The chosen frame was also the one most damaging to community understanding of mental health and illness because it explicitly linked mental illness to violence. Unfortunately, it is an all too familiar, but unfounded and misinformed, theme in news discourse” (67).

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contention in *Media and Crime* (2004, 69) that people with vested interests use the news media as a conduit to make a moral statement about a particular individual or group. Hence, Jewkes (2004, 59) argues that much of the news is “a mere side-show, a diversionary tactic which removes attention from more serious problems in society” (59-60).

While it is not possible to say with empirical certainty what interests influenced *The West Australian*’s framing of the Northbridge story, the findings of my analysis suggest that the sources most frequently cited – Northbridge business and the WA Police Service – would necessarily

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iii. “There must be at least a certain minimal measure of consensus in the society as a whole – or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behaviour”;  
iv. The concept of moral panic rests on disproportionality [which] is evident where “public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm”;  
v. “By their very nature, moral panics are volatile; they erupt fairly quickly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time and may reappear from time to time) and nearly as suddenly, subside”.

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16 Goode & Ben-Yehuda build upon Cohen’s (1972) classic study, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, which provided the first definition of the moral panic and established the centrality of the media in its creation, later elaborated upon by Hall et al. (1978) in *Policing the Crisis*. Cohen’s (1972, 9) much-cited definition of a moral panic in the opening paragraph of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is as follows: “Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself”. As Cohen points out, the media need not seek to create a moral panic in order to do so. He contends, “Even if they are not self-consciously engaged in crusading or muckraking, [the media’s] very reporting of certain ‘facts’ can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic. When such feelings coincide with a perception that particular values need to be protected, the preconditions for new rule creation or social problem definition are present (16)”.
have played an influential role.\textsuperscript{17} 18 The CRC researcher, for example, is dismissive of the popular discourse relating to indigenous youth, pointing instead to the real “white, adult” perpetrators of the problems in Northbridge. He explained:

I talk to people who tell me this stuff about Aboriginal kids stealing lobsters from tables; it’s all the same stories from 10 years ago, they get recycled, it’s kind of an urban myth around.\textsuperscript{19} If you look at things like assaults, and violence and drug-related and alcohol-related violence, that’s a white problem in Northbridge, the heavy end of violence is linked to the pub and club industry, not 14-year-old Aboriginal kids being on the street. It seems to be much more to do now with that urban culture, binge drinking and drugs and clubbing. … If you were a young woman going to Northbridge, you’d be more concerned about having your drink spiked at a club or getting mauled by some drunken person coming out of the pub later. … [But] nobody is going to turn around and try and put the clubs out of business, they’d lose too much money.

He found the narrative about the Northbridge report to be entirely predictable, saying that the story had already been framed by “the [popular] discourse”. He said it was “impossible” to put forward alternative views in the debate about Northbridge because “there are too many presuppositions around, it’s already been largely established, so I don’t see a lot of point, I find it a bit of a waste of energy”. The State

\textsuperscript{17} Hall et al. (1978, 30) contend, for example, that the “key role” of the media in creating a moral panic relating to “mugging” cannot be treated in isolation, arguing that, “It can only be analysed together with those other collective agencies in the ‘mugging’ drama – the central apparatus of social control in the state: the police and the courts”.\textsuperscript{18} The process driving a media-manufactured crime wave is complex, as Mickler & McHoul (1998, 29) find in relation to the 1991 youth “crime wave” in Perth. They argue that, “There is indeed evidence of the print media being complicit in manufacturing a youth-crime ‘wave’ with increasing reference to Aboriginal people. But this manufacturing process itself is complex. … It is a result of crime’s pre-eminent status as bad news; the routine business of news-gathering and -making; the pressures and counter-pressures of different news sources and participants; campaigns in neighbouring media industries (such as radio) and, finally, the effects news can have upon itself”.\textsuperscript{19} In his study of muggings against the elderly, Fishman (1980, 12) found that a wave of media publicity required only “some incidents on the streets” plus “considerable concern about [these incidents] among those sources the media relied upon”.

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Manager of MA agreed, saying, “There have always been issues around people in Northbridge that the rest of the public did not really want to have there, and particularly young people in Northbridge”.\textsuperscript{20} She confirmed, for example, that the WA press had exaggerated reports about seven-year-old children out alone in Northbridge at night, saying that only “a handful” of children that age had ever been detained. However, it is clear that such reports might be expected to provoke moral outrage among the readership.\textsuperscript{21}

When I put the above observations to a police reporter with \textit{The West Australian}, he responded by saying that it is immaterial whether or not indigenous young people are responsible for the crime in Northbridge; what matters is the public perception and that is what informs his news articles. He explained:

\begin{quote}
The most contentious thing with Northbridge is the issue of the Aboriginal kids that [are] hanging around in Northbridge [even if they are] not necessarily causing trouble. … It is impossible to talk about the future of
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20}Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994, 29) make the important point that moral panics are likely to “clarify (the) normative contours” and “moral boundaries” of the society in which they occur, demonstrating that there are limits to how much diversity can be tolerated in a society. In eclipsing what Jewkes (2004, 59) refers to as “the more serious problems in society”, the moral panic around Northbridge diverted attention not just from crime perpetrated by white adult males, but from the more insidious issue that is the contested place of indigenous people in the Western Australian community. I return to this point in Chapter 9.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{21}Entman (1991, 13-14), in his analysis of the framing of the KAL and Iran Air incidents, found that the attribution of agency was the centrepiece of the Reagan administration’s rhetorical construction of the problem and the key catalyst of the moral discourse, asserting that, “The KAL descriptors promoted moral judgment – even outrage – at the incident and its perpetrators by placing them in the category of criminal evil”. In a later work, Entman (2004, 149) noted that this case study “reveals how frames work in news texts, reflecting and reinforcing habitual schemas and blind spots that together help to establish a nation’s political culture. The Reagan administration’s success in dominating the frames of these two events yielded reactions that served the White House’s political and policy goals”.
\end{flushright}
Northbridge without talking about the issue of the Aboriginal kids, because it is absolutely part and parcel of the whole issue. … It’s just hopelessly naïve to say that the issue of young Aboriginal kids and the problems faced by Northbridge were separate issues. They weren’t. The issue of Aboriginal kids was the most pivotal issue with regard to Northbridge. … Even if that’s not a real fundamental cause of problems, but people think it is, that still affects the public debate.22

Thus, in choosing the dominant frame to tell the Northbridge story, The West Australian was reflecting the perceived concerns of its readership. Indeed, both the Editor of The Sunday Times and Former Editor (B) of The West Australian told me they seek to reflect the mood of the community, which they describe as generally right-wing, conservative, middle Australia. This is a pragmatic approach, as the Editor of The Sunday Times explained:

> Hopefully you take a position that you think the majority of your readership would support as well. You don’t want to be continually taking positions that most of your readers don’t support because you’d get yourself in some strife in the end because they’re going to stop reading you!

As they are the only newspapers produced in the State and in recognition of their diverse readership, both these editors said they were

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22 The West Australian’s General News Reporter makes a similar point. He believes indigenous youth are the focus of attention because they are very visible in Northbridge, saying that, “If you go to another nightlife district … you do not see groups of Aboriginal people in the numbers that you see in Northbridge. That has become an issue because it is associated with crime. The type of crime we’re talking about is not violent crime, it could be someone who is trying to have a coffee in the street, and someone spits in your coffee, or someone gives you a baleful stare or someone may shout at you, it is confrontational in that respect. … Compared with the amount of crime that happens in Northbridge on any given night … that kind of Aboriginal crime makes up … probably a fraction of things like drug dealing … so … I would not say that it is the biggest crime component in Northbridge on a Friday or Saturday night for example, but it’s one that stands out and that’s because it’s visual. Drug dealing, thefts, under age drinking … these things do not carry the same social stigma as if an Aboriginal person abuses someone who is peacefully having a cup of coffee. And that’s for a number of reasons. You’ve got an easily identifiable group, which assists in memory and helps you form a certain opinion”.

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concerned always to publish a range of views on issues. I have
demonstrated, however, that *The West Australian*’s coverage of
*Northbridge: Shaping the Future* fails to live up to this promise.\(^{23}\) I
discuss in more detail both newspapers’ attempts to cater for alternative
views in Chapter 8.

In his study of the “crime wave” against the elderly, Fishman (1981)
insists on the very real consequences of a moral panic, which brings
pressure for punitive action against the objects of indignation. He rightly
points out that, while one cannot be mugged by a crime wave, “one can
be scared … and one can put more police on the streets and enact new
laws on the basis of fear” (98). Hence, as Critcher (2003, 141)
contends, while the potential beginnings of moral panics may be “many
and complex”, the endings are “more transparent”. His case studies
found that moral panics always culminate in legislative action reflecting,
as he said, “the real political purchase of moral panics”.\(^{24}\) Thus, Critcher
argues that most moral panics tail off when “Something Has Been Done
– or, more accurately, when Something Has Been Seen To Be Done”.
My research drew similar findings. A police reporter with *The West*

\(^{23}\) As Entman (1991, 8) points out, the dominant frame makes opposing information
more difficult for the “typical, inexpert audience member to discern and employ in
developing an independent interpretation”. While this does not mean that every reader
interprets the information identically, “it does suggest the hypothesis that, when a
single frame thoroughly dominates a narrative, politically impressive majorities will
come to congruent understandings”.

\(^{24}\) In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. (1978, 75-6) found that once ‘mugging’ had
been defined as a matter of public concern, it served as a “continuing point of
reference for subsequent news reporting, action and campaigns”.
Australian told me that the agenda at the newspaper was that “something had to be done” about indigenous young people in Northbridge. The subsequent curfew, according to a senior official with the OCP, was all about showing that something could – and was – being done. Thus, Northbridge provided fertile moral ground for both the press and the State Government who were of one mind about indigenous youth in Northbridge. The West Australian called for something to be done and the Government responded.\textsuperscript{25} The State Government’s response to the ‘moral panic’ around Northbridge and the coverage of this response by the WA press is the subject of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{25} This is not to suggest that there was any conscious collusion between the two parties. As the editor of The West Australian at the time explained, “In Northbridge they [indigenous young people] were the visible impact, the violence, the accumulation of robberies with a visible impact. OK, underneath that were the causal factors that had to be addressed. And the Government and us didn’t get together and say, ‘Do you agree? Do you disagree?’ They came out with their [viewpoint], we had ours and [our] views probably came into line”.

CHAPTER 5

TELLING THE STORY

MILESTONE 2: TESTING THE WATERS (APRIL 2003)

“Something Was Seen to Be Done”¹ in Northbridge, but not until several months after *The West Australian* ran its stories about indigenous youth on the rampage that had been prompted by the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report. As I discussed in Chapter 3, there had been a “political appetite” to introduce a curfew for “some time”, but it had been necessary to find an appropriate platform to introduce it.² This presented itself in the form of the regular quarterly report from the WA Police Service’s JAG, which confirmed that police had apprehended 454 young people during the period January to March 2003; 404 of them were indigenous and 65 per cent were girls.³ According to the people working in Northbridge who participated in my research study, these figures were not unusual and reflected the increased attention that police were paying to young people in Northbridge following the heightened media and political focus on the entertainment precinct.

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¹ I am paraphrasing here Critcher’s (2003, 141) observation, discussed in Chapter 4, whereby most moral panics tail off when “Something Has Been Done – or, more accurately, when Something Has Been Seen To Be Done”.

² As discussed in Chapter 3, a senior official with the OCP spoke about the “political appetite” to do something in Northbridge, while a senior employee in the Premier’s Office confirmed that the introduction of a curfew in Northbridge had been discussed long before it was announced.

³ The JAG report does not say why the youths had been apprehended; for example, whether they had been arrested or whether they were considered to be at risk.
Thus, on 15 April 2003, Western Australians learned that “Something Had Been Done” about Northbridge. The front page headline of their daily newspaper announced that “children” were to be “banned” from the precinct after dark; the story detailed the Premier’s plan to introduce a curfew that would “take off the streets” children who were not only “a nuisance to others”, but also “a risk to themselves”.4 This was news not only to ‘ordinary’ Western Australians, but also to those who worked with the young people in Northbridge, such as the State Manager of MA and the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol.5 The latter said that the curfew “just popped out in the media, we as the committee never discussed the curfew; we were never involved at that level”.6

In this chapter, I am concerned with the discourse surrounding Milestone 2: “Testing the Waters” (April 2003) and explore the way in which the State Government and WA press framed the Premier’s proposal to introduce a curfew in Northbridge. I also discuss the role of a senior government media adviser in developing the ‘policy’ and accompanying media strategy. The latter involved the crafting of a moral argument – regarding the inappropriateness of children out alone after dark – that would win widespread support even though it was based on the false assumptions that indigenous youth were responsible

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4 “Children face ban from city streets”, The West Australian, 15 April 2003, 1.
5 The CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol was a member of a committee set up as part of the “priority project” on Northbridge. See Introduction, footnote 14.
6 According to the State Manager of MA, “it was extremely secretive prior to [the curfew’s] announcement”.
for most of the crime in Northbridge and that certain unnamed people were encouraging children to go to Northbridge after dark. I find that the WA press perpetuated these misconceptions because it continued to focus its discourse around indigenous youth rather than the non-indigenous, adult males who were responsible for most of the crime in the precinct, and because it failed to point out that no-one was in fact condoning the idea that children should be out alone after dark. Hence, both The West Australian and The Sunday Times adopted the State Government’s dominant framing of the curfew proposal around indigenous youth. I also find, however, that both newspapers presented alternative frames by using an extensive range of sources, including indigenous young people themselves. The West Australian’s sources for this series of press articles are particularly notable as they clearly reflect the news round that the reporter is responsible for, in this case the social welfare round, and they contrast sharply with the sources used by the person responsible for the police round, who wrote the majority of articles arising from Milestone 1. While my discussion of the WA press coverage demonstrates a significant difference in the level of analysis of the reporters, both newspapers suggest that there is actually a new policy in the pipeline (whatever its flaws may be) and fail to question the Premier’s promised initiatives that form part of the curfew’s “broader package”. Anytime the curfew is criticised, therefore, the Premier is able to point with impunity to this nebulous concept of “a
broader crime strategy” which, readers are given to understand, will address any gaps identified in the curfew ‘policy’.

April 2003 – Government media adviser leaks plan to introduce curfew

Why did the State Government choose a “curfew” to try to demonstrate to Western Australians that it was doing something about Northbridge? According to the senior government media adviser, the reference to a “curfew” was necessary “to grab attention”. Indeed, according to a senior official with the OCP, the term curfew was all about “marketing policy”; it was “what the pundits want to hear. That’s all they hear and it’s still going on, it’s still high recognition”. It is not clear how much the Premier himself was involved in the development of the subsequent proposal to introduce a curfew; however, the media adviser said he knew Dr Gallop would support it because it presented an unassailable moral argument. He explained:

I knew Geoff would accept it because of the kids; you couldn’t argue against the principle that young kids at risk should not be out on the streets alone at night. Geoff, a middle-class academic, wouldn’t know what was happening in Northbridge, but he is a parent and was appalled at the idea of young kids being out unaccompanied at night, at risk of negative influences and predators.

The media adviser said the Premier would present this argument to respond to any criticism of the curfew, contending:

All coverage – negative or positive – was good coverage because the Premier could say that, ‘I reject absolutely that this policy is discriminatory because it applies to everyone and this is a moral
argument regarding the kids at risk, alone out at night, vulnerable to predators’. No-one could argue against it.

During the course of the debate, as will be discussed below, the Premier did indeed continually revert to this moral argument to silence his critics. It proved a very effective tactic.

In discussing the development of the curfew story, it is important to recall the influence of the individuals involved. A different Labor Premier, for example, might not have agreed with the media adviser’s idea. One Minister claimed that, in the Premier’s position, he “would not have agreed to a media strategy that reinforced negative community attitudes towards Aboriginal youth”. However, Dr Gallop had extraordinary trust in his media adviser and supported his media judgement. Indeed, no other media adviser enjoyed the same level of influence within the GMO. As The Sunday Times’ columnist put it, “in this Government there’s [this particular media adviser] and then there is everyone else”. It was the view of the media and government

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7 Asked about the Premier’s involvement in the development of the curfew, one senior journalist commented, “[The senior government media adviser] is a lot more political [than the Premier] and sometimes I think [the Premier] goes along with those things. … Gallop trusts him incredibly because [the media adviser] was there during the lean years. … A lot of the times the Premier’s been talking to me, I have realised he’s actually been told something totally different from what actually happened or he’s actually got no idea of what’s actually happened, so he’s got a different view of how a story was run or what the media was told. So I sometimes think that he relies on his advisers and they tell him certain things and his opinion is shaped on that, but I’m certain that often what he is told isn’t full and frank. [But] when it comes down to you or the press secretary, he’s going to come down on the press secretary’s side”.

8 According to another leading print journalist, “[The senior government media adviser] has more power than some of the junior Ministers in Cabinet. … He’s not elected by
professionals interviewed for this project that the loyalty and performance of the media adviser when in Opposition is the reason why he had enormous influence over the Premier. Asked if the Government media adviser could have taken the decision regarding the curfew without Geoff Gallop knowing about it, one leading journalist who worked closely with him said, “It wouldn’t surprise me and I think it to be the case”. Similarly, the Minister I interviewed did not rule out the possibility that the media adviser could have gone to the media with the curfew idea without even the Premier’s knowledge or approval. As I discussed in Chapter 3, neither the Office of the Minister for Police nor the WA Police Service nor other officials in the Government Media Office were involved in developing the proposal. Further, there was no discussion in Cabinet about it. While a senior official of the OCP was apprised of the media adviser’s plans to leak the proposal to the media, he did not support his approach, as it did not give the OCP the opportunity to “tease out” the policy before it was announced. He commented, “I thought they went too far at the time”.

The government media adviser decided to first “test the waters” before locking the Premier into any fixed policy.⁹ He did this by leaking his curfew idea to the State Political Editor at The West Australian. The

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⁹ The media adviser explained that he did this because “leaders are better to announce broad initiatives to set the direction of policy, see the reaction to these and then add the detail”.

anyone, no-one knows who he is, [yet] he shapes more government policy than half the Cabinet”.

media adviser said he chose this particular journalist because he knew that his influence in the newspaper was such as to ensure that it would publish the proposal on the front page. In return for the ‘exclusive’, the reporter used the necessary language in his article to distance the Premier from any set policy details, stating, “The West Australian understands…”, “Dr Gallop confirmed…”, and so on.

The proposal to introduce a curfew in Northbridge resulted in 14 articles in *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*, in accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Methodology (page 24). I present these articles in Table 3. I set out below the main findings of my analysis of these texts, supported by data that I present in tables in Appendix 7.

Where relevant, my analysis includes extracts from parliamentary debates, which are sourced from Hansard (the full transcripts are provided in Appendix 8). In describing the media strategy that he developed to accompany the curfew policy in Northbridge, the media adviser explained that this included “the odd Parliamentary question” in order to keep the debate in the public mind. These parliamentary debates are particularly important in light of the media adviser’s insistence that “parliamentary strategy is media strategy: a victory in Parliament is a hollow one if it is not publicised”.
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Children face ban from city streets

EXCLUSIVE
By Steve Pennells

JUVENILES will be banned from Northbridge after dark under a formal curfew to be introduced by the State Government.

The ban, which is in its final planning stages, will target anyone under the age of 18 found unsupervised in the popular nightclub and restaurant precinct.

*The West Australian* understands the curfew will start within two months and be enforced by police and Department of Community Development officers using the powers of the Child Welfare Act.

Juveniles who defy the restrictions will be taken off the streets and held until they are collected by parents or guardians, or when alternative welfare arrangements are made.

The radical move is being driven by Premier Geoff Gallop and is aimed at addressing crime and child welfare in Northbridge.

It will not apply to children in Northbridge who are with their parents or guardians.

Dr Gallop confirmed the curfew yesterday and said he expected some resistance.

"It is not just a case of these kids engaging in anti-social behaviour, their age makes them vulnerable," he said.

"They are not just a nuisance to others, they are a risk to themselves.

"This is not going to be easy. Some people will complain. There will be resistance but issues need to be resolved and we have shown as a Government that we are prepared to tackle difficult issues head on."

The plan is being coordinated by the Department of Premier and Cabinet’s Office of Crime Prevention, but it is understood it has been discussed with the City of Perth, Department of Justice, welfare groups and Aboriginal groups.

Many details, including the time of the curfew, are yet to be finalised but the ban is expected to be in place by the middle of the year.

It will be part of a broader crime strategy being developed for Northbridge, which will look at a range of issues, including planning, tourist facilities and street lighting.

The planned curfew follows a crackdown by the police juvenile aid group between January and March in which 454 juveniles were picked up from Northbridge streets.

According to the group’s report, obtained by *The West Australian*, only four of the juveniles came from Perth.

Most had travelled to Northbridge from homes in Cannington, Mirrabooka and Midland.

More than 400 were Aboriginal and 65 per cent were girls. Most were aged between 12 and 16 years — the youngest was a six-year-old girl.

Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights produced the biggest problems.

Department of Community Development figures showed that one in five juveniles picked up in Northbridge was drunk.

Previous calls for a Northbridge curfew have been criticised strongly by civil rights and welfare groups, who say police already have the power to pick up juveniles and exercise it regularly.
Pennells framed his front page story around the media adviser’s argument regarding the notion of protecting young “children” rather than protecting business and visitors to Northbridge from “juveniles”. The picture caption, *Curfew plan to keep vulnerable juveniles safe*, reinforces this ‘welfare’ frame.

Having outlined the proposed restrictions, Pennells tells readers that the Premier is himself driving this “radical move” and he expects resistance to the plan. In this way, the reporter provides Dr Gallop with the opportunity to reassure readers of the Government’s commitment to “stand firm” and “tackle difficult issues face on”.

Pennells’ failure to check his source’s story is clearly demonstrated when he tells readers that “it is understood” that the plan has been discussed with key interest groups.

Pennells writes that the proposed curfew is designed to “address crime and child welfare” in Northbridge. This construction of the curfew’s objective – developed by the government media adviser and repeated by the reporter – marks the beginning of the crime/child welfare dual  

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10 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “child” is a boy or girl below the age of puberty while a “juvenile” is a young person. However, the State Government and WA press use these terms interchangeably throughout the period under review.
discourse that is to prevail in the press coverage of the curfew story. On the one hand, the curfew is about protecting business and visitors to Northbridge by ridding the streets of the alleged perpetrators of crime; on the other, it is about protecting young people from the perceived dangers of the entertainment precinct after dark. Pennells does not draw readers’ attention to the fact that the proposed curfew targeting juveniles could not address crime in Northbridge when adult, non-indigenous males are the main offenders.

Pennells’ article is the first in which readers are told that the curfew will be part of a “broader crime strategy” being developed for Northbridge. Pennells tells readers that the planned curfew follows a “crackdown” by the JAG, which “picked up” 450 juveniles during the period January to March. He notes that more than 400 of those apprehended were Aboriginal, 65 per cent were girls and the youngest “a six-year-old girl”. He does not say, however, why these youths were apprehended; for example, whether they were arrested or whether they were considered to be at risk. Pennells also notes that only four of the juveniles apprehended by the JAG came from Perth and that most had travelled to Northbridge from homes in the outlying and low socio-economic suburbs. It is not clear why Pennells considers their provenance to be of relevance. He then cites Department for Community Development
(DCD) figures, which showed that one in five of the juveniles picked up were drunk. Given that all the entertainment that occurs in Northbridge at night involves alcohol, one would expect this figure to be higher, if anything.

Pennells concludes his article with the observation that “previous calls” for a curfew in Northbridge had been “criticised strongly by civil rights and welfare groups, who say police already have the power to pick up juveniles and exercise it regularly”. He does not confirm that police do indeed already have this power; neither does he say who had made these “previous calls” for a curfew.

Premier answers ‘Dorothy Dix’ on the curfew proposal
On the same day that the curfew proposal was announced on the front page of *The West Australian*, the Member for Perth, John Hyde MLA, asked the Premier in State Parliament to confirm “media reports” that the Government was planning to introduce a curfew for juveniles in Northbridge. This ‘Dorothy Dix’ enabled the Premier formally to announce the details of the proposed curfew plan and the rationale behind it, as articulated word-for-word in *The West Australian* that morning. This suggests that the newspaper had been provided with a copy of the statement that the Premier was to deliver in Parliament the following day. (See Appendix 8 for full transcript of the Member for Perth’s question and the Premier’s response.)
Dr Gallop reinforced the crime/child welfare dual discourse stating that, “not only are [these] children a menace to the rest of the community, but also they put themselves in vulnerable and risky situations”. He said that the Government would “not tolerate large numbers of unsupervised juveniles roaming the streets of Northbridge, making a nuisance of themselves, harassing the public and putting themselves at risk”.

Hyde’s question also provided the Premier with the opportunity to demonstrate – with emotive language and reference to the recent Gordon Inquiry\textsuperscript{11} – his Government’s tough stand and willingness to tackle the hard issues “unlike the Opposition”. He goes on to introduce his preferred moral argument, crafted by his media adviser, whereby young children should not be out at night alone – even though no-one has suggested to the Premier that they should be. He said:

Like many Western Australians, I am appalled by statistics that indicate that children as young as six are on the streets, unsupervised, and at risk in the Northbridge area. The Government intends to take a stand and to do something about it.

\textsuperscript{11} The Gordon Inquiry is named after Sue Gordon, a magistrate with the Children's Court. In January 2002, the State Government asked Gordon to investigate family violence and child abuse in indigenous communities and to look at how State government agencies respond to the issues. The Gordon Inquiry made 197 recommendations.
Child curfew bid branded

Fremantle schools and Aboriginal youth organisations are leading a campaign to keep junior students off the streets at night.

The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 6
offensive political stunt

Traders back clamp plans

The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 7

Defend girls just want to have fun

The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 7

Rural MPs demand action

The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 7

The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 7
"Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt"
(see pages 237-238)

Notwithstanding the moral high ground that the Premier had sought to assume in proposing a curfew for Northbridge, *The West Australian* the following day indicated his plan had been dismissed as “an offensive political stunt”. Gauntlett was the lead journalist in a two-page spread devoted to recording the reaction of different groups to the Premier's proposed plan. While the banner headline presents the dominant news frame, whereby the curfew idea is rejected as a mere ruse, in the body of the story the reporters present alternative frames (those of Northbridge traders and residents who support the proposal, and country MPs who want curfews in regional centres).

Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark quote 12 sources from a wide range of welfare and Aboriginal groups, all of whom are opposed to the plan. The choice of sources reflects the rounds of the two reporters (social welfare and indigenous affairs). All the sources confirm that there had been no consultation regarding the proposal.

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12 It is ironic that this article won the reporters a State government award for reporting on youth affairs.
13 *The West Australian*’s Reporter (C), who covered indigenous affairs among others, explained that Gauntlett took the lead on the curfew story because “although implicitly it was about Aboriginal youth, it wasn’t explicit … so that’s why it was more broadly in her beat [which was] welfare and youth issues”. Reporter (C) added, “The more I talked to people, the more it was clear [the curfew] was specifically targeted at Aboriginal kids”.
14 Although the Premier had referred in Parliament the previous day to the Government’s “major consultation” with the City of Perth, Perth City councillor Bert
“Dreamer reaches out to help Perth’s youth”
(see page 237)

This short story appears unrelated to the curfew story, however it presents a positive frame of young people in Northbridge.

“History of Northbridge curfews”
(see page 237)

Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark accompany the main story with this short article, which switches the news frame to the history of infringement of Aboriginal rights. Readers might infer the reporters’ position on the proposed curfew when they take them back almost 90 years to the 1905 Aborigines Act, which restricted the access of Aboriginals to towns after 6pm.¹⁶

The accompanying graphic includes a box featuring the content of the relevant clause of the CWA, which provides a police officer with the power to apprehend a child considered to be at risk or who is “misbehaving”. In this way, Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark remind readers

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¹⁵ Tudori is cited in this article saying the Council had not been aware of Dr Gallop’s plans.

¹⁶ When asked about the absence of voices in support of the curfew in this article, the reporters explained that this was because the Premier had already had the front page of the paper the previous day: “The Government played it like that, they had leaked the story so they could get a one-side story in the paper and so our job the next day was to get the community reaction”.

¹⁶ This form of curfew was to continue until the 1967 referendum, which declared Aboriginal people full Australian citizens. This last milestone suggests to readers that the proposed curfew would once again result in the infringement of Aboriginal people’s rights as Australian citizens.
that the police already have the powers that the State Government is
touting as a new initiative.

"Barnett opposes Gallop’s plan"
(see page 237)

Pennells’ short article is framed around crime and the Opposition
leader’s criticism of the curfew as a means of addressing it. Colin
Barnett proposes an alternative strategy that would involve a “big boost”
in police numbers and an inner-city school. Pennells does not tell
readers what purpose this school would serve. It is significant that
Barnett points out that adults, as well as young people, engage in
“unacceptable behaviour” and that he makes no mention of the curfew’s
other stated objective, namely to assist young people at risk.

"Traders back clamp plans"
(see page 238)

The next article presents, for the first time, a view in favour of the
proposed curfew. Readers learn that Northbridge businesses and
residents have welcomed the curfew as a strategy “to rid the troubled
area of unruly and disruptive youth”.

The first source is restaurateur Bill (sic) Smales, who reminds readers
that Northbridge is an “adult area” (this would appear to be a counter-
productive comment to make, given that he owns a restaurant that
would cater for families and all age groups). It is interesting that he should say, “Juveniles … might not be doing anything wrong … [but] are intimidating if there is a group of them”. The second business source, Vivienne George, is confident “there had been wide-spread consultation about how to deal with Northbridge issues”. Wilson-Clark says George is mostly concerned about unaccompanied children who are engaging in antisocial behaviour (as opposed, presumably, to children at risk or those criminally offending).

Perth’s Lord Mayor, Peter Nattrass, is more circumspect in his praise than the business representatives and appears to have little confidence in the curfew’s ability to meet its stated dual objective of addressing crime and child welfare. His comments are particularly interesting given the Premier’s statement to Parliament that the City of Perth had been involved in developing the plan. Vincent Tan provides an alternative view for this group of stakeholders from Northbridge business and Perth City Council, saying, “the curfew could be more negative than positive”; implying that it might result in a loss of business for Northbridge.

“Nyoongar girls just want to have fun”
(see page 238)

Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark frame this story around Northbridge as a place of harmless fun for Nyoongar youth and the ineffectiveness of any
curfew in stopping them from visiting. In this article, Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark introduce the issue of alternative activities for young people and refer to ATSIC Commissioner, Gordon Cole, to highlight the need for Government “to invest in indigenous youth rather than target them”.

“Rural MPs demand action”
(see page 238)

This final story of the two-page spread presents an entirely different news frame around the metro/regional divide and two non-Government Members of Parliament who have criticised the Premier for failing to include the regions in his curfew plans.¹⁷ It is interesting that both parliamentarians insist only on the curfew as being a means of addressing crime; neither of them refers to the issue of child welfare. The response from the Premier’s parliamentary adversaries demonstrates the keen awareness on all sides of the political spectrum of the proposal’s popular appeal.

¹⁷ Unlike his Party leader (Colin Barnett), Birney supports the curfew proposal and, what is more, has called for the young people apprehended to be detained by the police.
Curfew plan lacks substance

FOR the second time this month, plans have emerged for curfews to be imposed on certain young people.

At the beginning of the month, a proposal to ban P-plate drivers from the road during specified night hours drew a favourable initial response from Road Safety Minister Michelle Roberts, who said she would await specific recommendations on the issue. Now The West Australian has revealed a plan to impose a ban on juveniles in Northbridge after dark.

Curfews seem to offer seductively simple political solutions. If statistics suggest that P-plate drivers might pose an extra risk to themselves and others after 10pm, ban them from the roads between them and dawn. If juveniles mix up in Northbridge at night, then ban them too.

On a philosophical level, there is always a problem with any proposal to impose a ban on people simply because they belong to an identifiable class — in this case, youth. There is an element of prejudice in casting suspicion or imposing restrictions on a whole class of people on the basis that some of its members have been shown to offend. However, it would be reasonable to expect that many people would be prepared to give up philosophical objections if it could be shown that such bans would deliver practical benefits. This newspaper has already questioned whether there is enough solid information available to justify the proposed P-plate ban, which could affect young people who drive at night because of the requirements of their jobs or studies.

The Northbridge proposal seems to be equally ill-considered, if not more so. There is a twofold problem. Children who are potentially in danger and youths who are potentially a danger or nuisance to others.

No responsible adult would accept that children who were too young to look after themselves should be wandering around the nightclubs and restaurant precinct at night alone or with others of a similar age. In one recorded case, a six-year-old girl was picked up from Northbridge streets by the police, juveniles and group.

Clearly, the police already have the authority to detain children if they need to be protected because of their age. It is hard to see how a curfew would change this element of police responsibility.

Older juveniles — those aged 16 or 17 — might have unavoidable reasons for being in Northbridge at night, such as jobs in restaurants. In any case, many responsible parents accept that children of that age are mature enough to be out at night without adult company if they attend events such as movies or concerts and get home at what is accepted as a reasonable hour.

If the curfew was introduced, the authorities would continue twofold to endorse such arrangements — just so long as they did not apply to Perth's premier entertainment area. This raises the question of whether the authors of this proposal gave any thought to the hostility and sense of alienation the curfew would generate among young people who would be excluded on no other basis than their age. In effect, youth would be made an offence.

And this proposal would do nothing to solve the problems caused by people aged 16 and older. It has the marks of being concocted on the run and without enough thought or consultation.

The Government has not produced an argument of substance for imposing any new restrictions on the movement of people on the basis of age.

This editorial makes clear the newspaper's position on the proposal.

The West Australian does not object to a curfew per se, but will support it only if there is evidence to show that it will produce results in relation to "children who are potentially in danger or youths who are potentially a danger or nuisance to others". Despite the focus of the articles on indigenous youth only a few pages earlier, the editorial does not refer to possible discrimination on the grounds of race, focusing instead only on discrimination on the grounds of age.
The West Australian draws attention to two different “problems” in Northbridge: children who are potentially in danger and youths who are potentially a danger or nuisance to others. This is the first (and only) time the newspaper appears to make a distinction between children and youths (although, in the following paragraph, it refers to 16 and 17-year-olds as “children”). In addition, the juxtaposition of “danger” and “nuisance” – the former referring to crime, the latter to antisocial behaviour – demonstrates the newspaper’s continued failure to distinguish between these very different categories of offence. Above all, it demonstrates that the newspaper has accepted the Government’s crime/child welfare dual discourse.

The West Australian also repeats the Premier’s preferred moral argument concerning the inappropriateness of children being out alone at night pointing, predictably, to the six-year-old girl who had been picked up by the police. It is interesting that the editorial should note that it is reasonable for certain “older juveniles” to be in Northbridge at night, for example because “responsible parents” accept that “children” of that age are mature enough to be out at night without adult company. Presumably these are not the Aboriginal families referred to in the previous year’s editorial.  

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18 “Aboriginal families must help”, The West Australian, 10 January 2002, 14, discussed in Chapter 4.
Importantly, *The West Australian* reminds readers in the penultimate paragraph that police already have the authority to detain young people at risk and that the proposed curfew will “do nothing” to solve the problems caused by people aged 18 and older.

**Premier answers questions from Leader of the Opposition on curfew**

The above articles, published in *The West Australian* on 16 April 2006, and in particular its lead story regarding the lack of consultation on the curfew proposal, prompt the Leader of the Opposition to ask the Premier in State Parliament that day whether he had “misled the people of Western Australia”. (See Appendix 8 for a full transcript of Colin Barnett’s question and the Premier’s response.)

The Premier suggests in his answer that the consultations on the curfew proposal had occurred some time previously on “the broader issue of public order in Northbridge and … options to improve public safety and security”. The Premier further claims that the proposal “emerged from the Department of Premier and Cabinet, which reports to [the Premier]"

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19 As discussed in the Introduction and elsewhere in this thesis, the key players I interviewed, such as the State Manager of MA and the CEO of the Nyoongar Patrol, told me they first learned about the curfew proposal through the media.
as the minister responsible for crime prevention”. Dr Gallop then takes the opportunity to reiterate his preferred moral argument, declaring:

I make no apologies for the fact I took leadership on the issue. … Is it desirable to have young children aged 10 to 13 on the streets of Northbridge unsupervised? I have made it clear that my Government will not tolerate that situation.

The Premier does not revert to the crime/child welfare dual discourse in his answer to the Leader of the Opposition, ignoring both the issue of antisocial behaviour and crime in Northbridge. This raises the question whether antisocial behaviour and crime may form part of the Premier’s argument in support of the curfew only when he is addressing specific audiences, notably the Northbridge business community and the readership of the WA press.

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20 As discussed in Chapter 3 and elsewhere in this thesis, a senior official with the OCP confirmed that the curfew proposal was developed by the senior government media adviser.
Police say curfew is unworkable

BY GRAHAME ARMSTRONG

POLICE say it would be impossible to enforce a night-time curfew on children in Northbridge.

An estimated 200 extra police officers would be needed.

WA Police Union president Allan Dean said there were hundreds of children, many of them under 16, on the streets of Northbridge every night.

"Problems across the state are unmanageable," Mr Dean said.

"When's the last time anyone went to a pub at 11.30pm that didn't have any trouble?"

Lake Macquarie under the Gold Coast Act start rules police to remove children from the streets and Lock them in.

Mr Dean said officers had turned to alcohol as a substitute for real policing.

"Police put drink and drugs above any law that can be enforced."

"They get a license to print the police up in the back yard.""

"They have support from 12 and 13-year-olds for low-level violence and alcohol."

"There are no arrests and no charges resulting from the curfew plan."

"We've added 100 extra officers to the streets but still have no plan for the kids."

"And the only answer is to put more people on the ground."

Mr Dean said the government needed to make the curfew work.

"The only way is to make sure the curfew is enforceable."

"The curfew is a disaster."

"We need to get officers to the streets and encourage them to be on the streets."

"It's a disaster and we need to fix it."

Mr Dean said the government needed to provide more officers and officers needed to be on the streets.

"The only way is to put more people on the ground."}

Mixed reception on the streets

BY TIM AYLING

It's 3pm on Thursday at Perth Football Park, and the Western Australian Police Officers Union has just announced its support for the curfew.

"We're looking at a new approach to policing," WAPOU president Allan Dean said.

"We need to get more people on the ground to enforce the curfew."}

The curfew has been introduced in response to the growing problem of youth crime in Northbridge.

"We need to get people on the ground to enforce the curfew," Mr Dean said.

"We're looking at a new approach to policing."
“Police say curfew is unworkable”
(see page 248)

The news frame of Grahame Armstrong’s article is around the lack of police officers to enforce the proposed curfew. His lead source is the president of the WA Police Union who questions the value of “making laws” that cannot be enforced. Armstrong does not point out that the proposed curfew does not involve any new laws in fact. However, later in the article, Dean reminds readers that laws already exist under the CWA that allow police to remove children from the streets; and, further, that police have been using the laws for a number of years.

It is interesting that, unlike police sources quoted to date, Dean should state “the majority” of young people are in Northbridge “simply to have fun”.

Armstrong’s second source, Opposition Leader Colin Barnett, uses some of “the tough talking” Supt McCagh’s choice of words when he talks about “rounding children up” in Northbridge. It is not clear why Barnett singles out the failure of the Government to consult with the police when no other stakeholders have been consulted either. It is in this article that readers learn for the first time the suggestion that the curfew may be designed, as Barnett asserts, “to divert attention from the cannabis debate”.
Armstrong concludes his article by noting the Premier’s determination to attend to young children out on the streets of Northbridge, thereby leaving Dr Gallop on the (tough) moral high ground.

“Mixed reception on the streets”  
(see page 248)

Tim Ayling’s accompanying article is framed around the different responses of Nyoongar girls to the proposed plan. They consider the plan “ridiculous” and ineffectual in reducing the number of young people in Northbridge at night. Ayling cites another source, Barbara, who is a supervisor from the Nyoongar Patrol, who says that the Northbridge regulars are “basically good kids” who come to the area to have fun. Interestingly, she says that unruly older children or young adults, who are not part of the usual “mob”, usually are responsible for any trouble. Barbara makes the interesting point that much of “the angst” about groups of young children on the street is based on perceived, rather than actual threat. However, she “conceded” (presumably to the reporter) that Northbridge at night was “not a safe place” for children.

Barbara’s comments reinforce what will become a familiar narrative whenever the issue of the curfew is raised with members of the indigenous community (ATSIC’s Eric Wynne was also asked to “concede” the point about the inappropriateness of children in
Northbridge, as I discussed in Chapter 4). There is the unspoken assumption that someone, somewhere is advocating that children should be out alone late at night in Northbridge.

Ayling sources some other Nyoongar girls who present different viewpoints. Delphine Jamet, for example, says "the curfew had merit" but Ayling does not ask her to explain why she is of this opinion. It is an important omission given that Jamet states that police already have the powers to apprehend children. It is therefore not clear what part of the curfew plan might have merit.
“Curfew a racial cop-out”
(see page 251)

Colleen Egan’s opinion piece in the same edition of The Sunday Times is unequivocal in its condemnation of the curfew proposal. Her article is framed around the racist nature of the curfew plan and its failure to address the reasons why some indigenous young people abuse substances and offend. Readers might be expected to understand from her opinion piece that the curfew will address neither child welfare nor crime in Northbridge.

This is a very powerful and emotive article, which uses dramatic language and evokes graphic images to draw readers’ attention to the horrific lives being led by the young people who, Egan argues, are being targeted by the curfew. Her core argument is the pathos and irony of the curfew proposal, which is targeting the very people the Premier had been “so moved to help” with the Gordon Inquiry. She brings to life Susan Taylor, whose suicide led to the Gordon Inquiry, in order to highlight the complexity of the problems faced by young people such as Taylor and the inability of a simplistic proposal such as a curfew to do anything other than move indigenous youth out of Northbridge to some other suburb.

\[21\text{ See footnote 11 for explanation of the Gordon Inquiry.}\]
Despite Dr Gallop’s statements to the contrary that week, Egan argues that the curfew is indeed all about race. Importantly, she points to the absence of any plan to look after the young people “after the cops [have] collared them”. She echoes the Leader of the Opposition’s observation earlier in the week when she asks whether the plan had been “an electorally popular move to get the headlines off the Government’s cannabis laws”.

In her condemnation of the curfew proposal, however, Egan does not appear to be aware that the police powers to apprehend young people are not new and that, in fact, the proposal is merely a re-packaging of existing policy. Neither does she challenge the Premier’s insistence that the curfew policy is part of a “wider strategy” to address social issues.
Gaunlett’s frame in this article reverts to the familiar theme of parental responsibility. Her source is a retired police officer, Kevin Moran, who headed Operation Sweep, “a controversial crackdown on unaccompanied juveniles”, in 1994. Moran urges caution when using the word “curfew” to describe police powers that have been available for a long time under the CWA. Gauntlett does not ask him why he does not question the use of “curfew” in relation to other apparent aspects of the proposal.
Moran believes a curfew for unaccompanied juveniles under 15 could work if it were operational in all Perth suburbs and police were able to charge parents with neglect under the CWA. Gauntlett does not explain why Moran proposes an age limit of 15.

“Curfew plan earns State racism tag” (see page 254)

Wilson-Clark takes up the ‘race’ news frame in an article two days later in The West Australian. Her lead source is Professor Gavin Mooney who labels the Gallop Government “institutionally racist”. Mooney notes the apparent lack of consultation with Aboriginal organisations about the plan and its failure to take into account the underlying causes that lead children to Northbridge at night.

Wilson-Clark then advises readers of the Premier’s response, who is said to have rejected Mooney’s criticism as “nonsense” and insists on the Government’s commitment to addressing issues of family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities. Wilson-Clark’s final source, ATSIC Commissioner Farley Garlett, questions this commitment given the Government’s failure to consult with ATSIC on “something as serious as a curfew”. Dr Gallop responds to this charge by saying that the Government will consult with Aboriginal people as the arrangements for the curfew are completed and that the objective of the curfew is to target behaviour, not race. Wilson-Clark does not comment upon or
question the significance of the Premier’s admission that the
Government has not consulted ATSIC, despite the fact that he has
consistently referred to the high proportion of indigenous young people
apprehended.

Concluding remarks on press coverage of Milestone 2

I have demonstrated that the “testing of the waters” with the curfew
proposal met overwhelming opposition in the WA press. Welfare
groups, youth organisations, young Nyoongar visitors to Northbridge,
the police union, indigenous organisations, an academic, the Leader of
the Opposition, a columnist with The Sunday Times and, most
importantly, the editorial of The West Australian opposed the plan for a
wide range of very different reasons. In contrast, only one business
owner, Robert Smales, and the chairman of Safer Northbridge, Vivienne
George, voiced unqualified support for the curfew proposal. This is
another instance where it is clear that the news round affects the
selection of sources and, consequently, how a story is framed. It is
reasonable to suggest that if the reporter who covered the Northbridge:
Shaping the Future report (and who covered crime stories) had written
about the plan to introduce a curfew, his stories would have included
more business sources who, one might expect, would voice support for
the curfew.
It is important to note here, however, that the WA press, as reflected in the editorial of *The West Australian*, did not oppose the Government’s planned curfew because they rejected the Premier’s dominant framing of the curfew story, notably the media adviser’s carefully-crafted moral argument. They opposed the curfew because of other issues, such as the Government’s failure to consult with organisations working on the ground or because the curfew policy “lacked substance”. However, the WA press supported the Government’s framing of Northbridge around youth (which we understand to be indigenous because of all the accompanying inferences) by making repeated references to the inappropriateness of children out late at night in the precinct. This failure of the WA press to question the Premier’s framing of the story led both newspapers to place indigenous young people at the forefront of the debate on Northbridge and to focus disproportionately on the curfew’s alleged “welfare” objective. Further, neither *The West Australian* nor *The Sunday Times* called the Premier to account in relation to his crime/child welfare dual discourse and require him to clarify the real purpose of the curfew. It is clear that the curfew as proposed could not address crime in Northbridge when it bypassed the demographic responsible for most of the crime in the precinct.

The difference in the level of analysis in the press coverage arising from Milestone 2 is striking in comparison with Milestone 1. Gauntlett and
Wilson-Clark raise the most questions about the proposal through the extensive use of sources who work directly with the young people concerned. In contrast, Pennells fails to raise any questions; had he done so he might have realised (contrary to what he wrote in his article) that the planned curfew had not been discussed with key stakeholders. Indeed, Pennells goes so far as to label the proposed curfew “a radical move”. The only source he uses as a direct quote other than the Premier is the Leader of the Opposition. Predictably, Colin Barnett opposes the curfew and focuses only on the issue of policing and crime.

With the exception of *The West Australian*’s editorial, none of the reporters questions why no initiative is in place to address those aged over 18.

I argue that government and other sources as well as the reporters themselves continue to use “crime” and “antisocial behaviour” interchangeably on a regular basis. For example, *The West Australian* editorial talks about young people being both “a danger [crime] and a nuisance [antisocial]” to others. As I have demonstrated, there is also considerable confusion arising from the interchangeable use (by government and other sources as well as the press) of “kids”, “children”, “juveniles”, “young people” and “youth”.

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The language used in this round of press coverage is considerably less colourful than that arising from Milestone 1. However, Egan does use some emotive language – such as “this scourge in their young lives”, “abuse their small bodies”, “blur the memories their young minds have already accumulated” – to support her argument regarding the failure of the proposed curfew to assist or promote the welfare of the young people involved (see Table 11, Appendix 7).

None of the reporters questions the use of the term “curfew”, which is known to have particularly negative connotations for Aboriginal people. As the author of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report, commented, “[curfew] conjures a mental image for many people. [Aboriginal people] had been there before, so that was something that immediately jarred with them”.

It is noteworthy that none of the press articles seeks to dispel the fears of the community regarding indigenous youth and Northbridge. They do not illuminate the debate by pointing to various cultural practices that give rise to concerns among the non-indigenous community, for example that it is customary for indigenous teenagers to look after their younger siblings or to gather in large groups. As the State Manager of MA points out, “it is actually very common for a 16-year-old Aboriginal
Finally, and most importantly, I have demonstrated that (with the exception of Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark’s article “Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt”, page 239) the Government succeeded in making the WA press report that there was a new initiative in the pipeline, when in reality there was nothing new being proposed at all. While *The West Australian* editorial takes up the points raised by Gauntlett and Wilson-Clark, notably in relation to the existing powers of the police to apprehend young people deemed at risk, the fact that the newspaper argues that the curfew proposal “lacks substance” suggests that there is at least a policy foundation upon which to build. In other words, the Government is trying to do something about Northbridge, even if its attempt is found wanting. Further, none of the reporters follows up on the promised initiatives that form part of the Premier’s “broader package” and therefore it is impossible for anyone to question their existence, let alone disprove them. The Premier, therefore, is always able to point with impunity to this nebulous concept of “a broader package” to silence his critics.

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22 The State Manager of MA stressed that she did not think it was appropriate for any young children to be wandering the streets, saying, “Any reasonable human being would say a child, an unaccompanied child, pre-adolescent, shouldn’t really be in Northbridge … they need to be supported and looked after”. She insisted that, “what has to happen is teaching the families that … the younger kids have to stay home with the adults and let the teenagers have their time out without having to traipse the younger ones around with them. But that’s quite a complicated issue, not one you can just strike a line through and say you will not do this anymore”.
I continue to trace the evolving response of the WA press to the story of the Northbridge curfew in the next chapter, in which I analyse the reportage around the Premier’s official “unveiling” of the policy.
CHAPTER 6

TELLING THE STORY

MILESTONE 3: CURFEW INTRODUCED IN NORTHBRIDGE (JUNE 2003)

The negative press coverage arising from the proposal to implement a curfew in Northbridge did not prevent its introduction. In fact, the WA press reportage all went according to the pre-ordained plan of the government media adviser who explained, “Where there’s friction there’s traction”. The negative criticism had helped to keep the story alive and, because it failed to raise the right questions regarding the ability of the curfew to address crime in the precinct and failed to challenge the Premier’s carefully-crafted moral argument, it provided the Government with the opportunity to present its tough ‘law and order’ credentials to the electorate and keep the Premier on the moral high ground.¹ The media adviser said that he not only welcomed the negative criticism, but also actively sought it from the appropriate quarters. He explained:

I knew it would be popular because a curfew was a red hot issue, a ‘barbecue stopper’. I knew it would give rise to charges that it was discriminatory, of human rights. But that was all good, friction equals traction. You need controversy, if things are universally accepted they have a short shelf life. I also anticipated the response of the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Youth Affairs Council, Mission Australia – I knew that it would generate the media’s interest if these organisations were attacking a Labor Government; if they’d been attacking a Liberal government it wouldn’t have sparked any media interest. [So] if I heard

¹ It is a matter of conjecture whether the Government would have welcomed such an adverse response from other sections of the community, for instance the Northbridge business community.
In this chapter, I am concerned with Milestone 3 in the story of the Northbridge curfew. I explore the way in which the State Government and WA press framed the Premier’s unveiling of the curfew policy and consider the effectiveness of the moral argument crafted by the media adviser. This was apparently so unassailable that it won the support of almost 80 per cent of Western Australians for the curfew even though, as I discussed in Chapter 5, it was based on two false assumptions; first, that indigenous youth were responsible for most of the crime in Northbridge and, second, that certain unnamed people were actually encouraging children to be in Northbridge after dark. My framing analysis of this round of press coverage finds that *The West Australian* becomes more dismissive of the State Government’s position as the story evolves, while *The Sunday Times* becomes more supportive of it. *The Sunday Times*’ adoption of the Government’s frame is particularly remarkable given the outright dismissal of the curfew as “populist politics in its purist form” by its columnist and one-time media adviser to the Premier, Grahame Armstrong. Notwithstanding *The West Australian*’s rejection of the Government’s framing of the curfew story, I find that the WA press continues to focus its discourse about Northbridge around indigenous youth rather than on the myriad other issues raised in the

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2 Dennis Eggington is CEO of the ALS (WA).
3 A Westpoll survey of voters in July 2003 found that 79 per cent supported the introduction of a curfew in Northbridge (*The West Australian*, 9 July 2003, 5).
Northbridge: Shaping the Future report, not least the people who commit most of the crime in the precinct. The reporters in both newspapers still fail to follow up the Premier’s promises of a broader package for Northbridge and, most importantly, to challenge the Premier’s moral argument and allow him to continue to avoid answering the actual and very real charges of his critics.

June 2003 – Government officially announces curfew policy
On 26 June 2003⁴, the Premier issued a statement to all media outlets announcing the “unveiling of the curfew policy”. This outlines the proposed restrictions, which are the same as those announced under the original plan. The lead quote from the Premier once more presents his moral argument that young children should not be out alone in Northbridge after dark. He then reintroduces the crime/child welfare dual discourse regarding the protection of “children” and the simultaneous protection of business and visitors. Unlike his statement to Parliament two months earlier, the Premier does not refer to the overwhelming number of indigenous young people apprehended by the police in Northbridge. However, the previous round of WA press reportage has repeatedly established this fact among the readership.

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⁴ Coincidentally, the same month that the Upper House passed a Bill to close the Swan Valley Nyoongar Camp (discussed in Chapter 3).
In his media statement, Dr Gallop addresses some of the key criticisms of the curfew proposal by announcing that the Government had “consulted widely” since flagging the proposal and would be working with the young people concerned “and their families” to address issues of family dysfunction and the underlying causes of disadvantage. The Government would also be working with the City of Perth to “develop other initiatives” to improve the safety and amenity of Northbridge and was looking to create “alternative activities” for young people across the metropolitan area (that is, in the suburbs, not in Northbridge). He also announces that four additional youth workers are being appointed and establishes Northbridge unequivocally as an “adult entertainment area”. The Premier notes that “some” will still be opposed to the curfew (without, however, saying just what they will be opposed to). This gives him the opportunity to conclude the statement as he begun, presenting, once more, his moral argument regarding the inappropriateness of young children out alone at night and his willingness to deal with the problem in a “tough but sensitive way”. (I provide the full text of the media statement, sourced from the Government Media Office website, in Appendix 9.)

The Premier’s media statement resulted in 17 articles in The West Australian and The Sunday Times, in accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Methodology (page 24). I present these articles in

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5 The youth workers are, in fact, funded by the Commonwealth Government.
Table 4. I set out below the main findings of my analysis of these texts, supported by data that I present in tables in Appendix 10.

**Table 4: Milestone 3 Press Articles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Journalist/s</th>
<th>Headline/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27/6/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kate Gauntlett, Pamela Magill</td>
<td>Children banned under new curfew; Changes bring a mixed reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/6/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kate Gauntlett</td>
<td>Tough love or a hard time?; Curfew won’t work, says former street kid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29/6/03</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nick Taylor/ Dave Franklin</td>
<td>Curfew bites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/6/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jerry Pratley, Pamela Magill, Steve Butler</td>
<td>Curfew success claimed; All quiet on Northbridge front line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Youth curfew is only the start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/7/03</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Grahame Armstrong</td>
<td>Don’t fall for curfew stunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/7/03</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Curfew for juveniles worth a try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cian Manton, Steve Pennells</td>
<td>ALP Left turns on curfew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Steve Pennells</td>
<td>Gallop’s curfew a winner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Steve Pennells</td>
<td>Cynic or swim in sea of spin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13/7/03</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Jim Kelly</td>
<td>Traders smile as curfew bites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Girls show up double standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kate Gauntlett, Cian Manton</td>
<td>Curfew to face legal challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/7/03</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kate Gauntlett</td>
<td>Curfew tit-for-tat continues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children banned under new curfew

Galloo details restrictions on youngsters

Reports by Kade Gauntlett and Pamela Magill

Children under 12 are banned from Northbridge, while those aged 12 to 15 must be home by 8pm under the State Government's new curfew rules.

The curfew will apply to young persons who are in or near the area, and be enforced in conjunction with police and other enforcement agencies.

But there was some criticism.

No extra police have been allocated to administer the policy, although four new youth workers will assist the police and the Juvenile Aid Group at Northbridge.

The policy included a crackdown on people under 18 who engaged in anti-social behaviour or were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

The Newsgroup's police and Opposition said the policy simply formalised informal arrangements already had in operation for 12 years.

Mr Galloos said the announcement was meant to deal with issues concerning the Government.

"I welcome the four extra youth workers but there is nothing new in this policy," he said.

"There is no curfew."

Mr Galloos said Northbridge needed more police and better lighting.

Mission Australia WA manager Anne Frith-Schmunks said the policy would be difficult to manage in conjunction with other law and order issues in Northbridge.

Extra funding for On-Track, which played a key role in the new policy, must be addressed, she said.

"We recognise there are issues out there and there is some confusion here," she said.

Mr Galloos said Northbridge had many problems and he believed the policy would provide greater security, and safety and security there.

"We obviously need the police to administer it, to put their direction. We believe there are problems and that is why the policy is being introduced," he said.

The policy was one part of what would be a broader strategy to deal with youth in the metropolitan area.

New programs would address family dysfunction and underlying causes of disadvantage, particularly in the indigenous community.

Mr Galloos said he would not accept the argument that Northbridge was a safer place than other areas, and that there was no curfew for some children.

"This is an inconsistent and defeatist view," he said.

Cheryl Metropolitan District Superintendent Chris Dawson would not speculate on the successes of the new policy but said there would be some restriction of police resources.

There had been 400 applications of children in Northbridge since January.

Curtew launched: A youth looks down as Geoff Galloos addresses a press conference to announce the Government's policy for a youth curfew in Northbridge. ANGIE NORTHERN

The West Australian, 27 June 2003, 6
Arguably reflecting its view that the policy “lacks substance”, The West Australian does not give front-page prominence to the introduction of a curfew in Perth’s premier entertainment district, but runs the story on page 6. While the headline and stand first frame the story around the new restrictions, Gauntlett and Magill present a competing news frame, which is around the criticism of the policy by key players (notably police and welfare organisations). They quote three sources, all of whom are opposed to or question the policy; they do not quote any views in support of the Premier. While they suggest that four new youth workers have been appointed as part of the curfew policy, they do not point out that the Commonwealth Government funds these positions.

The Premier is said to dismiss the various concerns raised by critics, because the problems in Northbridge are “unique” and the policy would provide better amenity, safety and security in the precinct. The reporters do not challenge him to provide details to substantiate this point.

Gauntlett and Magill report that the Premier will “not accept” the argument that Northbridge is a safer place than home or other alternatives for some children and that he considers such a view to be
"irresponsible and defeatist". The reporters do not ask Dr Gallop who actually holds this view.

The article concludes with a police source. Gauntlett and Magill advise readers that the police had apprehended 900 "children" in Northbridge in the previous six months; however, they do not say why the police apprehended them.

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**Changes bring a mixed reaction**

YOUTH groups are outraged at the Northbridge curfew policy and claim it will create more problems than it will solve.

But Northbridge businesses and the Police Union have welcomed the new rules.

Midge Turnbull, executive officer of the Youth Affairs Council of WA, which represents about 300 youth-focused agencies, said many groups were still unhappy about the lack of consultation.

The WA Government was treating welfare and social issues with a disconcerting legal response.

"This is another cheap shot by Government, targeting the most vulnerable members of our community," she said.

Vivienne George, chairwoman of Sails Northbridge, backed the curfew and knew many people believed it was long overdue.

Mr George, who is also a member of the Northbridge Business Improvement Committee, said traders welcomed the move.

"It's very holistic," she said, "it looks at other issues like underlying family dysfunction."

Police Union president Mike Dean said he was pleased at the plan to station more youth workers in Northbridge and that the Department of Community Development should be held responsible for the problem.

He hoped the DCD's input would mean children would not be left "lying around city police stations on beaches all night."

In the past, there had been a hard core of about 15 children whom police were left to deal with.

Mr Dean said he hoped it would not revert to the situation police had been faced with of driving around with juveniles, going from house to house to find a relative who would take them.

"Hopefully, these youth workers will be able to get some one-to-one attention to these children," he said.

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The West Australian, 27 June 2003, 6
“Changes bring a mixed reaction”
(see page 269)

The accompanying article, also written by Gauntlett and Magill, frames the story around the very different responses the announcement of the curfew has received. While the reporters lead with a strong statement in opposition to the curfew, this article gives considerably more space to those people speaking in favour of the curfew than the previous one. Midge Turnbull, representing the ‘opponents’ is given four paragraphs, while those in favour, ‘Northbridge businesses’ and the Police Union, are given a total of nine paragraphs.

It is interesting to note that the reporters’ business source, Vivienne George, says the curfew is “very holistic” and “looks at other issues like underlying family dysfunction”. This suggests that the Northbridge business community is adopting the Premier’s crime/child welfare dual discourse. The reporter then suggests that the police source, Mike Dean, who had previously strongly opposed the curfew proposal, now welcomes the placement of more youth workers in Northbridge.6

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6 In an interview, a senior official with media department of the WA Police Service explained that the issue of looking after young people in Northbridge is a major one for police who resent being placed in what they consider to be a “nanny” role.
Northbridge battles to shake the popular nightlife spot's reputation for trouble

Tough love or a hard time?

By Kate Overton

Northbridge is a name that's become legend among Perth nightlife regulars. It's where a cowboy can be killed or one of the pub's regulars can jump you in the street.

The club used to shut, but before the casualties started rolling in the club was open until the early hours of the morning. It was the place to be, the place to be seen.

Now, fighting,ilden drinking and drug-taking are problems. Violent incidents are becoming more common, and the club's reputation is suffering.

The club's manager, John Smith, says he's had enough of the problems. He's made changes, and now he's hoping for a new, cleaner image.

The club has also introduced new security measures, including加强 patrolling and increasing the number of staff on duty.

Critics have dubbed the proposal racist, redneck, shallow and anti-youth.

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Tough love or a hard time?
“Tough love or a hard time?”
(see page 271)

The following day, a Saturday, which is the day *The West Australian* enjoys the highest circulation, the newspaper runs two stories on the curfew on page 5. The masthead refers to Northbridge’s “reputation for trouble”, the article does not seek to deny or confirm this statement. The article is framed around the Premier’s assertion that the curfew policy is effectively about ‘being cruel to be kind’. The article itself, however, presents a competing – and ultimately dominant – frame that rejects this notion.

Gauntlett draws on a range of sources in this article, although she quotes none directly. Through these sources, she raises a number of questions about the “new policy”. She presents readers with the Government’s argument together with opposing views from a range of sources. Importantly, for the first time in this round of coverage, readers learn of concerns about the Government’s failure to focus on the people who are actually responsible for crime in Northbridge, the over-18s. It is not clear why, for the second time, *The West Australian* leaves this important detail to the very end of the article.

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7 The most prominent position in the newspaper after pages 1 and 3.
8 The masthead runs over the headline.
9 “Curfew plan lacks substance”, *The West Australian*, 16 April 2003, 24, discussed in Chapter 5.
When discussing the debate about the appropriateness of children in Northbridge, Gauntlett does not specify the age to which she is referring. There is, evidently, a considerable difference between a six- or seven-year-old being out in Northbridge after dark and a young person aged some 10 years older.

Once again, when referring to the appointment of additional youth workers as the only new measure the State Government introduced under the curfew, Gauntlett fails to point out that it is the Commonwealth Government that actually funds these positions.

When discussing the Nyoongar Patrol’s call for more activities for indigenous young people, Gauntlett fails to take the opportunity to follow up the announcement in the Premier’s media statement that the Government would be looking to create alternative activities “across the metropolitan area” as part of the curfew policy.

“Curfew won’t work, says former street kid”
(see page 271)

The news frame of the accompanying article, also written by Gauntlett, is around the inability of the curfew to stop young people from coming to Northbridge. It centres on an interview with an indigenous girl and former “street kid”, Delphine Jamet, who believes the curfew will fail to
deter young people from coming to Northbridge because, among others, “one of their favourite pastimes (is) playing games with police”. Readers might be expected to infer from this article that all indigenous young people who go to Northbridge engage in antisocial behaviour, if not crime.

“Curfew bites”
(see page 275)

Unlike The West Australian, The Sunday Times does put the curfew on its front page and reports on its first night of operation. The headline, stand first and picture caption all reinforce the article’s news frame of a massive crackdown on children visiting the “adult entertainment area” as an apparent result of the “new curfew laws”. Neither of the reporters, Nick Taylor or Dave Franklin, expands upon the reference to the apparent “new laws”.

The article leads by telling readers that “the controversial Northbridge curfew” had been introduced for the first time the previous night. This is the first of many times that journalists in both newspapers refer to the curfew as “controversial”, without explaining to readers why it has been given that label. (This article alone uses the label twice in the first two sentence paragraphs.) Readers learn that in fact only two young girls – who “looked to be aged about 12” – had been taken off the streets.
CURFEW BITES

First children removed from Northbridge streets by police

By NICK TAYLOR and DAVID PARKIN

The controversial Northbridge curfew took effect last night — on west, suburb

In what's believed to be the first police action to be taken under the controversial curfew, a boy and girl were arrested near midnight in the area

Two young children under 12 were removed from the streets last night under the new Northbridge curfew law on Saturday, and two others were moved to the area by 11pm

The two young girls picked up from their homes in the area were taken to the police station where they were allowed to remain in the area

The boys were taken to a nearby police station where they were charged

The girls were placed in the care of a nearby family

The police have arrested several young people under the new Northbridge curfew law

The police are expected to arrest several more young people under the new Northbridge curfew law

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Round up: Police officers arrest children in Northbridge last night under the new curfew laws.
Given that the Premier has been repeatedly quoting the large number of children apprehended by the police before the introduction of the curfew – 900 in the previous six months – this figure of two for a Saturday night confirms the sensationalist framing of this story.

Taylor and Franklin do not say why the girls were apprehended (they were entitled to stay in Northbridge until 10pm if aged 13 to 15) nor do they say where the police took the girls. While a police spokesperson had told the reporters earlier in the evening that no extra police had been put on patrol and that things would be “no different from any normal Saturday night in the city”, Taylor and Franklin fail to explore this claim further and reconcile this with the apparent introduction of new laws. (Their other police source, the President of the Police Union, seems to imply again that the curfew is providing some new powers.)

Taylor and Franklin’s final source, Anne Russell Brown, provides the article with an alternative frame around what she perceives to be the curfew’s infringement of people’s rights (both of the young people and their parents).
The West Australian, 30 June 2003, 9

Curfew success claimed

Eight juveniles picked up as Premier shurgs off criticism

By Jerry Peeling, Pamela Maga and Steve Butler

This Government rewarded on Sunday night by its our community for the use of the new curfew on juveniles. The move has been praised by many as a step towards reducing juvenile crime in the city.

The Premier, who was in attendance at the event, said: "This is a significant step in our fight against juvenile crime. We have listened to the community and have taken action to ensure the safety of our citizens.

The new curfew, which applies to juveniles aged 12 to 16 years, is aimed at reducing the amount of time that these young people are on the streets at night. It is hoped that this will lead to a reduction in juvenile crime and anti-social behaviour.

The Premier went on to say that the Government would continue to work with the community to find other ways of reducing juvenile crime. He said: "We will continue to listen to the community and work with them to find solutions to this problem."
“Curfew success claimed”
(see page 277)

The following day, *The West Australian* devoted its page 9 to the curfew’s first weekend of operation. Reporters Jerry Pratley, Pamela Magill and Steve Butler advise that eight “juveniles” were “picked up” but they fail to report that this is, in reality, a relatively small number when compared to figures cited, for example, in the JAG report for the period January to March 2003 (discussed in Chapter 5).

The article devotes 11 paragraphs to give voice to the Government’s line, while giving only four to the Leader of the Opposition. The reporters give six paragraphs to the police, who continue to avoid talking directly about the curfew. The absence of a source from a youth welfare organisation is an important omission.

While the reporters write that the Premier has shrugged off criticism of the “controversial scheme”, they do not say what the nature of that criticism has been. Readers might infer from the Premier’s statement (later in the article), that the curfew has been criticised by people who think it is appropriate for young children to be out alone at night in Northbridge, rather than for any other reason.
The Premier’s use of words in declaring the curfew a success is significant. For example, he talks for the first time about “youngsters”, a much friendlier, more positive term than “juveniles”. It is a matter of conjecture whether he chose this term so that readers might view the curfew policy as a benevolent one. The Premier’s reference to the young people apprehended being “reunited” with their family is also of interest. The use of this verb suggests they had lost each other or that they had been brought together again after a very long time apart. The reporters do not tell readers what had occurred. Neither do they tell readers whether “reuniting” the youngsters with their families was necessarily the best course of action to take.

Asked whether a “high concentration” of police would be “maintained” in Northbridge to enforce the curfew, Dr Gallop said that was a matter for the Police Commissioner. This suggests that there had indeed been a greater police presence in Northbridge that weekend, contrary to the statement made by the police spokesperson to The Sunday Times. The reporters, however, quote Central Metropolitan District Supt Chris Dawson who had said the previous week that the police “would continue to do as they always did”. The reporters do not take this opportunity to ask in what way the curfew has changed existing police operations. The article concludes with an unequivocally dissenting voice, that of Opposition Leader Barnett.

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"All quiet on Northbridge front line"
(see page 277)

The accompanying article presents an entirely different news frame whereby the curfew passes by unnoticed. Leith Paganoni reports that "any [children] who were picked up by police were picked up under existing laws". This statement again implies that the curfew introduces some new laws under which police could apprehend young people.

Paganoni also claims there were 40 extra police on the beat in Northbridge "in an operation unrelated to the curfew". She does not say more, however, to explain this unrelated operation, which required extra police while the politically high profile curfew did not.

The West Australian, 1 July 2003, 14
Youth curfew is only the start*
(see page 280)

The West Australian’s hard-hitting but thoughtful editorial the following
day is prompted by the Premier’s “precipitant” (sic) claim that the curfew
is a success. It is framed around the need to address the welfare
concerns arising from some unaccompanied young people out in
Northbridge at night.

For the first time, The West Australian suggests where the pressure for
a curfew may have emanated from, contending, “it was a simplistic
reaction to a problem which goes far deeper than complaints from
Northbridge business proprietors, about the antisocial behaviour of
some young people”. The editorial insists that the curfew has brought
no change to the “powers and responsibilities” of the police, “yet Dr
Gallop claimed it a brave initiative”. Indeed, The West Australian goes
so far as to refer to the curfew as “a politically-inspired re-statement of
the work that has been done by police and welfare agencies in
Northbridge for many years”. The West Australian again leaves it
towards the end of the article to point out that the introduction of the
curfew “does little to address concerns … about the level of crime in the
area”.

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11 The editorial under discussion was published under the Former Acting Editor. It is
interesting to note that when Paul Armstrong takes over as editor of The West
Australian, he refers to the curfew as “an excellent innovation” (“Give us police on the
streets, not rhetoric”, The West Australian, 23 April 2004, 14). I discuss the influence
of the different editors on the framing of the curfew story in greater detail in Chapter 8.
Don’t fall for curfew stunt

Grahame Armstrong

...
“Don’t fall for curfew stunt”
(see page 282)

Unlike his news story following the announcement of the curfew proposal (20 April 2003), Armstrong’s opinion piece provides a very thorough analysis of the political machinations behind the curfew policy. Not only does Armstrong’s hard-hitting, sometimes scathing, insight suggest just what the curfew ‘policy’ might be all about, but he is the only reporter in the WA press to connect the curfew with the Northbridge report and the fact that it ignores its main findings.

His column is framed around the argument that the curfew policy is nothing more than rhetoric, and represents “populist politics in its purest form”. He is the first (and only) reporter to point out to readers that the Commonwealth Government and not the State Government is paying for the four additional youth workers in Northbridge.

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12 It is worth noting here that Grahame Armstrong had worked as a media adviser for Geoff Gallop and could be expected to have inside knowledge of the workings of the Premier’s Office.
Curfew for juveniles worth a try

In the early hours last Sunday a 14-year-old girl in James St said she didn't care about the Northbridge curfew.

"If the police pick me up and put me on a train to get me to go home I'll just get off at the next stop and come straight back," she told a reporter from The Sunday Times.

The girl's comments accurately illustrate the type of problem facing police and welfare officers as they struggle to solve the nocturnal problem of Northbridge's wandering juveniles.

The bright lights of Northbridge - like areas in other cities - are a magnet to young people.

Sadly the magic of the bright lights can quickly turn to tragedy as vulnerable children are sucked in to substance abuse and crime.

Under the curfew, children under 12 are banned from Northbridge after dark and unsupervised children aged from 13 to 15 must leave the area by 10pm.

The curfew itself must be enforced if it is to have any meaning, which will over time result in a further drain on police and welfare resources.

On the first night of the curfew eight juveniles were taken off the streets. One was seriously afected by drugs.

But of the others were reunited with their family and the other one was taken to a hostel.

Premier Geoff Gallop was quick to declare the curfew a success.

But success can't be measured simply in numbers of juveniles detained. True success as far as the curfew is concerned has to go a lot deeper than that.

There are other important questions that the Government and welfare workers have to address.

Why are children - some under 11 - alone in Northbridge after dark? Where are the parents of these errant children and why don't they take responsibility for them?

Police and welfare agencies cannot overcome the problem without help from the parents; some of whom need to be educated in how to look after their children.

Another worry is whether the curfew will result in the juveniles turning up in other areas such as Midland and Fremantle when they find that Northbridge is off limits to them. If tougher laws are needed to make the curfew more effective, then they should be examined.

There is a lot of negativity about the State Government's controversial Northbridge curfew which has been branded by many as a political stunt.

But critics should stand back for a few months and see how the curfew works out.

At least Dr Gallop should get some marks for trying to deal with what is a tragic social problem.

The Sunday Times, 6 July 2003, 55
“Curfew for juveniles worth a try”

(see page 284)

This editorial presents a diametrically opposing frame to Armstrong’s opinion piece in the same issue. The Sunday Times’ editorial is framed around the need to support the Premier’s efforts to deal with a “tragic social problem” and uses some emotive language to support this frame.

The editorial tells readers that the “magic” of the “bright lights” of Northbridge can quickly turn to tragedy as “vulnerable children” are sucked into substance abuse and crime. The editorial does not explain just who these “vulnerable children” are and in what ways they may be “vulnerable”. It further suggests that the decline into substance abuse and crime is inevitable. Readers may be expected to understand that The Sunday Times is referring here to troubled indigenous children rather than to relatively privileged teenagers out for a night of ‘high jinks’ who may, in reality, be equally vulnerable.

The editorial insists that, “the curfew must be enforced if it is to have any meaning” and that, “over time”, this will result in a further drain on police and welfare resources. Readers might infer from this that there is actually a new policy to enforce and to which the State Government is allocating resources.
When discussing the “juveniles” apprehended by the police on the first night of the curfew, *The Sunday Times* adopts the Premier’s use of language, telling readers how six of the eight juveniles had been “reunited” with their family. It does not draw readers’ attention to the relatively small number of apprehensions involved.

Like *The West Australian*, the editorial notes that the curfew needs to address the welfare concerns of “errant children” in Northbridge. *The Sunday Times* then echoes another editorial in *The West Australian*, from some 18 months earlier, telling readers that the police and welfare agencies cannot overcome the problem without help from the parents.

Adopting the Premier’s dual discourse, the editorial questions whether the curfew will simply lead “juveniles” to go to other areas. Readers may infer that the newspaper is concerned here with crime as it talks about the need to examine “tougher laws” as a possible means of addressing this particular “worry”. The change in labelling from “children” to “juveniles” is significant. This suggests that “children” are the issue when the editorial presents the welfare argument; “juveniles”, however, become the focus when the discussion concerns antisocial behaviour. It is also significant that the mere presence of juveniles

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(irrespective of their behaviour) is considered “a worry” of similar magnitude to that of young children at risk on the streets of Northbridge at night.

**ALP Left turns on curfew**

Premier warns of despair under banner of freedom

By Clion Mantos
and Steve Pennells

The Labor Party's Left faction has slapped Premier Geoff Gallop's Northbridge youth curfew had aimed at winning media coverage.

Most Workers Union delegate Robert Curt told the ALP State conference that the policy was supported in a law and order framework which stressed young people as criminals and should be treated as such.

The curfew policy, targeting children aged 15 and under, had been based from Northbridge after dark and 15 to 17-year-olds have to be off the streets by 10pm. Children under 15 who are misbehaving, engaging in offensive behaviour, allowd to drugs, alcohol, smoking or begging have also been penalised.

The policy is part of a broader strategy to deal with youth in the metropolitan area and plan within programs to address and underlying causes of disadvantage.

Mr Curt said the lack of involvement of community groups in developing the policy had been disastrous.

"The hierarchical structure, those with the assistance of section 45 of the Labor Government would be above such a cynical act," Mr Curt said.

But he praised the Government's commitment to providing youth activities and role models around the Northbridge area.

The party endorsed a policy calling out our efforts to deal with unregulated young people on the streets of Northbridge," he said.

"Yes, it is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive response. But we shouldn't be making excuses for bad and offensive behaviour or legitimising despair under the banner of freedom.

"As every parent knows, sometimes you have to be tough to be fair." Almost 40 children were taken off the streets last Thursday, Friday and Saturday night under the curfew.

Most were Aboriginal and were taken home. A handful were left at a hotel.

Police have had the powers to remove at-risk children from the streets under the Child Welfare Act for several years and use those powers in the implementation of the new policy.

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The West Australian, 7 July 2003, 8

“ALP Left turns on curfew”

The curfew story takes a new twist the following day in The West Australian, which reports on criticism from within the Premier's own ranks. The headline frames the story, while the stand first presents an alternative frame, around the 'morality' of Dr Gallop's argument.

The WA ALP had held its State Conference that weekend (5 and 6 July 2003). Conference delegates received a report specially prepared by the OCP (Government of Western Australia 2003). It would appear this
report sought to dispel many of the concerns that had been raised in recent press coverage, notably concerning:

- the need to postpone judgement on the curfew;
- the need to address the underlying causes of the problems;
- the curfew as part of a broader package;
- the issue of consultation;
- consultation with ATSIC;
- race;
- performance measures. ¹⁴

(See Appendix 11 for key extracts from the OCP report.)

Reporters Cian Manton and Steve Pennells lead with the announcement that the ALP’s Left faction has condemned “Premier Geoff Gallop’s Northbridge youth curfew”. The direct attribution of the curfew to Dr Gallop, as opposed to the Government, is significant. The reporters repeat the Premier’s assertion (reported in his media statement) that the curfew policy is part of a “broader strategy to deal with youth in the metropolitan area”; however, they do not challenge this claim. Similarly, the reporters quote a conference delegate who praises the Government’s commitment to providing “youth activities and safe places around the metropolitan area”, but they fail to test his claim. Neither do

¹⁴ A senior adviser in Dr Gallop’s office told me that “a commitment had been made” not to introduce the curfew anywhere else in the State precisely in order to prevent negative debate on the curfew at the Party’s State conference.
Manton and Pennells follow up on the conference recommendation that the Government introduce protocols for police and social workers dealing with unsupervised young people and that it allocate more resources for indigenous and community groups.

The reporters again quote Dr Gallop attacking his critics with his now very familiar argument that places him on the moral high ground whence he fails to address the actual criticisms of the curfew that have been levelled.

Manton and Pennells conclude with the observation that the police already had the powers to remove “at-risk children … before the implementation of the new policy”; however, they do not question just what the “new policy” involves.

“Gallop’s curfew a winner”
(see page 290)

Despite this latest criticism of the curfew, The West Australian proclaimed two days later that “Gallop’s curfew” was “a winner” among the public.
Gallop’s curfew a winner

All-sides support for Northbridge youth bans

By Steve Pennell

THE controversial decision to ban young people from Northbridge after dark has had overwhelming public support, according to the latest Westpoll.

Almost 80 per cent of WA voters back the State Government’s ban and more than three-quarters want it expanded to include other Perth trouble spots.

Under the curfew policy, unsupervised children aged 12 and under are banned from Northbridge after dark and 13 to 15-year-olds have to be off the streets by 10pm.

Children under 18 who are misbehaving, engaging in offensive behaviour, affected by drugs or alcohol, soliciting or begging have also been singled out.

The two-week-old curfew has faced opposition from youth groups who said they were not consulted, been branded racist by Aboriginal organisations and was strongly criticised by rank and file at the ALP State conference last weekend.

But polling last week shows Premier Geoff Gallop appears to have struck a chord with voters.

Most voters said they considered Northbridge more dangerous than other parts of the city at night and many believed the curfew would make the area safer.

But a big minority — 35 per cent — still had reservations about whether it would make any difference to safety in Northbridge.

Support for the curfew also appeared bipartisan, with 83 per cent of Labor voters and 80 per cent of Liberal or National voters supporting the concept.

Support was strong across all age groups.

Liberal voters were more likely than Labor voters to believe that the curfew would make Northbridge safer for visitors.

Pollster Keith Patterson said there was a strong perception that the youth curfew would bring substantial benefits to the community.

“It appears that they equate the curfew with an improvement in safety for people who frequent these areas for a meal or other evening entertainment,” he said.

“It is not clear whether the support for the curfew is related to that perceived improvement in safety or a belief that the youngsters on the streets after dark should be taken home for their own safety.”

Westpoll Northbridge Curfew

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for curfew in Northbridge</th>
<th>Support for curfew in other areas</th>
<th>Would the curfew make Northbridge safer?</th>
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</thead>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The independent survey was carried out last week through phone interviews with 400 voters across the State. Figures are rounded.

The West Australian, 9 July 2003, 5
Pennells tells readers that, according to the latest Westpoll, some 80 per cent of WA voters support the curfew and more than three-quarters want the Government to expand it to “other Perth trouble spots”.

Cynic or swim in sea of spin

Prime Minister John Howard is visualised as a Hollywood starlet performing for a sea of adoring fans. He is seated on a throne, surrounded by a crowd of cheering supporters.

The West Australian, 11 July 2003, 20
“Cynic or swim in sea of spin”
(see page 291)

The results of the Westpoll may have prompted Pennells to focus his next opinion piece (two days later) on the Gallop Government’s growing reputation for “style over substance”. His column is framed around the increasing amount of spin in government communications; he points to the Northbridge curfew as an example of this trend.\(^{15}\) This is the first time that Pennells recognises, at least on record, the absence of any substance to the curfew policy. It is also the first time he refers to the curfew as “a handy distraction” during the parliamentary debate on cannabis law reform.

\(^{15}\) It is interesting to note here the difference in Pennells’ position on the curfew compared with when he first ‘broke’ the story two months earlier. He told me that he wrote the original stories on the understanding consultations had taken place with the key stakeholders and that the curfew proposal had received the backing of the indigenous community representatives. He changed his position on the curfew when he discovered that these consultations had not, in fact, taken place.
Traders smile as curfew bites

By JIM KELLY

NORTHBRIDGE business owners say the curfew on young people is beginning to bite.

The crackdown on unsupervised children and youths has entered its third weekend, with traders seeing fewer teenagers and experiencing less trouble.

More than 40 children and juveniles have been detained and sent home since the 10pm curfew came into force a fortnight ago.

On Friday night 35 juveniles were taken off Northbridge streets.

"The traders are happy as a pig in mud," said Valentino Cafe owner and Northbridge Business Improvement Group chairman Bob Smale. "The atmosphere on the streets has improved noticeably."

Business owners have long complained that uncontrolled teenagers were responsible for much of the anti-social behaviour that had tarnished Northbridge's reputation. Mr Smale said he expected the curfew would encourage families to return.

Perth councillor and Northbridge Business Association president Vincent Tan said the response to the curfew had been positive but the real test would come this weekend — the first of the school holidays.

"It has only been two weeks and the weather hasn't been good but the message appears to be getting through," he said.

"The fact is Northbridge is an adult entertainment area at night and these kids shouldn't be there."

Acting Superintendent John Chilcote said the challenge for police and welfare groups was to stop juveniles returning repeatedly to Northbridge.

He conceded the curfew had probably attracted others who wanted to challenge police authority.

"There are between 15 and 20 young people who regularly come into Northbridge during the evenings," he said. "It is this hard core we are trying to deter from coming into town.

"The ringleaders are bringing in others with them. Some of those probably want to come into Northbridge just to test the system."

Those removed under the curfew are taken to Mission Australia's city juvenile welfare centre where parents are contacted to come to collect them.

Police have been using the same powers of the Child Welfare Act to remove "at-risk" children and youths from Northbridge for years.

On Friday and Saturday nights last week 31 children and juveniles were picked off the streets and sent home. On the corresponding weekend last year, 16 were detained.
“Traders smiles as curfew bites”
(see page 293)

Jim Kelly reports that Northbridge business owners believe the curfew has succeeded in reducing the number of teenagers in Northbridge and that they are experiencing “less trouble” in the precinct. Readers might understand from this that the focus for traders, at least, is on the “trouble” caused by teenagers, rather than on their welfare.

The headline frames the story around the positive effects for Northbridge business of the “crackdown”. The Sunday Times again uses “bite” to describe its effects. Kelly reports that police have detained and “sent home” more than 40 “children and juveniles”. He does not say what happened to them after they went home.

Kelly reports that business owners have long complained that “uncontrolled teenagers” are responsible for much of “the antisocial behaviour that has tarnished Northbridge’s reputation”. Readers may understand from this that the curfew is about addressing antisocial behaviour rather than crime. When Robert Smales says he expects the curfew will “encourage families to return”, Kelly does not question the restaurateur’s change of position regarding the type of client he wants;

16 Kelly’s sources in this article – business owners/ representatives and police – are the same as those used by his counterpart at The West Australian in his articles on Northbridge some 18 months earlier in response to the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report.
previously, Smales had insisted it was a place for adults only. Kelly reports that 31 children and juveniles were “picked off” the streets and “sent home” that weekend, compared with 16 on the corresponding weekend the previous year. Kelly does not question whether these figures are merely a reflection of the number of police on the beat or their increased interest in picking children up due to the political imperative that the curfew be seen to make an impact.

The West Australian, 19 July 2003, 18
“Girls show up double standard”
(see page 295)

The following Saturday, its largest circulation day, *The West Australian* devotes its editorial to the curfew for the second time in a month.¹⁹ On this occasion, the newspaper draws readers’ attention to the contradiction in government policy, which deems 15-year-olds to be sufficiently responsible to live on the other side of the country from their parents (against the latter’s wishes) but does not consider them to be mature enough to visit Northbridge.²⁰ For the first time, the newspaper draws attention to the issue of parental rights (as opposed to their responsibilities) in controlling their children. The editorial does not, however, raise the possibility that the contradiction in policy may stem from the fact that one group of 15-year-olds is indigenous while the other is not.

Contrary to its earlier position, *The West Australian* now dismisses the Premier’s framing of the curfew story and accompanying dual discourse, arguing that the Government is clearly not interested in the welfare of the young people in Northbridge. It says, “as long as they are no longer visible, the Government is content that its policy is working”.

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¹⁹ The Former Acting Editor is at the helm at this time.
²⁰ *The West Australian* is referring here to a case of two girls who had run away to WA from their homes in the eastern States. A nation-wide search had that week ended with the discovery of the girls in Fremantle. The DCD said that they were not obliged to return to live with their parents.
Curfew to face legal challenge

Youth groups find voluntary support among lawyers

By Kate Gauntlett and Cian Manton

THE Youth Affairs Council of WA will mount a legal challenge to the Northbridge curfew.

Midge Turnbull, executive officer of the YACWA — which represents about 300 youth-focused groups around the State — said groups would complain about the curfew to the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the WA Equal Opportunity Commission.

Youth workers told a meeting on Friday that young people were being moved on while going about their daily business such as leaving TAPE or changing trains at Perth station. One boy was allegedly stopped while walking a dog in Leederville.

Under the Government's Young People in Northbridge policy, unsupervised children aged 12 and younger are banned from Northbridge after dark and 13 to 15-year-olds have to be off the streets by 10pm. Others under 18 who are misbehaving, engaging in offensive behaviour, affected by drugs or alcohol, soliciting or begging also have been singled out.

About 90 per cent of children apprehended by police under the 1991 Welfare Act are Aboriginal.

Ms Turnbull said groups would argue that the curfew policy discriminated on the basis of age and race. It breached the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Over the next few weeks, groups will collect statistics and compile evidence of how people's lives have been affected by the curfew.

Ms Turnbull said that since the introduction of the curfew on June 28, youth agencies had reported a strain on their resources because more young people were being detained.

She did not expect the legal challenge would be expensive because lawyers were not needed to take complaints to the two commissions. However, lawyers from the Youth Legal Service and at least one high-profile barrister had agreed to help the groups.

"Some lawyers have told us they have a real issue with this curfew and are willing to help us out," Ms Turnbull said.

Acting Premier Eric Ripper could not be reached for comment yesterday. But last week he said the curfew applied equally to children from all races and was introduced because of welfare concerns. The curfew had strong public support.

Mr Ripper said the Government's legal advice was that the policy was sound and he did not expect any challenge to succeed.

NSW Opposition Leader John Brogden has called for community discussion on his proposal that children aged 14 and under would be taken off the streets by 10pm in areas of high youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

Mr Brogden said it was a coincidence that he had developed the plan at the same time as WA's curfew was launched. He was monitoring the outcomes of the Northbridge curfew with great interest.

He had developed the proposal in response to problems of juvenile crime and anti-social activities in regional and rural areas.

The West Australian, 21 July 2003, 11
“Curfew to face legal challenge”
(see page 297)

Two days following the publication of its editorial dismissing the Premier's framing of the curfew, *The West Australian* reports that youth groups are to mount a legal challenge on the grounds that the curfew discriminates on the basis of age and race.

Gauntlett reports that young people "going about their daily business" are being "moved on" under the curfew and that, "about 90 per cent of children apprehended by police under the CWA are Aboriginal". She includes a response from Acting Premier Eric Ripper who insists the curfew applies "equally to children from all races and was introduced because of welfare concerns", had strong public support, and that the Government's legal advice was that the policy was sound and he did not expect any challenge to succeed.21

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21 The legal challenge was, in fact, never mounted against the curfew.
In the final article of this round of press coverage, Gauntlett reports again on the legal challenge. She leads with the State Government's release of statistics the previous day showing that police had apprehended more than 150 youths – including one aged seven – since the Northbridge curfew was introduced less than a month earlier. About 84 per cent of those apprehended were Aboriginal and about two-thirds were girls. Paul Delphin, executive officer of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, tells readers the statistics prove the policy is racist. Gauntlett does not explore Delphin’s claim.

She concludes her article by reminding readers that “some police” and the Opposition had criticised the curfew as “a media stunt to dress up existing policy”. Her own views may be transparent here; neither the police nor the Opposition have talked about “dressing up existing policy”.

Concluding remarks on press coverage of Milestone 3

The analysis of the press coverage arising from the official unveiling of the curfew policy demonstrates that The West Australian and The Sunday Times responded quite differently to the Government’s framing of the Northbridge story. While the latter embraced the Premier’s
preferred moral argument and adopted his crime/child welfare dual discourse (even using some of Dr Gallop’s language), the former rejected the Government’s frame. While in its first editorial, *The West Australian* said the curfew still had to prove its effectiveness in dealing with the causes of social disadvantage, by the second editorial the newspaper had dismissed the curfew’s professed welfare objective, asserting that the Government was interested only in responding to complaints from Northbridge business. *The Sunday Times*’ adoption of the Government’s frame is noteworthy given the outright dismissal of the curfew by one of its columnists who was formerly a media adviser to the Premier.

This round of coverage once again showed a striking difference in the level of analysis of the various reporters. Interestingly, it also demonstrated a transformation in Pennells’ framing of the story. Whereas in the previous round, he had referred to the curfew as a “radical move”, he now condemned the curfew as “cynical spin” designed to grab headlines.

Notwithstanding *The West Australian*’s rejection of the Government’s framing of the curfew story, my analysis has demonstrated that the WA press discourse on Northbridge continued to focus on the welfare of (indigenous) young people rather than on the issues raised in the
Northbridge: Shaping the Future report. While The West Australian recognised that the curfew failed to address crime perpetrated by the over-18s, it continued to confuse throughout its reportage the antisocial behaviour of the under-18 age group with crime. Any questioning of the curfew by the WA press, therefore, arose from concerns about the ability of the ‘policy’ to remove indigenous young people (now firmly established as the cause of the problems in Northbridge) rather than from its inability to address crime in the first place. Hence, a senior political reporter with The Sunday Times told me:

[The Sunday Times] supported the curfew because it was popular [among the public], not because it had any merit necessarily. However, you could feel comfortable arguing in favour of the curfew as it did seek to help young kids at risk, so that was obviously a good thing.

Further, none of the reporters followed up on the Premier’s promises in his media statement regarding alternative activities for young people and improved amenity for the precinct; nor did they question the Government’s new definition of Northbridge as an adults-only entertainment area. With the exception of Armstrong,22 the WA press continued to imply that there was some new, undefined government initiative under way. For example, even though both newspapers had acknowledged that the CWA gave the police the power to pick up young people deemed at risk, they still ran stories on the number of children acknowledged that the CWA gave the police the power to pick up young people deemed at risk, they still ran stories on the number of children

22 It is likely that Gauntlett (The West Australian) shared Armstrong’s views, given her reference to the curfew as existing policy “dressed up” as something new but, as a reporter rather than columnist, she was necessarily less explicit. Nonetheless, as I have discussed, Gauntlett still failed to raise a number of important questions.
“picked up” following the “introduction of the curfew”. The Sunday Times even reported that Northbridge traders were “happy as a pig in mud”, yet failed to ask what new initiative might be responsible for this new-found elation.

Most importantly, none of the journalists raised the fundamental issue of public space, notably the right of all members of the community to access it, nor did they seek to explain the different cultural practices of indigenous people that give rise to concern, or even provoke fear among the non-indigenous community. Above all, the WA press allowed the Premier to continue to imply that the criticism the curfew had “copped” had come from unnamed people who apparently believed it was appropriate for young children to be out late at night on their own. As a result of their continued failure to challenge this assertion, Dr Gallop was able to maintain the moral high ground and avoid answering the actual and very real charges of his critics.

Pennells was clearly surprised at the public’s support of the curfew, however I believe that the above analysis demonstrates why it was, in fact, entirely predictable. Both The West Australian and The Sunday Times continued to frame the story of the Northbridge curfew around indigenous youth on the rampage. This framing of the story merely fed the stereotypes that are prevalent among Western Australians who rely
upon the WA press as their only source of information on such issues. Further, the State Government was seen to be doing something – albeit imperfectly – about a problem which, as defined by the Premier and the WA press, made sense. Similarly, the proposed solution made sense. For this reason, I consider the public support of the curfew to have been as predictable as was the focus of the WA press on criminal indigenous youth. The narrative was, indeed, just as the government media adviser had foreseen it would be.
CHAPTER 7

TELLING THE STORY

MILESTONE 4: CURFEW IN CRISIS? (OCTOBER 2003)

The story of the Northbridge curfew returned to the front news pages in October 2003 when Children’s Court Judge Kate O’Brien criticised the policy some four months after its introduction. In this chapter, I explore the way in which the State Government responded to this criticism and the accompanying reportage in the WA press. I am concerned here with the discourse surrounding Milestone 4, namely the press coverage arising from O’Brien’s comments.

In Chapters 5 and 6, my analysis of the news texts arising from Milestones 2 and 3 demonstrated how the WA press supported the Government in selling the story of Northbridge curfew. Although *The West Australian* recognised that the curfew did not introduce any new powers, ignored the welfare needs of indigenous youth, and failed to address crime perpetrated by the over 18s, the newspaper nonetheless supported the State Government by framing the story around indigenous youth and by failing to challenge the Premier’s moral argument regarding children in Northbridge. In this chapter, I explore how *The West Australian*, in its reportage around Milestone 4, finally joined *The Sunday Times* in telling the Government’s version of the story. With a new editor and social welfare writer leading *The West Australian*’s
narrative, the newspaper allows the Premier to blame – without challenge – indigenous families for the curfew’s failure to deliver on its promises. Similarly, both newspapers allow the Premier to continue to ignore the very real concerns raised by welfare agencies regarding the need for more resources to deal with the increased numbers of young children the police are apprehending. In this way, the WA press silences alternative voices in the debate and, even, holds them to ridicule while allowing the Premier to assume the (tough) moral high ground. I also find that both newspapers finally abandon the fiction of the curfew’s alleged welfare objective in this round of reportage.

October 2003 – Children’s Court judge reignites debate on curfew

The State Youth Affairs Conference, held in October 2003, provided the catalyst for renewed debate on the Northbridge curfew.¹ Children’s Court Judge Kate O’Brien, who told delegates that the curfew “had no legislative backing and was bound to unravel”, opened the Conference. Premier Geoff Gallop predictably responded by drawing on his preferred moral argument, telling The West Australian that the curfew was “both the legally right thing to do and the morally right thing to do”. This quote received optimum exposure, with the newspaper publishing it on the front page.

¹ It is probably not coincidental that the debate on the curfew should have resumed when the weather was improving and more people could be expected to be out visiting Northbridge.
Paul Armstrong was editor of *The West Australian* during the period under review. This latest round of criticism of the Northbridge curfew resulted in eight articles in *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*, in accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Methodology (page 24). I list these articles in Table 5. I set out below the main findings of my analysis of these texts, supported by data that I present in tables in Appendix 12.

Where relevant, my analysis again includes extracts from parliamentary debates, which are sourced from Hansard. (See Appendix 8 for the full transcripts.)

**Table 5: Milestone 4 Press Articles**

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<th>Date</th>
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<td>Pamela Magill</td>
<td>Gallop blasts critical judge</td>
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<td>Jim Kelly</td>
<td>Children defy curfew</td>
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<td>Torrance Mendez</td>
<td>Northbridge curfew to stay: Gallop</td>
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<td>Gallop blasts curfew critics</td>
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<td>Nick Taylor</td>
<td>Courts ‘unfair on young Aborigines’</td>
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<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Back Gallop in stand over curfew</td>
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"Gallop blasts critical judge"

Although Judge Kate O'Brien's criticism of the curfew represents the latest development in the ongoing story, *The West Australian* frames its
front page article around the Premier’s response to the criticism and his
defence of the curfew. While Magill reports that the Premier “blasted”
the “controversial” judge, she does not explore the Judge’s comments
about the curfew’s legal base; neither does she tell readers why the
Judge is considered to be “controversial”. The use of such a label may
be expected to undermine the Judge’s credibility.

Magill cites MA figures that show a significant reduction in the number of
young people apprehended in Northbridge; however, she does not say
whether the reduction in numbers means that the curfew has failed or
succeeded. She tells readers that O’Brien had stressed that families
and carers had to “live up to their responsibilities” in addressing the
issue of young people out alone at night. “But”, Magill adds, “Dr Gallop
said it was appropriate for the Government to take action when children
as young as eight or nine were in an adult entertainment area, to reunite
them with their families and deal with any problems they might have”. It
is not clear why Magill begins her concluding paragraph with “but”.
O’Brien did not say that it was appropriate for children to be out at night;
neither did she say that the Government should not act.

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2 For example, the reduction in numbers could mean that the police are not able to
apprehend young people for some undefined reason or it could mean that fewer young
people are now visiting Northbridge.
3 As I discussed in Chapter 6, the Premier’s use of the verb “reunite” is significant in
this context, implying that the various family members had lost each other or that they
had been brought together again after a very long time apart. Readers are not told
what had occurred. Neither are readers told whether “reuniting” the youngsters with
their families is necessarily the best course of action to take.
The West Australian, 4 October 2003, 11

"City-wide plan to negate curfew"

Framed by the headline, Magill’s article the following day tells readers that the State Opposition would introduce “a broader strategy” across the metropolitan area that “eventually” would make the curfew redundant. Magill does not provide details about the plan, not least how it would replace the curfew. Neither does she remind readers that there is no consensus on the policy within Opposition ranks.⁴

Magill cites the State Manager of MA, who says the Government needs to support “young people and parents in their households” and advises that her agency is now meeting every week with the DCD to this end.

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⁴ As I discussed in Chapter 5, while the Leader of the Opposition categorically rejected the curfew as nothing more than a stunt and impossible to enforce without more police, the Opposition’s police spokesman called for it to be introduced in his electorate of Kalgoorlie.
These debriefings are the first indication that the Government is addressing the welfare of the young people apprehended and represents a positive development arising from the curfew; however, the point is buried more than two-thirds into the article. Magill makes no comment upon this development, either directly or through another source.

The article concludes by advising readers of the Premier’s resolve that there will be “no going back on the curfew” and his claim that he had not expected it to deliver solutions “within a short time”. Again Magill misses an important opportunity to challenge the Premier for, as I discussed in Chapter 6, Dr Gallop had already declared the curfew a success less than 12 hours after he first introduced it. This did not suggest that Dr Gallop was awaiting a long-term “solution”.

‘Dorothy Dix’ enables Premier to reclaim the moral high ground

Some two weeks after The West Australian ran the above articles, John Hyde MLA, Member for Perth, raised another ‘Dorothy Dix’ in State Parliament. This sought assurance from the Premier regarding the Government’s continued commitment to the curfew and “the actions necessary for long-term solutions to what is a serious community problem”. Hyde’s question enabled the Premier to blame the curfew’s critics, who apparently condone young children being out alone at night,
for undermining the policy’s effectiveness. It also provided Dr Gallop with the opportunity to reiterate his moral credentials and willingness to tackle the “hard issues”. (See Appendix 8 for the full transcript of the Member for Perth’s question and the Premier’s response.)

The Premier reintroduced his crime/child welfare dual discourse, telling of “youngsters” – “some aged seven and eight years” – who are on the streets of Northbridge late at night “at risk and causing a nuisance to the community”. However, when Dr Gallop refers to people who support young children being out at night alone, the Leader of the Opposition challenges him, demanding that he identify who has condoned children out in Northbridge. The Premier’s response is simply that, “Lots of people are implying that and lots of people are saying that these youngsters have a right to be there”. Dr Gallop once again suggests that anyone who criticises the curfew is doing so because they believe it is appropriate for young people to be out at night alone. He argues that, “in effect, they are encouraging some of those youngsters to go to the streets of Northbridge”.

Children defy curfew

Young horde descend on Northbridge

JENNIFER

This Northbridge curfew has failed to deter children from the entertainment district.

These people, serials of primary school age, are running in the streets as first seen by parents who watched as the police officers enforced the law.

The curfew, which was implemented in Northbridge, has been enforced against children as young as 12. But the children, who are mostly between the ages of 12 and 14, continue to defy the curfew.

Parents have complained that the police officers are not enforcing the law properly. They claim that the children are still out and about, even after the curfew.

CAUGHT OUT: Police apprehend two young men in Northbridge on Friday night.

"The police have not been effective in enforcing the curfew," said one parent. "We have noticed that the children are still out and about, even after the curfew has been put into place."
“Children defy curfew”  
(see page 312)

This article’s headline and stand first present a news frame around the lawlessness of juveniles that continues unabated in the entertainment precinct. The image, however, shows only two young people being escorted by two police officers into a caged van.

Kelly’s lead source in this article is the Nyoongar Patrol, which has called for an “urgent review” of the policy and the resources allocated to it. He reports that police had detained more than 50 children the previous weekend, the third busiest night since the curfew was introduced. Readers might infer that the numbers of juveniles visiting Northbridge have increased, rather than that the police have been apprehending a larger number of young people. Given that Kelly reports the Nyoongar Patrol as saying that the numbers in Northbridge had remained the same, it would appear that the increased numbers stem from increased police activity. Kelly, however, does not question the figures.

Kelly concludes his article with an apparently unrelated comment from the Premier who ignores the issue of the lack of resources to deal with the increased numbers of young people being apprehended. Instead, the Premier says that the Government will “never accept” that it is in the best interests of children to be “exposed to an adult entertainment area”.

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Kelly does not ask who actually said it was in the children’s best interests to be there. Dr Gallop goes on to say that the number of children still visiting Northbridge is not unexpected “when a section of the community continued to oppose the curfew”. Readers are left in no doubt as to whom the Premier is referring when he calls on “everyone in the wider community, including the Aboriginal community, to say to these kids it is not OK to be in Northbridge at night”. Kelly does not explore the Premier’s charges further. This omission is particularly significant given that the only criticism of the curfew reported in the press that week came from Judge Kate O’Brien and the Opposition, neither of whom come from the indigenous community. Instead of challenging the Premier, Kelly provides Dr Gallop with the opportunity to seize the moral high ground again and to talk, for the first time, about the need “to turn these kids around”. This will become part of the Premier’s familiar narrative. Kelly concludes his article reporting the Premier’s undertaking that the curfew is being “constantly reviewed” and extra welfare staff would be assigned to follow-up troublesome children “if necessary”. The WA press never follows up on these undertakings.
Northbridge curfew to stay: Gallop

Calls for juvenile entertainment firmly rejected

By Torrance Mendez

PREMIER Geoff Gallop has refused to budge on the controversial Northbridge curfew in the face of new criticism.

Dr Gallop said the policy, aimed at clearing unsupervised under-15s from Northbridge after 10pm, would not be reversed in the face of claims it had not made a difference.

The criticism demonstrated that his Government had a battle on its hands to keep Northbridge free of troublesome juveniles.

"These kids are getting mixed messages — on the one hand the Government will not compromise in saying that they should not be there," Dr Gallop said.

"And they're getting the message from other people in the community who say they have every right to be there."

The policy, introduced on September 1, had improved the amenity of Northbridge, Dr Gallop said. He rejected calls for special entertainment for juveniles.

"Absolutely no way are we going to provide activities for children in Northbridge," he said. "It's an adult entertainment zone."

The Nyoongar Patrol — a publicly-funded agency whose indigenous patrollers aim to prevent youngsters getting into trouble — noted three problems affecting the curfew:

• A lack of police to apprehend offenders.
• The Juvenile Aid Group, where police process youngsters, was often overrun by new arrivals.
• And a responsible adult could be hard to locate for some youngsters, causing delays.

Patrol chief executive Maria McAtackney said her agency's patrols concentrated on James Street, the cultural centre and Russell Square because of a lack of staff.

"I wouldn't say the curfew has failed," she said. "I would say there are some major issues that we need to reform and look at how we can deal with issues a lot better."

Ms McAtackney said there was a hard core of 15 to 20 youngsters who were causing concern. They were crying out for dance or hip hop entertainment but there was nothing.

She was supported by Christian community service agency, Mission Australia, which runs the Commonwealth-funded On Track program to provide a waiting room for curfew victims.

Mission State manager Anne Russell-Brown said the curfew was "injecting a sense of rebellion and was racist because it was clearly aimed at indigenous young people."

She said her agency considered there was already sufficient support to take children off the streets without need for a curfew.

Opposition police spokesman Matt Birney said his party supported the curfew but it required more police on the ground if it was to be effective.

The West Australian, 20 October 2003, 11
This story’s dominant frame is once again around the Premier’s rejection of criticism of the curfew, rather than the nature of the concerns raised. Both the headline and the stand first reinforce this frame.

Torrance Mendez leads with the announcement that the Premier is “refusing to budge” in the face of new criticism that the “controversial curfew” policy has not made a difference. He allows the Premier once again to ignore the actual concerns raised, in this case by the Nyoongar Patrol. Instead, Mendez quotes the Premier saying that, “These kids … are getting the message from other people in the community who say they have every right to be there”. Mendez does not ask who these “other people” are. Neither does he draw the Premier’s attention to the curfew’s other stated objective (in addition to protecting Northbridge from “troublesome juveniles”), namely the welfare of these “kids”. Mendez also reports that Dr Gallop has rejected calls for special entertainment for juveniles; he fails to remind the Premier of his undertaking to establish alternative activities for young people (as announced in his media statement of 26 June 2003).

Mendez concludes his article with Opposition police spokesperson Matt Birney, who says his party supports the curfew, but that it “requires more
police on the ground if it is to be effective”. Mendez does not draw readers’ attention to the contradiction between this comment and those of Party Leader, Colin Barnett, who has dismissed the curfew as a hollow stunt.

Although this article raises the concerns of three people, the attention of readers is drawn primarily to the Premier’s viewpoint due to its positioning in the lead paragraph. Mendez does not challenge the Premier to respond to the key concerns raised regarding the need for additional resources to deal with the larger numbers of young people being picked up because of the increased police activity in Northbridge.

“Gallop blasts curfew critics”
(see page 318)

The following day, The West Australian again gives the Premier the opportunity to lead the debate. The story is framed once more around the Premier rejecting criticism of the curfew and his morally superior position vis-à-vis his critics, who the newspaper explicitly identifies here for the first time as “Aboriginal leaders”. The headline and mast head reinforce the frame. The reference in the mast head to “their children” is significant, as it makes an explicit distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in Northbridge.
Aboriginal leaders accused of leading their children down wrong path

Gallop blasts curfew critics

By Clan Manton

The West Australian, 21 October 2003, 5

PREMIER Geoff Gallop has accused some Aboriginal and community leaders of undermining the Northbridge curfew by encouraging children into the entertainment precinct.

Defiant after yet another round of criticism of the youth policy, Dr Gallop said community leaders were sending the wrong message to young people.

"There are some leaders in our community who have expressed the point of view that we don't have any right to take these kids off the street," he said.

"While you get some people saying that kids have a right to be there, that's sending a very, very bad signal out and it's making it harder for the Government to do what it should do on behalf of the community."

The curfew enables police to take children under 15 off the streets if they are in Northbridge after 10pm.

Dr Gallop said he had only ever heard criticism from the Aboriginal Legal Service.

"Young Aboriginal people have got a tremendous future in WA but to get them caught up in that culture in Northbridge sends them exactly down the opposite path and I do not want that to happen," he said.

ALS chief executive Dennis Egginton said if the curfew failed it was because it was an ill-thought political move that did nothing about addressing the social needs of children.

He said the curfew was punitive aimed at Aboriginal people and set back reconciliation.

"It was a disgusting policy that has done nothing to help Aboriginal people overcome the huge injustices we suffer in this day and age," he said.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission South-West commissioner Farley Garlett said the curfew was outdated and did not empower Aboriginal people or help them to take responsibility for their actions.

"Don't blame community leaders Geoff, have a look and be man enough or strong enough to say, 'We might be wrong,'" he said.

Youth Affairs Council executive officer Midge Turnbull said the council generally believed young people had a right to be in Northbridge.

She said instead of bating young people, Dr Gallop should look at working with them.

"There is absolutely no reason for not providing a youth space (in Northbridge)," she said. "If they did, some of the problems would be addressed.

"If people misbehave when they have nothing to do.

"Give them something productive to do and it would be a wise investment."

Dr Gallop said the resources needed to implement the curfew were being monitored and would be increased if needed.

He dismissed calls for the Government to help establish youth activities or events in Northbridge.

Dr Gallop said Northbridge would be intolerable without the curfew. "I say to the critics — start to consider the point of view of the victims — the people that live in this area, the people that work in this area, the people that visit this area," he said.
The article provides the Premier with the opportunity to shift the blame for problems with the curfew (arising from lack of resources) onto the “Aboriginal leaders”. Manton and Magill report that Dr Gallop has accused “some Aboriginal and community leaders” of undermining the Northbridge curfew by “encouraging” children into Northbridge. Neither of the reporters tests the Premier’s claims by asking him to substantiate them.

The curfew story takes a new twist when the Premier says that he has “only ever heard criticism” from the ALS. This reference to the ALS is significant given that The West Australian has only once reported any criticism from that organisation and that was some seven months earlier, in April.5

Manton and Magill report that Youth Affairs Council executive officer Midge Turnbull “generally believes” young people have a right to be in Northbridge. They do not remind readers, however, that Turnbull, Anne Russell-Brown (MA) and Judge Kate O’Brien are the only people who the WA press have reported talking about the right of young people to be in Northbridge. None of these women is Aboriginal.

5 “Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt”, The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 6. Eggington was reported as saying that the curfew plan “sprang from an attitude of anger and exclusion which clearly targeted Aboriginals”. He said, “At this moment we are concerned about whether or not kids can be lawfully detained. I think the Premier is missing the point if he thinks it is going to be as easy as removing children, placing them somewhere and then waiting for people to come and pick them up”. Eggington’s were, in fact, among the more judicious comments made about the proposed curfew.
The article concludes, as it began, with Dr Gallop. He tells readers the resources needed to implement the curfew “were being monitored and would be increased if needed”. He again dismisses calls for the Government to help establish youth activities or events in Northbridge. Again, the reporters miss the opportunity to remind the Premier about his undertaking to create alternative activities for young people and to follow up on the issue of increasing resources to the agencies working on the ground.

It is significant that, once again, the Premier fails to mention the curfew’s other stated objective, namely to protect children. He no longer appears to consider them “victims”. The reporters do not question this major turnaround.

This article demonstrates that the original question from the Nyoongar Patrol, concerning the need for more resources to deal with the increased number of children being apprehended, met with the unrelated response from the State Government that Aboriginal leaders were leading “their children” down the wrong paths by claiming they had the right to be out at night in Northbridge. The West Australian reporters enabled the Premier to avoid responding to the Patrol’s concerns by failing to challenge Dr Gallop’s claims.
Second ‘Dorothy Dix’ enables renewed attack on curfew critics

Unlike the reporters, the Leader of the Opposition does endeavour to challenge the Premier that day (21 October 2003) in State Parliament. However, Dr Gallop once again succeeds in avoiding the charges. The exchange occurred when the Premier was responding to a question, once again from John Hyde MLA, Member for Perth, seeking assurance from Dr Gallop that he remained committed to the curfew in light of the concerns expressed about it by “some people”.

The ‘Dorothy Dix’ again provides the Premier with the opportunity to reiterate his moral argument while pointing to those (still unidentified) people who say that children have the right to be out alone at night. He also repeats his crime/child welfare dual discourse, saying that the Government remains committed to the curfew “in the interests of both children in Western Australia and the people who live and work in the Northbridge area and those who visit it”. The Premier confirms that, “The Government will not provide facilities for young people to access entertainment in Northbridge” on the grounds that to do so would be to encourage young people to the precinct.
Northbridge’s curfew is not the problem

THE problem in Northbridge is not the Government’s curfew. It is that children — some of them up to no good — roam the area at night without responsible adult supervision.

The curfew is a justifiable response and partial solution to the problem. It applies to children under 15 after 10pm.

It is hard to believe that critics of the curfew could argue seriously that unsupervised children, some of whom are not even in their teens, have some sort of right to be in an adult entertainment precinct late at night. It does not seem to occur to them that the presence of groups of children in the area reflects a deficiency of care and supervision that cannot be blamed automatically on the various authorities.

There are two key elements to this problem. One is that children left to their own devices in such an area are unprotected and potentially in moral danger. No amount of philosophising about who should be responsible for what can make this acceptable. At least the curfew can result in the removal of children from immediate potential danger, even if it does not resolve the bigger problems that cause them to be there in the first place.

The other is that children, especially in groups, sometimes commit crimes, disrupt businesses and so on. Regrettably, the police have cause regularly to take an interest in their activities, regardless of whether there is a formal curfew.

Consistent protests against the curfew by the Aboriginal Legal Service, in particular, have turned this into an Aboriginal issue — though it applies to all children. ALS chief executive Dennis Eggington says the curfew is punitive, aimed at Aboriginal people and sets back reconciliation. He says it is a disgusting policy that has done nothing to help Aboriginal people to overcome what he calls the huge injustices they suffer.

This might be resounding rhetoric, but it does not offer even a slumber of a remedy. If this is, as Mr Eggington insists, an Aboriginal problem, then it is reasonable to expect that he and other Aboriginal leaders might put their minds to finding ways to overcome it.

This would involve confronting some hard questions, such as why so many Aboriginal children are wandering the streets at night and putting themselves and possibly others in danger. The answer is not to be found in blaming history or the authorities.

Ideally, solutions for the care and supervision of these children should come from within Aboriginal communities and families. Until they do, the curfew remains necessary for their protection and that of others.
“Northbridge’s curfew is not the problem”
(see page 322)

This editorial, the first on the curfew since Paul Armstrong took over the reins of *The West Australian*, focuses on ALS CEO Dennis Eggington’s criticism of the curfew. The choice of Eggington is significant given that he is clearly not as well placed as other critics, for example Anne Russell-Brown (MA) or Maria McAtackney (Nyoongar Patrol), to talk about the curfew. Whatever the reason for choosing Eggington as talent, the comments of this well-known advocate of indigenous youth would be more likely to provoke a reaction, even moral outrage, among the readership.

The headline frames the editorial, which argues that it is Aboriginal families, not the curfew, who have created the problem. In this way, the newspaper takes the debate back full circle to January 2002 when it said that “Aboriginal families must help” address the “social ills” that beset Northbridge. 6 Unlike its last two editorials on the curfew, the newspaper now considers the curfew to be “a justifiable response and partial solution to the problem”. *The West Australian* echoes the Premier’s moral argument, saying it is “hard to believe” that critics of the curfew could “argue seriously” that unsupervised children, “some of

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whom are not even in their teens”, have “some sort of right” to be in Northbridge late at night. As I have indicated above, no-one has ever suggested that children should be in Northbridge late at night. The focus of the criticism has been on what happens to the children after they are picked up by the police and why they are there in the first place; an argument that the newspaper itself had also presented under the Former Acting Editor. *The West Australian* says that the presence of groups of children in the area reflects a “deficiency of care and supervision that cannot be blamed automatically on the various authorities”. The editorial does not point out, however, that the curfew critics have repeatedly raised this issue of family dysfunction in fact, and the need to introduce programs to address it. Further, the newspaper fails to draw attention to the Government’s undertaking to introduce new programs to work with the identified families. This appears to be another forgotten promise from the Premier’s media statement announcing the introduction of the curfew.

*The West Australian* then presents the crime/child welfare dual discourse first introduced by the Premier regarding the simultaneous protection of children and business. Readers are first told that children who are left to their own devices in Northbridge are unprotected and potentially in moral danger. *The West Australian* ignores not only the fact that the responsibility for these children has never been an issue,
but also that the police already had the powers to remove children at risk. Further, the newspaper fails to consider what should happen to the children after they are “removed”, which is the principal issue concerning the curfew’s critics.

The editorial argues that consistent protests against the curfew by the ALS “in particular” have turned the curfew into an Aboriginal issue, “though it applies to all children”. Readers are not told that the ALS has, in fact, been quoted only twice in the newspaper in a total of seven months. The “protests” have come from a very broad range of groups. Further, the curfew is inevitably an “Aboriginal issue”, given that the overwhelming majority of young people picked up are indigenous – as the editorial itself later points out. The newspaper then repeats some of the comments made by Eggington, which it had published the previous day. The newspaper dismisses Eggington’s comments as “resounding rhetoric” that does not offer “even a glimpse” of a remedy; however, it fails to point out that Eggington, like everyone else in the community, was never consulted nor invited to give an opinion as to the best “remedy” to be developed. It goes on to tell readers that “if this is, as Mr Eggington insists”, an Aboriginal problem, then “it is reasonable to expect that he and other Aboriginal leaders might put their minds to finding ways to overcome it”. In this way, the newspaper fails to acknowledge the work that ATSIC and others had undertaken, in
partnership with the Government, to address issues of indigenous youth before they were pre-empted by the curfew. *The West Australian* also ignores the input from indigenous as well as many other interested parties into the recommendations of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report.

The editorial says the answer is not to be found in blaming history or the authorities. However, no-one has simply blamed history or the authorities. The many different criticisms of the curfew, including those expressed in two previous editorials of *The West Australian*, have involved a range of concerns, none of which is as simplistic as this editorial suggests.

*The West Australian* concludes by telling readers that until Aboriginal families come up with solutions, the curfew “remains necessary for their protection and that of others”. This statement makes clear that the newspaper agrees with Eggington that the curfew is indeed about Aboriginal children, while at the same time confirming the newspaper’s adoption of the Premier’s crime/child welfare dual discourse and framing of the Northbridge story.⁷

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⁷ It is interesting to note that this editorial led to a series of letters to *The West Australian* editor in support of Dr Geoff Gallop and the curfew, and denouncing Dennis Eggington.
Courts ‘unfair on young Aborigines’

By NICK TAYLOR

ABORIGINAL juvenile courts should be introduced into WA, the state’s Aboriginal Legal Service says.

The ALS said existing juvenile justice options in WA had proved to be ineffective for Aboriginal children.

Deputy chief executive of the ALS in WA Debra Rose said: “To treat Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal juveniles in the same manner fails to acknowledge cultural differences and the long-standing disadvantages suffered by most Aboriginal offenders.

“Like many other jurisdictions in Australia, it is hoped that WA will introduce an Aboriginal court for juveniles not only in regional locations but also in the metropolitan area.

“However, there is a strong need for such a court in Perth and specifically to deal with juveniles,” Ms Rose said.

Mr Rose, speaking at the National Indigenous Juvenile Justice conference in Adelaide, said WA had a series of severe and discriminatory laws and policies that had impacted on Aboriginal children.

“It is time that the Government recognised that rounding up our children, taking them off the streets and locking them up is at best a temporary measure and in reality further entrances them within the criminal justice system and does nothing to reduce their level of future offending,” Ms Rose said.

She said the State Government introduced the Northbridge curfew in June, 88 per cent of those apprehended were Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders.

“Once again there is a policy which at the very least indirectly discriminates in its effect upon Aboriginal youth,” she said.

The curfew was broader than other provisions because it allowed police to hold children in a station rather than being required to return them home.

“The essence of the existing provision is to consider the individual and whether they are actually in any danger rather than the Northbridge policy, which simply uses age and time, as the primary criteria,” Ms Rose said.

“They may be with older siblings or relatives and would be in far greater danger making their way home on their own than remaining with their family,” Ms Rose said.

Mr Rose said the ALS was extremely concerned at any initiative that increased the powers and contact of police and Aboriginal youth.

“The history between Aboriginal people and the police has always been strained and many Aboriginal young people feel that they are constantly watched and picked on by police for behaviour or lack of behaviour which would go unnoticed if they were not Aboriginal,” she said.

Attorney-General Jim McGinty said steps were being taken to allow Aboriginal courts to be set up.

Legislation would be introduced in Parliament next month that would allow specialist courts to be set up.

The Law Reform Commission was looking at Aboriginal customary law and a report was expected in 2003. But if the commission made interim recommendations Mr McGinty would be happy to look at them.

“Everyone is aware of the problem of the number of Aborigines in trouble with the law, over-representation in prison and the need to tackle the issues in different ways,” Mr McGinty said.

Magistrates in the Pilbara, Kimberley, Gascoyne and Murchison were already involving Aboriginal elders in hearings.
“Courts ‘unfair on young Aborigines’”
(see page 327)

The Sunday Times provides readers with the opportunity to understand better what Dennis Eggington might actually have said about the curfew and to put it in context. The Sunday Times’ article presents a comprehensive account of the ALS’ (and the WA Attorney-General’s) position on the very complex issue of customary law and the inadequacies of the current juvenile justice system. The article does not present any sources opposing the ALS or WA Attorney General.

“Back Gallop in stand over curfew”
(see page 329)

This round of press coverage ends with an editorial in the same issue of The Sunday Times, which like the earlier editorial in The West Australian, adopts the Premier’s framing of the Northbridge story. Employing much of the Government’s narrative and language, it commends the Premier for “standing firm” in the face of criticism. Like The West Australian, and indeed the Premier, it demonstrates a poor understanding of the criticism that has been levelled against the curfew or, alternatively, misrepresents that criticism.
Back Gallop in stand over curfew

It is hardly surprising that a number of young people appear to be defying the controversial Northbridge curfew.

With any such policy it was likely that at the beginning it would make a difference but some time down the track things would get more difficult.

We seem to have hit that time. But does that now mean the whole idea should be declared a failure and the Government forced back to the drawing board?

The answer is quite simply NO.

And it was pleasing to see Premier Geoff Gallop standing firm in the face of criticism last weekend in The Sunday Times from the Nyongar Patrol.

The Premier is correct when he says that everyone in the community, including the Aboriginal community, should be saying to these children it is not OK to be in Northbridge at night.

The Government needs to make sure that the police are in a position so that they can enforce the curfew. It is no good expecting desperately understaffed police stations to be able to effectively carry out this work.

If they need more resources they should be given them.

And the Government should look widely at the issue.

There are obvious education issues involved. They need to know, for example, exactly why these children are on the streets.

Why aren’t their parents looking after them — do their parents need help or education so they are better able to control their children?

This problem is not a simple one and it is not one that will go away.

And while statistics are easy to quote, it is much harder to use them to judge the success or failure of the curfew.

Surely, it has achieved some measure of success if it has turned a few wild children around.

Early evidence from the streets was that Northbridge was a much more pleasant place to be in.

If this is not the case now, then Dr Gallop should make sure that the curfew is strongly enforced — because it will only be after an extended period of serious enforcement that the community can judge if it is working.
The headline frames the editorial, which once again calls on readers to support the Premier in his approach to Northbridge. *The Sunday Times* tells readers that it is “hardly surprising” that a number of young people appear to be defying the “controversial” Northbridge curfew, although it does not say why it reaches that conclusion.

The newspaper considers it inevitable that “any such policy” should run into difficulties at some stage, but that this is not a reason to abandon the policy. It does not remind readers, however, that the problem that the Premier has now encountered with the curfew is not new, but stems from the Government’s failure to provide extra resources to enable agencies to deal with the increased police activity in Northbridge.

*The Sunday Times* welcomes the Premier’s “firm stand” in the face of criticism from the Nyoongar Patrol. It tells readers that the Premier is correct when he says that everyone in the community, “including the Aboriginal community”, should be discouraging children from visiting Northbridge at night. In this way, the newspaper echoes the Premier’s preferred moral argument and misrepresents what the Nyoongar Patrol said. The Patrol’s criticisms concerned the lack of resources to deal with the increased police activity in Northbridge. Like the Premier, the newspaper also singles out the Aboriginal community, implying that they
are actually saying that it is appropriate for children to be out alone in
Northbridge at night.

The editorial acknowledges that the problem is not “a simple one” and
states that the curfew has achieved some success if it has “turned a few
wild children around”. It does not provide readers, however, with any
evidence that this has actually happened. Instead, *The Sunday Times*
states that “early evidence from the streets” is that Northbridge is “a
much more pleasant place” to be in. It does not say what this evidence
is; neither does it say where it has come from. It concludes by telling
readers that if this is not the case, then Dr Gallop should make sure that
the curfew is strongly enforced. Readers might infer from this that the
success of the curfew depends on police numbers who will “take the
wild children off the streets”.

Readers are unlikely to understand from this editorial that the issue that
the Nyoongar Patrol and others have raised is about the need to provide
welfare agencies with the necessary support to follow up on each child
apprehended and to address family dysfunction and other issues
wherever necessary.
Concluding remarks on press coverage of Milestone 4

This round of press coverage, which was ostensibly prompted by Judge Kate O’Brien who queried the curfew’s legislative backing and raised the spectre of the curfew “petering out”, provided the Premier with significant opportunities to claim the moral high ground in the discourse surrounding the curfew. In so doing, the Premier succeeded in introducing an extraordinary twist to the debate. When the Nyoongar Patrol raised early in the coverage its concerns about the lack of resources to deal with the additional number of young people being apprehended because of the increased police activity, the Premier, instead of responding to the issues raised, “blasted” Aboriginal leaders for sending “their children down the wrong path”. He accused them of telling children that it was appropriate for them to be out alone at night in Northbridge, when they had never in fact said this. Both newspapers repeated the Premier’s charge. This set the tone for the remainder of this round of debate, with both newspapers placing the blame for the problems in Northbridge on an ‘irresponsible’ indigenous community and admiring the Premier for ‘taking them on’. The Premier, and the WA press, levelled their criticisms primarily against Dennis Eggington, known to be an unpopular figure among some in the media and wider community.
The repeated references to Eggington’s comments on the curfew, rather than to the concerns voiced by those working with the young people in Northbridge, resulted in *The West Australian* taking a firm stand in favour of the curfew and adopting the Government’s framing of the debate about Northbridge around the notion of parental responsibility. At the same time, *The Sunday Times* continued to repeat the Government’s line on this issue, as it had in the previous round of coverage. It is significant that the WA press did not source the Northbridge business community at all during this round of coverage, suggesting that it was no longer required to provide support for the Government’s frame.

The adoption by both newspapers of the Government’s framing of the curfew story had significant implications because of the issues that they consequently excluded from the debate. While the newspapers repeated the Premier’s call for the young people apprehended to be “turned around”, they did not ask how this was being achieved or what happened to them after they were taken off the streets. The real criticism that had been levelled against the curfew, namely the difficulties being encountered by the welfare agencies in dealing with the increased number of young people being apprehended, was never addressed. Neither newspaper challenged the Government about its failure to introduce, as promised, “new programs” to address family
dysfunction and the underlying causes of disadvantage; nor did any of the reporters challenge the Premier for reneging on his undertaking to create alternative activities for young people. The concern raised previously by *The West Australian* that the curfew might be nothing more than a “re-packaging of existing policy” that only pretended to be concerned about the welfare of young people in Northbridge was now outside the frame, no longer an issue warranting even a mention.

The government media adviser’s dictum, “where there’s friction, there’s traction”, proved to be correct in the coverage arising from Milestone 4. It began with the curfew as the subject of constant criticism, seemingly ‘in crisis’, but ended with the editorials of both newspapers adopting the Government’s framing of the curfew and expressing their support of the policy simultaneously to protect young people and Northbridge business.

Both newspapers either dismissed or misrepresented the concerns that had been raised about the curfew and merely repeated the Premier’s moral argument regarding the inappropriateness of young children out alone in Northbridge at night. The newspapers also failed to acknowledge that, with the exception of Northbridge business, all parties concerned with the precinct (the WA Police Service, welfare organisations, youth organisations, legal entities, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth City Council, criminologists, senior government bureaucrats, ATSIC,
ALS, the ALP (WA)) had raised a range of concerns about the curfew.

Further, the vast majority of these critics were non-indigenous and those indigenous representatives who did criticise the curfew did not do so because they believed it was appropriate for young people to be out alone in Northbridge at night.
CHAPTER 8

TELLING THE STORY

MILESTONE 5: CURFEW CONSOLIDATED (JANUARY 2004)

The final chapter of the story of the Northbridge curfew unfolded in January 2004 when the State Government declared the curfew a success, despite the release of figures which showed that it had failed to deter a “hard core” of young people from visiting Northbridge.¹ In this chapter, I explore the reportage arising from this announcement and demonstrate the continued failure of both WA newspapers to challenge the moral argument crafted by the government media adviser to justify the so-called curfew, thereby perpetuating the narrative of criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ and failing to expose the curfew as a case of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’.² I find, instead, that the discourse of the WA press, which mirrored that of the Premier, was effective in bolstering the Government’s ‘law and order’ credentials while silencing or misrepresenting other voices, notably of those people working with indigenous youth who sought to present alternative frames around the curfew story. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the influence of individual editors and reporters on the different frames used

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¹ See Introduction, footnote 22.
² As discussed in Chapter 6, the senior government media adviser explained that all coverage of the curfew, negative or positive, was good because the Premier could respond to all criticism with the argument saying, “I reject absolutely that this policy is discriminatory because it applies to everyone and this is a moral argument regarding the kids at risk, alone out at night, vulnerable to predators”. As the media adviser rightly noted, “No-one could argue against it” – not that anyone, to my knowledge, ever suggested that it was appropriate for young children to be out alone at night in Northbridge.
to tell the Northbridge curfew story and I inform this discussion with the findings from my interviews with the relevant media professionals. In the final section, I consider the relative lack of influence that ‘ordinary’ members of the community have in framing stories in the WA press. I explore the influence of the competing frames in the WA press narrative and argue that because both newspapers allowed the Government’s frame to eclipse these, the WA press was complicit in the political success of the Northbridge curfew. I find that the newspapers’ support arose from a combination of factors, but particularly from the fact that they drew on the same moral value judgements as the State Government to construct their version of reality of Northbridge.

**January 2004 – Government releases six-monthly figures**

While the State Government’s six-monthly figures demonstrating the failure of the curfew to meet its stated objectives did not make the front pages of the WA press, it did prompt three articles, in accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Methodology (page 24). I present these articles in Table 6. I set out below the main findings of my analysis of these texts, supported by data that I present in tables in Appendix 13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Journalist/s</th>
<th>Headline/s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/1/04</td>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cian Manton</td>
<td>Problem youths in sights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/04</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Graham Armstrong/Jesse Riseborough</td>
<td>Curfew is doing its job, says Gallop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/04</td>
<td><em>The Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Pat on back for Gallop crime fight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Problem youths in sights”

The headline frames this story, which puts the spotlight on the DCD’s intervention programs to “tackle the problem of a hard-core group of youths … repeatedly breaking the Northbridge curfew”. Rather than leading with the six-monthly figures, which show the scale of the problem, Manton begins with the Government’s announcement that it has these intervention programs in place. Manton tells readers that these intervention programs are beginning to have an impact. She does not tell readers, however, when these programs, promised six months earlier, were actually introduced.
It is significant that Manton does not provide comment from the Premier who has driven all government debate on the curfew since it was first mooted. Instead, Manton tells readers that the DCD "expects the number of youths in the group to drop off" as the programs take effect. Readers might infer from this that the Government had introduced the programs recently. This would suggest that the Premier had not fulfilled his promise to accompany the curfew with intervention programs. Manton does not pursue the question of when the programs started.

Manton quotes one of DCD’s executive directors, Sue Ozich, who says that government and non-government agencies are working collaboratively with the young people affected and their families to deal with issues “ranging from truancy to family dysfunction”. This is a significant development, which appears to respond to one of the key criticisms regarding the lack of follow-up care for apprehended young people that opponents have levelled against the curfew. Although this was a major concern of The West Australian under the Former Acting Editor, Manton does not draw attention to this point. Readers also learn, towards the end of the article, that DCD is working with youth agencies in the suburbs on “safe activities and entertainment in their local areas”. This is another significant development, which demonstrates that the Government is responding to another major criticism of the curfew, namely its failure to provide alternative activities.

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for young people. The Government, however, is creating these activities out in the suburbs, away from Northbridge. Manton does not report this point.
Curfew is doing its job, says Gallop

By GRAHAME ARMSTONG
THE TIMES

OF all high schools near mine, it’s the one that has caught the most attention. The authorities have been dealing with the issue for the past two weeks, and the parents of the students have been left wondering what to do.

According to the police, the situation is under control, but the parents of the students are not so sure. They believe that the curfew is not being enforced properly and that the students are still being allowed to stay up late.

"We’ve been trying to talk to the authorities about this for months," said one parent. "But they just won’t listen to us. They say that the students are being monitored and that everything is under control. But we don’t believe them. We know that the students are still staying up late and that they are still getting into trouble.

"I don’t want my child to be a statistic," said another parent. "I just want my child to be safe and to have a good education. But if the curfew is not being enforced properly, then I don’t see how that can happen.

"I’m tired of hearing about the curfew," said the police chief. "We are doing everything we can to enforce it. We have increased our patrols, and we have increased the number of officers in the area. But we can’t be everywhere.

"We understand your concern," said the police chief. "But we are doing everything we can to enforce the curfew. We are aware of the problems that are being caused, and we are working to solve them. We are not going to let this situation get out of control.

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“Curfew is doing its job, says Gallop”
(see page 341)

On Friday night, 9 January 2004, the Premier organised a media opportunity in Northbridge to announce the success of the curfew policy. This headline frames the story around the Premier’s announcement.

The reporters, Grahame Armstrong and Jesse Riseborough, do not use any sources in their article other than the Premier; neither do they question any of the statements he makes. These omissions are of particular interest given that the lead journalist, Armstrong, had previously rejected what he called the “curfew rhetoric” out of hand.4

Readers learn that the Premier walked through Northbridge “again” on Friday night. He said he had “felt safe walking the streets” and declared the Government’s policy a success. The reporters do not tell readers that Dr Gallop was walking the streets accompanied by at least three security guards.

The Premier took the opportunity to repeat his moral argument and continue his crime/child welfare dual discourse regarding the need to “turn the children around” while looking after Northbridge business and

4 When I asked why there were no other sources cited in the article, Armstrong explained, “It was because the news event that night was the Premier in the street. I don’t think there was anything sinister as to why we didn’t include any reaction, I mean, what would you ask of anyone else? It was just an event that happened that night that we covered … there was plenty of questioning and criticism in other stories. In theory you could argue that you should have this in every story you write, I suppose, but it just doesn’t work that way.”
residents. Dr Gallop noted that there were some issues with lighting in laneways. The reporters do not challenge the Premier about the Government’s failure to adopt the recommendations of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, which included the issue of lighting.

The reporters tell readers that the Government is planning to give courts the power to issue “Parental Responsibility Orders”. In this way, the Premier has conveyed to readers that the problems in Northbridge come down to “parental responsibility” and that “punishment” will solve the problem. The reporters do not question this analysis.

The article concludes with the Premier repeating his commitment to the curfew. He tells readers that he had not expected a “100 per cent success rate in terms of the kids coming back in the area” and that the Government would work with these “problem kids and their families to try to turn them around”. The reporters do not say that the Premier had, in fact, declared the curfew a success less than 12 hours after it was introduced. Neither do they challenge the Premier about the significant delay in providing follow up care to the young people apprehended. If the reporters had provided this information, readers might have concluded that the Government had finally been forced to look beyond simply taking children off the streets and focus instead on attending to the young people’s welfare, in accordance with the concerns raised by such agencies as MA and the Nyoongar Patrol.
Pat on back for Gallop crime fight

The Sunday Times
January 11, 2004

PEOPLE are tired of governments and politicians talking big on crime. They want real action. And that's why the State Government should be commended for its latest initiative to make our streets safer.

The Gallop Government this week announced laws to target adults who use young children to commit crimes.

The so-called "Fagan Laws" are tough — people who attempt to evade justice by using young children as pawns would be punished with jail terms up to 14 years.

Using or forcing children to commit crimes is a deplorable act.

Police intelligence shows that children are increasingly being recruited by adults to carry out burglary and thefts. This includes going into shops to distract staff while the shelves are raided.

Nearly half the offences dealt with by the Children's Court in 2003 involved such crimes.

Under the proposed laws, people who procure children aged between 10 and 17 will be charged with a new offence that carries a seven-year jail term.

This will be doubled — up to 14 years — for those who procure children under 16.

The Fagan Laws are part of the Government's anti-burglary legislative package to be introduced to Parliament soon.

We should give credit where it's due. The Government's focus on burglaries appears to be working. Police figures show home burglaries across Perth have fallen 12 per cent in the past six months.

The Gallop Government is building an impressive law and order record to take to the next election.

Since Labor came to office, WA now has the toughest laws in the country to combat organised crime (specifically outlaw motorcycle gangs). DNA identification laws, increased maximum penalties for crimes against vulnerable people, particularly the elderly, tougher penalties for bribes, new offsets for police officers and a royal commission to root out corruption.

The Government has also introduced legislation to regulate and control prostitution, a difficult policy area the previous government was either unable or unwilling to tackle in eight years of office.

The Government's approach to law and order issues has also been consistent. The Fagan Laws follow the Northbridge curfew and a proposal for parents of troubled children to attend classes, forcing mums and dads to take responsibility for their children's behaviour.

It appears at this stage of the electoral cycle that Labor has outpointed its political opponents on law and order.

Premier Geoff Gallop may be winning the law and order battle against Colin Barnett and his team in the political arena. The people are more interested in winning the war against crime.

This requires constant vigilance, to borrow Dr Gallop's phrase.

The Sunday Times, 11 January 2004, 59
“Pat on back for Gallop crime fight”
(see page 344)

The editorial in the same issue of *The Sunday Times* offers unqualified support for the Government’s “initiatives” in addressing crime. It includes the curfew among these, confirming that it considers this policy to be a means of addressing crime in Northbridge.

The headline frames the story, which is around the need for readers to commend the Premier for his record in “fighting crime”. The editorial’s conclusion is particularly significant given that much of the criticism of the curfew (including that of its own columnist, Grahame Armstrong) is that it is indeed just about politics, rather than about actually addressing crime in the area because it fails to target the appropriate demographic.

**Note:** *The Sunday Times* is not alone in congratulating the Premier on the curfew as a means of “making our streets safer”. Three months later, *The West Australian* also applauds the Government, referring to the curfew as “an excellent innovation”. Whereas that newspaper had been opposed to additional powers being given to the police because this would be “heavy-handed”; it now calls for Northbridge to be made a “no-tolerance” precinct.5 Both WA newspapers called for the return of the Gallop Government in the 2005 State election.

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5 “Give us police on the streets, not rhetoric”, *The West Australian*, 23 April 2004, 18. Under Former Editor (B), *The West Australian* rejected the call for more police powers
Concluding remarks on press coverage of Milestone 5

This last series of articles demonstrates that the media adviser succeeded in boosting the Gallop Government’s electoral fortunes through his “hard-edged law and order response” to Northbridge, winning the points that it needed to take to the next election. Both *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* adopted the Government’s framing of the curfew story, presenting the policy as a means of addressing crime in Perth’s premier entertainment district while at the same time protecting the welfare of youth at risk. Not only did both newspapers fail to challenge the Premier’s moral argument, but they also joined him in suggesting that indigenous community leaders were encouraging young children to be out alone in Northbridge after dark while also ignoring the actual concerns that the Nyoongar Patrol, MA and others had raised. Further, they omitted to report that the curfew could never make the streets of Northbridge safer in fact, because it targeted the wrong demographic; neither could the curfew protect the welfare of youth at risk unless the State Government provided proper follow up services. In this last round of coverage, the fact that police already had powers under the *CWA* to remove youth at risk was left outside the frame.

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*As I discussed in Chapter 3, the media adviser said he had not consulted the relevant agencies before announcing the curfew policy because if he had done so, they would have provided “a social worker response to the problem rather than a hard-edged law and order response”.*
Indeed, the discourse of the WA press around Northbridge in the period under review concluded as it began, with indigenous youth and their apparently irresponsible parents presented as the cause of crime in the precinct. The reportage continued to focus on the high proportion of indigenous young people picked up, without questioning whether these apprehensions were a reflection of increased police interest in indigenous youth, as MA – the agency most involved in working with young people in Northbridge – had claimed. Neither did the WA press improve readers’ understanding of the issues in Northbridge, preferring instead to focus on the exceptionally young children picked up, continually confusing “antisocial behaviour” with “crime”, and even accepting the Premier’s definition of Northbridge, where an abundance of restaurateurs ply their trade, as an adult entertainment area only.

Given the newspapers’ lack of inquiry, it is little surprise that the WA press consistently ignored the fact that the Government was failing to address the 18- to 35-year-old age group that its own research had identified as responsible for the majority of crime in Northbridge. Further, it failed to focus on the delays in providing follow-up care to apprehended children. The WA press also failed to call the Government to account over the provision of alternative activities for young people in Northbridge. Above all, it failed to remind readers that the curfew was, in fact, an old policy dressed up as a new initiative, a clear case of the
‘Emperor’s new clothes’. The WA press chose instead to focus on the familiar narrative of errant indigenous youth and parental irresponsibility.

The advocates of ‘law ’n’ order’ had drowned out the voices of the curfew’s critics, which had dominated in particular *The West Australian*’s news frames during Milestones 2 and 3. By Milestone 5, the WA press had framed the curfew as part of the Government’s tough stand on crime in the community; the critics had been silenced and the curfew was, therefore, off the front news pages. Meanwhile, the issues and recommendations presented in the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report never even entered the frame.

**Editorial influence on framing the curfew story**

In Chapter 2, I discussed the influence of editorial policy on news content. It is useful now to explore this issue further in light of the different frames presented around Northbridge by the three editors of *The West Australian* during the period under review. At *The Sunday Times*, the influence of the editor was also apparent in the editorials, which consistently presented the Government’s frame of the curfew story, in stark contrast to those employed by senior staff at the newspaper, especially Armstrong and Egan.
While I believe it is essential to acknowledge the influence of the individual editors in the framing of the curfew story, I am not suggesting that these individuals play a more important role than the news values I discussed in Chapter 2. As my framing analysis has demonstrated, the focus of the WA press narrative was the same throughout the period under review, namely indigenous youth running wild, regardless of which editor was at the helm. It was the notion of indigenous youth apparently on the rampage in Northbridge that provided all the elements of a ‘good story’. For this reason, none of the editors sought to focus on any of the other and – according to the author of *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* – more fundamental issues surrounding Perth’s premier entertainment district. Most importantly, none of the editors exposed the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’. The individual editors, however, did adopt different frames in telling the story about ‘indigenous youth on the rampage’.

During Milestone 1, under Former Editor (B), *The West Australian* placed indigenous youth at the forefront of its discourse around Northbridge, and framed the story around the issue of parental responsibility. The newspaper also rejected police calls for more powers in Northbridge. During Milestones 2 and 3, under its Former

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7 *The West Australian* came closest to exposing the curfew’s lack of substance under the Former Acting Editor; however, she failed to acknowledge the cynical motives behind the media adviser’s carefully-crafted moral argument and the false assumption on which it was based. Indeed, she also adopted the media adviser’s argument.
Acting Editor, *The West Australian* continued to place indigenous youth at the forefront of the discourse around Northbridge, however it framed the story around the Premier’s failure to attend to the welfare of those young people apprehended by the police.\(^8\) Finally, during Milestones 4 and 5, under the editorship of Paul Armstrong, *The West Australian* not only continued to place indigenous youth at the forefront of the discourse around Northbridge, but also adopted the Government’s framing of the story around the irresponsibility of Aboriginal leaders.

The editors’ approach to the reporting of indigenous affairs in general helps to illuminate the different frames they employed to present the Northbridge story. My research found, for example, that both Former Editor (B) and the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* attached importance to running ‘positive’ stories about the indigenous community and therefore considered it essential to have a full-time indigenous affairs round.\(^9\) Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian*, for example, said, “No newspaper is going to succeed if it’s just totally negative”. He said, “You have to try to blend a bit of representation across the board and that often means taking positive stories and we do. [But] whether

\(^8\) Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* told me that he agreed with the Former Acting Editor’s approach in this editorial, saying that the curfew was “a cheap political shot which made a bit of a headline”.

\(^9\) The Former Acting Editor, who won a Walkley Award in 1992 for her reporting of indigenous affairs, in turn credits her editor at the time, Paul Murray, for her achievement. She said, “I was supported by an editor who believed in the need to tell those stories; under Murray, there was a big commitment; [he believed that] indigenous people are part of our community and this is part of our community that we need to know about”.
we find enough [is another matter]”. While at the helm of *The West Australian*, Former Editor (B) recruited a 16-year-old Aboriginal girl who had no academic qualifications, but “who had shown a bit of interest”.\(^{10}\) He believed that this appointment would benefit not only the new recruit, but also “existing staff would gain a better understanding by working with a member of the Aboriginal community”.

As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the current editor of *The West Australian*, however, does not appear to share this perspective and even downgraded the indigenous affairs round to a part-time position.\(^{11}\)

According to one leading columnist at the newspaper:

> I suspect this editor takes the view that Aboriginal issues are a turn off and unless we really have to, we won’t. He’s pretty good when there’s a hot negative on the go. … [But] reporting on indigenous affairs in a responsible way – it’s just not happening.

*The West Australian’s* Reporter (A) who covered social affairs, among others, summed up her experience under the different regimes saying:

> I think there was more willingness to pursue social issues and Aboriginal affairs [previously] than under the current editorial management team. As a writer on social affairs, I was encouraged to probe the social ramifications of government policy and explore social issues that affected West Australians.

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\(^{10}\) While Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* credited his chief of staff at the time with this idea, the appointment could not have been made without his approval.

\(^{11}\) For example, several journalists at *The West Australian* said Armstrong wants “a less considered, more sensationalist approach to reporting” (Chapter 2). According to *The West Australian’s* Reporter (C), who covered indigenous affairs among others, Armstrong does not believe indigenous people either buy or read the newspaper, a perspective that would inevitably influence his approach to reporting on matters affecting this section of the community (Chapter 1).
Indeed, Reporter (C), who covered indigenous affairs among others, left the position because she felt that, under Armstrong, she was “burning her contacts”.12

The Editor of The Sunday Times said he took the view he did about the curfew because he believed the Government was tackling “the problem” head-on and not “sweeping it under the carpet”.13 Given that his analysis of “the problem”, outlined below, was the same as that presented by the government media adviser, it is to be expected that he would also support the media adviser’s proposed solution. The Sunday Times’ Editor explained:

I think we arrived at [our position] by looking at what was going on over there. … I thought some of the most important people here were the owners and people who ran businesses [in Northbridge] and the experiences that they were having. … I think that probably galvanised a fair bit of our support and the fact that the police seemed to be successfully taking young people off the streets and taking them out of harm’s way or out of the area where they were causing problems; it just seemed that it was working and was working well and that’s probably how we came to the view that we were supportive of it. … I think there was a belief within the newspaper and myself that the Government were trying … something and it was something new, it was reasonably bold. OK, it was controversial, but just because something’s controversial doesn’t make it wrong, and it did actually target and get at the problem, which was these kids being on and around Northbridge at all hours of the day and night.

Thus, the editor not only accepted the crime/child dual discourse presented by the Premier, but also the concerns voiced by the

12 Reporter (C) explained, “I felt like I was only using them for the hard news type stuff and I wasn’t getting a chance to give back; to me, it’s a relationship [with your sources], it’s not just taking all the time”.
13 It is interesting that these are the exact words the Premier used to justify the introduction of the curfew. See Premier’s response to John Hyde MLA’s Question without Notice no. 626, Appendix 8.
Northbridge business community. When asked for his response to the very different views put forward by his columnists, he said he did not agree with them. He commented:

> We fully understand and see the arguments that other people had with it, understand that yes, maybe a little bit of it was a media stunt … how much of that I don’t know, you hope that all our politicians aren’t quite that cynical. … [But] Geoff Gallop shouldn’t run his Government thinking like that: ‘Will this be seen as a media stunt?’ … If they are running government thinking like that – and maybe part of their Government Media Office does think like that, I don’t know … but if they do run government thinking like that, it’s a pretty sad state and I don’t necessarily think that the Premier himself would do it. He and the majority of the Ministers there are doing it because they think it is the right thing to do.

Despite the ‘inside knowledge’ of one of his senior staff, who had worked from May 2001 to September 2002 as one of two media advisers to the Premier, *The Sunday Times*’ Editor rejected the suggestion that the curfew was little more than government ‘spin’ that responded to the widely-held expectations of many Western Australians faced with groups of indigenous youth in Northbridge. It is interesting that he, like *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, did not think that the Premier himself would have approved the curfew if he had thought it nothing more than a stunt; however, *The Sunday Times*’ Editor does not appear to rule out that possibility in relation to the GMO.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) As I discussed in Chapter 3, the Minister interviewed for this project did not rule out the possibility that the government media adviser might have leaked the curfew proposal without prior approval from the Premier.
I asked Former Editor (B) why he put indigenous youth at the centre of the Northbridge debate, contrary to the concerns raised in the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, which was leaked to *The West Australian* when he was at the helm. He said that he did so because he believed they were the major problem in the precinct. He rejected the suggestion that the newspaper had focused disproportionately on indigenous youth, saying:

> Aboriginal youth are there because they are the point of blunt impact in Northbridge. The numbers say it. Nobody, whether they’re black, white, pink, or red should be drifting into [Northbridge at night at that age]. I wouldn’t read what you read out of it. We had a view that day, we sat through it, I thought it was reasonably balanced actually. …15 The curfew editorial which gave Geoff a slap over the wrists for it, I think that was after my time [under the Former Acting Editor ].16 I think it’s a fairly good reflection of where we are. *The West* does not have a hand-in-glove relationship with the Government or the Opposition or anybody.17

Thus, Former Editor (B) insisted that if *The West Australian* accepted the Government’s framing of Northbridge, it did so because it arrived at its own conclusions, which happened to coincide with those of the Premier, and not because the newspaper was influenced by any government ‘spin’. I return to this important point below.

**Individual reporters’ influence on framing the curfew story**

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15 Former Editor (B) is referring here to his editorial, “Aboriginal families must help”, *The West Australian*, 10 January 2002, 14, discussed in Chapter 4.
16 Former Editor (B) is referring here to “Youth curfew is only the start”, *The West Australian*, 1 July 2003, 14, discussed in Chapter 6.
17 Former Editor (B) later gave by way of example the successful campaign *The West Australian* ran under his editorship against the State Government’s plan to introduce a premium property tax, which Dr Gallop was forced to abandon.
In Chapter 2, I discussed Tiffen’s (1989, 67) observation that while journalists may be cynical, the news is “gullible”; that is, that the values of news organisations transcend those of their employees. My research similarly found that the scepticism of the overwhelming majority of journalists who I interviewed for this project in relation to the curfew was not reflected in their reportage. However, while they cannot readily communicate their opinions in their news texts, it is clear that the individual journalists necessarily influence news content to a degree, depending upon their particular network of sources, level of expertise in a given area, socio-cultural background, and so on.18

The marked difference in the articles written by the two reporters with responsibility for social and youth affairs demonstrates this. Gauntlett (Milestones 2 and 3) was able to draw on a much more extensive range of contacts working with indigenous youth in Northbridge and her historical knowledge of the area necessarily informed the questions she asked. Magill (Milestone 4), on the other hand, with less experience in the round, left unchallenged a number of broken promises by the

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18 It is helpful to recall here McQuail’s (1994, 202) observation that “the possibility for personal influence by mass communicators varies according to the genre and the type of the organization. Non-news genres offer more scope for expressing personal beliefs, and there is probably more scope where commercial and financial pressures are less”.
Premier, which she may have exposed had she been working in the round for a longer period of time.\textsuperscript{19}

The use of different sources by the various journalists covering the curfew story is particularly illuminating. Those with responsibility for the political and police rounds typically cited government/opposition sources and police/business sources respectively, and sought reaction from indigenous and welfare organisations; those with responsibility for social, youth or indigenous affairs, on the other hand, typically led with welfare and youth organisations, and sought reaction from government and other ‘official’ sources. Those covering general news and without a specific round, meanwhile, typically went out and sourced people on the ground in Northbridge, while using the contact lists of the relevant rounds people. Reporter (A) who covered social affairs, among others, for example, says she remembers, “feeling disappointed that \textit{The West Australian} had appeared to swallow the government line in relation to initial stories without really delving into the politics behind the policy”. She believed that the State Political Editor did not discuss his front-page story announcing the planned curfew with “either the indigenous affairs

\textsuperscript{19} This is not to say that Gauntlett would necessarily have picked up on these points; she also left many issues unchallenged, however her reportage was, overall, considerably more critical of the Government than Magill’s.
writer or others who might have been able to shed light on the fact that it was not as dramatic a policy shift as it first appeared”.20

It is also clear, as Wiggins & Yarborough (1973) found, that personal values and education are “key predictors of the behavior of reporters”.21

I would argue that they are also major determinants of a journalist’s approach to a story. As Ward (1995, 112) points out, while the use of frames is “an unavoidable feature of newwork”, journalists may have “considerable discretion in selecting which particular frame to apply”. This discretion is apparent, for example, in the very different frames employed during the same round of coverage by, for example, Taylor and Gauntlett. While Taylor framed his article “Curfew bites” around the massive crackdown on Northbridge arising from the “new curfew laws”, Gauntlett’s article, “Tough love or a hard time?”, was framed around the curfew as a mere “re-packaging of existing measures”.22

However hard journalists may try to be objective, it is clear, as Gans (1980, 39) argues, that “neither they nor anyone else can in the end proceed without values”. These, he contends, can come from “personal experience and background; … their definition is taken, more often than

20 Reporter (A) said this might have been because the State Political Editor was complying with the conditions attached to the leaked story, which forbade him from going elsewhere for comment.
21 Cited in Chafee 1975, 226.
22 “Curfew bites”, The Sunday Times, 29 June 2003, 1 (discussed in Chapter 5); “Tough love or a hard time?”, The West Australian, 28 June 2003, 5 (discussed in Chapter 5).
not, from what they perceive as normal in the upper middle-class’ (208-209). My research supports this finding. According to *The West Australian*’s State Political Editor, for example, many reporters shy away from stories involving indigenous people because of their own personal prejudices or experience. He explained:

> Aboriginal affairs are difficult to do because of the sensitivities involved, you upset people any side every time. Often people [who are] a product of their society are scared when they go out to an Aboriginal community, they are just not familiar with it, they think they’re going to be attacked, they think the worst stories they can possibly think, and you see some of these reporters in Perth, not just in this paper, especially junior female reporters, will not go out and do these things, they’re scared, or hold back on stories. … You’ve got to be tenacious, that’s our job. You can have a bad experience with Robert Bropho, which is easy to do, and for some reporters that shapes their opinion about Aboriginal people because that’s the only contact they’ve had and that’s the sad thing.  

The State Political Editor’s counterpart at *The Sunday Times* agreed, but insisted that while all reporters may be products of their upbringing, this was not an excuse for not knowing “what’s right and wrong”. He described his encounter with what he called “entrenched prejudice” against indigenous people as displayed by one of his senior colleagues:

> When I was chief of staff, we had a story about an eight-year-old kid being banned [by the Council] from entering Narrogin because he was supposedly wreaking havoc. … One of the senior people on the paper asked me if this kid was Aboriginal, and I said, ‘He is’, and he said, ‘Well, we should mention that in the story’, and I said, ‘Why?’ And he

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23 I agree with McQuail (1994, 203) who considers Gans’ view of journalists as “safe” but not reactionary more convincing than the other extreme view that they are a conservative elite, mainly serving the interests of the state, the governing class and big business (as argued, for example, by Herman & Chomsky 1988).

24 This point is illustrated in a comment made by General News Reporter (B) with *The Sunday Times*, who said, “As I saw it, I didn’t think they were doing anything wrong or causing too much trouble at all, but at the same time to me it just didn’t look right, you know, kids out in a nightclub spot after dark. It doesn’t look right”.  

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said, ‘Well, I think it’s an issue, those people’. Those were his exact words… So I said, ‘Let’s check it with the lawyer shall we?’ Anyway, it turns out I was right – of course I was right – but that is what you’re up against. I’m talking about a senior person on the paper.

Columnist (B) with *The West Australian* was very candid in describing how his opinions changed over time and how there were pieces that he had written with which he no longer agreed. He commented, “Quite often I’ve looked back on something I’ve written before and I’ve thought, gee, that’s a pretty green, naïve attitude to have”.

The journalists’ interests will also play a role. For example, it was a police reporter’s personal interest in the entertainment precinct and, indeed, his initiative in getting hold of the leaked *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report that led to Northbridge becoming a policing issue with a particular focus on the business community, rather than a social welfare issue. As he explained:

I knew Northbridge very well. I spent a lot of time there. I knew a lot of pub owners and restaurant owners, which gave me a pretty good base to get the information. So I knew what was going on in Northbridge better than most people. I think it was an awkward area for journalism because it fell between the police round and social welfare and City of Perth and business and all the rest of it, and I basically just hijacked the issue for myself.

*The West Australian*’s Reporter (A) who covered social affairs, among others, however, said she sought to redress the balance by “presenting a summary of key arguments of who was for and against [the curfew]”. She felt it important to look at “why it had come about” and “social welfare/Aboriginal groups’ concerns that it was nothing really new in the
sense that authorities had been removing children from the precinct for years”. She was particularly keen to examine the view of youth on the streets, saying that, “Their voices had until that point not been heard during the debate. We had done quite a lot of stories from the perspective of crime statistics and Northbridge business owners”.

It is helpful to recall here my finding, discussed in Chapter 1, that the journalists interviewed generally believed there was little interest in indigenous stories and there was, therefore, little incentive for them to pursue the ‘indigenous frame’. Both the Former Acting Editor, who had previously held the position of full-time Indigenous Affairs Reporter, and Reporter (C), who covered indigenous affairs among others, said their work was a product of their particular interest in indigenous issues. The columnist with The Sunday Times also said that she writes “a lot” about Aboriginal issues because she has “strong views in that area”.

**The influence of alternative frames presented on the curfew story**

As Blood (2002, 8) concludes from his study of the media’s coverage of mental illness in Australia, the framing of news is conceptualised as a “contest between alternative frames, involving a decision about what to present to … readers about ‘what’s at stake’”. This was my finding also. Each of the editors I interviewed for this project insisted on the importance of providing “alternative frames” about a story; indeed,
according to Former Editor (B) of The West Australian, “the role of any newspaper [is] not to limit a reader's understanding to one particular side of the argument”. The Former Acting Editor of The West Australian agreed, saying that she did not “necessarily” have a problem with an editorial that supported the curfew “as long as the pages of the newspaper are allowed to reflect the entirety of the debate”. She added that this was particularly important in WA where there is only one daily newspaper produced locally.

The competing frames presented on the curfew were arguably most evident at The Sunday Times, where the columnists and editorials were diametrically opposed. The editor said he gives free rein to his columnists in order to ensure the newspaper provides a range of views. He commented, “I've never, ever said to one of the columnists, I can't publish what you've written, it's unacceptable. ... I think that it's healthy for the paper to have opposing views”. During the period under review, The West Australian also provided a range of sources to put forward differing views, from Nyoongar girls visiting Northbridge to the business people seeking to expel them from the precinct. Unlike the news reporters, the columnists were able to have their personal say. Thus, The West Australian’s Columnist (A), for example, sought to

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25 The news stories in The Sunday Times did not necessarily support or inform the views expressed in the editorial either. The article about the difficulties with the juvenile justice system, “Courts 'unfair on Aborigines’” (discussed in Chapter 7), for example, was in stark contrast with the tough ‘law ‘n’ order’ stand taken in the editorial “Pat on back for Gallop fight against crime” (also discussed in Chapter 7).
present a different frame around the discourse about indigenous youth.

He explained:

Because [indigenous juvenile crime] was an issue at the time, it occurred to me that I could use the subject that was currently on people’s minds and try to put a different perspective on it. I thought, as I wrote at the time, that it must be awful to be in a situation or in a category that wherever you go people treat you as if you are dangerous. … People expect that you want to do them harm or that you’re going to steal their stuff. And these were just kids that might have been like any other kids, just having a ride around the neighbourhood, but because they belong to a particular category they have got to bear the burden of this suspicion, and the point that I was trying to make was, try to picture how you would like it if, from a young age, everywhere you go you are viewed with fear or suspicion. That must be tough.

_The West Australian_’s State Political Editor, who was “given a big space” to fill as he pleased, said he tended to write about issues that might not get coverage elsewhere in the paper or “something that needed a bit more exposing or analysis or background”. He said he had been “angered” by the curfew. He explained:

> If that Northbridge curfew had applied to white kids, and it was a white area, can you imagine the outcry on that? And that’s why I was quite angered … because I saw the sheer politics of that and I know how some of the people in the Premier’s Office work … but it goes totally against what the Government claims its policies are about. … The issue was a manipulation of the voters and it was so transparent to me and yet it worked for them and that was what made me angry. … So I was saying, hold on, let’s just have a look at what’s happening here.

According to _The West Australian_’s Columnist (B), “a vibrant newspaper with differing opinions” is the definition of “a good newspaper”. He contends, “As long as there is robust discussion, that’s well thought out and it’s put out there in the public domain, that’s what it’s all about”.

However, I agree with Entman (1991) who argues that examples of
“polysemy”\textsuperscript{26} in news texts are not necessarily evidence that all sides of an issue are being presented. As Entman points out, such inferences are problematic from a framing perspective because:

for those stories in which a single frame thoroughly pervades the text, stray contrary opinions that expert readers might pick up from careful analyses are likely to possess such low salience as to be of little practical use to most audience members (22).

My framing analysis supports this finding. As I discussed in Chapter 4 (page 217), “the frames that are most accessible are the ones that are most easily available and retrievable from memory” (Scheufele 1999, 116). The dominant frame during the period under review was around criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’. This was a familiar and predictable narrative built on negative stereotypes of the indigenous community that the media, among others, had perpetuated over many years and that the RCIADIC had sought to address. Had any of the alternative frames prevailed, such as the Government’s failure to attend to the welfare of children apprehended by police, the policy would not have had such extraordinary public appeal.\textsuperscript{27}

Further, the WA press did not reflect the “entirety of the debate” in their reportage (as Acting Former Editor of \textit{The West Australian}, for example,

\textsuperscript{26}“Polysemy” is a term used in the field of cultural studies to describe the notion of multiple meanings in media texts.

\textsuperscript{27} Some Western Australians, however, must have recognised the fallacy of the curfew’s stated ‘law ‘n’ order’ objective, accounting for the discrepancy between those who said they supported the curfew (79 per cent) and those who thought it would actually improve safety in the precinct (54 per cent) (Source: Westpoll, \textit{The West Australian}, 9 July 2003, 5.)
said that it should). Not once during the period under review did the WA press give anyone challenging the Premier’s moral argument a voice. It did not give any of the welfare or indigenous organisations the opportunity to say that, while they did not think it was appropriate for young people to be out on the streets at night, they opposed the curfew for any number of different reasons. My framing analysis shows that, as far as the Northbridge curfew story is concerned, the WA press did, indeed, “limit a reader’s understanding to one particular side of the argument” (contrary, for example, to the role prescribed for the newspaper by Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian*, discussed in Chapter 2). I further argue that the Government’s framing of the curfew story influenced public opinion and the WA press. Contrary to the assertion above regarding the inability of the Government to influence the press, it is evident that journalists’ framing of a story can be shaped only by the arguments that they hear; voices that are silenced are necessarily powerless to influence.

**Unequal power to frame the curfew story**

As I discussed in Methodology, frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements. My analysis of the WA press coverage of the Northbridge curfew supports Entman’s (1993) finding that framing plays a major role in the exertion of political power. He argues that, “the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power – it

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28 See Chapter 2.
registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text" (33). Thus, the frames that I have analysed in relation to the telling of the Northbridge curfew story are the outcome of the interaction between journalists and their sources. They reflect the success ultimately of the Government (or the government media adviser) in convincing the WA press that its frame was the best way to present the story as opposed to, for example, that presented by MA or the Nyoongar Patrol.

Johnstone et al. (1976) rightly contend that, “In any society those in charge of mass communication tend to come from the same social strata as those in control of the economic and political systems”.29 Thus, as I discussed in Chapter 3, people from the same strata have what Fowler (1991, 22) calls an “accessed voice”, that is, the media and people from the same strata enjoy reciprocal (and privileged) access. In other words, these people have the power to frame stories; make sense of Northbridge for the rest of the community; and shape the debate. Fowler further notes that privileged sources provide the press with “modes of discourse which already encode the attitudes of a powerful elite” (23).30 My content analysis reached a similar conclusion, finding

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30 Pan & Kosicki (2003, 36) similarly argue that, “The news media … more often than not are found to be collaborating with the ruling elite in weaving this discursive order”.
repeated instances where the WA press used the same language and labels as the Government.\textsuperscript{31}

It is useful to consider here what the attitudes of the “powerful elite” were in relation to Northbridge. As Gans (1980, 39) rightly observes, there is, “underlying the news, a picture of nation and society as it ought to be”. This picture, he recalls, is “shared by or originates with the sources from whom the journalists obtain information”. There is an extensive body of academic research into the ideology of “consensus” (see, for example, Gans 1980, Hall et al. 1978; 1981, Ericson et al. 1987, Tiffen 1989, Ericson et al. 1987, Tiffen 1989, Fowler 1991, van Dijk 1991, Entman 1993, Tarrow 1998, Croteau & Hoynes 2003), which assumes that there is no difference or disunity in the interests and values within a given population. As Fowler (1991, 48) puts it, “the whole population acknowledges this ‘fact’ by subscribing to a certain set of beliefs: everyone agrees that p and that q and that r…”. However, as Fowler explains, “Consensus is posited about a set of beliefs or values, not facts” (49). As I discussed in Chapter 1, news is a construction of this reality, not a value-free reflection of ‘facts’.

\textsuperscript{31} It is useful to recall here the debate about how far the media act as mouthpieces for the views of “primary definers” who set the agenda for social problems (Hall et al. 1978, 58). According to Hall et al., the primary definers (representatives of the State) give prominence to certain issues and set the parameters of debate, which others, notably the media or “secondary definers”, have to follow. The function of the media is, therefore, to translate official statements into everyday language.
The overriding attitude I encountered among the media professionals I interviewed was that, regardless of any reservations that they might have had about the curfew, they believed they had been correct to place indigenous youth running wild and the irresponsible ‘other’ at the forefront of the debate. My research suggests that this was not the product of anything sinister, but was because this narrative provided the ingredients of a ‘good story’ and because the Government and other media savvy groups enjoyed easier access to the WA press’ collective ‘ear’ than other sources. I agree with Fairclough (1995, 44-45), for example, who argues that while the media can sometimes appear to be “little more than tools of dominant interests”, overall they are in a “more complex and variable relationship with such interests”. This relationship, he contends, can sometimes involve “direct conflict” between the parties and, where “relationships of complicity” do exist, “they take a wide variety of forms”. Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* spoke about the complexity of relations between his newspaper and the Government, and insisted on the futility of adversarial relations for their own sake. He explained:

> We used to have the view that, in politics, if both sides are saying you’re treating them badly, you’re probably doing a good job. I think acceptance is a state of mind in yourself, you have to assess how you’re engaging with the community, with the power elites and so forth. The power elites do represent a significant part of our lives, they influence all of our lives, so therefore we engage with them.

My research suggests that the WA press supported the State Government in selling the Northbridge curfew primarily because the
story’s moral dimension provided a common point of reference for both parties. As Critcher points out (2003, 147), “disapproval of deviants and confirmation of moral boundaries remains a staple function of the press” while, at the same time, “politicians use morality as the justification for their use of power. In modern democracies discourse about morality informs public debate”. The moral dimension of the Northbridge story served the interests of both the WA press and the State Government. It allowed a Government flagging in the polls to win some crucial law and order points over the Opposition while at the same time providing a ‘good story’ that helped the WA press sell their newspapers.
CHAPTER 9

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

In the previous five chapters, I have demonstrated how the WA press, through its framing of the Northbridge story, supported the State Government in selling the curfew to the WA public. The curfew story was based on the assumption that the criminalisation of indigenous youth in Northbridge and the concept of the irresponsible ‘other’ would have considerable public appeal. This assumption proved to be correct; although the Northbridge curfew was based on a distorted picture of the reality of crime in the entertainment precinct, some 80 per cent of Western Australians applauded its introduction. It is unlikely that any of the narrators of the curfew story – within either the State Government or the WA press – were actively seeking to further marginalise or demonise the indigenous community. Rather, they were simply doing their respective jobs by advancing a frame that would either win votes or sell newspapers. Nonetheless, the version of reality that they jointly constructed has significant implications for the Western Australian community as a whole.

In this chapter, I discuss the other side of the Northbridge story. While the State Government and the WA press played out the debate in a world “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” to most of the community, Western Australians were obliged to decode a “second-hand reality” that
the power elites had constructed to make sense of Northbridge.\(^1\) As Hall et al. (1981, 340) contend, “The media … offer [for the majority of the population] powerful interpretations of how to understand” the events they report upon. In other words, through their framing of the Northbridge curfew story, the State Government and WA press determined how Western Australians would understand the issues; how they would look upon indigenous youth in the entertainment precinct; and how they would view these young people’s alleged representatives.

Drawing on the extensive body of literature that has been developed in recent decades on media effects and audience reception, I explore how the Northbridge curfew story and attendant ‘common-sense’ reporting served to perpetuate stereotypes and reproduce racism within the WA community. I consider these influences within the contemporary political context and taking into account the very real problems the indigenous community experienced. I also explore how the curfew story reinforced the boundaries between WA’s indigenous and non-indigenous communities, both in popular discourse and on the streets of Northbridge. Having discussed the major influences of the story of the Northbridge curfew, I conclude by considering the major influences on the narrative itself, that is, the dynamics of media/public opinion and the impact this has upon government policy.

\(^1\) Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion* (1922, 18) that, “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind”. Similarly, McCombs (2004, xiv) noted that, “For nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists’ reports about these events and situations”.

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The WA press circle of influence

In considering the effects of the Northbridge curfew story, it is necessary to consider first who constitutes the WA press readership or "audience". As Moores (1993, 2) points out, the "audience" defies full categorisation and has been the subject of considerable academic debate for many years. According to Hartley (1987), for example, the audience is a fiction, which serves the need of the "imagining institution". Hartley argues that in no case is the audience "real", or "external to its discursive construction" (125).\(^2\) Moores, however, argues that there is a reality outside of and beyond the discourses, which constitute "the audience as a category to be known" (3). He points to Ang's definition in *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991), which distinguishes between the "audience as discursive construct and the social world of actual audiences" (13). In a later work, Ang (1996, 4) further states that, "the audience" no longer represents simply an "object of study", a reality "out there" constitutive of and reserved for the discipline, which claims ownership of it, but has to be defined first and foremost as "a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption".\(^3\) Ang further argues (1996, 52), "What matters is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences,

\(^2\) Cited in Moores 1993, 2.

\(^3\) Ang (1996, 52) similarly asserts, "Reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent, and that there is no such thing as 'audience' whose characteristics can be set once and for all".
but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through media consumption”. I find Ang’s definition most useful for the purposes of my research because of its focus on the interaction between the WA press and its readers.

While the explication of the audience may provoke much academic debate, it fails to arouse much interest among the media professionals themselves. In their study of news organisations in Canada, for example, Ericson et al. (1987) found that journalists base their news judgements not on any informed knowledge of their audience’s interests and tastes, but on their own assumptions or those of their sources and colleagues. Indeed, Ericson et al. contend that news organisations have no interest in finding out who their readership is or what it wants. They argue that:

(T)here is no organizational emphasis on knowing the audience, only on having one. Assignment editors make ‘plausible assumptions’ about what their ‘imaginary audience’ might want. The apparent lack of systematic effort by journalists to know their public rather than just have one appears as somewhat of a contradiction in the face of official statements and their own statements that they are agents of the public (194).

My research supports Ericson et al.’s findings. According to the Editor of The Sunday Times, newspapers take positions on issues that they believe will appeal to their readership;⁴ further, both WA newspapers

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⁴ As discussed in Chapter 4.
claimed to cater for all members of the Western Australian community (as I discussed in Chapter 8). However, according to *The West Australian*'s Reporter (C), the current editor does not consider indigenous people to be part of his newspaper’s readership and the majority of journalists I interviewed tended to hold a similar view (the overwhelming majority saying they had not previously given any thought to this question). It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the WA press (consciously or unconsciously) directed its framing of the Northbridge curfew to non-indigenous readers to whom, they believed, it would – and did – appeal.

Notwithstanding my finding that local journalists perceive that the readership of the WA press comprises non-indigenous Western Australians who hold particular opinions and values (discussed further below), it is clear that even Western Australians who do not read the WA press do not necessarily escape its effects. As leading media commentators Mayer & Nelson (1980) contend:

> There is no refuge from the mass media and their effects. Even if you never touch a paper or switch on a TV or radio, most people do all three so often and so frequently that the media affect you through them (535).

Given that *The West Australian* claims to be read by more than one million Western Australians every Saturday while *The Sunday Times* is reportedly read by more than 65 per cent of Western Australians aged
over 14, Mayer & Nelson’s argument is compelling.⁵ It is my contention, therefore, that the WA press circle of influence potentially includes all members of the community, irrespective of whether or not they actually read these newspapers.

How the WA press influenced public opinion

It is axiomatic that the information presented in the media matters and has consequences (Altheide & Snow 1979).⁶ In considering the influence of the Northbridge curfew story in shaping public opinion vis-à-vis indigenous youth, it is useful to recall the substantial body of theoretical work that has developed in the field since the 1940s and 1950s when the ‘minimal effects’ school dominated thinking. In their much-cited study, *The People’s Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) found that the media did little to affect attitudes and opinions, but served instead to reinforce existing beliefs (Croteau & Hoynes 2003). The ‘minimal effects’ theory reigned until the 1960s, during which time researchers increasingly accepted what came to be known as the ‘agenda-setting’ role of the media (McCombs & Shaw 1972, Iyengar & Kinder 1987). In his classic articulation of the argument, Bernard Cohen (1963, 13) said that the press “may not be successful in telling people

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⁵ The *West Australian*’s figures are provided in their advertising literature while the figure for *The Sunday Times* was given by its editor at interview.

⁶ According to Moores (1993, 5), the degree to which the media influence the thoughts and actions of their consumers has “always” been at the centre of communications research.
what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.⁷

McCombs (2004), who with Shaw first coined the term ‘agenda-setting’ in 1972, rightly argues that the agenda-setting hypothesis is testament to the media’s strong causal effect on public opinion.⁸ Agenda-setting demonstrates the dynamics between journalists and their audiences; through their ability to direct people’s attention toward certain issues, the media effectively make their agenda the public agenda. Readers are provided with a host of cues as to the alleged importance of topics in the newspapers – through their positioning on the front or back news pages, headlines, frequency, and so on (Merritt & McCombs 2004, 41).

According to McCombs (2004), once an issue is placed on the public agenda it becomes the focus of public attention and represents the first step in the formation of public opinion. Thus, to apply agenda-setting to the case of the Northbridge curfew, the WA press not only informed Western Australians that the State Government had introduced this new

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⁸ It is important to stress that agenda-setting does not negate the ‘minimal effects’ findings of Lazarsfeld and colleagues. Agenda-setting is concerned with how the media influence the importance that people attach to various issues, not with how media influence people’s opinions about these issues. Indeed, two of agenda-setting’s leading proponents, Iyengar & Kinder (1987, 117), say that if their experiments of television news had set out to convert Democrats to Republicans, or pro-choice advocates to pro-life advocates, they “strongly suspect that the results would have demonstrated yet more evidence in support of minimal effects”. According to Hartmann & Husband (1974), people tend to notice and recall information that is consistent with their existing attitudes. Hence, they argue, “The media provide people with a picture of the world which makes the development of one kind of attitude more likely than another” (95).
policy, but suggested to readers that it was a significant development
given the importance that they attached to the story through its frequent
and repeated positioning on the front news pages.

In mapping the media’s influence on opinions, McCombs (2004, 124)
distinguishes between the impact of media attention to an issue (what
he calls the first level of agenda-setting) and the influence of media
framing of an issue (the second level of agenda-setting). While agenda-
setting is concerned with which issues the media attach importance to,
framing deals with how an issue or event is portrayed. By framing
issues in certain ways, the media influence the way people perceive a
problem or issue and its consequences, possibly altering their final
evaluation of the issue. For example, research suggests that framing
economic and foreign policy questions in terms of gains versus losses
(Quattrone & Tversky 1988) or framing affirmative action in terms of
unfair advantage versus reverse discrimination (Kinder & Sanders 1990)
can change the basis of political judgement. The most obvious
contemporary example is arguably the framing of the ‘war on terrorism’
in terms of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. As Entman (2004, 1) points out, “by
conveying an unambiguous and emotionally compelling frame, Bush

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9 I also discuss this point in Chapter 4.
10 In their study of the effects of framing on attitudes towards the importance of the
Federal Budget deficit, Jasperson et al. (1998, 206) similarly conclude that framing
“provides a means of describing the power of communication to direct individual
cognitions towards a prescribed interpretation of a situation or object”.

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promoted assent from Congress and the media – and overwhelming public approval” for the so-called ‘war on terrorism’.

Thus, McCombs revises Cohen’s argument, cited above, to read, “The media not only tell us what to think about, but that they also tell us how to think about some objects”. According to McCombs (2004, 89), positioning the concept of framing in the context of agenda-setting theory “underscores its subsequent consequences as well as [its] power to organize and structure thought”. Graber (1988) makes a similar point in her seminal work, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, when she asserts that the media both draw attention to an issue and provide the context which determines how people think about the issue. She insists that news stories are not absorbed in isolation, contending that, “the backdrop and mood created by the context of major news stories and the schemata they bring to the fore become major reference points for judging all stories that surface at a particular time” (264). Alternatively, an issue is understood quite differently depending upon the frame the media use to define it (Gandy 2003, 59).¹¹

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¹¹ It is useful to recall in this context an observation by Page et al. (2002) who found in their study *What Moves Public Opinion?* that people tend to be “uninfluenced or negatively influenced” by the positions of groups whose interests are perceived to be selfish or narrow, while they respond more favourably to groups and individuals believed to be concerned with broadly defined public interests. Page et al. contend that, “Not only business corporations, but also some mass membership groups representing blacks, women, the poor, Jews, and organised labor seem to have been held in disrepute and to have had null or negative effects on opinion about issues of direct concern to them, including social welfare policies and some Middle East issues”
As discussed in the previous chapters, the WA press presented the curfew in the context of indigenous youth being allowed to run wild in an adult entertainment precinct. Readers may have understood, therefore, that the curfew represented a decisive response to what they interpreted as a moral outrage. Had the WA press presented the curfew in the context of crime linked to the pub and nightclub industry, however, readers may have questioned the appropriateness of a policy that targeted young people aged under 18.

The political context of the Northbridge curfew

In considering the effects of the framing of the curfew story, it is important to recall the political backdrop against which the State Government introduced this ‘initiative’ in Northbridge. The curfew was introduced just months after the Government closed the Swan Valley Nyoongar camp and announced the findings of the Gordon Inquiry into child abuse in the indigenous community. The curfew was therefore introduced at a time when negative attitudes towards the indigenous community would have been at a peak. According to a senior official with the OCP, the curfew’s effective “demonisation” of indigenous youth would have had little additional impact on a public opinion already

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(222). This, in turn, recalls Mickler & McHoul’s (1998) important observation regarding the difficulty the indigenous community face in making their concerns “everybody’s” (discussed in Chapter 1, footnote 15). Of course, the telling of the Northbridge curfew became an indigenous story only because the State Government and WA press chose to frame it that way.

12 See Chapter 5, footnote 11.
hostile to the indigenous community. He said there would be “no sympathy” for indigenous youth and that “the great unwashed” have no respect for the ‘Robert Brophos’ who they perceive to be representative of the indigenous community. He commented, “I don’t know how much more damage you can do [to public opinion of indigenous youth], frankly”.

The West Australian’s State Political Editor said that a policy “as radical as a curfew and a process as flawed as that which saw its introduction” could be accepted only because it was targeted at the indigenous community; it would not be tolerated for any other members of the community. He commented:

It was all done in the Premier’s Office, with his little star chamber of advisers, and there was no consultation of anyone else. … It’s not the way they do it with anything else, but they do it with Aboriginal issues where they weigh up the benefits and the side effects, and the side effects [here were] Aboriginal groups complaining; well, [if they complain] that’s just going to feed straight into the prejudices of the electorate out there who think Aboriginals just sit around and complain all the time anyway.

It is illuminating to recall research by Entman (1991) who found that journalists do not challenge the ‘official line’ when their interests coincide with those of government. The interests of the WA press and the State Government can be seen to have converged in relation to the Northbridge curfew when one takes into account the political context of the curfew, where both parties perceived their constituencies to be

13 See Chapter 1, footnote 16.
hostile towards the indigenous community. Indeed, there was a general feeling among the participants in my study that since the Howard Government had come to power in 1996, Aboriginal affairs had been “off the agenda”, the general public was “not interested”, and that this lack of interest had been reflected in media reporting, which had focused only on “hot news” in the indigenous community. For example, the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* believed that there had been a much greater engagement between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities when she was a reporter in the early ‘90s. She explained:

I look back now and see that the nature of that engagement has changed quite dramatically over the last decade. I think some people’s awareness has gone backwards and quite often the [media] coverage comes about because of hot spot issues rather than [anything else].

According to *The West Australian*’s Columnist (B), ‘mainstream’ public opinion has had enough of indigenous issues and has “moved on”. He said:

Indigenous affairs really had its day during the Keating era, that was when the opportunities were really there to make some big gains and I think they did that to a certain extent. But that was maybe the 10 years from the mid ‘80s to mid ‘90s. The [indigenous community] tried to keep it on the [Howard Government] agenda with forcing him to say sorry, but again mainstream Australia was saying, I think, ‘OK, they’ve had 10 years of it, we do connect with these people, we understand their tragedies, we say sorry, but let’s move on’.

*The West Australian*’s State Political Editor agreed, pointing to the backlash he encounters from readers anytime he writes an article about the indigenous community that is not “hot news”:

Every time I write an Aboriginal story or one that is sympathetic to Aboriginal issues, I get letters saying I’m a bleeding heart; I’m a do-
gooder; all those sorts of things. And I get them constantly. And that’s the readership, unfortunately, and the readership is a reflection of the people out there, so maybe the paper is just a reflection of the general prejudices in our society.

It is possible to infer from this that public opinion influenced the WA press’ framing of the curfew story, as well as the other way round.

Indeed, according to The West Australian’s Columnist (A), for example, journalists sense what the political mood is in the community and seek to reflect it. He explains:

I think the one [mood] reflects the other. In Australia now, the Howard years, there has been a strong movement to the Right and I think that’s reflected in a lot of the newspapers, including The West Australian, and I think what happens is that although nobody deliberately censors journalists or columnists or anyone else, they start to sense the mood of the times, that this is the way we are going.

Thus, The West Australian’s State Political Editor concludes that because of the hostility towards the indigenous community at the time of its introduction, the curfew provided the Premier with a golden opportunity “to be tough with minimal political damage”. He explained:

It’s harsh, but it’s a reality that the Aboriginal vote doesn’t count very highly so you can upset a particular group while also pandering to the great masses of voters out there who may have prejudices or who may have certain views which may have been fuelled by racism or an exaggerated problem based on media reports and things like that or anecdotal evidence. As a media strategy, it was a stroke of genius, as a political strategy, too.

Curfew’s appeal to (perceived) shared moral values

According to a senior official with the OCP, the curfew was “what the pundits wanted to hear”. To understand why the official should believe that Western Australians wanted such punitive action against indigenous
youth, it is important to recall the hostility towards these members of the community, as discussed above, and the appeal of the moral argument used by the State Government to justify the curfew and repeated by the WA press.

Research undertaken by Terkildsen & Schnell (1997) helps to illustrate how the framing of the Northbridge curfew around the Premier’s moral argument may have influenced public opinion by appealing to the readership’s (perceived) moral values. Their study documents the different frames used in the print media to define the women’s movement and related issues during the period 1950 to 1995. They found that frames that appealed to the most commonly-held moral values mobilised the greatest public support while appeals to economic rights or group-specific legislation, for example, had least resonance with the readership.\(^\text{14}\) In the case of Northbridge, the framing of the curfew around the Premier’s moral argument would be almost guaranteed universal appeal. As the State Manager of MA, one of the policy’s most vocal critics, commented, “No reasonable human being would say an unaccompanied child, a pre-adolescent, should be in Northbridge at night”.

\(^{14}\) For instance, framing the abortion debate as a question of women’s rights or individual freedom as opposed to morality or foetal rights changes the appeal of the debate.
The Premier’s strategy was what Edelman (1971, 81) calls a “classical rhetorical gambit” or “the public exhortation to sinners to turn to virtue”. Edelman contends that when making public appeals, such as calling on trade unions to exercise restraint in wage demands or on blacks to avoid violence in urban slums, to most of the audience the politician seems to be “battling heroically for virtue against a visible enemy”. However, Edelman notes that both the heroism and the battling evaporate when one examines the response of the politician’s ostensible audience (the real audience being much wider); the allegedly sinning groups also oppose the vice, they just have other concerns that are different from the politician’s.

My analysis in the previous chapters has demonstrated how the WA press failed to give any member of the indigenous community the opportunity to agree with the Premier that it was unacceptable for young people to be out alone at night. As a result, the issue rapidly became one of ‘them’ and ‘us’, where ‘they’ (the Aboriginal leaders) were leading their children down the wrong path and allowing them to run wild, while ‘we’ (the non-indigenous community) upheld our parental responsibilities and kept our children safe at home at night. I therefore agree with Hollinsworth (1998, 32) who asserts that, “Discourses are not innocent or objective, in that they empower some categories (or subject positions) while disempowering or silencing others”. It is interesting to recall here
van Dijk’s (1991, 246) finding that the reproduction of racism by the press is effective not because all readers always adopt the opinions of the press, but because the press manages to manufacture what he calls “an ethnic consensus” in which the latitude of opinions and attitudes is quite strictly constrained. Because the readers of the WA press occupy the same community and are perceived to belong to the same ‘culture’, it is assumed that there is basically only one perspective of events and this was the only one given (in relation to the Premier’s moral argument). Such thinking derives from what Hall et al. (1978) call the “central value system”. They contend that this view denies any “structural discrepancies between different groups” and has important political consequences.\textsuperscript{15} They argue:

\begin{quote}
‘Consensual’ views of society represent society as if there are no major cultural or economic breaks, no major conflicts of interests between classes and groups. So that, when events are ‘mapped’ by the media into frameworks of meaning and interpretation, it is assumed that we all equally possess and know how to use these frameworks, that they are drawn from fundamentally the same structures of understanding for all social groups and audiences (54-56).\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

In his extensive research into racism in the press, van Dijk (1987) finds, for example, that even if negative stories or statements are not always persuasive, “[they] are at least pervasive in society”. They are ‘what

\textsuperscript{15} I discuss this point in greater detail in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{16} While Fowler (1991, 49) accepts Hall’s concept of consensus, he insists that it is “a linguistic practice”. He argues that the use of such pronouns as ‘we’, ‘us’ or ‘our’ is a mechanism that “assumes and in times of crisis actually affirms, that there is no difference or disunity in the interests and values of any of the population, or of any institution” (49). The press translates bureaucratic into public language, mediating between government and populace. The language of newspaper editorials embodies assumptions about the speaker, the audience and the issue, addressed in a “vocabulary of categories” (49).
everybody knows’ and the consensus therefore becomes rooted in these common sense representations of minority groups. He contends:

The individual actively reproduces the pervasive ethnic prejudices that characterize the consensus and, at the same time, recognizes the legitimacy inferred from such a consensus. The conflict between the higher norm that prohibits racism, and the actual reproduction of racism through talk and action, is thus resolved: Our negative stories about foreigners are not prejudiced or racist, they are true and legitimate complaints, and everybody says so (179).

Fairclough (1995, 14) further points out that such implicit assumptions in news texts contribute to producing or reproducing unequal relations of power in the community. As I discussed in Chapter 1, social constructions can become social facts17 and because people believe in these false or imagined ideas, these constructions are made real in their consequences. As Pettman (1992, 3) asserts, “There are real and sometimes deadly consequences for those who are named as belonging to, or outside, particular boundaries”. In telling the story of the Northbridge curfew, I believe that the WA press and State Government succeeded in drawing clear moral boundaries between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

Those dependent on WA press most open to suggestion

It is clear that the framing of the curfew story would have had most influence on those Western Australians who had no source of information on Northbridge other than that provided by the WA press. As Lippmann argued, “The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the

terrorist can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information” (1920, 50). In their study of the women’s movement, for example, Terkildsen & Schnell found that media frames had particular influence over the opinions of individuals who not only responded to their moral appeal but also had no other source of information (see also Croteau & Hoynes 2003, 243). Terkildsen & Schnell concluded that:

The subtle, often non-conscious, nature of frames to direct for many citizens what set of beliefs or information is cued for subsequent evaluations is an immense power. Given that for most issues the vast majority of citizens are without a strong personal stake or a cognitive ballast, news frames are a potent source of public opinion orchestration (894).

Their argument is compelling in light of my own research findings. As The West Australian’s Columnist (A) noted in Chapter 1, most Western Australians have not had any real contact with indigenous people; therefore they do not have what Terkildsen & Schnell refer to as a “cognitive ballast” in relation to the curfew. Further, any personal stake may be limited to those people who have visited Northbridge and have been “unsettled by confronting young Aboriginals” in the precinct.18

Thus, the WA press framing of the curfew story would have greater influence over such individuals. On the other hand, as Graber (1988, 126) points out, personal experience with an issue reduces the media’s

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18 I am quoting here The West Australian’s Columnist (B), from my discussion in Chapter 2.
influence. She argues that attention to media stories and learning from such stories diminish when the reader is familiar with the subject matter, whether that knowledge is a product of exposure to prior media articles or through personal experience. Graber bases her argument on a year-long study when she monitored the media while at the same time conducting intensive interviews with 21 participants. Her study was designed to gauge the influence of the media on the participants’ attitudes and opinions; her interviews revealed that on many issues, people “round out and evaluate news in light of past learning and determine how well it squares with the reality that they have experienced directly or vicariously” (93). Entman (1993, 56) makes a similar observation, contending that people can “recall their own facts, forge links not made explicitly in the text, or retrieve from memory a causal explanation or cure that is completely absent from the text”.20

19 Iyengar & Kinder (1987, 52-53) made an interesting finding in relation to people’s personal experiences and the influence of television news in agenda-setting. Their results suggest that where problems flare up and capture the attention of the media, agenda-setting effects show up most immediately among those directly affected by the problem. They contend that television news reinforces and ratifies the experiences of everyday life. However, they found that if coverage continues and the problem stays at the top of the media’s agenda, agenda-setting effects will begin to register just as deeply among those viewers whose personal lives are untroubled by the problems given national attention. They contend that eventually such viewers may actually be influenced more by additional coverage than are the problems’ real victims, whose concern may have reached maximum levels. Thus, they argue, “This means that for those problems that burst upon the political scene, appearing without warning and disappearing just as suddenly, agenda-setting effects will be greatest among those whose personal lives are directly affected. For problems with more staying power, however, though the personally affected may react more rapidly, the rest of the public may eventually catch up”. Given that Northbridge and the curfew story have attracted front news coverage for several years, it is reasonable to infer that the agenda-setting effects of the WA press will have registered both among those people who work in Northbridge or visit the precinct as well as those who are unfamiliar with the area.

20 But Zaller (1992, 311), for example, suggests that many citizens “pay too little attention to public affairs to be able to respond critically to the political communications
Another scholar of political communication in the US, Gamson (1992), conducted similar research to Graber’s. He found that participants in his focus groups constructed meaning by combining media-based information with popular wisdom and experiential knowledge. His study treated the media as a resource that people can use, to varying degrees, to help them make sense of current events. While accepting the potential influence of the media, he argues that this approach balances media power with the creative agency of readers. Hence, the WA press’ framing of the curfew story would have most influenced Western Australians who had little or no direct knowledge or experience of indigenous youth or Northbridge.

**The influence of the individual**

In considering the influence of the framing of the curfew story, it is necessary also to consider – to paraphrase Blumler & Katz (1974) – not just what media discourse does to people, but what people do with media discourse. It is clear that Western Australians are not they encounter; rather, they are blown about by whatever current of information manages to develop the greatest intensity”.

21 Gamson (1992, 129) found that, “Even on affirmative action, where an overwhelming majority of the groups in our study introduced experiential knowledge, most drew on media discourse and popular wisdom as well in constructing a shared frame”.

22 Theorists associated with the ‘uses and gratifications’ tradition in mass communications research were concerned with the uses that people made of the media rather than the effects of the media on people (see, for example, Blumler & Katz 1974). Scholars within this tradition focused on the audience, rather than the media, and from a perspective that privileged psychological rather than social or structural explanations. According to uses and gratifications theories, “people pay attention to
automatons waiting for the WA press to tell them what to think and how to think. The media set the agenda only when the public consider their news stories to be relevant (Merritt & McCombs 2004, 47) and, as Gamson (1992) has demonstrated, people construct their own understanding of issues (see also Crigler 1996, Neuman & Fryling 1985). Further, according to Iyengar & Kinder (1987, 61), the media can influence opinion only if they use “pictures and words” that are compelling.

Thus, the influence of the media is a two-way process that depends on both parties involving, on the one hand, “encoding” (the construction of the message by the producer) and, on the other, “decoding” (the interpretation of the message by the reader).23 According to the encoding/decoding model, developed by the Media Group at

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23 The encoding-decoding model was the dominant model in the 1970s and implied that the process of producing or “encoding” the text exerted a great deal of influence over what the audiences did with it. While the model admitted that audiences could interpret a text in a number of ways, such interpretations were limited and depended upon the decoder’s social, economic, or cultural origins. The balance of power was decidedly in favour of the text. Subsequent arguments, drawn in particular from television audience research (Morley 1980; 1986, Ang 1989), have qualified the encoding-decoding model; especially this insistence that texts actively suggest a “preferred” reading to their audiences. As discussed in this chapter, explanations of the production of meaning from texts gradually have become much more complex. Among the variables now considered are the degrees to which audiences understand texts through their experience (Turner 1993, 265).
Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, producers create media texts in ways that encode a preferred or “dominant” meaning – that is, the interpretation that will most likely follow from a decoding based on the codes in the text and the “dominant assumptions” of the reader. The codes in the text build on assumptions – the common sense representations discussed above – that do not have to be articulated. In other words, the meaning of media texts depends, to a great degree, on the taken-for-granted (Croteau & Hoynes 2003, 275). Fowler (1991, 46-47) argues that while readers may not possess the writing crafts of the professional journalist, in a sense they “know” the significance of the various journalistic codes already, through living within the society that has moulded the institution of the press, and through habitual exposure to the discourse. Unconsciously, readers “read in" the ideology that shapes the newspaper's representation of reality. Thus, values that already exist – in the case of Northbridge, the perceived moral transgressions of the indigenous community – are reproduced in the discursive interaction between the newspaper text and the reader.

In his watershed *Nationwide* (1980) study, Morley finds people can read in a news text the preferred meaning, or develop what he calls a

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24 Morley’s (1980) study is recognised as representing a turning point in the study of media audiences, employing an ethnographic approach, which involved in-depth interviews to learn about the differentiated subtleties of people’s engagements with television and other media.
“negotiated” reading, or they can draw on extratextual resources to construct an “oppositional” reading.\textsuperscript{25} In considering the importance of Morley’s research, it is useful first to recall the ‘codes’ in the WA press coverage of the Northbridge curfew. As discussed in the previous five chapters, the dominant message in reportage concerned criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’. In considering the importance of the readership’s “dominant assumptions” to which Morley refers, it is helpful to recall Fiske & Taylor’s observation in Social Cognition (1984, 139) that people “do not easily” change their assumptions and expectations, even when the evidence contradicts them.\textsuperscript{26} Fiske & Taylor further note that, “Relying on one’s own schemata provides the sense of prediction and control which … is critical to one’s well-being” (134).\textsuperscript{27} They add that people often perceive information in ways that confirm their stereotypes, insisting, “It does not

\textsuperscript{25} Morley’s (1980) study is concerned with identifying which groups decode messages in line with the preferred meaning and which groups produce negotiated or oppositional meanings. The Nationwide study indicated that there was a tendency for people from different socio-economic classes to interpret the meaning of the television program in different ways. There was no direct correlation between class and interpretation, and Morley was reluctant to draw definitive conclusions from this study. Notwithstanding this, Morley found that in decoding Nationwide coverage of economic issues, workers and managers constructed very different interpretations.

\textsuperscript{26} Graber (1988) found that there are, however, situations where people do pay attention to discordant information and adjust their beliefs accordingly. She noted that although the participants in her study “were reluctant to change their well-established views, all of them did so on occasion” (128).

\textsuperscript{27} It is interesting to note here ‘cognitive balance theories’ which seek to explain people’s interactions with the news (see, for example, Blumler & Katz 1974). According to these theories, people avoid information that conflicts with knowledge, attitudes, and feelings that they already possess or that disturbs or threatens them in other ways. They seek out information that is reassuring and congruent with their beliefs. Graber (1988, 128) notes, “Uses and gratification theorists would explain this phenomenon by arguing that dissonant or threatening information brings no gratification because it is psychologically disturbing.”
take a bigot” to misperceive members of a particular group as all the same. They argue:

Any group of outsiders (an out-group) appears less variable than one’s own group (in-group), whether the out-group is students at a neighboring college or members of another profession. Because people see out-groups as less variable than in-groups, they are willing to make predictions about a whole group of outsiders on the basis of meeting only one (161).

In exploring the influence of the framing of the Northbridge curfew by the WA press, which criminalised indigenous youth and constructed the indigenous community as the irresponsible ‘other’, it is important therefore to be mindful of the pre-existing fears or prejudices of the readership. In The mass media and racial conflict, for example, Hartmann & Husband (1981) argue that the media are much more likely to reinforce existing attitudes than to change them. They further contend that, “Attitudes may be expected to be particularly resistant to change when they are supported by strong group norms or the prevailing cultural climate” (289). Croteau & Hoynes (2003, 247) make a similar observation when they assert that, “Readers approach media products with a pre-existing set of beliefs and experiences through which they filter media messages”.

Finally, in light of Morley’s (1980) findings, it is useful to consider the “extratextual” resources that influence how readers negotiated the

28 This is, of course, the same conclusion drawn 40 years earlier by Lazarsfeld and colleagues, but which gave rise to the ‘minimal effects’ school of thought.
“dominant” meaning that the WA press constructed about the Northbridge curfew. Croteau & Hoynes (2003) refer to these “extratextual resources” as “decoding tools”. They argue that social class (the focus of Morley’s study) as well as age, race, ethnicity, and gender play a key role in providing the cultural “tools” for decoding (267). They also include what they call “discursive resources”, for example, the language, concepts, and assumptions associated with a particular subculture or political perspective. Thus, it is important to be mindful of the different discursive resources to which the readership of the WA press would have had access for decoding its messages. Importantly, Croteau & Hoynes point out that some meanings will be easier to construct because they draw on “widely shared cultural values and sets of assumptions about the way the world works” (273). They contend:

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29 Graber (1988, 133) includes additional factors that encourage or discourage attention to the mass media and learning from them. These include socialisation, life experiences, current knowledge, and current needs for various types of information. Likewise, she finds that attitudinal factors, such as interest in news, trust or distrust of news sources, and trust or distrust between the sender and receiver of a message, are important.

30 According to Croteau & Hoynes (2003), this approach demonstrates that media texts have neither a singular, dominant meaning to be interpreted by audiences, nor do they have limitless meanings. They argue, “Media messages matter, but so does our location in various social groups” (273).

31 Drawing on Morley’s (1980) framework, Hunt (1997) argued that the viewers in his study constructed “negotiated” readings of the news, with different groups bringing different resources to their decoding (153). Black viewers were far more likely to decode the news in ways that suggested an alternative or oppositional interpretation of the [LA] riots, whereas the white and Latino viewers were likely to interpret the news in line with the text’s preferred meaning. Hunt suggests that this racial difference in decoding media was, in large part, the result of differences in social networks and the sense of group solidarity among the different groups. At the same time, differential interpretations helped to reaffirm a sense of racial identity among viewers. Hunt argues that this “raced subjectivity” shapes the process of decoding (166).
Other meanings will be less commonly derived because they require substantial rethinking or depend on the use of alternative informational resources. As a result, meaning may be actively constructed by audiences, but in most cases one interpretation is likely to be most common and fit with the underlying values of the culture. We can think of this as the ‘preferred’ reading, in that the text itself is most amenable to this interpretation (273-274).

As I discussed in Chapter 8, the WA press coverage presented a familiar and predictable narrative that built on the negative stereotypes of the indigenous community, which the media, among others, had perpetuated over many years and which the RCIADIC had sought to address in 1991. As the Editor of The Sunday Times acknowledged:

There’s a lot more negative stuff written than there is positive. That’s just a product of the way that people of indigenous background often come to the notice of the media; it isn’t always in a positive light and that’s a reality.

It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that readers would have drawn on these negative stereotypes in their manoeuvres to “tame the information tide” (Graber 1988). The “preferred” reading of the WA press narrative was that the curfew was an effective response to addressing criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’.

In his study Communicating Racism, which is concerned with the encoding and decoding of racism in the press, van Dijk (1987) explores what he calls “biased information processing”, which directs what readers choose to focus upon in a text (selection), what they choose to ignore (discounting), and what they choose to deny (negativisation).
Like Graber (1988) and other scholars mentioned above, van Dijk (1987, 240-242) also finds that readers monitor incoming information according to “personal or contextual relevance criteria”, asserting that readers assign “special cognitive treatment” to information they recognise “as being socially or affectively relevant”. “Discounting” strategies, on the other hand, involve the converse of selection, namely the reader pays less attention to or explains away information as less relevant, *ad hoc*, or as an exception “that confirms the rule”. In other words, van Dijk argues, people selectively fashion what they see and hear. Finally, readers apply “negativisation” processing where they have “previously stored negative models and attitudes” (241).32 This recalls Hollinsworth’s (1998, 34) observation, discussed in Chapter 1, that when non-Aboriginal drunkenness and fighting occur, they are viewed as individual lapses, not as a community problem. As van Dijk (1987) argues:

> These processes … imply that less attention is paid to in-group members and their properties or actions, so that negative actions of less salient in-group members tend to be represented in a less prominent way in the model and, therefore, tend to be less retrievable (241).

In summary, the above discussion suggests that the WA press influenced public opinion about the Northbridge curfew in a number of ways. First, by giving prominence to the story in the front news pages,

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32 Mickler makes similar findings in *The Myth of Privilege: Aboriginal Status, Media Visions, Public Ideas* (1998), which concerns popular assumptions about the indigenous community.
the press indicated to readers that the curfew represented an important development. Second, the dominant framing of the Northbridge curfew suggested to readers that they should view the policy as a means of addressing the problem of young children allowed by their parents to roam the streets of an adult entertainment precinct alone at night. Third, the argument presented to justify the curfew served to draw a moral boundary between ‘us’ – the ‘in-group’ who did not think it appropriate for children to be out alone at night – and ‘them’, the ‘out-group’ explicitly understood to be the indigenous community who think such behaviour is appropriate. Finally, the ‘common sense’ reporting in the WA press about criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ would have been instantly recognisable to a public opinion already hostile to the indigenous community and who, in decoding the narrative, would have drawn on their individual “cultural tools” and “stereotypical attitude schemata” to make sense of Northbridge. As Morley (1980, 150) asserts, “If we are to speak of the reproduction of a dominant ideology, we must see that such an ideology can only have effectivity in articulation with the existing forms of common sense and culture of the groups to whom it is addressed”.

This is not to suggest that all Western Australians would have read the curfew story in the same way. As discussed above, readers would have decoded the press articles differently according to their individual
cultural tools and discursive resources. In other words, not all members of the in-group (or out-group) possess the same “stereotypical attitude schemata”. It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the impact of the curfew story on individual Western Australians (indigenous or non-indigenous); my aim is instead to draw some broad conclusions as to its influence on public opinion in general. The overwhelming support the public gave to the curfew, based on a distorted representation of the reality of crime in Northbridge, suggests that the majority of Western Australians did indeed decode the news texts according to the newspapers’ preferred reading. This is not to deny that other Western Australians would have arrived at what Morley refers to as “negotiated” and “oppositional” readings of the press reportage.

The other effects of the curfew story

Having considered the influence of the framing of the Northbridge curfew on the attitudes of Western Australians, it is useful now to explore the broader effects of the State Government/WA press discourse. Through his *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, the author said he hoped to “shift the fundamentals” of the debate in order that the State Government might address the many and complex issues facing the entertainment precinct. However, as I discussed in Chapter 2, this approach was not as newsworthy as escalating crime perpetrated
by indigenous youth on the rampage; consequently, it failed to generate media interest.

The subsequent framing of the curfew story around criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ had several important effects beyond entrenching ‘mainstream’ public opinion against the indigenous community. Most importantly, it meant that the “fundamentals” to which the report's author had sought to draw attention were ignored. Scholarly research suggests that this is a standard effect of the ‘moral panic’ discussed in Chapter 4 (Cohen 1972, Hall et al. 1978, Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, Critcher 2003). Wolsfeld (2001, 247-248), for example, talks about the “emotional roller coaster” of sensationalist media coverage where events rush by in a “blur of drama and action”. He argues:

It is a thrilling ride, which explains why so many people are willing to line up for it every day. However, one leaves dizzy and slightly off-balance, in no condition to make any serious decisions about public issues. The need for a quick, well-packaged response becomes a central priority. Other, often equally important issues are ignored (247-248).

*The West Australian* reporter, who triggered the ‘moral panic’ with his coverage of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report, insists that the newspaper could not have framed the narrative in any other way because indigenous youth were the ‘deviants’ and ‘villains’ of the story. He argues:
I don’t think it would be fair, it would not be truthful and it would be a complete and utter inaccurate way to present a public debate without talking about Aboriginal kids and without talking about what people thought about Aboriginal kids. I just don’t think it could have been done. OK, it could have been done, but it would have been a completely and utterly meaningless debate where nothing actually happened.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, the newspaper held this view, not because it thought these “Aboriginal kids” were responsible for the crime in Northbridge but because it believed its readership was more concerned about the presence of large groups of indigenous youth on the streets. That the WA press failed to challenge this view would come as little surprise to scholars such as Schudson (1995, 76) who contends that, “the press follows more often than leads and reinforces more than challenges conventional wisdom”. The editors I interviewed, however, believed their newspapers did play a role in changing attitudes through the provision of “comprehensive information and analysis”.

Notwithstanding this, The Sunday Times’ Editor insists that the power of the individual’s opinions overrides any influence of the newspaper. He contends:

I think that the so-called power of what we do is at times overstated; I think that generally people in the media often underestimate the intelligence of the people who are consuming their products and I try not to do that. I think you can have a certain amount of shaping of people’s opinions but in the end, they are our readers’ opinions and they are not going to be totally changed because we say something. … It’s much more important for us to be providing people with information that they find useful or interesting or compelling [enough] to pick us up every week rather than us trying to impose our own views or beliefs on other people.
The West Australian’s Columnist (A) said that while he does try to challenge people’s perceptions rather than conform to them, he believes that the media generally do tend to conform to existing beliefs. He says journalists do this, “not out of any conspiracy but simply because of whatever the mood is at the time. It’s done unconsciously; people are probably unaware that they’re even doing it”. Hence, in its framing of the Northbridge story, the WA press presented the major problem to be that of criminal indigenous youth, in accordance with the perceived beliefs of the readership. By conforming to its readership’s perceived pre-existing fears and prejudices, the WA press effectively endorsed a system of spatial apartheid in the entertainment precinct. According to the CRC researcher, the media discourse about Northbridge reflects “unresolved issues” about the place of Aboriginal people in the Western Australian community. He argues:

[These issues include] our incapacity to see the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture and way of life and always trying to criminalise it. Wherever there are groups of Aboriginal people, white people get scared. And there is still a belief out there that Aboriginal people shouldn’t be in public space.

Similarly, the State Manager of MA argues that the curfew is a “reactionary policy” that panders to the ‘mainstream’ public’s aversion to indigenous young people in Northbridge. She suggests that the hostility towards indigenous youth in Northbridge prevented the State Government from addressing the recommendations in the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report and from introducing real solutions to address
the problems in the precinct, such as providing alternative activities for young people and promoting indigenous culture. She explains:

There seems to be almost a morbid fear [among] the people who are running the Northbridge precinct at the moment who are saying, ‘No, no, we don’t want to bring them in here, we don’t want to attract them, we don’t want to make it more interesting for them to come in’, but no recognition that that’s happening anyway, that they’re in there.

The CRC researcher suggests that the Northbridge business community, in particular, wants to ban indigenous people from the precinct and is responsible for the Government’s failure to respond to important recommendations of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report. He argues:

These kinds of processes [the development of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report] tend to be geared towards trying to assuage or satisfy or reduce the anxieties usually of business people and so-called residents – Aboriginal people can never be residents – so in a sense white society gets the accredited version of events and it’s their issues and anxieties that the Government has to respond to. So I thought from the very outset that the whole thing was a bit problematic because, as far as I’m concerned, the underlying issue – the issue underpinning the so-called debate about Northbridge – was the desire of people within the business community to find a satisfactory or legitimate mechanism for, in a sense, banning Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal young people, from Northbridge.

To illustrate his point further, he recalls Operation Sweep in 1995-96, which saw the police use the CWA to pick up young people at 4pm on a Saturday afternoon and other “mad stuff”. He insists that the right of indigenous people to be in Northbridge is the bigger issue that needs to be addressed, contending that:

The hidden agenda – hidden behind this concern about antisocial behaviour, children at risk – was a traditional anxiety about Aboriginal
people in public space. And I think the dominant discourse … has been about that.

The State Manager of MA points out that the State Government did not provide any funding to address the welfare of the young people apprehended. She argues that the voice of indigenous people had been silenced in order to enable a moral boundary to be drawn between the two communities, which then gave Dr Gallop the pretext to exclude indigenous youth from the precinct. She comments:

It’s very hard not to feel cynical and to think that the curfew in itself was simply a vote gatherer, because Mr and Mrs Public will say, well of course those children shouldn’t be in the city – I mean they absolutely should not – and the Premier is being good and strong and saying, ‘Out you go, you’re not allowed to be there’, and then that becomes, ‘And they are causing all of the problems and therefore Northbridge will be better when we do this’.

The discourse about indigenous youth in Northbridge is reminiscent of what Herman & Chomsky (1988, 37) refer to as “worthy” and “unworthy” victims. My analysis has demonstrated how the discourse relating to indigenous youth was dominated by news stories that invoked the moral order in order “to praise the heroes who uphold it and bludgeon the villains who defile it” (Pauly 1999, 147). I have demonstrated that indigenous people typically do not compete for access to the media on a level playing field; that some members of the WA community, consequently, have a much greater power and capacity to mark out the moral boundaries that establish what is good and bad, while others,
such as the indigenous community, are denied a voice or, even, ridiculed.

I am not seeking to suggest that the perceived hostility of the ‘mainstream’ public towards indigenous youth in Northbridge is entirely without cause. There are very real problems affecting indigenous youth in Northbridge; some are itinerants, homeless or involved in drugs and violence. As Former Editor (A) of *The West Australian* commented, “I’m not interested in seeing Aboriginal kids stereotyped, but … it’s very hard to stick up for these kids that are taking part in antisocial behaviour”.

Former Editor (B) defends the position the newspaper took under his editorship in relation to indigenous youth in Northbridge on the grounds that they were seen to be the problem. He said:

> If these people are, as they appear to be on the facts available, the prime cause of intimidation and so forth in the area, then I don’t have an issue with it; I’m not going to hide it, and I’m certainly not going to be intimidated by the political correctness of the day.

However, as Trigger (1995, 120) points out, to raise the matter of racial reporting,

> [Is] not to glibly ignore that there are certain realities at the root of much media coverage – including criminal behaviour among Aboriginal people in some contexts. … It is to recognise the fashion in which newspaper headlines … can sensationalise such matters and thereby reinforce a process of crudely racist sentiments being focused upon Aboriginal people as a general category.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) Thus Meadows (1987, 111), for example, argues that “journalists must admit responsibility for sensationalising Aboriginal issues – and resist the temptation”. 403
That some indigenous youth have engaged in crime is not, therefore, reason to draw general inferences about the indigenous community and the risk that they pose in Northbridge; still less is it reason to present these inferences to the readership as ‘fact’. Yet these inferences informed the framing of the Northbridge curfew story, which resulted not only in the negative stereotyping of indigenous youth but also in an inappropriate policy response from the State Government. As the CRC researcher argues:

There are issues with Aboriginal youth, and the Aboriginal community generally doesn’t want to see six- and seven-year-olds on the street, but there are mechanisms for dealing with that, [they] have always been there. But these are policy issues; [it’s about] providing welfare support to these families, resourcing Aboriginal agencies; it’s not a policing issue. It’s not about more police. There are enough bloody police [in Northbridge]. … A curfew reinforces in the public mind that there’s a real danger, that’s we’re all at risk, and I don’t think that’s the case in actual fact. I don’t think Northbridge is uniquely bad. … There’s a cynicism about [the curfew], because it still reinforces the view – even though the Government may say sotto voce, look we’re not doing anything new – that the problems are about Aboriginal kids and that removing them is a legitimate thing to do.

His finding recalls the observation made by Jewkes (2004, 141) whereby “the dual outcomes of [the media’s] portrayals of crime and violence are heightened public anxieties and a greater public mandate for increasingly punitive punishments”. The Government responded to indigenous young people in Northbridge with a ‘get-tough’ approach enforced by the police, while at the same time fuelling public anxiety about the risk posed by these youth. As The West Australian’s State
Political Editor rightly points out, the introduction of a curfew in Northbridge is an extreme measure by any standard. He comments:

To say that people have to be away by a certain time is incredible. And they [can do it] because it’s about Aboriginals. To implement something so radical on a particular group you are creating a perception that something radical needs to be done to stop this group being a problem. And people hear that there’s a curfew and they say, hey, a curfew, it must be terrible; they see Aboriginal people in Northbridge and they cross the street or run away. So you’ve got to question how much damage a curfew like that is doing.

Far from dispelling the negative perceptions of Northbridge as the report’s author had hoped the report would do, it is my contention therefore that the Premier’s framing of the story exploited Western Australians’ perceived fear of indigenous youth for political gain. According to political scientist Edelman (1971), this is a popular tactic. He finds that, “By personifying the threat, [the politician] appeals to the strong temptation already noted among anxious people to see conspiracies rather than complex causes” (82). Iyengar & Kinder (1987) make a similar point when they argue that those news stories focusing on individuals or on specific groups may make the public see a given issue as a problem arising from those particular individuals or groups, rather than one requiring social or government action. As discussed above, the introduction of the curfew and surrounding discourse had the effect of channelling the anxieties of the electorate into hostility towards indigenous youth while the “fundamentals” of Northbridge were ignored.

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34 As I have discussed throughout this thesis, however, the ‘curfew’ was in reality a curfew in name only.
There is an extensive body of literature demonstrating the direct correlation between the level of fear of crime and the amount of crime news in the press (see, for example, Cohen 1972, Chibnall 1977, Hall et al. 1978, Fishman 1980, Graber 1980, van Dijk 1987, Mickler & McHoul 1998, Critcher 2003). As a *New York Times* editorial observed, “A simple truth of human existence is that it is vastly easier to amplify fear than it is to assuage it”. Commenting on the irrational fear of shark attacks, the same editorial noted that 28 children in the United States were killed by falling television sets between 1990 and 1997, which was four times as many as the number of people killed by great white shark attacks in the entire twentieth century. It thus concluded that, “Watching the movie *Jaws* on TV may be even more dangerous than swimming in the ocean”. McCombs (2004, 21) rightly argues:

> When the events and situations of each day are refracted through the professional lens of news organizations, the result often is a picture of the world, a pseudo-environment, that is far from isomorphic with more systematic assessments of that environment.

I believe that the second-hand reality of Northbridge constructed by the State Government and WA press served to increase the ‘mainstream’ public's fear of indigenous youth, with potentially very damaging effects for these young people and without increasing understanding of the causes of crime. As Jewkes (2004, 201) points out, “Crime is constructed and consumed in such a way as to permit the reader, viewer or listener to side-step reality rather than confronting or ‘owning

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up’ to it”. Thus, while the State Government and WA press sought to persuade the majority of Western Australians that measures were being implemented to address crime in Northbridge (by removing indigenous youth), the indigenous community was the target of popular outrage. As Ericson et al. (1991, 358) find, “News touches everyone. It soothes some, pricks others, and wounds a few”. The curfew story may well have “soothed” some members of the Western Australian community; however, it also “pricked” and certainly “wounded” others. It is useful to recall here the findings of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence (HREOC 1991, 115), which noted, “Direct physical violence is only one aspect of the effect on the victim [of racial vilification]. There are also psychological effects to be considered. … [These] effects are cumulative in nature rather than simply derived from any single incident”. The State Manager of MA believed that the Northbridge curfew served to further marginalise indigenous youth and increase their sense of alienation.36

While officially the curfew applied to all young people in Northbridge, it was seen to be targeted at indigenous youth (and this was reflected in the numbers apprehended). This targeting of one section of the Western Australian community suggests to the rest of the population

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36 William F. Pinar (1993) notes that marginality can suggest invisibility, as portrayed in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952). He contends, “As that novel indicates, it is possible to be invisible to others yet not to oneself; by the end of it Invisible Man realizes that he is ‘invisible, not blind’” (563). In the same way, in Northbridge, while indigenous young people as a group were highly visible, as individuals they were invisible; their rights and, even, their legitimacy became invisible as they were subsumed into one homogenous grouping.
that this one group is less worthy than others, making it easier to deny them the respect and rights afforded the rest of the community.\(^37\)

Finally, and most importantly, the curfew itself – because it was a mere repackaging of existing policy based on a distorted picture of reality of Northbridge – failed to address either of its stated objectives of tackling crime or child welfare. It is, therefore, illuminating to recall the observation by Bennett & Entman (2001, 22-23) in relation to ‘moral panics’ that it is not that the “problem \textit{du jour}” is not serious or that people and politicians are not genuinely interested in doing something about it, but that the “outpourings of popular concern … may not be well connected to policy processes or to sensible and enduring governmental responses”. For example, when asked whether the curfew had actually succeeded in preventing indigenous young people from visiting Northbridge, MA’s State Manager said simply:

\begin{quote}
No. I don’t believe so. … Our experience is not that young people are sitting around saying that we better not go into the city and misbehave because we’ll get picked up by the curfew. I mean they don’t think about it.\(^38\)
\end{quote}

\(^37\) In her 1994 study of racial vilification laws, Mahoney (1994) discusses the extreme consequences of “ideas” that promote hatred against an identifiable group, such as the Holocaust.

\(^38\) The State Manager of MA says there are what she calls “offshoots” of the curfew that have been beneficial. She says that the media coverage of her criticisms of the curfew resulted in the Government being forced to look at the question of follow-up care for the young people apprehended. As a result, there is now much better co-ordination of the agencies working on the ground and there are fewer repeat offenders in Northbridge. While MA’s State Manager insists that these beneficial effects “did not fall naturally out of the curfew, but out of our response to the curfew”, the government media adviser says that the curfew illustrates how the media can be used to “achieve better outcomes in government”. He says the media attention ensured the policy was better than it would have been if it had just been a “social worker response” to the problems in Northbridge; because the curfew had a high media profile, the
Who influenced the story of the Northbridge curfew?

In considering the effects of the framing of the Northbridge curfew story, it is useful to recall how the narrative began and the different parties that influenced its course. As I discussed in Chapter 4, *The West Australian* called for ‘Something To Be Done’ when the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report was leaked; then ‘Something Was (Seen) To Be Done’ when the State Government introduced the so-called curfew. In this way, I argue that the WA press, and *The West Australian* in particular, triggered the introduction of the policy when it began the moral panic with its narrative of indigenous youth on the rampage. As discussed above, however, the newspaper representatives interviewed for this study suggested their reportage reflected the assumed concerns of a Western Australian public who was afraid of visiting Northbridge because of the presence of indigenous youth in the precinct. In other words, public opinion influenced the WA press, rather than the other way around. For its part, the State Government suggests the curfew was a response to public opinion, which demanded such ‘tough’ action from government. The State Government also claims, therefore, that it was driven by public opinion. Notwithstanding these assertions, it is clear that public opinion does not exist in a vacuum; the way in which information is accessed or mediated shapes it. According to the Anti-

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Government had an interest – or stake – in ensuring that it would work and had to ensure it got the necessary follow up. Further, according to a senior official with the OCP, the curfew’s high political profile galvanised the police into “doing their job” and exercising the powers they already enjoyed.
Discrimination Board of NSW (2003, 4), this is a “two-way process” involving the media and public opinion; I would argue that it is in fact a three-way process including government which, together with the media, influences how public opinion is formed.

It is not clear who triggered the framing of the Northbridge curfew story. I share the frustration of Gandy (1998, 194), for example, who finds that “the causal links between media use and social perceptions are … maddeningly complex and contradictory”. What is clear, however, is that by framing the Northbridge report as it did, The West Australian was not simply reflecting public opinion but was propagating particular understandings of the issue, which in turn determined perceptions of what needed to be done. Golding & Middleton (1979, 19), for example, contend that the media do not need public support for a moral panic to develop because “in the long term media coverage not only moulds public opinion, to all intents and purposes it is public opinion, or at least that visible version of it to which politicians and administrators respond”. In other words, the State Government would consider the WA press to be a ‘mirror’ of public opinion, even if it is not. Lang & Lang (1983, 24) make a similar observation, suggesting that the media present political actors with a “looking-glass” image of how they appear to the public. Thus, McQuail (1994, 371) contends that it is often for the benefit of the “bystander public” that “political actors … frame many of their actions”. 
My research, however, finds the State Government's interpretation of media reportage is less conclusive than Golding & Middleton et al. would suggest. For example, a senior official with the GMO said that the State Government uses a variety of means to gauge public opinion, including focus groups and Parliamentarians' one-on-one contacts. He said this was because “many of [the Government's] messages don’t get through [in the media], people tend to fixate on certain ones and others get lost. So, media is not seen as a barometer”. However, the GMO official said that the State Government “would obviously take notice of a media campaign – we’d be crazy not to”. According to the ABA (2001, 77), “newspapers … are the greatest influence on politicians and opinion leaders, while television is most influential in shaping the general public’s views”.39

The editors of the WA press also suggest that the question of influence in the curfew story presents a circular argument, with no obvious starting point or driver.40 Former Editor (B) of The West Australian, for example, commented:

I think ‘The West’ basically holds itself up as a mirror of middle Australia. Does it influence public opinion? I have no doubt it does. Equally, is it influenced by public opinion? I have no doubt I was; I have no doubt my predecessor was and my successor is. You’ve got to actually find points

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39 The senior official with the OCP certainly believes the WA press is influential in determining government policy. He points to the so-called ‘Peter the Rabbit’ case which, he argues, the DCD failed to address “until it was on the front page of The West and then something happened”. ‘Peter the Rabbit’ refers to the case of an indigenous boy who was a ward of State and was named by The West Australian in August 2005. See Chapter 2, footnote 23.

40 Hall et al. (1978, 52) also refer to the “circle” out of which moral panics develop.
in the argument to say who is doing the influencing because I think no one body drives an issue *per se*; things tend to roll and build on themselves, and therefore both parties come into play and go through.

Critcher (2003, 13) also finds that moral panics involve a “circuit of communication” between the mass media, claims makers and the political elite, contending that, “If enough of these decide there is an issue and that action is required, a moral panic becomes possible”. Thus, as I noted above, the support of public opinion is not required because it can be constructed. This, in turn, recalls Gandy’s (1998) important observation as to the influence of the media on public policy. He laments that, “Political scientists have paid relatively little attention to the influence of media on the development of the social perceptions which are at the heart of racially sensitive public policy” (222).

I find Entman (1991) to be most helpful in seeking to determine the “circle of influence” involved in the framing of the Northbridge curfew story. He argues that, “News organizations shape their reports to elicit favorable reactions from readers and viewers, and the anticipated reactions of the public also affect the rhetoric and actions of political elites, who are the primary ‘sponsors’ of news frames” (7). It is my contention that the WA press and the State Government framed the story of the Northbridge curfew around criminal indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ because both parties (rightly) believed the story would appeal to their readership/electorate; not because they believed
their audiences had driven them to this action. In this case, the business model of the media (where audience numbers translate into advertising dollars) and the opinion poll-led reactivity of modern politics coincided in a result that was a win/win for both parties. The framing of the curfew story was made possible thanks to the ability of the elite – or at least the ‘media savvy’ members of the community – to construct a second-hand reality for a Western Australian public opinion, which both the State Government and WA press frequently invoked but did not endeavour to keep fully informed.
CONCLUSION

TELLING A DIFFERENT STORY

When I first embarked upon this study, I wanted to know how the WA press could have joined the State Government in constructing a fable about a fictitious policy in Northbridge that criminalised indigenous youth and risked further damaging community relations in Western Australia. Some three years later, my question now is: how could it have been otherwise?

My research found that the recommendations to news media of two nationwide inquiries – the RCIADIC and the HREOC’s National Inquiry into Racist Violence – which more than 15 years ago drew attention to the prevalence of uninformed, stereotyped reporting about indigenous people, have had little, if any effect. Indeed, the media professionals I interviewed rejected them on the grounds of journalistic ‘objectivity’, arguing that the same principles should apply to all reporting. Former Editor (B) of *The West Australian* explained the news media’s position vis-à-vis these recommendations most eloquently when he said, “It would be moral cowardice to bow and scrape to the political correctness that says you can’t report this because you know it’s just going to damage the public perception of these people”.¹ However, at the same time, the participants in this study said they faced particular challenges

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¹ As discussed in Chapter 1.
when reporting on indigenous affairs, particularly as regards access to ‘ordinary’ indigenous people and issues arising from mutual distrust and cultural difference. It is clear that these challenges necessarily preclude journalists from applying the same principles they use when reporting about non-indigenous Western Australians.

My research also found that because the WA press categorise indigenous people on the grounds of ‘race’ – as the homogenised ‘other’ – they fail to portray them as ‘ordinary citizens’ in the routine reporting of everyday life in WA. This drawing of boundaries between Western Australians on the basis of a social construct, rather than on socio-economic or other factual points of difference, makes the indigenous Western Australian, whom the non-indigenous Western Australian may ‘know’ only through sensationalist media reportage, an easy target for stereotyping. I have demonstrated how a stereotype on the grounds of ‘race’ becomes ‘common sense’ or ‘social fact’; consequently, deviant or criminal behaviour becomes something inherent in the racial identity of indigenous people. The race of the group does not even need to be specified for the translation from stereotype to social fact to occur; it is simply understood. Thus, when the Premier, for example, said the curfew applied to all youth of a certain age because they were “a
nuisance to themselves and to others”, it was understood that he was in fact referring to indigenous youth only.²

While the overwhelming majority of media professionals that I interviewed insisted that they recognised that the Northbridge curfew was nothing but a re-branding exercise designed to exploit negative feelings towards indigenous youth for political gain, such scepticism was not apparent in their reportage. One of the reasons for this anomaly, I discovered, was to be found in the routines of news gathering, which left journalists more inclined to use the State Government and other ‘media savvy’ groups such as Northbridge business owners as sources of information, rather than the people working on the ground in Northbridge who had less understanding of what the news media require. I found, therefore, that despite journalists’ assertions to the contrary, the Government and groups that enjoyed easy access to the WA press necessarily influenced reportage more than those groups that were less well resourced. It is hard to conceive of any source other than the Government, for example, with sufficient resources or influence to be able to generate the same level of coverage about a pseudo-policy such as the curfew. Indeed, my discussions with media professionals about news routines demonstrated that government media advisers with the expertise and resources to provide newsworthy material in a most efficient and expedient manner would always represent a most

² See discussion about “new racism” in Chapter 1.
appealing source of information for journalists under pressure to provide good copy to tight deadlines. Thus, my research revealed, as Husband puts it, the “distressing truth” that “nice people can discriminate” as a result of “the unthinking continuation of routine organisational practices that in their effect can be discriminatory”.³ My content analysis further revealed, as Fowler (1991, 22-23) asserts, that privileged sources provide the press with “modes of discourse which already encode the attitudes of a powerful elite”. I discovered repeated instances where the WA press used the same language and labels as the Government.

A further reason for the discrepancy between what the journalists wrote about the curfew and what they said in interview resides in the very sophisticated media management machine that the State Government has in place to ‘feed the chooks’. The curfew story was crafted by a senior government media adviser who was considered to be not only the leading strategist in the GMO, but also an individual who was very politically astute and who enjoyed more influence with the Premier than most Cabinet Ministers. By his own reckoning, the media adviser immediately recognised the political mileage the Government would gain from a curfew in Northbridge. It had the potential to solve many problems in one stroke: The Government was down in the polls and about 18 months out of an election. It was under pressure from

³ Professor Husband was talking at a seminar that I attended on “Racism in the Public Sector” in Perth, November 2003.
“powerful interest groups” to “do something” about Northbridge⁴ and its new cannabis legislation was attracting negative media attention. At the same time, The West Australian was reportedly pushing for “something … to be done” about indigenous young people. The newspaper’s ‘common sense’ reporting of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report provided all the ingredients of a ‘moral panic’ to which the State Government could easily be seen to respond. As a senior official with the OCP stated, “There was a … political appetite to do something like this”. Thus, the media adviser crafted the story of the Northbridge curfew and ensured it had widespread moral appeal; as he said, no-one could take issue with the moral argument that young children should not be out alone in Northbridge at night. At the same time, the curfew provided all the ingredients of a good story. It was based around crime, the number one news staple in a city whose residents fear crime more than do residents in any other Australian capital,⁵ and it played out in Northbridge, which is reportedly Perth’s crime ‘hot spot’. The story also provided copious opportunities for the WA press to dramatise and sensationalise by focusing on children as young as six or seven out in Northbridge after dark.⁶ The principal actors in the story were indigenous youth, known to provoke hostility among Northbridge

⁴ According to the CRC researcher, the curfew was a response to pressure from “powerful interest groups”, primarily Northbridge business.
⁵ As noted by a senior official with the media department, WA Police Service, Chapter 2.
⁶ As noted by the State Manager of MA, only a handful of children that age had, in fact, ever been picked up. See Chapter 2, footnote 21.
business and to intimidate visitors to the entertainment precinct.

Further, the time was ripe; hostility towards the indigenous community was at a peak following the closure of the Swan Valley Nyoongar Community camp and the Gordon Inquiry into sexual abuse in indigenous communities. Neither did the story require any explanations about what the policy actually involved or any analysis of the causes of crime in Northbridge.

The targeting of criminalised indigenous youth and the irresponsible ‘other’ simply ‘made sense’; it was a logical conclusion to decades of negative stereotyping about indigenous people in the WA press. As Scheufele (1999, 116) argues, “The frames that are most accessible are the ones that are most easily available and retrievable from memory”. The fact that some indigenous young people had been engaged in crime only made it easier for general inferences to be drawn about the indigenous community as a whole and the risk they posed in Northbridge. As *The West Australian* reporter who ‘broke’ the story about criminal indigenous youth in Northbridge said, “The issue of Aboriginal kids [is] the most pivotal issue with regard to Northbridge. … Even if that’s not a real fundamental cause of problems, but people think it is, that still affects the public debate”. In other words, he framed his story around criminal indigenous youth not because these “Aboriginal kids” were responsible for the crime in Northbridge, but because he
believed his readership was more concerned about the presence of large groups of indigenous youth on the streets. Thus, my research found that the WA press reportage, on the instigation of a highly skilled media adviser, drew, in the main, on a familiar and predictable narrative that might perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotyping and prejudices, while at the same time provoking moral outrage among those readers who have no alternative sources of information. The assumptions of both the government media adviser and the WA press regarding the story’s appeal proved correct, with some 80 per cent of the public expressing support for a policy which provided nothing new; neither extra powers for the police nor additional resources for the organisations working on the ground with young people in Northbridge.

As a result of deadlines, historical knowledge, experience, personal values or even the conditions attaching to a leaked story, journalists frequently failed to check government stories with alternative sources or undertake sufficient research before submitting their copy. This explains the discrepancies between stories written at the time of the curfew announcement and those written later. As a result, the WA press overwhelmingly failed to see that the curfew was a case of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’ because they either misunderstood or ignored particular dimensions of the debate. This truncated approach to news gathering allowed the Premier to maintain the moral high ground.
throughout the narrative, to avoid answering the very real criticisms of the curfew policy and, even, to cast aspersions upon his critics. The major omissions evident in the reportage of the WA press included:\(^7\)

- Failure to ask the Premier who had condoned the presence of children in Northbridge at night;
- Failure to challenge the Premier to substantiate his claim that indigenous leaders were sending “their children down the wrong path”;
- Failure to state explicitly that the curfew was an old policy dressed up as a new initiative; that the police already had the powers to pick up young people at risk under the CWA, and that it did not provide any additional resources to the welfare workers on the ground;
- Failure to acknowledge that, with the exception of Northbridge business, all parties concerned with the precinct (and others, including the ALP-WA) had raised a range of concerns about the curfew. The vast majority of these critics were non-indigenous and those indigenous representatives who did criticise the curfew never did so on the grounds that it was appropriate for young people to be out alone in Northbridge at night;
- Failure to challenge the Premier’s dual discourse regarding crime/child welfare;

\(^7\)This is not to suggest that all the journalists involved were responsible for all these omissions. This list covers the entirety of omissions that became apparent as a result of my analysis of the WA press reportage as a whole during the period under review.
• Failure to question what happened to the young people after they were apprehended and how they were being “turned around”;

• Failure to reveal that the majority of crime in Northbridge is perpetrated by non-indigenous males aged 18 to 35 years;

• Failure to challenge the Premier to detail the initiatives promised as part of a “broader package” for Northbridge;

• Failure to assert the right of indigenous young people to be in Northbridge (provided they, like anyone else, follow legal norms of conduct);

• Failure to follow up on the Premier’s promise of alternative activities for young people and improved amenity for the precinct as well as “new programs” to address family dysfunction and the underlying causes of disadvantage;

• Failure to reveal that the so-called curfew had been developed single-handedly by a senior government media adviser without any discussion even in Cabinet;

• Failure to follow up on the Nyoongar Patrol’s concerns regarding the lack of resources to deal with the additional number of young people being apprehended as a result of the increased police activity;

• Failure to investigate MA’s claim that more indigenous young people were being picked up as a result of increased police activity;
• Failure to investigate the claim of Northbridge business that the curfew had “noticeably improved” the atmosphere in Northbridge;
• Failure to address the issues arising from the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report, especially the need for alternative activities for young people;
• Failure to differentiate between antisocial behaviour and crime;
• Failure to challenge the Premier’s definition of Northbridge as an adult entertainment area while at the same time seeking to attract ‘families’ back to the precinct.

Conversely, my research found that where journalists approached several different sources, as for example in the case of the article “Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt”, this led to a wide range of questions being raised.⁸ Indeed, this article led The West Australian to present a very different frame of the curfew story from that employed previously (or subsequently). Arguably, the most striking example of the impact of proper research on reportage is to be found in the articles by Pennells in The West Australian. When he was first leaked the curfew plan, he described the proposal as a “radical move” in his front-page story; a few months later, in an opinion piece on page 20, he condemned the curfew as “a policy that had been in place unofficially for

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⁸ “Child curfew bid branded offensive political stunt”, The West Australian, 16 April 2003, 6, discussed in Chapter 5.
Pennells' more-informed article came too late to undo the damage that had already been done; for there is no doubt that the constructed story of the Northbridge curfew did indeed have significant consequences beyond fuelling readers’ anxieties about indigenous youth in the precinct. As Phillip Adams observes in his article "Weapons of Mass Delusion", how questions of race are reported have "an enormous capacity to make a real difference to not only the character of our community but to the lives … [of] ordinary women, men and children who will always be the personalised victims of race hatred and racial prejudice". My research has demonstrated how the framing of the curfew story drew moral boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous Western Australians, sending a clear message about who is ‘one of us’ and who is not. The overwhelming public support of the curfew, which was based on a distorted picture of reality of crime in Northbridge, demonstrated that the majority of Western Australians decoded this message according to the newspapers’ – and the Government’s – preferred reading.

It is noteworthy that none of the press articles sought to dispel the readership’s fears of indigenous youth and Northbridge, nor to illuminate the debate by pointing to the various cultural differences that might give
rise to concerns among the non-indigenous community, for example that it is customary for indigenous teenagers to look after their younger siblings or to gather in large groups. Further, by conforming to its readership’s perceived pre-existing fears and prejudices, the WA press effectively endorsed a system of spatial apartheid in Northbridge. As the CRC researcher so eloquently commented, “[The curfew] reinforces the view – even though the Government may say sotto voce, look we’re not doing anything new – that the problems [in Northbridge] are about Aboriginal kids and that removing them is a legitimate thing to do”. In other words, targeting the indigenous community in this way suggests that they are less worthy than non-indigenous Western Australians and that it is acceptable to deny them the respect and rights afforded the rest of the community.

The development of the curfew story and its subsequent success were clearly dependent upon the individuals involved. My research found, for example, that the different editors who held the reins during the period under review heavily influenced The West Australian’s reportage of the Northbridge curfew. While the focus of the narrative of both newspapers remained unchanged throughout the period, namely indigenous youth running wild, it was only under the current editor, Paul Armstrong, that The West Australian fully adopted the Government’s framing of the curfew story. Under the Former Acting Editor, for example, The West
*Australian* initially adopted a sceptical approach saying the curfew had to prove its effectiveness in dealing with the root causes of social disadvantage; by her second (and final) editorial, the newspaper dismissed the curfew’s professed welfare objective, asserting that the Government was interested only in responding to complaints from Northbridge business.\(^\text{11}\) *The Sunday Times*, on the other hand, repeated the Government’s framing of the story throughout the period under review, even against the advice of senior staff and despite the fact that one of its columnists had first-hand background information about the curfew.

It is clear that the individual journalists also influenced the framing of the curfew story, depending upon their networks of sources, interests, level of expertise in a given area, and so on. For example, the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report became a crime story rather than, say, a welfare one because the reporter who covered crime stories at *The West Australian* happened to have a particular interest in the precinct. As a result, the sources used to tell this initial chapter of the story, which provided fertile moral ground for the subsequent curfew, were Northbridge business representatives and the police. It is reasonable to suggest that the outcome would have been quite different had the initial Northbridge report been covered by, for example, Reporter (A) using her

\(^{11}\) “Youth curfew is only the start”, *The West Australian*, 1 July 2003, 14; “Girls show up double standard”, *The West Australian*, 14 July 2003, 18.
network of sources (primarily youth and welfare organisations). There was also a marked difference in the level of analysis when general news reporters took over the coverage of the curfew story. This lends support to Gans’ (1980) finding that rounds people are less exposed to government spin than general news reporters. He argues:

> Experienced beat reporters seem to be able to escape co-optation, even while they enjoy being flattered with invitations and unpublishable secrets; and they learn to endure a politician’s wrath when his or her flattery does not stave off a critical story. … General reporters [who, on the other hand, are] transient and unprepared visitors … often observe only the dramatic incident, not the routine social process. In short, they see highlights (134/140).

The level of analysis of the curfew story also reflected the individual reporter’s level of experience in the area. The reportage by the two reporters at *The West Australian* with responsibility for the youth and social affairs rounds is a case in point. Gauntlett was able to draw on a much more extensive range of contacts working with indigenous youth in Northbridge and her historical knowledge of the area necessarily informed the questions she asked. Magill, on the other hand, left unchallenged a number of broken promises by the Premier, which she may have exposed had she been working in the round for a longer period of time.

The curfew story was, of course, very much influenced by the political actors involved. A different Labor Premier, for example, might not have agreed with the media adviser’s curfew idea. The Minister who
participated in this project claimed he “would not have agreed to a media strategy that reinforced negative community attitudes towards Aboriginal youth”. However, Dr Gallop had extraordinary trust in the media adviser and supported his judgement. The Minister hinted that the media adviser had unusually free rein in dealing with law and order issues, saying that, “law and order is an exception from the point of media management and (the media adviser’s) power”. The fact that the ‘initiative’ risked making scapegoats of indigenous youth was also an anomaly, according to this Minister, who commented that, “Geoff’s incursions into the Aboriginal area were unusual. There was no coherence about what we were doing; they were inconsistent with policies elsewhere”.

Without the support of the WA press, the story of the curfew would never have been told. The curfew was given substance only because it generated the newspapers’ interest and subsequent support. Had it been exposed as a case of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’, dismissed as a mere repackaging of existing policy, or simply ignored, the curfew would have remained an ephemeral idea that travelled no further than the walls of the Premier’s office. As Curran & Seaton (1997, 274-275) contend, “Views may become more strongly held because they are reinforced by the media. However views may also wither and die because they receive no public reinforcement”. In other words, the WA

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12 As discussed in Chapter 3, footnote 41.
press chose to pay attention to the curfew story. It supported the Government in constructing the fable because it was in its own interests to do so, not because the Government coerced it into telling the story.

My research found that, on balance, the State Government and the WA press are engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship that results in ‘wins’ and ‘losses’ on both sides. This supports Fairclough’s view (1995, 44-45) that while the media can sometimes appear to be “little more than tools of dominant interests”, overall they are in a “more complex and variable relationship with such interests”. As Lippmann (1922, 10) found so many years ago, “under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond” (emphasis added). The State Government provided the right conditions – a good story – and the WA press responded because it rightly believed the story would appeal to its readership. Far from being cause for surprise, therefore, the WA print media’s support of the State Government’s story of the Northbridge curfew was not only predictable, but also inevitable.
A circuit breaker for WA press/State Government debate on indigenous youth

My research found that the fertile conditions in which the Northbridge curfew story took hold were set long before the government media adviser decided upon his plan. Since long before the RCIADIC, there has been a circular discourse surrounding Northbridge in which the State Government, WA press and ‘mainstream’ public opinion have all played an important role. It is clear that some form of circuit breaker is required to arrest the current cycle of debate and move it forward.¹³ To this end, I set out below a series of recommendations that have arisen from my research, each of which might form the component of a circuit breaker. I address these to the WA press and the State Government.

While the majority of the recommendations relate to the WA press, this does not imply that the news media are more responsible for moving the debate forward, but simply recognises the critical role they play in community relations in WA. As Tiffen (1989, 198) rightly asserts, the

¹³ The pressing need to move forward the current cycle of debate was demonstrated once again in December 2006 when the new WA Premier, Alan Carpenter, issued a media statement announcing the success of the curfew in reducing “juvenile anti-social behaviour” since the curfew was introduced three and half years earlier (Government of Western Australia 2006). Unlike the initial statement announcing the introduction of the curfew (Government of Western Australia 2003), this media statement mentioned the policy only as a means of reducing antisocial behaviour and attending to the welfare of unsupervised children aged 15 and under who are “roaming the area at night”. The media statement does not suggest that the curfew was ever designed to address crime in Northbridge. However, The West Australian, reporting on the Premier’s announcement, runs an article that is framed around the curfew’s apparent success in reducing crime. It includes an image of an adult man, who is clearly not a teenager (The West Australian, 11 December 2006, 11), being taken into a caged police van. The following day, the editorial of The West Australian calls on the Government to extend the curfew to other “areas of concern” (The West Australian, 12 December 2006, 14).
media are “the pivot between the rulers and the ruled”. This does not negate the fact that racism in WA is the concern of all members of the community, in the sense that we are all part of the problem and, by extension, its solution.

I wish to acknowledge that I present the criticisms of the WA press coverage of the story of the Northbridge curfew with the wisdom of hindsight, without pressure of deadlines and with access to all the necessary resources. I am also aware that some of the recommendations that I present may, at first sight, appear impractical given the ‘real life’ conditions of news production. However, I do not believe, for example, that space constraints should mean that newspapers cannot accommodate a broader spectrum of views than is currently case; neither should the unwritten rule that stories be in tune with readers’ beliefs mean that stereotypes should be perpetuated.

Finally, I agree with Cunningham & Turner (1993, 5) who contend that no-one can have a disinterested position vis-à-vis the media as their “social function is so profound, so central, that all of us adopt attitudes towards it which reflect our own interests, our own placement within the power structures of the society, our own cultural politics”. Notwithstanding such caveats, I hope that the following recommendations, which draw on the combined wisdom of the
practitioners who participated in this study – in the WA press and State Government – are of practical relevance in the workplace so that, in future, a different story of Northbridge might be told.

Recommendations for WA press

*Present the entirety of the debate*

It is clear, as Tuchman (1978, ix) argues, that the news media set the frame in which members of a community discuss public issues; that the quality of public debate necessarily depends on the information available. To use the window analogy once again, by reporting some events and ignoring others, the news media open just one of many possible windows on the real world (Ward 1995, 123). All four editors who participated in this study insisted on the need for newspapers to present the full range of views on any given issue. Former Editor (B), for example, said that it was the role of a newspaper “not to limit a reader’s understanding to one particular side of the argument”. The editors found this to be a particularly important consideration for their newspapers given their monopoly status in WA.

My framing analysis of the reportage of the curfew story, however, demonstrated that the WA press failed to provide Western Australians with the entirety of the debate surrounding Northbridge. For example, not once did the WA press give a voice to anyone who would contradict
the Premier’s moral argument and say that it was inappropriate for young people to be out on the streets at night, but that the curfew was still misplaced for any number of different reasons. As Schudson (1995, 223) asserts, “Journalists would do well to be of two minds because the world they report is of two (or more) possibilities”.14 It is useful, therefore, to draw on the experience of the Former Acting Editor of The West Australian. She won a Walkley award for her reporting on indigenous affairs in the 1990s precisely because she tried to present all sides of a story. She says:

I can remember as a young reporter [Paul Murray, then editor] talking about the fact that sometimes the paper has a very important role to play in terms of trying to inform the debate, and making sure that the messages that people won’t necessarily hear are aired. I think most Australians would look back on that era [at the height of Mabo debate] now and accept that … nobody lost control of their backyard and a lot of the negative hype at the time didn’t eventuate. … Both sides of the story fortunately were told. And that’s part of the responsibility; you do have a responsibility to tell both sides.

I agree with her comments and suggest that while it may never be possible to know all sides of a story, let alone tell them, a story that presents only the official perspective obviously leaves other dimensions untold.

14 In an ideal world, the WA press would balance the State Government’s versions of reality with more impartial perspectives that enable Western Australians to have a better understanding of the issues under discussion. In practice, however, as Entman (2004, 2) observes, the relationship between government and the news media “is less distant and more cooperative than the ideal envisions”. Entman argues that this is especially the case in foreign affairs.
Access alternative sources

In light of the relative lack of access of “ordinary indigenous people” to the media as I discussed in Chapter 1, it is useful to consider Tiffen’s (1989, 51) contention whereby:

Where there is a source monopoly, which reporters must use on a regular basis, and which has discretion about whether and how to get publicity, source power is greatest, and the dangers of self-censorship, sycophancy and skewed disclosure are likewise greatest. Where there are diverse sources with a strong interest in gaining publicity, which are regularly accountable to media scrutiny, journalists’ power and news quality are greater. Conflict between sources of diverse viewpoints allow more cross-checking and facilitates the disclosure of critical information.

While I do not agree with Herman & Chomsky’s (198, 298) suggestion that the media consciously seek “to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state”, I do believe the WA press should engage with the views and experiences of all Western Australians. It is clear that journalists can frame stories only according to the arguments that they hear; silenced voices are necessarily powerless to influence. I therefore agree with Gans (1980) who argues that the news media need to be “multiperspectival”, that is, to present as many perspectives as possible in the interests of democracy. He argues:

Multiperspectival news will enable people to obtain news relevant to their own perspectives, and therefore to their own interests and political goals, if they have any. In the process, the symbolic arena would become more democratic, for the symbolic power of now dominant sources and perspectives would be reduced (332).

The journalists I interviewed did not believe the Government’s highly sophisticated media management machine influenced them, believing
rather that they saw through the ‘spin’. However, my research found that the WA press was undoubtedly influenced by the Government’s framing of the curfew story because it not only adopted the same position as the Premier, but silenced other voices, notably of those people working with indigenous youth who sought to present alternative frames around the curfew story. My analysis of the press coverage of the Northbridge curfew supports Entman’s (1993) finding that framing plays a major role in the exertion of political power. He argues that, “the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text” (33). Entman (1993) further contends that ‘objective’ reporting effectively supports the elite. He finds that:

> Journalists may follow the rules for ‘objective’ reporting and yet convey a dominant framing of the news text that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation. … Because they lack a common understanding of framing, journalists frequently allow the most skilful media manipulators to impose their dominant frames on the news (56-57).

Thus, I argue that the framing of the Northbridge curfew story is the outcome of the interaction between journalists and their sources. It reflects the success ultimately of the Government (or the media adviser) in convincing the WA press that their frame was the best way to present the story as opposed to, for example, that presented by MA or the Nyoongar Patrol.
Support less experienced staff in dealings with elite sources

Participants in my study considered junior journalists particularly vulnerable to sophisticated media management techniques. In order to counteract spin, the Former Acting Editor of The West Australian said it was crucial that news organisations support their reporters and provide an environment in which they feel confident to discuss any doubts they might have about a given story. Former Editor (A) agreed, saying that journalists felt less pressured into toeing the government line during his time as editor of the newspaper “because they knew [he] would always support them”.

Make time to do homework

According to the State Political Editor with The West Australian, it is “the very nature of being a journo to be an unofficial Opposition … to constantly question”. However, Steve Pennells failed to question the Government when he was leaked the curfew story and, as a result, the government media adviser was able to successfully generate a very positive front-page story about the introduction of the policy in Northbridge.\(^\text{15}\) As discussed above, when Pennells had done some more research, his opinion changed completely. Similarly, The West

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\(^{15}\) The real “battlefield” on which the ideal of the fourth estate must be defended, according to Ward (2000, 159), is in the day-to-day reporting of political news. He argues that, “It is only by spurning the press releases, the made-for-TV soundbites, the off-the-record briefings, and all the other ‘information subsidies’ which politicians and their media minders will routinely provide them that journalists may secure their independence. Here, the untroubled insularity of journalists works against them – and for those governments who will happily fashion the news if they can”.
Australian’s Columnist (B), a staunch opponent of the curfew, initially wrote a column applauding the Premier for his initiative.

These cases illustrate the dangers of quick-reaction journalism where there is a tendency for journalists to allow the agenda to be set and only later reflect enough to work out ‘the real story’ or, at least, to discover that there is another story. Indeed, I believe that the failure of the WA press to publicly recognise the curfew as nothing more than a brilliant marketing strategy derived primarily from a lack of research into what the so-called policy involved and the issues surrounding Northbridge. This lack of research arose principally because of time pressures and looming deadlines, which were major influences militating against considered analysis of issues and in favour of ‘common sense’ reporting. This is a particularly important issue in relation to indigenous affairs, because the journalists who took part in this study said they found that indigenous issues were “more complex” and required “more time” than other areas.

The Sunday Times’ columnist was one of few journalists who made a conscious effort to draw attention to the different layers of the curfew story and condemned the curfew for being a ‘racial cop-out’. She explained:

My column was directed at reminding people why some of these kids are in Northbridge in the first place and reminding why some of them are very antisocial and why some of these kids behave the way they do. … I just wanted to remind people – including Geoff Gallop – why these kids are in the position that they are in. The idea of the Gordon Inquiry was to look at the base problem and the reason they behaved that way, whereas the idea of the curfew is just out of sight, out of mind. That was my view on it and that's why I wrote [the column] the way I wrote it.

Yet, despite this columnist’s knowledge of the issues and her considerable experience in dealing with the senior government media adviser, she failed to realise that there was, in fact, no new policy and saw only the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’. It is useful to consider in this context a point raised by the Former Acting Editor of The West Australian relating to the need to ‘dig hard’ at a story. She said of her work as a rounds person on indigenous affairs:

At the time, it was about making sure that you didn’t prejudge and that no issue was ever black and white, corny as it sounds. I look back now and there are some things which I wish I’d dug harder at. I was probably too blinkered in terms of seeing the good rather than the bad, there are things I’d do differently and I’d do harder, but I think that’s also probably a function of age and a function of having been in a really different role in a newsroom where you think about how to flesh a story out.

The Former Acting Editor also pointed out that time is not always a factor and that politicians and their media advisers should say if they think they have been asked to respond to a query in an unreasonable time period. However, she acknowledged that such candour requires the trust of both parties. She explained:

I think sometimes [Ministers and their Advisers] need to rely on us being upfront, we say we have to have it today or we’re not running it at all; or no, this is something we’re digging on, we can wait … a lot of the time we can. It requires reasonableness on both sides; it requires an
understanding of resources. Give them time – as long as you don’t get your chain yanked.

**Look beyond simplistic angles for reporting issues**

All journalists are faced with the daily task of finding interesting angles to stories in order to appeal to their readership. My research found, however, that the search for a ‘sexy’ frame can result in issues being simplified rather than the ‘true’ picture being presented in all its complexities. According to Former Editor (B), for example:

> One thing the media is very bad at describing is the grey because it’s too easy for journalists to put in a black or a white answer, it’s easy, but when you try to get down to complexities and understand the background behind issues you find there aren’t easy answers.

The Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* made a similar observation, believing that the community as a whole was tending to simplify issues. She commented:

> I think one of the things that we suffer from as a community is a lack of depth in public debate. And I sometimes think that that lack of depth is a result of the fact that we arrive at positions that aren’t particularly well informed. Part of the challenge for newspapers is to take difficult issues and to ask the questions, to look at the good and the bad.

The challenge lies in striking a balance; in recognising that news stories that are interesting and news stories that address issues in all their complexities are not mutually exclusive. For example, in relation to the Northbridge curfew, the WA press could have done a story on the lack of follow up care given to young people apprehended by the police.
This would have had strong ‘human interest’ appeal, while also presenting another side of the story.

**Remember indigenous people are part of readership**

The RCIADIC was concerned about the failure of the WA press to “include Aboriginal people within the community of readers that is addressed” (Dodson 1991). Many of the journalists who took part in this study also failed to include indigenous people among their readership. It is clear that journalists should write their stories in the knowledge that indigenous and non-indigenous people will read them. Equally, it is evident that indigenous people are part of the community and that the WA press should make the effort to include them in the routine reporting of everyday life in WA. As the Former Acting Editor of *The West*

*Australian* comments:

> Part of the challenge is making sure that indigenous affairs is no different from health reporting or anything else – it’s part of the news mix and that’s how it should be. It shouldn’t be something we feel we have to campaign on; it should be part of our society.

**Have full-time indigenous affairs round**

Many of the participants in this study talked about the mutual distrust between the WA press and the indigenous community. The importance of having a full-time indigenous affairs rounds person to build relationships is, therefore, apparent. Both former editors of *The West* *Australian* who participated in this study agreed that it was necessary to have dedicated rounds people to develop relationships, build trust and
“balance” the reportage about indigenous affairs. Asked about her experience in building relationships with members of the indigenous community, Reporter (C) stressed that her success in this area was due to the time she was able to invest in developing relations and in writing ‘positive stories’. She said that this was made possible by the management of *The West Australian* at the time. In this context, it is significant that under the current editor of *The West Australian* the indigenous affairs round has been downgraded to a part-time position.

**Recognise choices in use of frames**

As Harvey’s coverage of the *Northbridge: Shaping the Future* report demonstrated, framing a story with a view to enhancing its news value can lead a journalist to make salient those aspects of an issue that promote fear of particular groups, in this case through the criminalisation of indigenous youth. The overall picture that emerged from subsequent articles around the curfew was one of a group of dangerous ‘others’ on the rampage. Throughout the curfew story, the WA press provided little contextual information to readers about how real or valid the risks from indigenous youth were to the community.

Journalists must recognise that there are choices in the framing of news stories, for example, that they have discretion in what is included and what is excluded in a story; what is made explicit or left implicit, and so
Tilley & Cokley (2005) offer a way forward in assisting journalists to identify the framing choices available to them. In *Unfreezing the frame: Functional frame analysis for journalists and journalism students*, they propose that journalists ask themselves the following five questions before submitting copy: What is the problem here?; Who, or what caused or is blamed for this problem?; What solution is proposed?; What type of frame is this? (For example, factual vs. values); and Who is missing? (That is, what other frames are possible). Through case studies, Tilley & Cokley demonstrate how reference to these questions can help prevent what they call ‘offensive’ framing (78).

**Respect your power**

Through their framing of the Northbridge curfew story, the State Government and WA press determined how Western Australians would understand the issues, how they would look upon indigenous youth in the entertainment precinct, and how they would view these young people’s alleged representatives. At the same time, the story served to marginalise indigenous youth further. As the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW notes in *Race for the Headlines* (2003, 10), “The media play a crucial role in the way that people view the world and their place in it. … Through the media, the reader or viewer can feel connected, or disconnected, to the broader community or society”. My research found, however, that journalists had little awareness of their potential influence.
on their readership’s attitudes and opinions. As the Former Acting Editor of *The West Australian* put it, “You have to respect the power that comes with the tool”. Two former US journalists, Merritt & McCombs (2004, 54) make the point more forcefully, contending that, “Daily and hourly decisions about the media agenda – what to include and how to play it, as well as what to omit – are among the most important ethical questions in journalism”.

**Recommendations to State Government**

*Lead the debate*

My research supported Wolfsfeld’s (2001, 248) observation that, “Drama is often valued over substance [and] political leaders find themselves under increasing pressure to provide short-term solutions to long-term problems”. The CRC researcher, for example, said that the curfew reflected a reactive way of responding and that the Government needed “to try to get a different sort of message out”.

The challenge for the State Government seems, therefore, to be in focusing on the ‘bigger picture’. According to the Minister who participated in this study, the Government could have led the debate and asserted the rights of indigenous youth to be in Northbridge, rather than choosing the damaging route that it did. He pointed to the change in public opinion that he believes the Attorney General, Jim McGinty,
effected vis-à-vis the rehabilitation of offenders. Before the 1990s, Western Australians were not interested in rehabilitation; they just wanted offenders to be locked up and for the key to be thrown away. Under McGinty, however, the debate shifted away from Aboriginal kids and onto what he called the “top end of crime”, such as the Royal Commission into Finance Brokers and corrupt police. However, when Police Minister Michelle Roberts took over the prisons’ portfolio, she went back to the “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” mindset and this pushed the incarceration figures back up to where they had been. In other words, the Premier could have led a different debate, one focused on the rights of indigenous youth, had he chosen to challenge – rather than conform to – popular wisdom.

**Reject policy development by ‘populist hit’**

My research also confirmed the increasing tendency to communicate government policy in terms of media ‘grabs’. For example, the government media adviser felt he was justified in excluding both government and non-government policy-makers from the development of the curfew ‘policy’ because he believed what was required was a “hard-edged law and order response” and not a “social worker response”. However, the work of the State Government with indigenous youth is not a ‘story’; it is – and should be seen to be – part of the routine business of the relevant government agencies. Further, had the
relevant agencies been involved in developing some form of a curfew policy for Northbridge they would have been aware of its racist effect, even if this may have escaped the media adviser’s attention. As MA’s State Manager pointed out, even if the intent of the curfew was not racist, its effect in practice was that indigenous young people were among the majority apprehended. These agencies might also have been more familiar with the RCIADIC’s (1991) recommendation that incarceration should be only the “last resort” for indigenous youth. Hollinsworth (1998, 206), for example, points to WA as one Australian State where this RCIADIC recommendation has clearly not been followed given the “rise in simplistic law ‘n’ order campaigns, mandatory sentencing and other measures which, while not necessarily aimed at indigenous people, impact heavily on them”. Therefore, the Government should discourage the involvement of media advisers in the development of government policy.

*Clarify purpose of Northbridge*

My research found contradictory assessments as to whom exactly Northbridge is catering for. Is it for families, *al fresco* dining, or is it an entertainment area for adults only? On the one hand, the State Government says it wants to “attract families back” to Northbridge¹⁷ but, on the other, it is refusing to provide diversionary activities for young

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¹⁷ As, for example, Eric Ripper, then acting Premier, was reported as having said in “Crime hot spot: Police vow action on Northbridge thugs”, *The West Australian*, 8 January 2002, 11, discussed in Chapter 4.
people because it is an “adult entertainment area”. As the CRC researcher asserts, the confusion is causing tensions within the business community. He explained:

It’s a very odd and very contradictory set of messages that we are constantly given about the place. … It’s a bad compromise between the al fresco dining and then you have the big pubs and clubs, the sex shops and one or two brothels around there, places where people are going to get drunk and shoot up. … I think at the moment there is a tension between the restaurant trade and the night trade.

According to a senior official with the OCP, Northbridge is an adult entertainment area “by and large”. However, according to a police reporter with The West Australian, Northbridge is all about families. He said:

The problem was, as the Government said, as did the police and the traders was, we want families to be able to come into Northbridge on a Saturday night – not at 2 in the morning which we can understand is not entirely appropriate – but certainly say 7.30 or 8 o’clock on a Saturday night – people shouldn’t feel intimidated or they shouldn’t feel that it’s a dangerous place.

There can be no clear understanding of the issues facing Northbridge until this confusion as to the purpose of Perth’s “premier entertainment precinct” is dispelled.

*Attend to the recommendations of the Northbridge: Shaping the Future report*

This report was one of the most comprehensive of its kind and participants in my study who work with young people in Northbridge made frequent references to the important recommendations contained
therein. The report’s author stressed the need “to grow the positives” in Northbridge and not just “manage and police the negatives”. For example, he emphasised the importance of exposing people who have had no first-hand contact with indigenous youth to more positive experiences. He recommended, for example, that the State Government enable indigenous artists to work in Northbridge. He explained:

People don’t tend to think about Aboriginal footballers, amazing though it is; people don’t associate the 18-year-old running around for the AFL side with the 18-year-old running around Northbridge. So, [it is important] to look at things which actually provide a vehicle for people to see [young indigenous people] in a more positive environment, even develop some sort of passing relationship contact. One of the things we [the stakeholders] talked about was the value of having Aboriginal art produced in Northbridge; it would be culturally valuable to get older Aboriginals as well as younger Aboriginals, and they’d be developing their art but it would be in a situation that would draw people in, have a look, have a chat, make a sale. So suddenly you just change the mix. So you say ok, Aboriginals in Northbridge – and they’re very entitled to be in Northbridge – you are doing something actually very constructive and it would also change people’s attitudes.

The CRC researcher also said it was essential that the State Government provide adequate resources to organisations like the Nyoongar Patrol and indigenous welfare organisations to work with indigenous families and young people in Northbridge.

**Concluding comments**

Just as the WA press and the State Government have the power to erect boundaries between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities in WA, so they have the power to break them down.
However, none of the above recommendations serves any purpose unless and until both the WA press and the State Government premise their debate upon the rights of all Western Australians – indigenous and non-indigenous – to be in Northbridge, provided they behave in accordance with the law.

It is beyond the scope of this research to explore the role of parties other than the State Government and the WA press in constructing the story of the Northbridge curfew. However, the role of the indigenous community, and in particular indigenous youth, cannot be overlooked. There is a need for further research to be undertaken into the role that they played in the construction of the distorted reality of Northbridge, if only as a result of their failure to demand that their voice be heard. Many of the media professionals who participated in this study pointed to the responsibility of all members of the community – indigenous and non-indigenous alike – to take a more proactive role in making themselves more accessible to the WA press. They encouraged individuals seeking access to the WA press to endeavour to understand better the organisational requirements and imperatives that the WA press and other news media must observe. In other words, it is essential that all parties in the debate cooperate with each other by respecting the other’s needs. Without such collaboration, a different story of Northbridge can never be told.