

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
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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.

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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.

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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.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABA	Australian Broadcasting Association
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ALP	Australian Labor Party
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRC	Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia
CWA	<i>Child Welfare Act 1947</i>
DCD	Department for Community Development (Government of Western Australia)
DPC	Department of the Premier and Cabinet
GMO	Government Media Office (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
JAG	Juvenile Aid Group (WA Police Service)
MA	Mission Australia (Western Australia)
MEAA	Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance
NSW	New South Wales
OCP	Office of Crime Prevention (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)
PR	Public relations
RCIADIC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
WA	Western Australia