

Addressing anti-Asian racism in news reporting

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

The Commission consistently heard from communities that the media plays a crucial role in combatting racism. Factual and equitable representation of negatively racialised communities is foundational to anti-racist media narratives. It first requires us to acknowledge and tackle the harms of racist portrayals and stereotyping. Portrayals of communities that reinforce racism and stereotypes misguide public perceptions and self-perceptions of negatively racialised communities, while also preventing audiences from accepting anti-racist messages.

This resource presents several case studies of Asian and Asian Australian communities' experiences of systemic racism in news reporting and solutions to address it.



Examples of anti-Asian racism in news reporting: monolithic portrayals and demonisation

This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services [here](#). Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.

This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew.ⁱ Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.

There is great diversity in the experiences, cultures, languages, and faiths of South Asian communities, but news portrayals often reduce communities into monolithic groups with homogenous lived experiences.ⁱⁱ Monolithic portrayals are often used to “other”, demonise, or scapegoat South Asian communities to serve xenophobic and polarising political narratives. These media portrayals exacerbate the intersectional and multilayered forms of racism – including discrimination based on skin colour, xenophobia, and Islamophobia – that South Asian communities face.ⁱⁱⁱ

A recent example is how monolithic portrayals of South Asian communities intersect with rising Islamophobia in the media, and lead to increased racism against Asian Muslim and Sikh communities, as well as other Asian Australians perceived as Muslims. Research shows that Islamophobia has been invoked alongside COVID-19 racism earlier through false claims in the media about Muslim cultural festivals spreading the virus.^{iv} More recently, researchers like Dr Susan Carland have identified

bias and racism in the media coverage of the war in Gaza and Israel’s attacks on Palestinians, which they found have contributed to a 1300% surge in anti-Muslim sentiments and violence in the last months of 2023 alone.^v The drastic increase in Islamophobia resulting from racism in media coverage harms not only numerous Asian Muslim communities, but also other groups, such as Sikh communities, who experience Islamophobia because people conflate their appearance and attire with being Muslim.^{vi}

Similar approaches of monolithic portrayals and “othering” are also seen in news reporting about refugees and people seeking asylum, as well as migrant communities more generally. Particularly, tactics of labelling and creating moral panics are prevalent. For instance, refugees and people seeking asylum are labelled in the media as “queue jumpers” even though they are not breaking the law when seeking refuge.^{vii} As such, rather than accurately identifying rule-breaking behaviours, these labels associate certain groups with unlawfulness based on non-factual and racist beliefs.^{viii}

Media reporting on structural issues, such as youth crime and global humanitarian crises, is also often done without including the appropriate contexts, such as the contexts of structural and racialised economic disadvantage, and the systemic lack of trauma-informed and culturally appropriate supports. Instead, reporting tends to focus on stereotyping youth from negatively racialised communities – such as Vietnamese youth in the 1980s – as delinquents, and refugees and people seeking asylum as risky and capable of swamping the country. These moral panics are often created and amplified through sensationalist media headlines and stories, which put communities at the centre of exaggerated outbursts of public concern.^{ix}

These marginalisation tactics targeting Asian and other negatively racialised communities in the media are conceptually tied to the racist notions that Australia is inherently a white nation. These beliefs seek to enforce white control over the continent and its borders and shores, as well as who is deemed worthy of entering Australia. Tackling racism in the media, and white-centric nationalism narratives, therefore requires us to centre First Nations sovereignty and self-determination in any anti-racism action and advocacy.

Pathways forward – committing to a National Anti-Racism Framework

The Commission heard calls for stronger media regulation and standards, including in digital media and in relation to online hate, to tackle racism. Recommendations include reform that ensures anti-racism media standards are community-informed, enforced, and independently monitored. This also includes establishing adequate moderation and regulation mechanisms across platforms to better protect individuals and communities from online racism.

The Commission also heard the importance of better resourcing community-controlled media outlets, and utilising non-traditional and participant-led research to amplify the perspectives of negatively racialised communities. There is also a need for media organisations to develop culturally safe workplaces to advance culturally safe reporting, and to resource and platform stories that amplify the voices and lived experiences of First Nations and other negatively racialised communities.

Read more about what's next for the National Anti-Racism Framework [here](#).

References

- ⁱ For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.
- ⁱⁱ Ravi Chand, 'South Asians on Screen', *CINESPACE* (Article, 4 July 2019) <<https://www.cinespace.org.au/post/south-asians-on-screen>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Audrey Yue, 'Queer Asian mobility and homonational modernity: Marriage equality, Indian students in Australia and Malaysian transgender refugees in the media' (2012) 8(3) *Global Media and Communication* 269.
- ^{iv} Derya Iner, Ron Mason and Chloe Smith, *Islamophobia in Australia Report- IV* (2014-2021) (Report No 4, Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University, 21 March 2023) <<https://islamophobia.com.au/resources/>>.
- ^v Susan Carland, *A War of Words: Preliminary Media Analysis of the 2023 Israel-Gaza War* (Report, Islamophobia Register Australia, December 2023) <https://islamophobia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IRA_2023-Israel-Gaza-War-Report_Final_V3.pdf> 2.
- ^{vi} Sikh Nishkam Society of Australia, Submission No 44 to the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee, Queensland Parliament, *Inquiry into serious vilification and hate crimes* (2021).
- ^{vii} Giridharan Sivaraman, 'Albanese's cabinet reshuffle is a chance to reset the rhetoric on immigration and multiculturalism', *The Guardian* (online, 31 July 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/31/anthony-albanese-labor-cabinet-reshuffle-immigration>>.
- ^{viii} Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (Free Press, 1963).
- ^{ix} Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Routledge, 1972).