



Challenging Racialised Discourse Project 2018-2021

Quantitative findings from the analysis of 724 media pieces collected over 26 months between April 2018 and June 2020

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Partners:



Australian Government

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Functional definitions

Covert racism (in the media) is difficult to identify as it requires the use of implicit or intertextual meanings e.g. dog-whistling, irony and de-contextualisation.

Dog-whistling: In the context of racism, a technique that relies on stoking racial fears in particular sections of the audience, without using explicit language.

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

Media pieces: newspaper opinion pieces and segments or episodes of television current affairs television shows

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

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

Opinion pieces: the data collected from (digital) newspapers: editorials; 'blog posts' published by columnists in the opinion section of Herald Sun, Courier Mail, Daily Telegraph; race-related articles published in the Commentary section of The Australian; and race-related articles labelled as opinion from Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. We excluded the 'copy and paste' articles from The Australian and readers letters from all publications. Opinion pieces are different from news pieces because they centre the author's opinion, rather than centering factual claims or statements.

Overt racism (in the media) uses explicitly and negatively racialised language or framing.

Race: While there are no valid biological criteria for dividing people into distinct racial categories, the concept of 'race' is a social construct that creates and organises systems of difference.¹ For the purpose of this research, we look at instances where the concept of race is used explicitly (through language) or implicitly (through framing) to infer conclusions about and based on someone's racial background. 'Race' as a producer of difference is commonly used to describe a person's physical features, such as skin colour, hair type and/or colour, body shape or facial features.

Race-related: We use this term to describe **racialised** media content. Sometimes we use the two terms, 'racialised' and 'race-related' interchangeably. The meaning of 'racialisation' is multidimensional. Depending on the context within which these terms are used, they can have different connotations. 'Racialised' has a negative meaning when used as a metaphor for processes of exploitation, domination and subjugation, while its non-negative meaning is reclaimed when used as a metaphor for struggles over meaning and identity.²

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

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

Social commentary: umbrella term used when referring to print, digital and television opinion and commentary in Australian mainstream media. It includes newspaper opinion pieces and television current affairs programmes.

Television segments (or stories) are parts of an episode; for the purpose of our research, we defined television segments as standalone stories, discussions or investigations of a single topic, that are more in depth than a comment by a panel member. We collected either entire race-related episodes (where they discussed one topic), or segments/stories, where one episode discussed multiple distinct topics. Each television data entry point is referred to and counted in our statistics as one 'television segment'.

¹ S Jhally, S Hall & Media Education Foundation, *Race: The floating signifier*, Media Education Foundation, Northampton, MA, 1996.

² H Winant, *Racial Conditions*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994.

Note on the community categories (codes) used in this report. We used functional categories that reflect the language and categorisations used by media in the content analysed. We acknowledge that this method has limitations, and does not always reflect the cultural diversity/heterogeneity of the Australian population. These limitations stem from systemic racism, and a failure on the part of mainstream media to reflect Australia's diversity.

- 'African', 'Chinese' and 'Muslim' were used to describe racial backgrounds. They are used as umbrella terms for African and African-Australian people, Chinese and Chinese-Australian people, and Muslim or Muslim Australians respectively.
- 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples' was used when referring to First Nations (Indigenous) people and communities in Australia. We sometimes use these terms interchangeably.
- 'African American' refers to Black communities in the United States
- 'Jewish' refers to any Jewish people or communities in Australia or abroad.
- 'Middle Eastern' was used when referring to asylum seekers and immigrants from the Middle East geographical region, where there was no mention of their religious background in the media content (for example, if a media piece included Islamophobic sentiments, the code 'Muslim' would have been used instead of 'Middle Eastern').
- 'Other Asian' is an umbrella category that we used when referring to various people and communities whose racial background can be assigned geographically to the Asian continent. Individual Asian countries that did not have a significant number of mentions in our data set were placed under this umbrella category, for statistical purposes. 'Other Asian' here includes the following backgrounds: Indian, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Pakistani, Korean, and media pieces that used terminology such as 'of Asian descent' or discussed a matter related to Asia more broadly. 'Chinese' is a separate category, for statistical purposes, due to a higher percentage of media mentions.
- 'White' as a distinct racial category was only encountered in one media piece discussing 'white South African farmers'. This is an illustration of the colonial-settler system within which the mainstream media still operates, where whiteness, though a social construct, remains unquestioned and unnamed.
- 'Race in general' refers to coverage that discusses race-related matters without mentioning a specific race or racial background.

General findings

Figure 1: Portrayal of race in all opinion pieces analysed

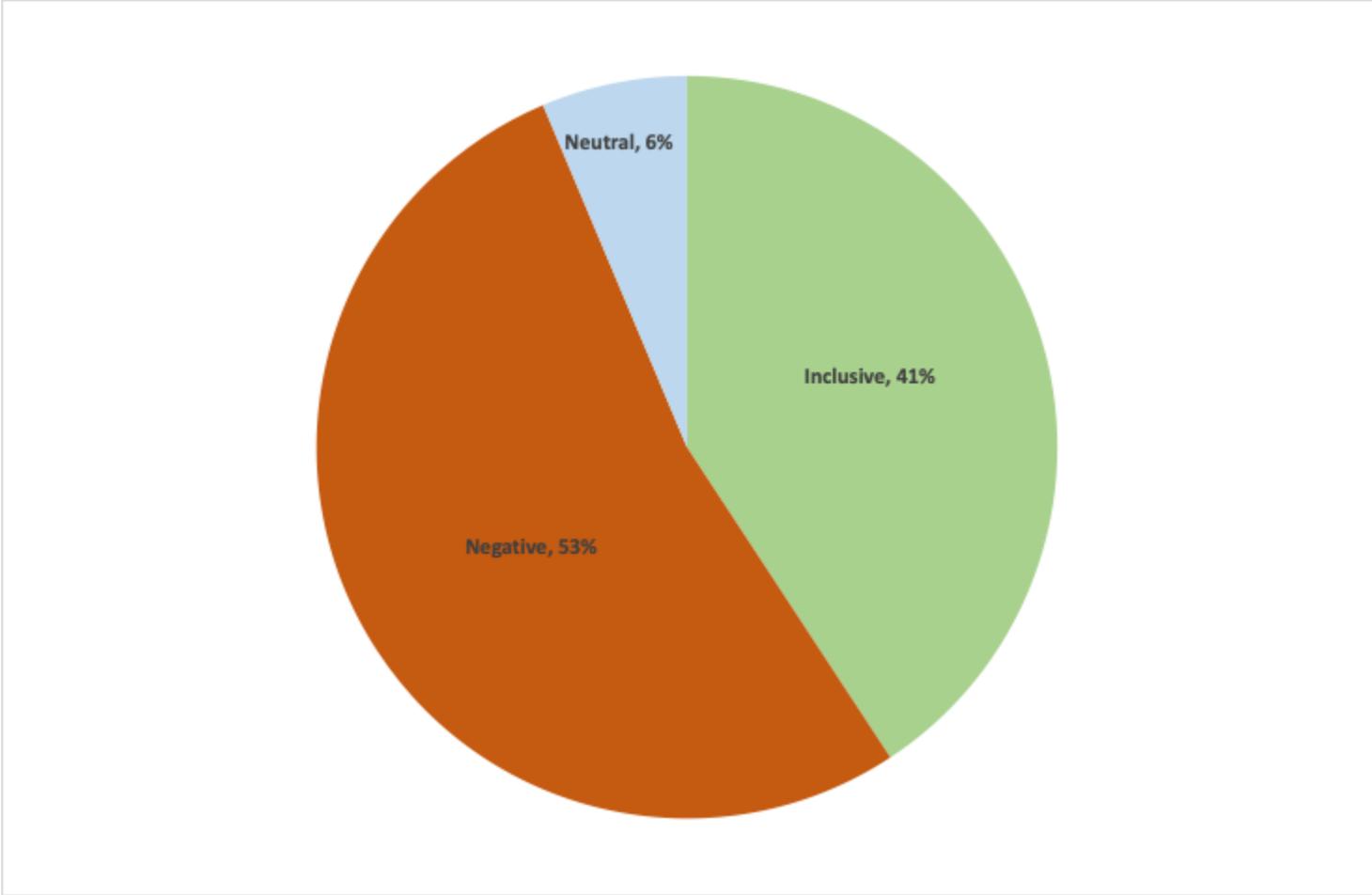
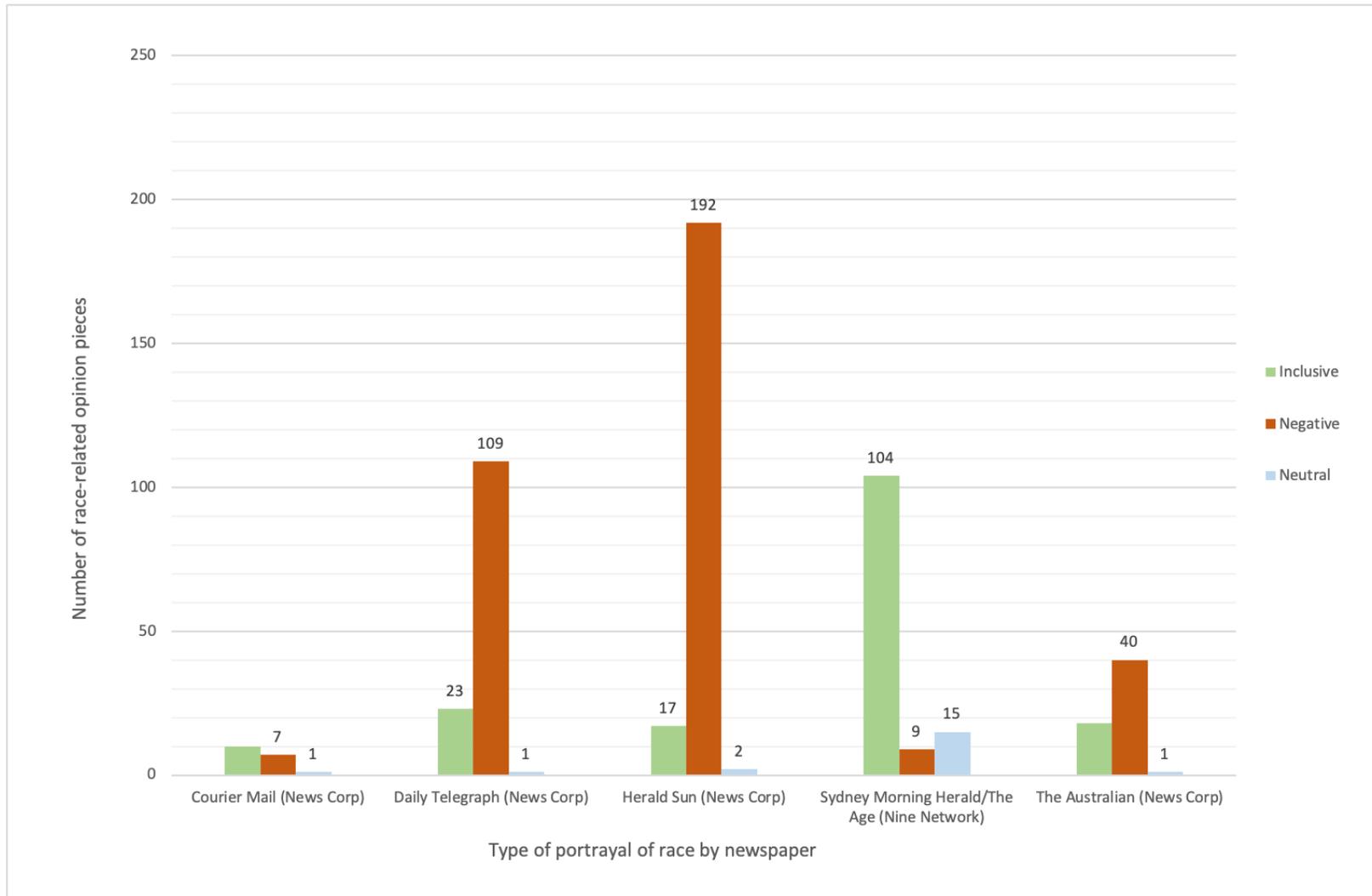


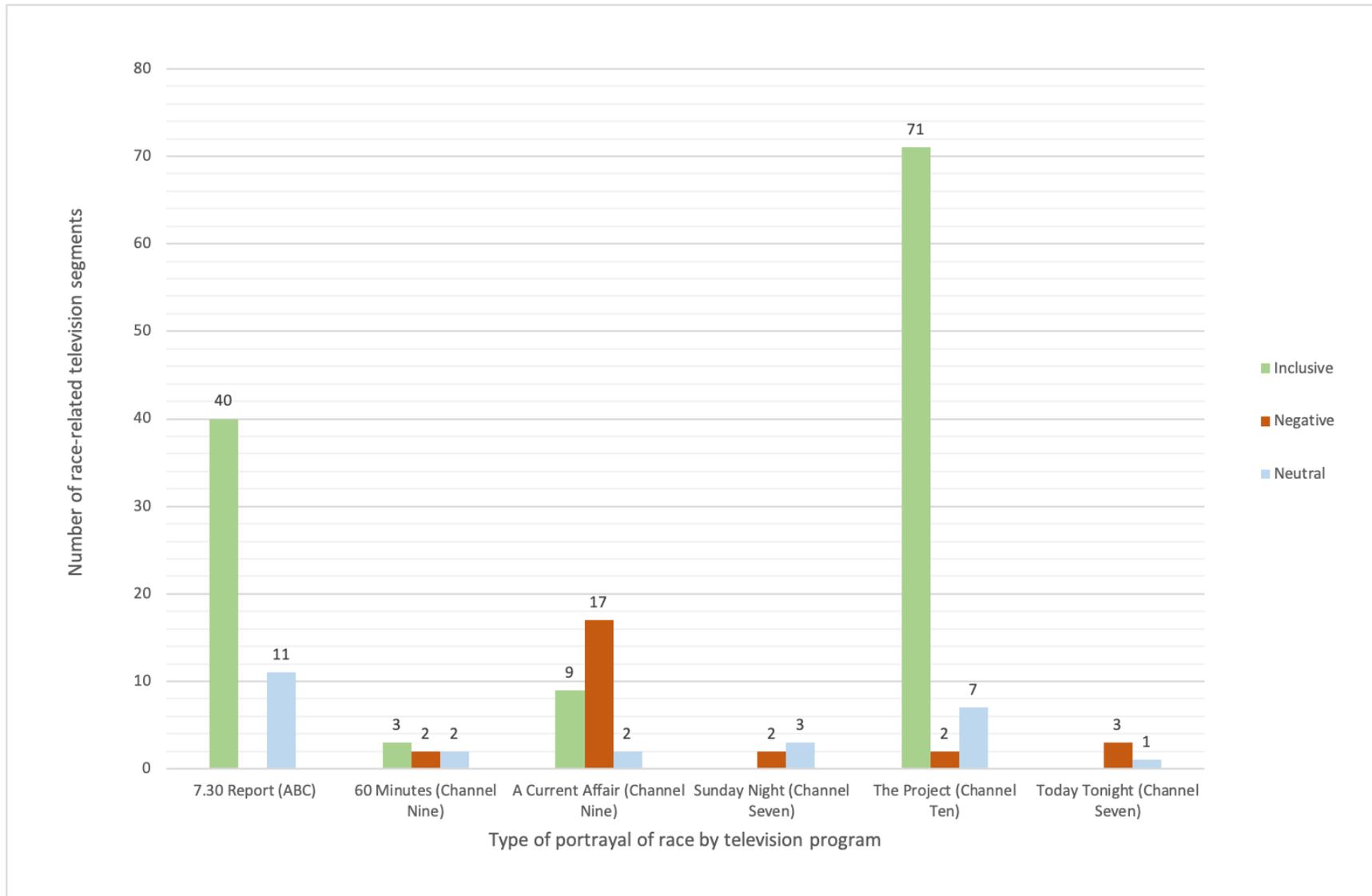
Figure 2.a: Portrayal of race by media agency (Newspapers)



Note on Figure 2.a

One opinion piece can be published across two or more newspapers. For example, a single article published by a Herald Sun columnist, can often be read in The Daily Telegraph and The Courier Mail too. For accuracy, and to avoid duplication, we only counted each opinion piece once and assigned it to the newspaper that hired the respective columnist.

1) Figure 2.b: Portrayal of race by media agency (Television)



Note on Figure 2.b

The Project is overrepresented in our sample, at least in part due to the show's longer running time of 40 minutes, compared to its ABC counterpart, 7.30 Report's 30 minutes. Anecdotally, The Project produces shorter segments compared with 7:30 Report. Another reason for the overrepresentation is The Project's frequency, of 7 episodes per week. The 7.30 Report is broadcast only 4 times a week.

A Current Affair has a running time of 30 minutes, including ads, and is broadcast 6 times a week. Sunday Night and 60 Minutes are weekly programs, with hour long episodes, so they are naturally underrepresented in the sample size. Today Tonight was a nightly, 25 minute current affairs program that aired in Perth and Adelaide. It was cancelled in November 2019, however we chose to include it in the results, as we have monitored it between April 2018 and November 2019.

While Network 10's The Project segments classified as inclusive are not of a comparable investigative quality to ABC's 7.30 Report, due to their different formats, it is clear that both programs stand out through their inclusive coverage on race-related matters. A Current Affair stands out through its predominantly negative coverage.

Figure 3: Portrayal of race by community

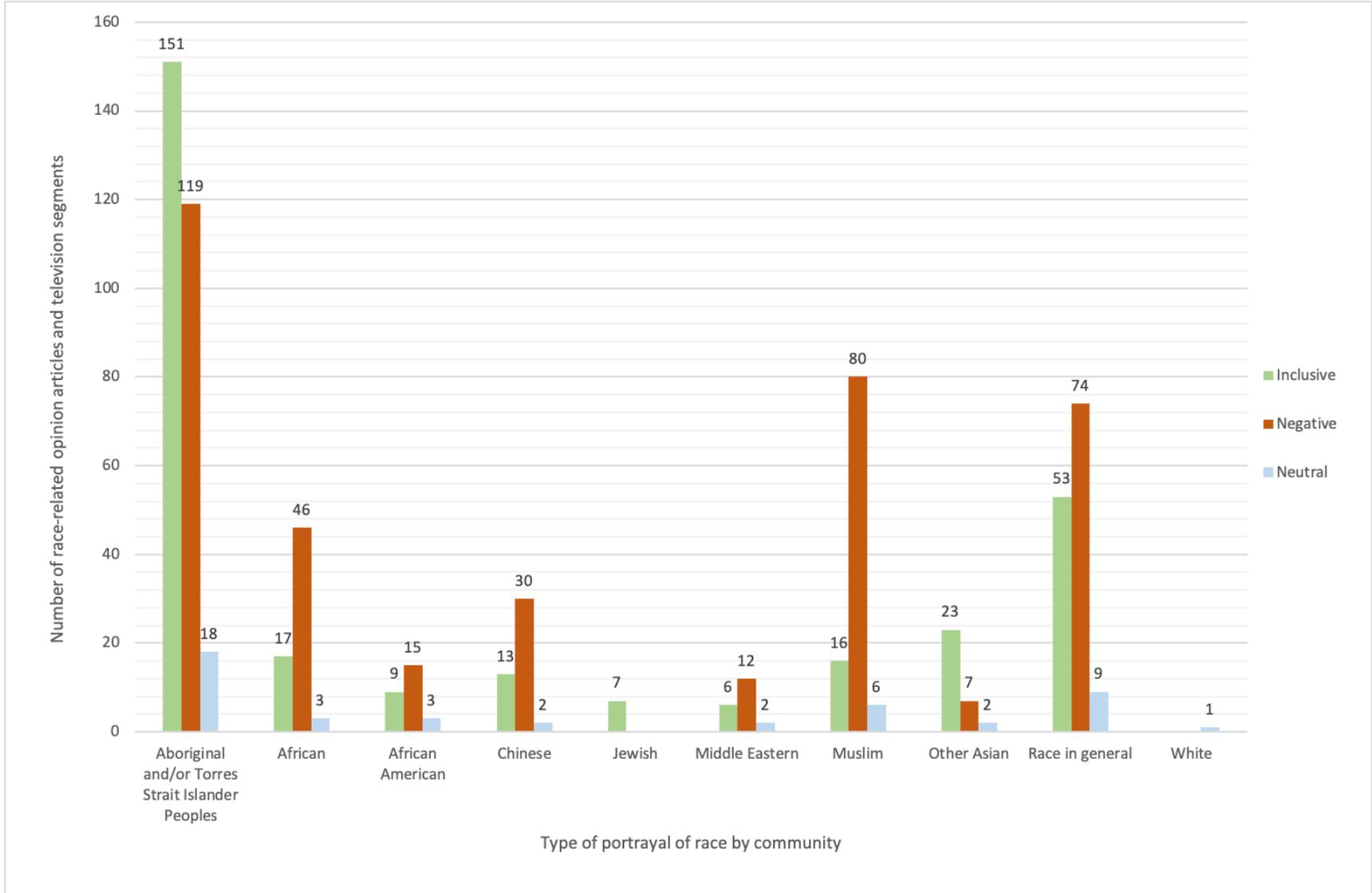
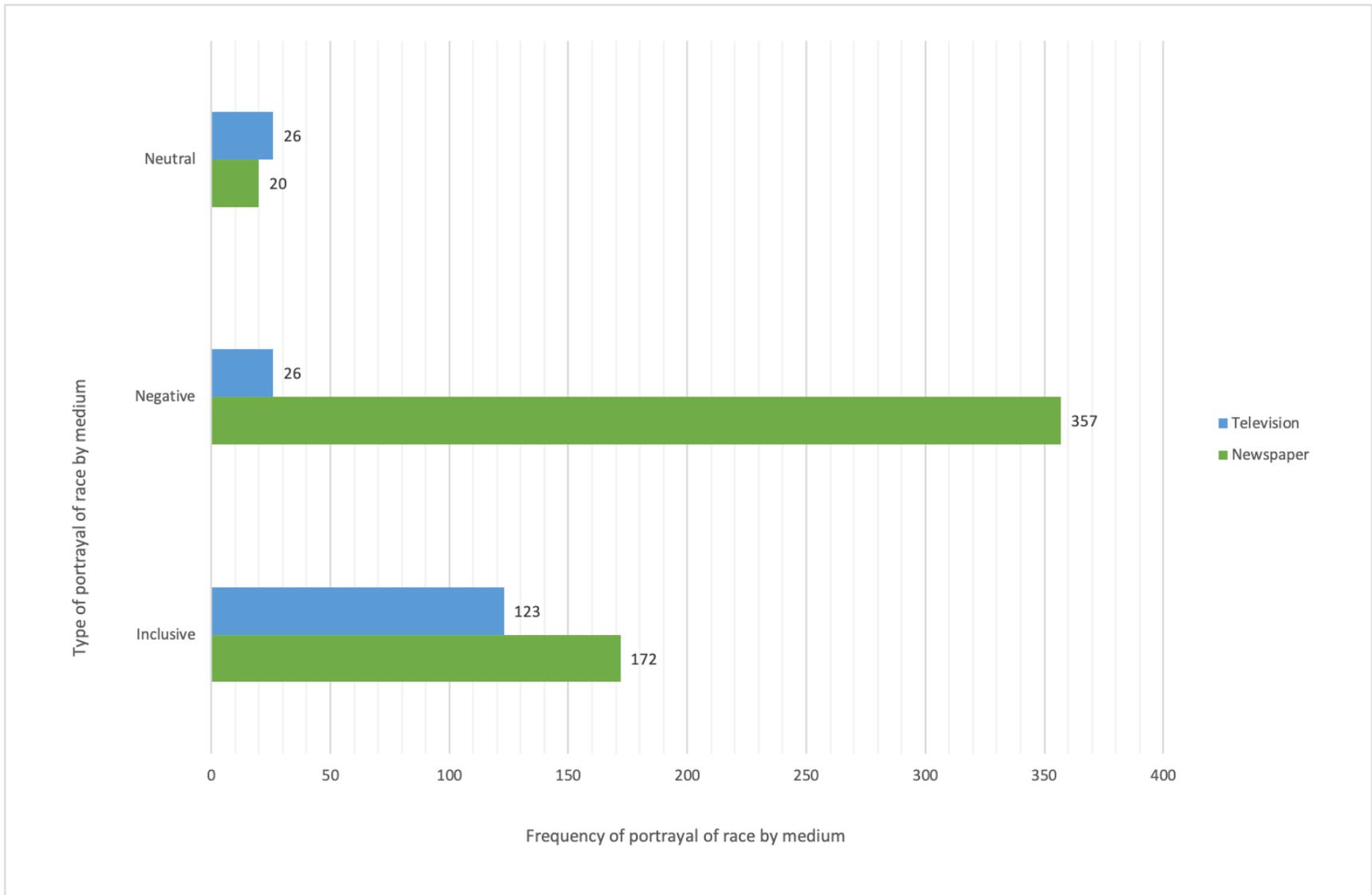


Figure 4: Portrayal of race by medium



Note on Figure 4

We are showing here aggregated figures of content from different newspapers and TV programs, with different target audiences. For example, there is a high number of inclusive media pieces on Indigenous communities, but that does not mean they could possibly outweigh the negative coverage. We should not imagine that the same people read both negative and inclusive opinion pieces and they form a balanced opinion. The inclusive coverage is predominant in Nine newspaper, Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, whereas opinion pieces published in News Corp newspaper are overwhelmingly negative. The chart does not translate into a balance of opinion in the public sphere, as we do not have data to show that The Age has the same readers as Herald Sun, for example.

Detailed findings

Figure 5: How negative media pieces promoted racist notions

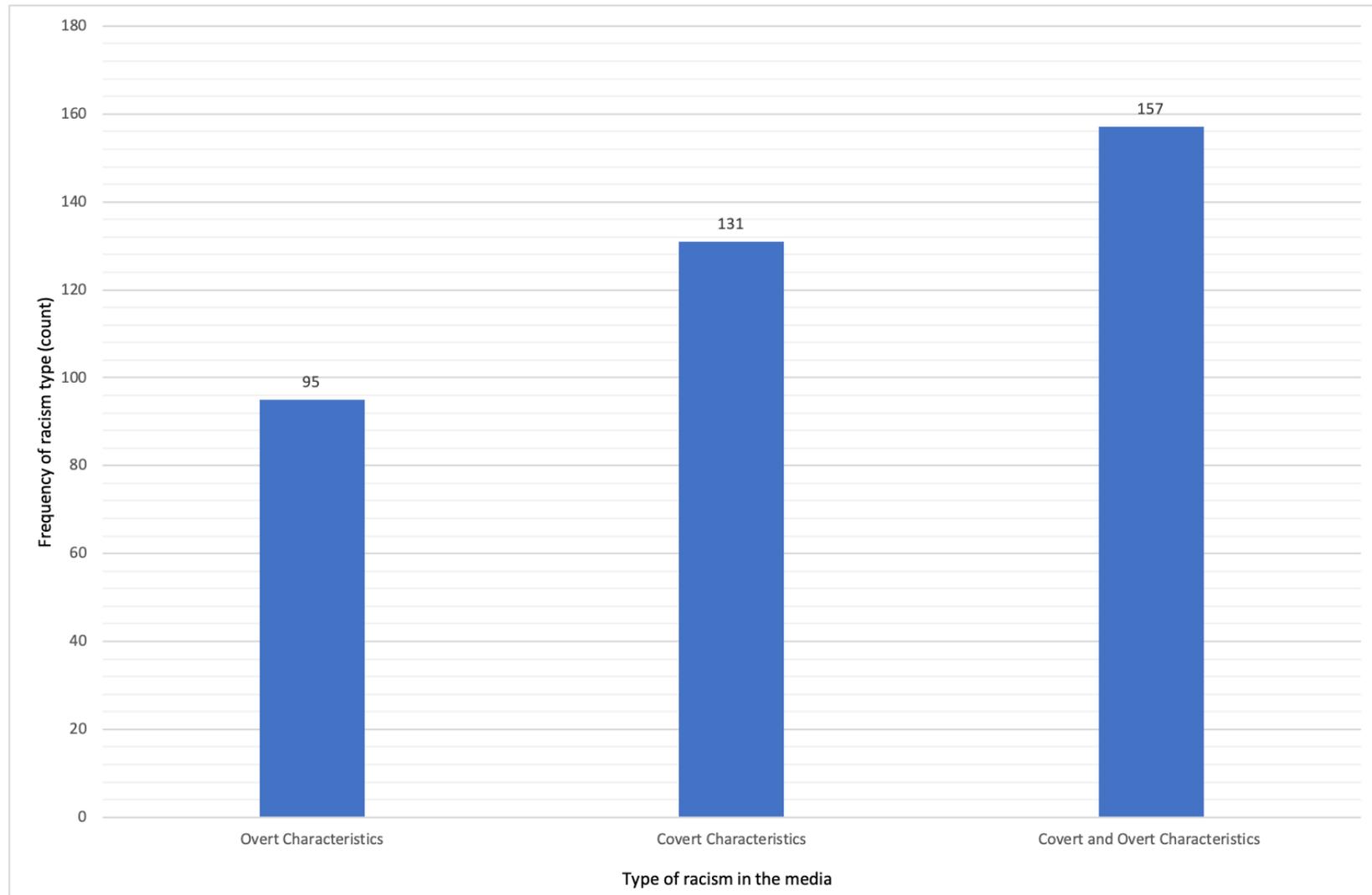


Figure 6.a: Types and frequency of overt racism

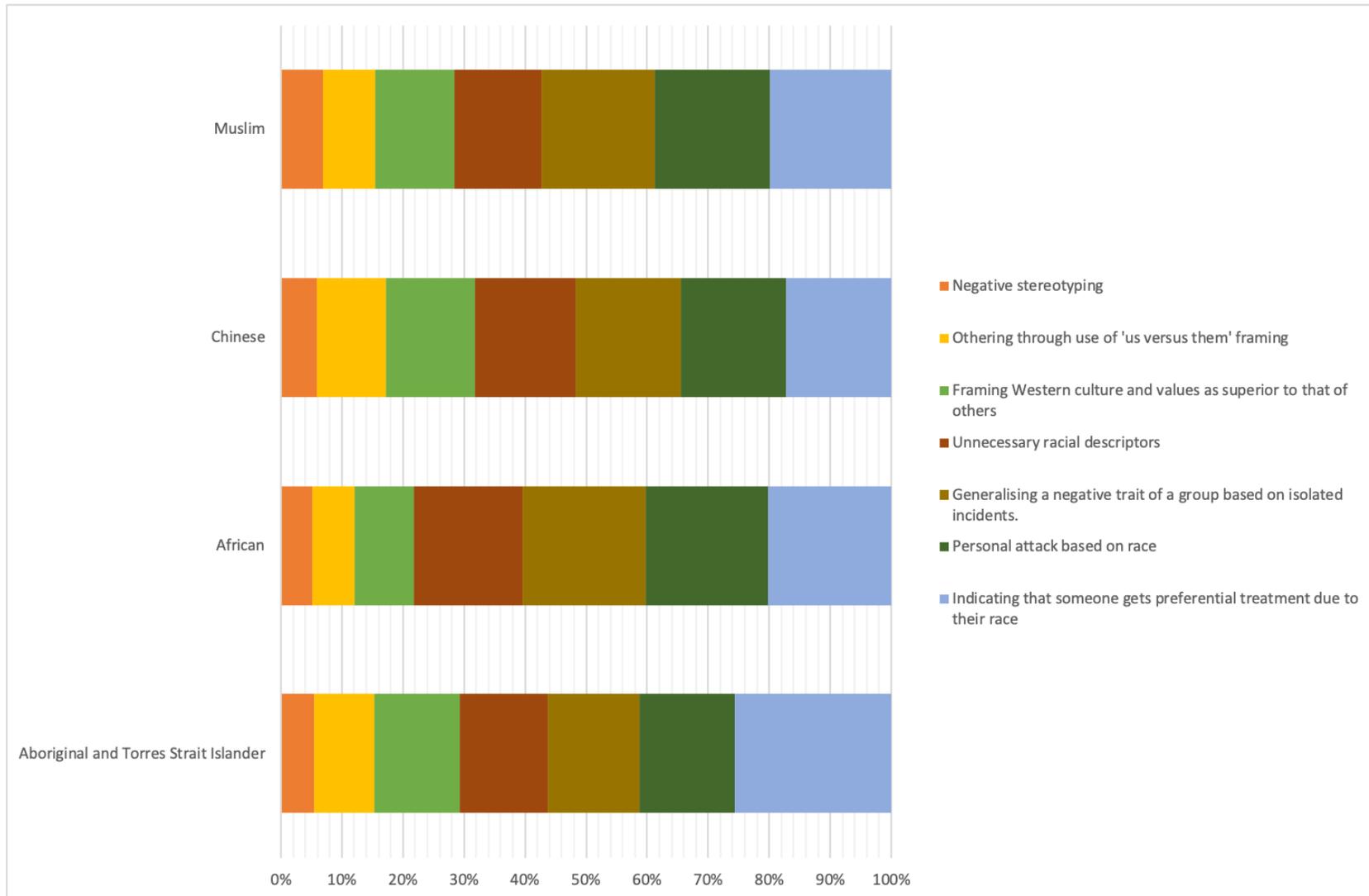
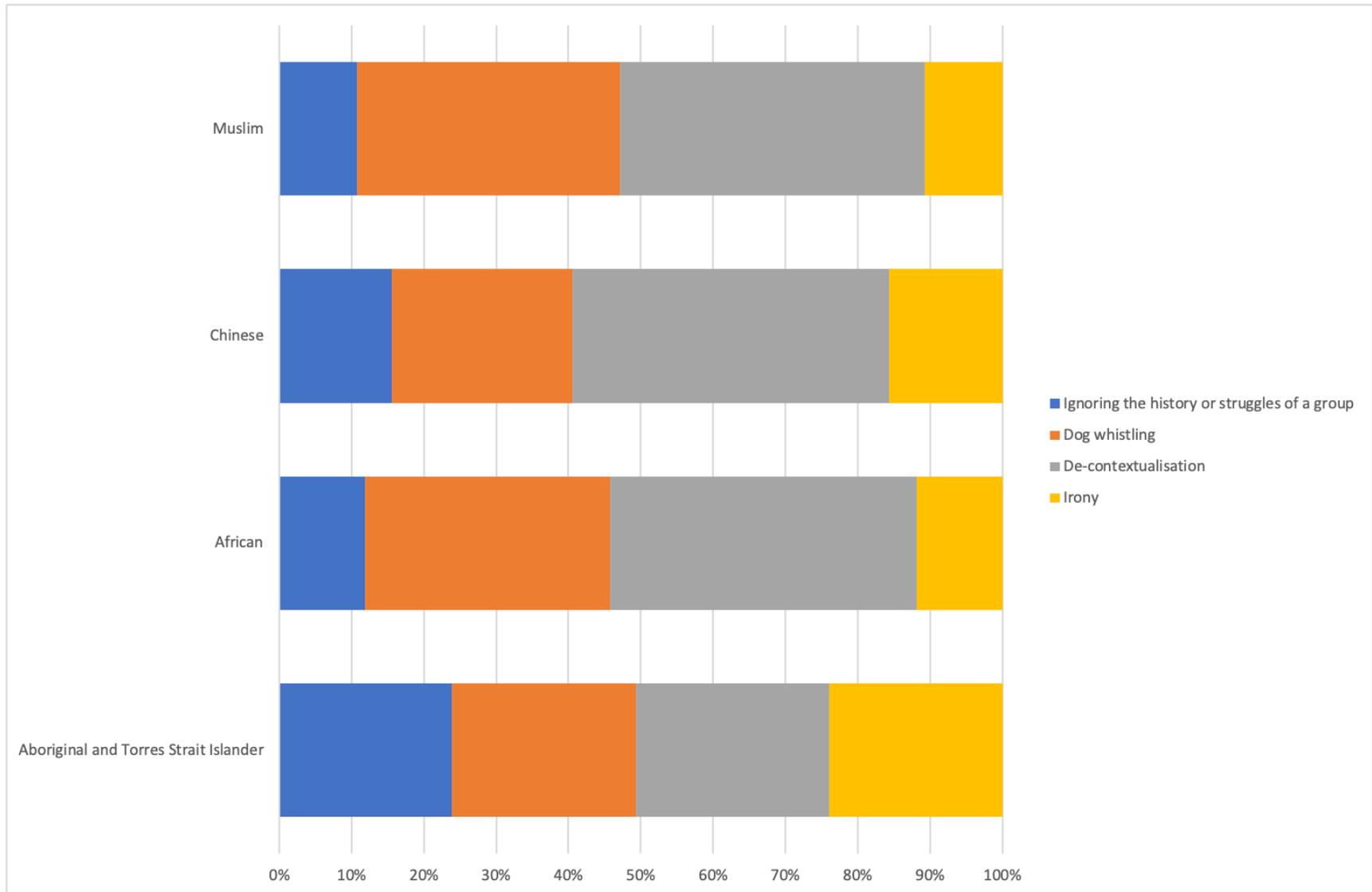


Figure 6.b Types and frequency of covert racism



Note on Figure 6

The percentages in figures 6.a and 6.b represent parts of the total number of negative media pieces for each community. These numbers can be found in Figure 3. For example, 94 (79%) of the 119 (100%) negative media pieces about First Nations people ignore Australia's colonial history and its continuing impact on First Nations peoples.

Covert techniques:

- **ignoring the history or struggles of a community** - for example, a media piece that disregards the effect or offence created by racism, or it undermines the validity of a person's stance on a racial issue that affects them, or it disregards the cultural norms of a community, or it makes a joke about a culture;
- **dog whistling** – a writing technique that relies on stoking racial fears in particular sections of the audience, without using explicit language;³
- **de-contextualisation** - a writing technique that omits information, which causes the misrepresentation of the person or community discussed⁴
- **irony** – the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.⁵

³ This is a functional definition that we adapted based on the dictionary definition of dog whistling and Ian Haney Lopez's concept of dog-whistle politics in H Lopez, Race and economic jeopardy for all: a framing paper for defeating dog whistle politics, AFLCIO, Washington, 2016.

⁴ This technique is not necessarily negative outside of this context.

⁵ As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. This technique is not necessarily negative outside of this context.

Newspaper opinion pieces authors' backgrounds: analysis by CIRCA⁶

Who authored the social commentary about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people?

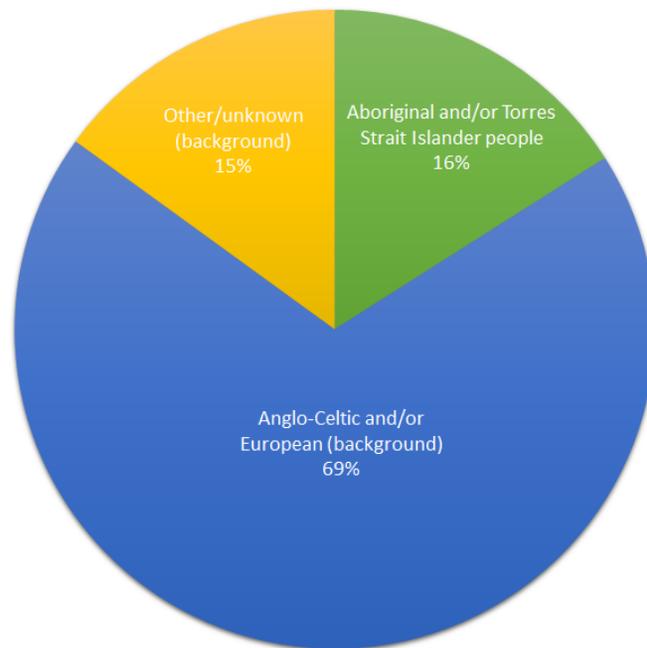


Figure 7: Cultural backgrounds of columnists who wrote about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people

Only 16% (29) of all newspaper opinion pieces about First Nations people (n=179) were actually authored by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. 69% (123) of all newspaper opinion pieces that mentioned or discussed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were authored by people of Anglo-Celtic and/or European backgrounds.

⁶ Please note that Editorials are included in the statistics, with the author's background marked as unknown. They account for approx. 9% of the total number of newspaper opinion pieces.

Who writes inclusive social commentary and who writes racist social commentary?

Figure 8 shows that 89% (318) of the negatively racialised opinion pieces (n=357) were authored by people of Anglo-Celtic and/or European backgrounds, while most of the opinion pieces authored by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and people of color were inclusive (66 out of 89), as seen in figure 9.

Figure 8: Negatively racialised opinion pieces - authors' cultural backgrounds

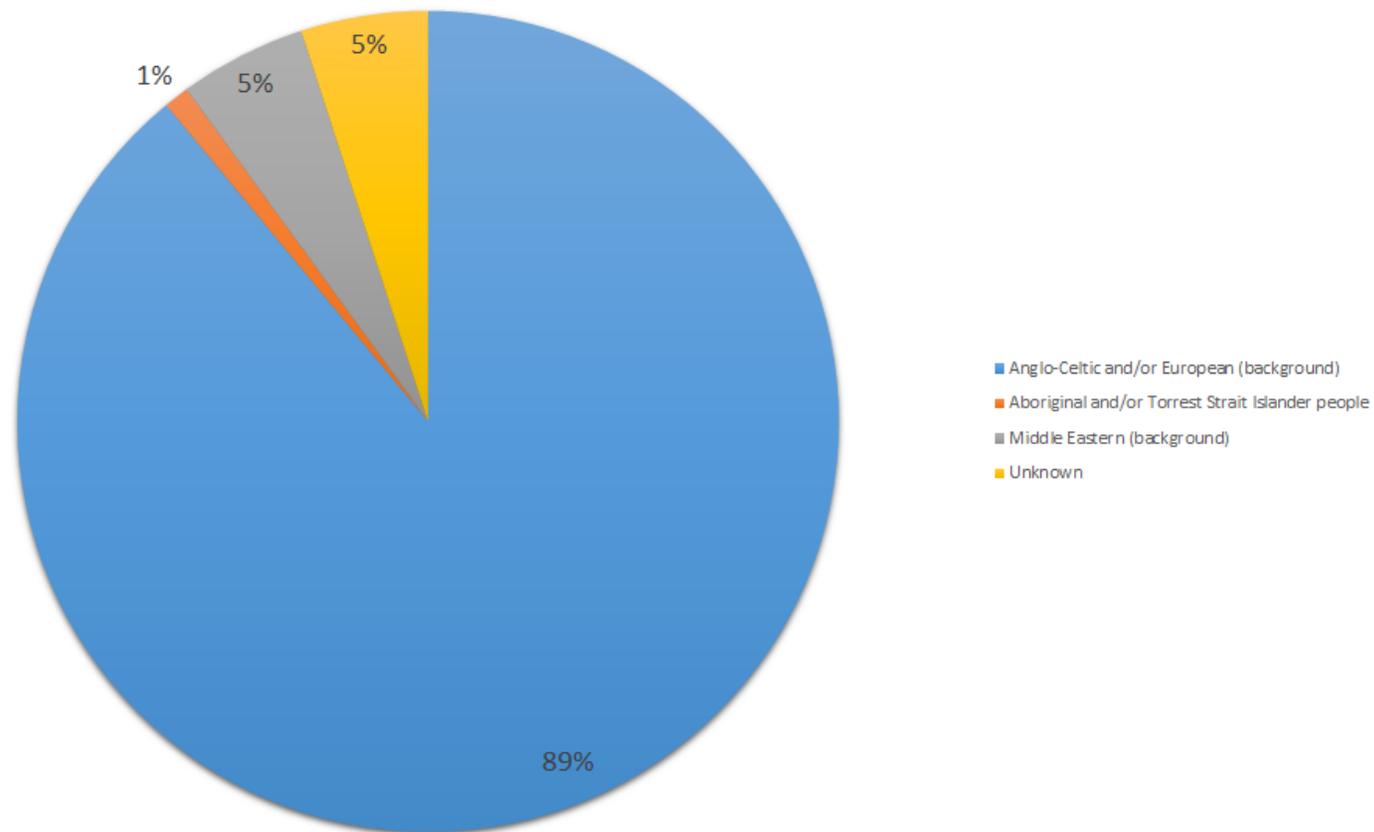
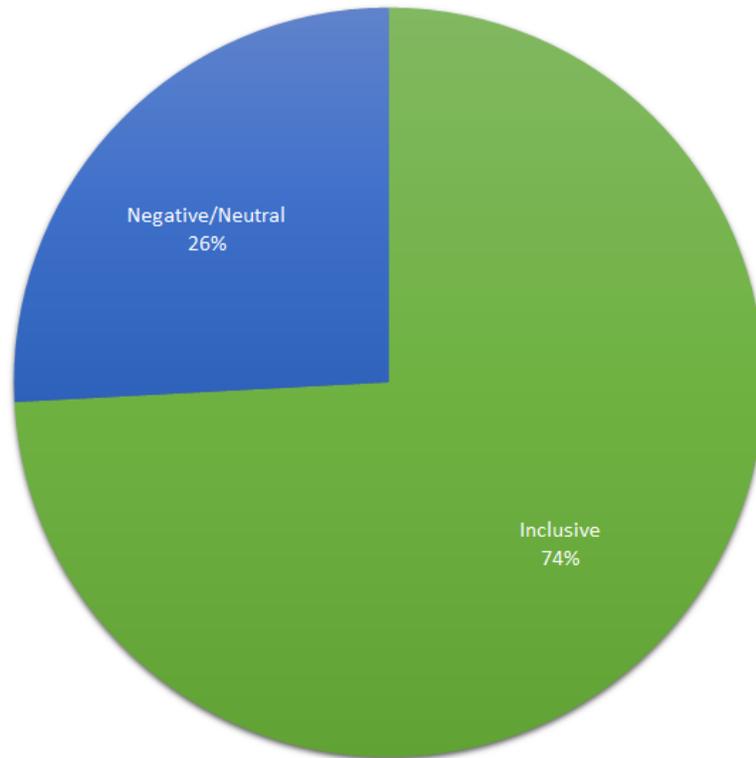


Figure 9: Race-related opinion pieces authored by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and people of color



Methodology

Assessing race-related media pieces

This section outlines the methodology we used to assess race-related media pieces.

Sampling

We used sampling, which involves a consistently taken sample of an appropriate size that will yield results that can be applied to the population as a whole.⁷ Based on resourcing, we limited our data population to the top six online newspapers with the highest cross-platform readership (both print and online)⁸ and the most-watched current affairs shows⁹.

The newspapers and television shows we looked at were:

Newspapers

- *The Age*
- *The Australian*
- *The Courier Mail*
- *The Daily Telegraph*
- *Herald Sun*
- *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Television shows

- *60 Minutes (Nine Network)*
- *The 7.30 Report (ABC)*
- *A Current Affair (Nine Network)*
- *The Project (Network Ten)*
- *Sunday Night (Seven Network)*
- *Today Tonight (Seven Network)*

⁷ H Collins, *Creative research: the theory and practice of research for the creative industries*, Fairchild Books, London, 2015.

⁸ Roy Morgan Research, *Australian readership archive*, Roy Morgan Research, 2021, viewed 7 April 2021, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/industries/media/readership/readership-archive>>.

⁹ TV Tonight, *Timeshifted*, TV Tonight 2021, viewed 7 April 2021, <<http://tvtonight.com.au/category/timeshifted>>.

For newspapers, we conducted the sampling weekly over 26 months between April 2018 and June 2020.

Volunteers were trained to select and code content under the guidance of the lead researcher. We read the opinion section of each newspaper and selected only the race-related stories. *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* share all their opinion content, so we monitored them as one newspaper. For television, we watched all episodes weekly online. Where the network's homepage presented each episode by story with a relevant headline, we only watched race-related stories.

A general criticism of this type of convenience sampling, as highlighted by Thurman¹⁰, is that the units sampled do not represent adequately what is being analysed. We addressed this through subscribing to the online publications that we monitored, which allowed us access to all the articles, and we could go back one week to read them. This way we guaranteed that no newsworthy events were being left out. *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* only display three-day-old opinion articles each day, so we checked them twice a week to ensure even monitoring.

The Australian media ownership is highly concentrated, and we monitored all the main outlets, which means that the conclusions reflect the broader trends of the data population.

Coding

Our research began by creating our framework with UTS in 2016, a set of questions designed to code data based on existing literature¹¹ and legislation on racism in Australia. We continue to work with UTS to refine the framework regularly. Initially, the codes worked as functional, broad categories of explicit, textual racism and were used to categorise and collect race-related stories. The framework's main function is to categorise all race-related stories into a negative, inclusive (formerly called positive) or neutral portrayal of race, along with categorising them by community (racial background) and media agency.

¹⁰ N Thurman, *Mixed-Methods Communication Research: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches in the Study of Online Journalism*, Sage Research Methods Cases, 2018, viewed 10 October 2019, <<http://methods.sagepub.com/case/mixed-methods-communication-research-online-journalism>>.

¹¹ D Swartz, 'Introducing Pierre Bourdieu', *Culture and Power: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, pp.1–14.

D Schon, 'Reflection in Action', *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Aldershot, England, 1991, 99, pp. 49–69.

T Van Dijk, 'Discourse and Racism', *The Blackwell Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, pp. 145–59.

P Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital' in J Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood, New York, 1986.

The “negative” category was well structured using existing research, whereas the “neutral” and “inclusive” categories were semi-structured. This allowed us to identify trends and patterns over time through the data collected. Due to the stories' complexity in terms of themes and writing style, some of the data we collected did not fit neatly within the initial categories. Therefore, during the first six months of data collection, we assigned new labels to that data and kept it separate for further refining. Those labels, based on popularity and functionality, became new framework categories in which to capture covert forms of racism. In a nutshell, coding and creating new codes have overlapped as the research progressed, in a continuous process of refining.

The neutral and positive categories were reviewed at the end of the first six months into our project. The positive category was re-named “inclusive” to better reflect the complexity of the data. We created new functional definitions and new categories based on data observation. For this reason, the positive and neutral categories were initially designed to produce quantitative results, while the negative category produced both quantitative and qualitative data through more detailed categorisations. The focus on the “negative” section of our framework was a conscious choice, in line with the gap in existing research: monitoring racism in Australian media. At the same time, from a methodological point of view, keeping a detailed account of the negative stories' features increased the transparency of the coding process.

The main challenge of our coding method was the researchers' subjectivity in reading texts and creating new codes versus using the existing ones. We addressed this challenge by testing the margin of error by inviting independent analysts to re-code a data sample each six months. The results were compared without significant differences in coding being identified. For pieces that didn't fit well into the framework, at least two independent assessments were done until consensus was reached; if there was no consensus, the sample was considered unfit for our purposes.

Note on “neutral” and “inclusive” definitions

The **neutral** category of our framework does not have a restrictive definition because, unlike news, opinion pieces aren't often neutral in their framing. For a piece to be classified as neutral, it had to be framed in a way that:

- did not place unnecessary focus on the race of a person or community;

- did not single out a person or community based on their race;
- did not vilify a community based on isolated incidents.

The criteria above does not suggest colour-blindness (i.e. it does not propose ignoring racial identity altogether) as a solution for more balanced reporting. As outlined by Race Forward¹², the term colour-blindness describes the disregard of racial characteristics and is a concept “often promoted by those who dismiss the importance of race, to proclaim the end of racism”. All Together Now agrees with the view that colour-blindness is a concept that presents challenges when discussing diversity and equity that require being racially aware.

The **inclusive** definition includes the criteria of giving a voice to a minority group to tell their version of the story. However, if an author of a media piece belonged to the racial minority group they were speaking about, but their content satisfied our negative definition, then their media piece was classified as negative.

¹² Race Forward, *Race Reporting Guide*, Race Forward, 2015, viewed 24 July 2019, <<https://www.raceforward.org/reporting-guide>>.

