Media Event, Racial Ramblings, or Both? An Analysis of Media Coverage of the Tamworth Council Sudanese Refugees Resettlement Case (2006)

Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo¹ and Virginia Mapedzahama²

Abstract
This article presents our analysis of Australian media reporting of the 2006 Tamworth City Council’s decision to refuse the resettlement of five Sudanese families in Tamworth (NSW) and subsequent reversal, supposedly due to the pressure brought to bear on the council as a result of the media “hype.” The question at the core of our analyses is as follows: Did the media play a role in the over-(re)presentation of this case as racist or was it just a case of the media reporting racism? Informed by media framing theory, we examine print media reports for patterns of presentation as well as representations of both the council and the refugees who were the focus of the reporting. We conclude that while the media played a significant role in making visible a case built on racial stereotypes, their reporting also contained racializing and paternalistic stereotyping that contribute to the reproduction of both everyday and systemic racism.

Keywords
Tamworth, Sudanese, media, framing, racism, refugees

Prologue: What Was All the Media Hype About? The “Tamworth Case”
In 2006, the federal government of Australia made a request to the Tamworth City Council for the town to become a regional resettlement location (ABC News, 2006) under the broader Humanitarian Settlement in Regional Australia Program (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2011). The Tamworth Scheme would be similar to the Regional Humanitarian Settlement Pilot programs “already running in Goulburn, Wagga Wagga and Coffs Harbour, and other towns across the country” (Munro & Welch, 2007). Under the Tamworth Scheme, up to 10 Sudanese families would be resettled in the town each year. However, according to the ABC News (2006),

The council […] made it clear [to the government] it will only accept the refugees if the proposal has widespread community support. A public meeting held [in August 2006] highlighted deep resentment to the idea and a survey […] conducted thereafter] exposed further opposition to the move. [When] the council […] released the survey results, […] [they showed] only 96 of 393 participants […] were in favour of accepting the refugees.

As a result, at a meeting in December 2006, the Tamworth Council refused the federal government’s proposal for an initial resettlement of five Sudanese families in the town. According to media reports, the council voted six to three, “to spurn the offer by the Department of Immigration to resettle the families” (Norrie, 2006, p. 3). The council’s decision attracted negative (national and international) media coverage and attention: On the 15th of December, newspapers all over Australia, and indeed internationally, widely reported and condemned the decision as a race-based decision, that is, based on racial prejudice and stereotypes (of Sudanese people and culture). The decision was reported and condemned as an act of racism. “The mayor, James Treloar, came under fire for what were regarded as racist comments when he said the town wasn’t coping with the 15 Sudanese refugees who already lived there” (Frost, 2007, p. 21). He “said the city was struggling with the 15 refugees it already had, stating they were having problems assimilating” (Clifton, 2007).

¹Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
²Western Sydney University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo, Department of Media and Communication, Faculty of Health, Arts, and Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122 Australia.
Email: kkwansah@swin.edu.au

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So, did the media really report an act of racism or was this just another instance of media-fuelled racism? Or, could it have been both?

**Introduction**

Some researchers have suggested that media coverage of any societal happening(s) can be done in such a way as to turn it into a “media event,” and elevate such happenings to a level of importance that would otherwise not be attained (see, for example, Iyengar & Simon, 1997; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). They suggest that this happens as a result of the “heavy mediation,” in terms of coverage that goes on, and also the nature of such mediation, in terms of the frames adopted for covering what is happening, which eventually influence the way people think about it (see, for example, de Vreese, Boomgaard, & Semetko, 2011; Entman, 2002; Iyengar, 1991). Iyengar (1997) for instance, suggests that the media can influence the importance people attach to issues or events through the subtle means of “framing.” In a similar vein, the role the media play in the construction and reproduction of the “refugee narrative” has been the focus of much research in recent years. In remaining critical of the media’s significant (albeit subtle) role in shaping and amplifying public attitudes and perceptions toward refugees, much of this significant body of work has focused not only on media mis-information, but also on how the media presents negative and distorted images of refugees thereby influencing public opinion. The power of the media to influence what people think about through their agenda-setting function has been established through over 200 publications on the subject (see, Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005) and how people think about what is presented to them, through framing has also been well documented (see, for example, de Vreese et al., 2011).

This article adds to the body of work described above by analyzing the media reporting of the Tamworth Sudanese refugee case described in the prologue. In this particular case, it can be argued that the issue at stake (refugee resettlement and also race relations in Australia) was a complex one, making public opinion about it unstable, and therefore subject to influence through framing of the issue by both the political elites and the news media (de Vreese et al., 2011).

Informed by Media Framing theory, we argue that while the media reports exposed the “ordinariness” of racism, the media reporting in itself, that is, the framing of it, was done in such a way as to turn the issue into a media event “par excellence” (Iyengar & Simon, 1997, p. 256) and also construct the council’s decision as based on race, thereby making the whole event an act of “racial consumption” (Carbado, 2005, p. 635). The media engaged in what we describe as, “normalised” reporting of the “other” that, though presented as an egalitarian and objective attempt to expose racism and “close” the racial gap, was imbued with racial overtones consumed by the White majority. Framing can help us understand the way in which the media attempt to influence individuals in their efforts to make sense of everyday issues that occur in the socio-political and economic realms of their lives (Chong & Druckman, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2011; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Framing can also present us with a more critical way of looking at the media reporting that took place and thereby make a valuable contribution to the literature on the “refugee narrative.”

Interrogating media coverage of the Tamworth Case using the conceptual framework offered by Framing is pertinent for a number of reasons. First, apart from economic and political/geo-strategic considerations, the issue also contains cultural dimensions (de Vreese et al., 2011) and is therefore significant in the light of on-going attempts at addressing racism in Australia (see, for example, The Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012), public discourses about multiculturalism, and also the choice of multiculturalism as official cultural policy. Second, the subject matter provides an interesting case to study how news frames can affect/influence the decision making of elected bodies (in this case, possibly cause a change of mind/decision by the Tamworth Council). Third, the issue is of major importance to the future direction of government refugee settlement policy, and for gaining both public and council support for such policy, as well as for the future of multiculturalism in Australia. Finally, it can help in understanding the subtle and incessant way in which racism reproduces itself in the Australian society, through seemingly objective and benevolent ways of reporting the “other.”

Whereas some commentators have argued that “there is a general expectation that the media will provide accurate, unbiased and complete information” (Wilson, Bonevski, Jones, & Henry, 2009), the discussion in this article will show that the information that the media disseminated was not in itself unbiased, rather it was framed in particular ways, “stressing certain aspects of reality” while “pushing others into the background” and suggesting “certain issue attributes, judgments and decisions” (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012, p. 186). It is worth noting at this point that, for purposes of this article, only online print media coverage is presented and analyzed, hence all reference to “media” in this article refers to “online print media.” This is due to the fact that the search for media reports was conducted more than 5 years after the event occurred, and the easiest access to reporting of the event was through online print media. An initial search for media reporting on the Tamworth event found only one video, hence the decision to limit the analyses to print media.

**News Framing and Audience Understanding**

The issue and nature of refugee settlement is such that media coverage can offer multiple and varying points of understanding. As a result, it is important to identify which particular aspects of the entire Tamworth Refugee Settlement...
issue of 2006 were highlighted at the expense of others. In an attempt to understand how framing works, many studies have specifically investigated the ways in which the news media frame messages, how news frames affect audiences, and the circumstances under which audiences are influenced (de Vreese et al., 2011). Historically “framing” was applied to how journalists and editors selected certain facts, themes, and so on, to present (frame) a story in a way that will generate maximum interest and understanding among audiences (Willcox, 2001). Entman (2002) notes that frames “call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions” (p. 394). He explains further,

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and / or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 2002, p. 391)

This means that in discussing issues, events, or objects that the media present, framing ensures that attention is paid to only a small number of attributes (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). As Iyengar (1991, p. 11) has observed, “Framing is the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue by the media to make them more important and thus to emphasize a particular cause of some phenomena.” A media frame therefore is “the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggest what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991, p. 3). Framing is important in assessing media coverage because if the media can tell people what to think about, as has been proved overwhelmingly in agenda-setting research, “then it stands to reason that the media can also influence how people think about what they tell them to think about” (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005, p. 48). Indeed, some agenda-setting scholars have argued that not only do the media provide cues about the salience of certain topics and issues, but they also tell people how to think about these topics and issues (McCombs, 1992; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000).

Some scholars have observed that frames, apart from influencing the way people think about an issue, can also affect the content of people’s beliefs (Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach, & Zubric, 2004; Slothuus, 2008; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Actually, de Vreese et al. (2011) argued that frames not only affect the importance of beliefs but also directly affect attitudes. This may happen either through the provision of valence to the frame or by offering new considerations (Slothuus, 2008; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). It has also been suggested that some frames carry more “weight” than others thus making the valence of some frames stronger than others, and their consideration important (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Valenced news frames, as de Vreese et al. (2011) note, provide an indication of the “inherent good and positive or bad and negative aspects” of the news story. Some scholars such as Shah et al. (2004), de Vreese et al. (2011), and Schuck and de Vreese (2006) have argued that the valence news frame is important because it can affect both cognitive responses and attitudes.

Entman (2002) points out that “frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is a subject of a communication, thereby elevating them to salience,” and defines salience as “a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to an audience” (p. 392). In that regard, research has shown that negative information tends to be more salient and memorable than positive information (de Vreese et al., 2011; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Lau, 1985).

There is conflicting research evidence regarding how framing interacts with political sophistication to produce effects. While some studies (see for example, Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001) have shown that less politically sophisticated people have a higher susceptibility to framing effects, others such as Druckman and Nelson (2003), Lecheler and de Vreese (2012), Slothuus (2008), and Sniderman and Theriault (2004) found a reverse relationship, showing “the moderately or most politically aware to be more responsive to news framing,” particularly where the issue concerned is multi-faceted (de Vreese et al., 2011, p. 184). Accordingly, we would expect that all things being equal, the negative valenced news frames used in the coverage of the Tamworth refugee case had a strong effect on the council.

**Method**

The analyses in this article are drawn from the content of 29 newspaper articles (online print media) sourced from an online search of Google and the newspaper database: News Bank conducted from April to November 2012 (refer to Table 1).

For purposes of this article, articles by the same author(s) that were published as (slightly) different editions/versions under different headlines have been considered as different articles. This is primarily because headlines are significant for the analyses we engage in here, and also some of the differences have implications or the potential to alter the narrative being constructed. Initially, search terms were Tamworth, SUDANESE, and refugee as keywords. The key word search included title, abstract, and body, and was not limited by date. For purposes of this discussion, any newspaper article reporting on the case was included in this study, regardless of the article’s length. On the other hand, any articles that were not (entirely) about council’s decision (or reversal thereof), but instead only made reference to the case, are not included for analysis. In other words, the criterion for inclusion was that the article should substantially focus on reporting the case, not a casual reference to it while reporting on something else. Moreover, given that the focus is on how the
| Source                          | Title                                                                 | Author(s)                     | Date                          |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sydney Morning Herald          | “You’re Not Welcome, Town Tells Refugees”                            | Justin Norrie                 | Friday, December 15, 2006     |
| The Age (Melbourne)            | “Home of Country Music Slams Door on Refugees”                       | Justin Norrie                 | Friday, December 15, 2006     |
| The Age (Melbourne)            | “Tamworth’s Rejection of Sudanese Families ‘Racist’”                  | Justin Norrie                 | Friday, December 15, 2006     |
| The Mercury (Hobart)           | “NSW City Refuses Refugees Claims of Racial Hatred”                   | Susanna Dunkerley             | Saturday, December 16, 2006   |
| Sydney Morning Herald          | “Rejection of Sudanese Refugees Sparks Outrage”                       | Justin Norrie                 | Saturday, December 16, 2006   |
| Sydney Morning Herald          | “Chorus of Outrage at Rejection of Refugees”                         | Justin Norrie                 | Saturday, December 16, 2006   |
| Daily Telegraph (Sydney)       | “No More Refugees—Tamworth Mayor Defends Vote to Slam the Gate”      | Lillian Saleh and Neil Keene  | December 16, 2006             |
| Weekend Australian             | “Sudanese ‘Betrayed’ by Mayor’s Comments”                            | John Stapleton and James Madden | Saturday, December 16, 2006 |
| Canberra Times                 | “Shame Tamworth”                                                      |                               | Tuesday, December 19, 2006    |
| Geelong Advertiser             | “Racism Alive, Sick in Tamworth”                                     | Mirko Bagaric                 | Tuesday, December 19, 2006    |
| Sydney Morning Herald,         | “Tamworth’s War Fits Small Minds Against Big Hearts—BACKLASH”         | Damien Murphy                 | Saturday, December 23, 2006   |
| Northern Daily Leader          | “Mayor Treloar Apologises to Sudanese”                               | David Ellery                  | January 15, 2007, 9:41 a.m.   |
| Bulletin Wire (Australia)      | “Bulletin Wire: Govt, Tamworth Discuss Sudanese Settlers”            | No name                       | Monday, January 15, 2007      |
| Northern Territory News (Darwin)| “Troubled Tamworth Gets Govt Support”                               | Wire (no name)                | Tuesday, January 16, 2007     |
| Bulletin Wire                  | “Govt Backs Tamworth Decision on Refugees”                           |                               | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Daily Telegraph                | “Tamworth in Refugee Shift”                                           | MATP                          | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Daily Telegraph                | “Singing From Different SongSheet: Race Row Council Still Divided”    | Lillian Saleh                 | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Daily Telegraph                | “‘Racist’ Council’s Apology of Sorts—Tamworth’s About-Face”           | Lillian Saleh                 | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Daily Telegraph                | “Council Reconsiders: Tamworth Says Sorry to Its Sudan Refugees”       | Lillian Saleh                 | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Daily Telegraph                | “Tamworth in Refugee Talk”                                            | No name                       | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| MX (Sydney)                    | “Refugee Ban is Quashed—TAMWORTH VOTE”                               | No name                       | Wednesday, January 17, 2007   |
| Sydney Morning Herald          | “Tamworth to Welcome Refugees”                                        | Catharine Munro and Dylan Welch | Wednesday, January 17, 2007 |
| Newcastle Herald               | “Different Tune on Refugees”                                          | Catharine Munro and Dylan Welch | Wednesday, January 17, 2007  |
| Daily Telegraph (Sydney)       | “Church Won Over Council—Behind Tamworth’s Reversal on Refugee Refusal” | Stephanie Wilson              | Thursday, January 18, 2007    |
| Daily Telegraph                | “How Church Fought for Refugee Rethink”                              | Stephanie Wilson              | Thursday, January 18, 2007    |
| Geelong Advertiser             | “Canberra Welcomes Refugee Backflip”                                 | No name                       | Thursday, January 18, 2007    |
| Daily Telegraph                | “Sour Notes—Shame of a Town Called Malice”                            | Clare Masters                 | Saturday, January 20, 2007    |
| Manly Daily (Sydney, Australia)| “Churches Lead the Way”                                              | Michael Frost                 | Saturday, January 27, 2007    |
| Leader—Diamond Valley News     | “Tamworth Out of Tune”                                               | No name                       | Wednesday, February 14, 2007  |
media reported the case, responses or comments/responses to media articles (this includes letters to the editor) have also been excluded. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the responses are significant in that they not only expose how people respond to reports (hence the power of the media), they may also be useful for insights into broader community attitudes.

Of the 29 newspaper articles, 15 were published before the council reversed its decision, that is, they were about the Council’s initial decision of rejecting the refugees, and the remaining 14 reports were about the council’s rescinded decision. Very few of the 29 articles did not make references to race. A content analysis revealed that out of the 15 articles that reported on the council’s initial decision, 13 used the words race, racism, or racial, and these words altogether occurred a total of 31 times in these articles. The words/phrases Cronulla, Cronulla riots, and Cronulla type situation were used in 11 publications, occurring a total of 19 times. Out of the 14 reports that dealt with the council’s reversal of their initial decision, only four mentioned race, racism, or racial, with these words occurring a total of 14 times, while the words/phrases Cronulla, Cronulla riots, and Cronulla type situation occurred only once in a publication. While these findings about word count are important, what is even more significant is the discourses that were circulated within these media reports and how these words were used to frame the reports to paint a certain kind of picture for readers through emphasizing a particular cause of this phenomena (Iyengar, 1991) and influencing how people would think about what they were telling them to think about (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). Consequently, the discussions here employ elements from content analysis to the media language and discourse to highlight the biases in the ways in which media reported the events surrounding this case. Schulz (2008) notes that

[A] major tool in modern communication management is discourse analysis. The rationale behind discourse analysis holds that discourses (linguistic constructions) are used within and describe cultural, political and community ideas and, so, both construct and sustain the specific forms of knowledge and understanding among the general public. (p. 225)

The approach we adopt here to determine the media frames adopted in the coverage of the Tamworth case is partly in line with that suggested by Matthes and Kohring (2008). Following (Bell & Entman, 2011), “We scrutinize the most concrete, measurable subsidiary attributes of media discourse at a granular level of analysis rather than making broad thematic statements about news coverage” (p. 555). To make a case for framing and also racialization, we are especially interested in how the media supplied information that would enable and encourage citizens and politicians, in particular ways as suggested by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997), Bell and Entman (2011) or Hacker and Pierson (2005), to see the Tamworth Council’s initial decision as racist and the whole issue as being about racism. Specifically, we adopted a consistent system of analysis in dealing with the reports. First, the reports were searched to identify recurring regularities in terms of discourses. It was then determined that these discourses or discursive regularities contained and reflected certain themes; these themes were further sorted into frames. The frames were determined from the number of times certain words or combination of words (phrases), that served to highlight some bits of information making them more “noticeable, meaningful or memorable” (Entman, 2002, p. 392), were used in the reports. Afterwards, the reports were carefully examined to ensure that the frames within each theme were the same and deserved to be grouped together. In the same vein, the themes were carefully examined for differences so as to ascertain that words/phrases that had been grouped under the different frames were dissimilar and could be classified under the determined frames. This process ensured that all aspects of the reports received the same attention and treatment. It is worth pointing out though that our analyses here does not attempt to discuss every element of the articles, but as is acceptable in these kinds of analyses, we only focused on the aspects that seemed useful to answering the concerns of framing and racialization (Mckee, 2003).

According to Schulz (2008), the “recurrent and patterned use of language elements such as lexical choice, syntactical structuring, genres and rhetorical constructs can deliver preferred versions of understanding on a specific subject” (p. 225), similar to framing as previously discussed. Our analyses in the discussion that ensues concentrates on two significant issues that we argue are evident in the media’s language, highlighting that the media coverage was intentionally meant to portray racism or race as “the” factor in the councils’ decision. First are the headlines, whose wording was not only deliberately meant to “catch” the reader’s attention but also to “shock.” Second, is the methodical centering of, and emphasis on, the aspects of the case, to the exclusion of others (framing) that can readily and easily be interpreted as racist. Here we concentrate in particular on the strategic and constant citing of the Tamworth City Council Mayor’s (Mayor Treloar; implicit and explicit) race-based comments on the decision. In addition, it follows that in a discussion of this nature, a question be asked on whether the media “raced” this event: Did they make a racism case out of a non-raced decision, or did they simply report on racism? Our contention is that while the council may have had legitimate reason to refuse the resettlement on the basis of inadequate resources, racial stereotyping and prejudice also played a part in coming to that decision. We conclude our analyses by discussing how the media coverage, though it may be interpreted as “pro-Sudanese refugees,” may have also re/produced certain negative and problematized images of Sudanese refugee subjectivity.
Putting Race Upfront: What's in a Headline?

Headlines seem to matter on their own . . . they inevitably enhance or “play up” some information while suppressing other information. (Andrew, 2007, p. 29)

Andrew (2007) observes that “functionally speaking, headlines are simplifying mechanisms that summarize and attract attention to what lies ahead (or below)” (p. 24). A news headline “encapsulates the entire story” (Chiluwa, 2011, p. 89) and to that extent, it can be argued that, to all intents and purposes headlines constitute part of the framing mechanisms used by journalists and that, perhaps more than any other aspect of the news story/article they (the headlines) highlight particular frames adopted in a story.

Accordingly, it is now widely acknowledged that headlines “can have a powerful effect on the attitudes that people adopt” (Andrew, 2007, p. 25). Arguing along similar lines, Schulz (2010) notes that “when a specific position is consistently highlighted throughout media headlines [and reports] it establishes a theme or recurrent motif” (p. 70), which is “used then in a promotional type of role to sustain reader interest or shock” (Schulz, 2012, p. 4). Citing van Dijk (1998), Schulz (2012) further describes headlines as “semantic macrostructures, which lead media consumers into what to think” (p. 6). One could argue therefore, that in the case of the Tamworth Council’s decision, the media headlines represented framing that was meant to present the case as being about race and provoke reactions or attitudes to racism. Some of the headlines explicitly included the word racist, racial, or race, clearly intended to incite outrage toward an act of racism. The examples below are illustrative:

- “Racism Alive, Sick in Tamworth” (Mirko Bagaric; Geelong Advertiser, Tuesday December 19, 2006)
- “NSW City Refuses Refugees Claims of Racial Hatred” (Susanna Dunkerley, The Mercury (Hobart), December 16, 2006
- “Singing From a Different Songsheet: Race Row Council Still Divided” (Lillian Saleh, The Daily Telegraph, January 17, 2007 [Edition 1: State]
- “Racist’ Council’s Apology of Sorts—Tamworth’s About-Face” (Lillian Saleh, The Daily Telegraph, January 17, 2007 [Edition 4: City Edition])

Moreover, the articles that were explicit about racism in the headlines tended to have lead paragraphs that also linked the decision directly to racism. The lead paragraph for Bagaric’s (2006) article, for example, said,

SUDANESE have black skin and are often Muslim but in every meaningful respect they are the same as every other person in Australia. That’s a lesson civic leaders in Tamworth who have refused to re-settle five Sudanese families need to have drilled into them. Otherwise, their town, which has been voted Australia’s most friendly, might also get the mantle as the most racist. (p. 17, emphasis added)

The lead above is not surprising and only goes to buttress the point about the intended frame of the report as represented in the headline. Journalistically, the lead immediately follows the headline in order of importance, and together they represent the most notable part of the story. They combine to provide a gist of what the story is about and what is most significant, and must therefore necessarily work together. In fact, in journalistic terms, the lead is merely an expansion of/on the headline. Consequently, those two parts of the story taken together will offer the most clues about the frame/s adopted by any story. The lead cited above therefore proves that the story was racially framed. The tone of the lead and the subtle reference (Iyengar, 1991) to skin color, religion, and so on, as well as the suggestion that Tamworth will become known as the most racist town in Australia, all point to an intention to highlight race and to make race and racism the most important aspect of the case/story.

Similarly, Saleh’s (2007) article “‘Racist’ Council’s Apology of Sorts—Tamworth’s About-Face” had the following lead paragraph/sentence:

A COUNCIL accused of racism for refusing to take more overseas refugees apologised to its African population last night and reconsidered its stance. (p. 12)

Again, here the headline and lead work in tandem in the effort to frame the case/story as being about race/racism. The choice of words and the inclusion of the words race and racism in the headline and lead are all pointers. Also, by highlighting that a council that had been previously “accused of racism” had now apologized, Saleh infers that the council knew it was being racist, and was apologizing for the act of racism. All of these provide hints and show coverage in particular ways (framing) that encourage the audience to see the Council’s initial decision as racist (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997; Hacker & Pierson, 2005). In fact, when Saleh cites the mayor’s clarification of his earlier statement that compared having Sudanese in Tamworth to Cronulla riots (discussed in detail in the ensuing section), this reinforced the inference that the council was apologizing for racist behavior:

I used them as an example of where the program had failed—not to say they were a lawless mob running riots in Tamworth or that I was concerned about them forming gangs and getting like Cronulla . . . (p. 12)

Most of the headlines, however, were only implicit in their reference to race: that is, they did not explicitly reflect the discussion about race and racism in the article. For example the Daily Telegraph’s “Sour Notes—Shame of a Town Called Malice” (Clare Masters, 2007) was in fact extensive in its coverage/discussion of race relations in Tamworth. The article focused on the Council’s explanation of its decision...
and was one of the few that sought to include multiple voices. There were at least three voices included: the Tamworth Sudanese refugee voice (including their thoughts on/reactions to the mayor’s comments/Council’s decision, as well as their general racial realities in Tamworth), the mayor’s comments, and Tamworth residents (both those who supported the resettlement and those who opposed it). Furthermore, some of the articles only implied race, racism, or racial prejudice in the headline, yet also often had lead paragraphs/sentences that made reference to race/racism. For example, the lead paragraph of the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s article, “You’re Not Welcome, Town Tells Refugees,” had the following lead sentence:

A month before Tamworth hosts overseas musicians and fans at its world-renowned country music festival, the NSW town has become embroiled in a racism row over a decision to reject five Sudanese refugee families. (Norrie, 2006)

It can also be argued here, that while most of the headlines were racially implicit, they were nonetheless framed in ways that portrayed the council’s decision as morally appalling thus confirming Entman’s (2002) suggestion that framing seeks to promote a particular way of defining a problem and moral evaluation. This kind of framing can potentially contribute to a “fear discourse” (Schulz, 2008, p. 227) and potentially create a moral panic about racism or perhaps more specifically racial panic or racial anxiety (Abel, 2011, p. 5) among the readers or the wider Australian community. The headlines below again exemplify this point:

- “Rejection of Sudanese Refugees Sparks Outrage” (Justin Norrie, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 16, 2006 [Fourth edition])
- “Chorus of Outrage at Rejection of Sudanese Refugees” (Justin Norrie, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 16, 2006 [First edition])
- “Home of Country Music Slams Door on Refugees” (Justin Norrie, *The Age*, December 15, 2006)
- “No More Refugees—Tamworth Mayor Defends Vote to Slam the Gate” (Lillian Saleh and Neil Keene, *Daily Telegraph*, December 16, 2006)
- “Tamworth Tainted by Small Minds” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23, 2006)

### “If That is Racism, Then Call Me a Racist!” The Utterances of Mayor Treloar

Almost all of the articles reviewed began with the mayor’s racially provocative comments. In most of the reports included here, the mayor’s utterances cited were either implicitly or explicitly racist. Below are some excerpts that exemplify the mayor’s utterances that dominated media coverage of the council’s decision from December 15, 2006:

Mayor James Treloar said, “The community is concerned that allowing (the families) to move here could lead to a Cronulla riots-type situation. Ask the people at Cronulla if they want more refugees.” (Norrie, 2006)

“The community has expressed enormous concerns of mistrust against the Sudanese people, I think this is largely based on previous events like the Cronulla riots,” he [Mayor James Treloar] said. (Dunkerley, 2006, p. 46)

Tamworth is a melting pot of cultures including migrants from India, Italy, Lebanon and Greece—but Mr Treloar said it was the recently arrived Sudanese who were causing angst [. . .] “They fly out of Sudan, arrive in Sydney, pop on a plane and come to Tamworth—and they come with trauma,” he [Mayor Treloar] said. “We acknowledge that, but we don’t have the trauma counsellors to help them. These people do not respect women. Most of the people haven’t been able to maintain employment because of sexual harassment claims.” (Saleh & Keene, 2006, p. 10)

All of the articles reviewed either included the mayor’s reference to the Cronulla riots, or to some conception of “culture clash” or criminality of the Sudanese people. One could argue therefore that the media highlighting of the mayor’s statement that equates bringing in Sudanese refugees to Cronulla riots, which were themselves branded an epitome of difficult race relations and racism in Australia, infers two significant things about the council’s decision. First, that the mayor or the council in fact considered this as a decision about race, not resources. The mayor’s statement that “allowing (the families) to move here could lead to a Cronulla riots-type situation” implies that it will be inevitable that allowing the families to settle in the town would result in race-based social unrest or social problems (regardless of the availability of resources). Second, the reference to a violent act (Cronulla riots) implies racial stereotyping that constructs the Sudanese refugees as a violent group. For purposes of contextualization, it is worth pointing out that, at the core of the Cronulla riots was a gang fight between the established “Ozzie” gang and intruding new ethnic gangs, largely Lebanese (who were harassing Australian European women dressed in bikinis and calling them names). There is no evidence that there were any Sudanese involved. Hence, linking Sudanese families to a Cronulla risk (as the mayor did) would seem to be wrong and the only connection is that they are a different racial group from overseas so the mayor’s comments in this respect were patently racist and the framing insofar as it accused the mayor of racism is accurate. Our argument here, however, is not about the racist nature of the mayor’s comments, but rather the focus on those comments to the exclusion of other non-racist comments that were equally important and worth noting.

Not surprisingly then, only one of the reports (Norrie, 2006) made explicit reference to the mayor’s utterances about the council’s concern regarding the lack of resources to support the program, but even then, only one sentence was
devoted to it: “The town did not have enough health and education services to support the refugees, he said.” This is a clear indication of intent to frame the issue in racial terms on the part of many. Here, we can talk about framing by exclusion/omission (Entman, 2002) or framing by paying attention to only a small number of attributes at the expense of others (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Furthermore, in some cases, the media reports even disputed the mayor’s claim of lack of resources:

Tamworth City Council voted to reject an offer by the department to resettle the families, saying the town did not have the resources to cope. But detractors say the decision was simply racist, arguing the city has the resources to look after 50,000 extra people every year when it holds its famous country music festival. (“Troubled Tamworth Gets Govt Support,” 2007, emphasis added)

Some reports even painted the mayor himself, not the council as an entity, as the racist one:

While Treloar keeps running off at the mouth about resident Sudanese, the Oxley Local Area commander, Superintendent Tony Jefferson, gives the lie to the Mayor’s words. He says some have been charged with assault, traffic and domestic matters—but “they do not stand out over any other ethnic group in the community.” Unrepentant, Treloar says: “If this is racist, well so be it. Call me a racist then.” (Murphy, 2006)

In some cases, the council’s concern about lack of services was subsumed under a more intense discussion about concern with the “difference” of the problematized Sudanese refugees:

Tamworth City Council has voted to refuse an offer by the Immigration Department to resettle five refugee families from the war-torn African nation. It feared cultural differences and a lack of services could lead to increased violence in the city, which is home to the world-renowned country music festival. Mayor James Treloar said public submissions showed there was a clear sense of mistrust in the town, after several existing Sudanese residents were charged with driving offences and one with sexual assault. (Dunkerley, 2006, emphasis added)

What seems clear from these reports then is that the council’s decision was not solely about race, as one report cites the mayor: “It was a rejection of the government’s program, not of the Sudanese.” This reaffirms Schulz’s (2008) contention that “modern media practice includes selective processes within the newsroom environment, and journalists abide by certain clearly defined ‘news values’ that prescribe the elements of a ‘good story.’ Such elements generally include “the sensational and the dramatic” (p. 224). It also aligns with the view put forth by certain framing scholars that valenced news frames provide an indication of what is inherently good and positive or bad and negative in the news story (de Vreese et al., 2011) while confirming that negative information tends to have greater salience and memorability than information which is positive (de Vreese et al., 2011; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Lau, 1985).

Furthermore, where the mayor was quoted citing statistics to validate the council’s decision, these were presented as either unsubstantiated or motivated by bigotry (Leader, Diamond Valley News, 2007). This again points to framing which is about highlighting and/or downplaying some bits of information about an item to either make them more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to an audience on the one hand, or less noticeable, less meaningful, or less memorable on the other (Entman, 2002).

One other important observation about the reporting of the council’s reversal of the decision is how the media coverage magnified the role of external pressures (for example from the church) or widespread outrage (for example from the media “bashing,” community outrage, etc.) that implied that the “racist council” could not come to this decision on its own, without these outside/external pressures. For example, two of the articles included in this review reported on the role of the churches in the reversal of the decision (Wilson, 2007a, 2007b)

Race/ing the Tamworth Case?

The media coverage of the issue was largely devoted to trying to prove that residents of Tamworth (and, by extension, most Australians) were racist, while failing to address the basic question of why the local council was voting on the issue in the first place and how they actually had the power to veto the decision to locate the refugees in the town. (Allsop, 2007, p. 27)

The question therefore arises, given the foregone discussion as well as Allsop’s contention above, did the media “race” the Tamworth council’s decision? In other words, was the Tamworth council’s decision inherently racist, implying that the media were simply reporting/exposing an act of racism? As discussed already, clearly some of the reports privileged racism above all else, giving the impression that racism was at the core of the council’s decision, as Mirko Bagaric (2006), a social commentator (Geelong Advertiser), writes,

Racism, pure and simple is the only reason the council rejected the re-settlement of the Sudanese families. Service provision has nothing to do with it. Tamworth has 40,000 people. An additional few families won’t break the bank. In case it decides to stay open, here are some lessons for the councillors. (p. 21)

Bagaric’s statement does not leave room for any other explanation for the council’s decision, in spite of some other commentators’ claims that “the broader concerns of the council, in tune with community sentiment, were that the existing government HRRP was ill-equipped to deliver full services to newly arrived refugee families, threatening the longer-term success of the pilot scheme” (Fraser, 2007, p. 17). The racism frame adopted by the writer from the Geelong Advertiser and
the emphatic nature of the claim again fits well with the observation made earlier that framing seeks to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 2002, p. 391) and also tries to “emphasize a particular cause of some phenomena” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 11).

Nonetheless, we contend, that while the media did give most of their attention to race (to the extent of almost disregarding any other basis for the decision), they did not “race it.” To start with, as Fraser (2007) notes,

The Tamworth incident was played out at a time of glaring public media profile for the Sudanese community in Australia. The recent cases of convicted rapist Hakeem Hakeem, and of Taban Gany, sentenced for drink driving causing serious injury, have subjected the wider Sudanese population to columns of outrage in the press and to simmering distrust from within sections of the public. (p. 17)

One could argue therefore that the council’s decision was made in the context of attitudes and understandings emanating from discourses of the racially problematized Sudanese refugee and that they were influenced by these discourses, while at the same time contributing to them. As Fairclough (1989) rightly points out, “Social conditions determine properties of discourse” (p. 9)” and “the language activity which goes on in social contexts is not merely a reflection or expression of social processes and practices; it is part of those processes and practices” (p. 23).

Media (Re)Producing the Problematized (Sudanese) Refugee Subject

An important (perhaps unintended) effect of the media’s framing of the Tamworth case as a racist event is how the Sudanese subject was portrayed and positioned. The portrayal of the Sudanese refugee—oftentimes reported by quoting the words of Tamworth city councilor and local pub-"event of compassion”; “poor souls”). Further, the paternalistic overtones constructed and reproduced an “other” who is abjectly poor, hence different from “us” a “wealthy country.” Perhaps more important in the excerpts is the references made to war and persecution. These have more enduring and possibly even inimical consequences for portrayal of the Sudanese subject—as victims, who as Mayor Treloar argued, “fly out of Sudan, arrive in Sydney, pop on a plane and come to Tamworth—and they come with trauma, . . . [to a place where they] don’t have the trauma counsellors to help them” (Saleh & Keene, 2006). Thus, rather than centre the resilience of Sudanese to survive under crisis situations, such reporting instead associates them with violence:

Few people could have greater claims to being given safe haven in Australia than the Sudanese. Apart from a hiatus from 1972 to 1983, civil war has raged in southern Sudan since 1955. It has claimed close to two million lives and displaced about four million people. Despite international efforts to broker a peace deal between rebel forces and government troops allied with Arab janjaweed militia, the conflict in the Darfur region shows little sign of abating. (“Shame Tamworth,” 2006, p. 12)

Adopting the frames of war, persecution, and violence, instead of resilience and survival in the discussion of Sudanese subjectivity meant that attention was paid to only a small number of attributes, which would subsequently ensure that Sudanese refugees are seen only in a certain light (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Such reporting/framing reinforces Councilor Schofield’s statement that war is “all they [Sudanese refugees] have known.” A consequence of such reporting is that it can conjure up images and constructs of an “other” sufficiently different from “us” (one’s only ever known violence) that there is the possibility of a “clash of civilisations.” Not surprising then that the Sudanese subject would be subsequently associated with violent behavior, as Mayo Treloar argued. This “violent” subject, “different from us” is highlighted in the reporting of the sentiments of a Tamworth resident below:

A few doors up, a single mother shoos her young daughter inside. She is a large woman, and stands barefoot on her dying front lawn, pointing angrily at her neighbours. “Did you ask them about the 11-year-old-girls that go into that house? It’s totally inappropriate,” she says, her eyes welling with tears of rage. “Did you ask them about driving off and not paying for petrol? We don’t do that. Why are the Aborigines scared of them? They stand outside here on the street yabbering away on their mobile phones. They just stare at you. Everybody’s terrified of them in the street. Why can’t they just go back where they came from?” (Murphy, 2006)

Councillor and local publican Robert Schofield said: “These are people escaping war and persecution. I’m sickened by the lack of compassion.” (Norrie, 2006, emphasis added)

We’ve got many, many volunteers up here. There’s lots of volunteer groups, they’re only too pleased to help the Sudanese, the poor souls, to get a new life back in Tamworth, Mr Schofield told Southern Cross Radio. “We’re a wealthy country and it’s only five families, and the poor souls have got absolutely nothing. They come from a war-torn country where they’ve been fighting there for 21 years, that’s all they’ve known. (Geelong Advertiser, 2007, emphasis added)
The excerpt above not only frames the Tamworth case as a racist event, but exposes the fear and uneasiness of some of Tamworth residents with the Sudanese subject. We argue that it is this fear and uneasiness that is behind such residents’ support of the council’s decision: Allowing more Sudanese refugees into the town meant the potential to increase violence (and crime) in an otherwise peaceful town.

Moreover, some of the reporting highlighted the Sudanese refugee as not only “different,” but also “raced”:

Sudanese have black skin and are often Muslim but in every meaningful respect they are the same as every other person in Australia. That’s a lesson civic leaders in Tamworth who have refused to re-settle five Sudanese families need to have drilled into them. Otherwise, their town, which has been voted Australia’s most friendly, might also get the mantle as the most racist [. . .] Sure some Sudanese might express themselves in slightly different ways, prefer different music and eat different food but these no more differentiate them from the rest of us than does the fact most of us follow different football teams. (Bagaric, 2006, p. 17)

Such descriptions though purporting to be benign, serve to subtly prop up “the structural relation in which ‘whiteness’ is defined against a homogenized Other constructed as black” (Stratton, 2006, p. 676).

It is worth pointing out that the Sudanese refugee subject who is re/produced in the reports is one who is silenced. In analyzing the media reporting of the Tamworth case, what is glaringly obvious is the lack of the Sudanese voice in most of the reports, that is, the views/opinions of the Sudanese refugees living in Tamworth in relation to the vote. In this sense, the media not only reproduced the problematized Sudanese refugee, it also silenced them, thereby committing what Spivak (1994), calls an act of “epistemic violence” (p. 78). Interestingly, of the few articles that included comments from migrants of Sudanese background, none was from Sudanese living in Tamworth. For example, Saleh and Keene’s article: “No More Refugees—Tamworth Mayor Defends Vote to Slam the Gate” references the experiences of Marial Fieg, residing in Newcastle. Similarly, Saleh’s articles: “Racist Council’s Apology of Sorts—Tamworth’s About-Face” and “Council Reconsiders: Tamworth Says Sorry to its Sudan Refugees” also include “the voice” of Sudanese residents in Blacktown. Our contention then is that the media failed in their role of serving as “a crucial arena for challenging prevailing attitudes regarding the many ‘others’” (Howard & Idriss, 2007, p. 2).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has presented analyses of online print media reporting of the Tamworth City council’s 2006 decision (and subsequent reversal of that decision) to refuse the resettlement of five refugee families into the town, which gained media attention and condemnation as an act of racism: a decision based mainly on racial prejudice. Bullimore (1999) writes that

The Australian media, like the media of many Westernised countries, play a significant role in not only providing information about the society in which we live but also in actively constructing for us a picture of that society. (p. 72)

What picture of society did the media paint in the Tamworth case then? We have argued in this article that the media framed the Tamworth Sudanese issue in particular ways that would encourage the audience to see the Tamworth Council’s initial decision as racist and the whole issue as being about racism (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997; Hacker & Pierson, 2005). According to Gitlin (1980), “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely handle discourse” (p. 7). Our discussion here has shown that the media’s selection, interpretation, and presentation of the events surrounding the Tamworth Council’s decisions—rejection and subsequent reversal—were meant to introduce patterns of cognition to the audience that would more than likely make them see the case as being about race and racism. Tamworth council was constructed in the media coverage and discourses as having made a decision based on racial prejudice. In other words, through their framing, the media painted a picture of a “racist” council, by extension, a racist Tamworth, and by inference a racist country/rural Australia (at the very least).

The heavy mediation and the frame(s) adopted by the media, which linked the Council’s decisions to the wider issue of race, racism, and racial harmony, turned what could have easily passed for an innocuous everyday occurrence—a Federal Government request to a City Council, and their negative response to the said request—into a media event “par excellence” (Iyengar & Simon, 1997, p. 256). In so doing, the media provided “a society-wide forum where values, norms, and social structures were scrutinized, challenged, and celebrated” (Hunt, 1997, p. 410) in the name of so-called racial moral outrage and harmonious race relations.

Moreover, when one applies Essed’s concept of everyday racism to the case, it is evident that the decision was an act of everyday racism. Essed (1991) describes everyday racism as the everyday manifestations and (re)production of systemic inequality based on race and/or assumptions around race, whether intended or unintended. Though other factors may/could have influenced the decision-making and attitudes of decision makers in this case, it is not far-fetched to argue that the structural forces of racism, represented by attitudes and understandings that permeate the circulating media discourses around Sudanese refugees that problematize and present them as the “racialized other,” would have played a role in influencing the council, acting in an everyday routine situation, to take a decision that would discriminate against the refugees. And as Stratton suggests, these attitudes and
understandings are so embedded in the everyday life of a racialized Australian culture that its members don’t even recognize themselves as making decisions based on a racialized history (Stratton, 2006, p. 662).

Our conclusions about the media’s framing notwithstanding, it remains debatable whether the media reporting mirrored or portrayed community attitudes and perceptions toward Sudanese refugees. While some may hail the reporting of the Tamworth case as an exposé of a case of racism, it could also be critiqued as sensationalist reporting that pushed the media agenda and exaggerated a race issue for the sake of news (see, for example, Allsop, 2007; Fraser, 2007).

Moreover, as has been discussed in detail in this article, the media, in their reporting still reproduced the current negative discourses of refugees that are not only paternalistic and patronizing, but also problematize and pathologize refugees. In so doing, the media became a site for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Sudanese (and by extension African) refugeehood that were in themselves racist. In our view, what the media did qualifies as racial ramblings because of the nature of their coverage and their insistently and persistent focus on race and racism, and the presentation of stereotypes, which while supposedly intended to be benign, ultimately served as a platform for (re)producing and enhancing both everyday and systemic racism. The analyses in this article illustrates that the Tamworth Case contained base materials for different frames and that there was an opportunity to offer multiple explanations as to why the Tamworth Council made their initial decision to reject the Federal Government’s request, but that did not happen. This article therefore shows that explanations offered in news coverage of such issues while at least partially inherent, are influenced to a great extent by “social, cultural, and historical forces influencing the institution and practice of journalism” (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012, p. 477).

In terms of value, this article has provided insights into an issue that is of politico-cultural significance within the Australian society—the issue of race, racism, and racial relations. Given the on-going discussions about racism in Australia and how to deal with it, and also public discourses about multiculturalism as official cultural policy, the discussions in this article help us to understand the mass media’s role in highlighting racism as a problem for public and political concern while providing valuable insights into how the media can act as a double-edged sword: helping to unearth and fight racism, thereby championing racial harmony on one hand, while providing a platform for (re)producing racial stereotypes and subsequently everyday racism.

The article is also important because it has shown that news frames can affect/influence the decision making of elected bodies (in this case, cause a change of mind/decision by the Tamworth Council), thereby confirming research findings that suggest that people who are moderately or most politically aware are more responsive to media framing (see, for example, de Vreese et al., 2011; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Slothuus, 2008; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Also by providing some understanding of the “dynamics between media coverage and what people make of the issues presented to them on one hand, and how this coverage interacts with societal factors to produce effects” (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001, p. 364), the discussions and revelations here can inform discussions around the future direction of government refugee settlement policy. It can also help in designing programs that seek to gain both public and council support for such policy, as well as helping in discussions of a more robust multicultural policy for Australia. Last but not least, the worth of this article can be seen in the way in which it has shown why despite all the talk about racism and the efforts at ending it, race and racial matters continue to be issues of everyday concern. Our discussions have exposed the subtle and yet persistent way in which racism reproduces itself in the Australian society, through seemingly objective and benevolent ways of reporting the “other.”

To sum up, we revisit the question in our title and conclude based on our discussions so far, that the media through their intense coverage and the negatively valenced frames that they used in their articles/stories, turned the Tamworth Sudanese Resettlement Case of 2006 into a media event (Iyengar & Simon, 1997; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). We also contend that in the process of doing so they engaged in reporting, which inadvertently served to enhance stereotypical ways of viewing the migrant Sudanese, and by extension African “other,” thereby contributing to the reproduction of both everyday and systemic racism (Essed, 1991; Stratton, 2006) and thus qualifying it as racial ramblings.

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**Author Biographies**

Kwamina Kwansah-Aidoo. PhD, is associate professor of marketing/public relations at Swinburne University of Technology. His research interests span across the fields of public relations, media, and new communication technologies, and has published several refereed journal articles, book reports, and chapters in these areas. He is currently working on two emerging streams on race, racialization, and the experiences of the new African diaspora in Australia, and the budding video film industry in Anglophone West Africa.

Virginia Mapedzahama has a PhD in sociology from the University of South Australia and is currently working on the Challenging Racism Project (CRP) at Western Sydney University. Her research focuses on understanding the social construction of all categories of difference, meanings attached to this difference, how it is signified, lived, and its implications for those assigned difference. She explores this interest in the context of migration, diaspora, blackness, race, racism, and ethnicity in Australia.