South African Attitudes to Australia and Australians

G.M. Mersham and
P.E. Louw

The Olympics, The Media, and our Images of Others

Cognitive science has long known that people construct pictures in their heads about the world beyond their direct experience, using messages from the mass media and other sources as their raw material. They process this information using criteria 'loaded with preference, suffused with affection or dislike, attached to fears, lusts, strong wishes, pride, hope' (Lippmann 1922:78). The result is that our images of Others are highly generalised, subjective, and relational. People tend to define an out-group by comparison to the circumstances and values of their relevant in-group. This intergroup dynamic tends to be much more influential in the formation of our images of other countries and peoples than any particular demographic or personality attribute at the individual level.

Since Lippmann's time, it has been well documented that the mass media play a dominant role in creating and circulating our images of other peoples and places. However, the media are never transparent in their presentation of distant places. The media construct their 'cognitive pictures' in much the same way Lippmann's describes above—only they are available for all to see (Van Ginneken 1998; Dahlgren 1982). Further, the visual media are assumed to be especially important in the creation of perceptions of cultural nearness and distance. As Sadkovich (1998:60) argues:

> If television is a dream, it also decides what is real .... As the tube creates and idealises some groups and ideas by focusing on them, it makes others disappear by ignoring them. Because it is the key source of news for most Americans it has seriously distorted our view of reality.

In sum, most audiences rely heavily on the limited repertoire of information supplied by the selection processes of culturally and ideologically biased national media to build up a 'common knowledge' of overseas people and places (Neuman *et al.* 1992).

Groups seeking to present themselves on a global stage, such as Sydney's bid to host the Olympic Games, must not only work through the filters of international media, but confront all the varieties of audience 'common knowledge' around the world. As such, the Sydney Olympics offers a small window of opportunity to further investigate the ideas of Lippmann, Sadkovich, Neuman, Van Ginneken, and others.

This study explores international public perceptions about Australia; changes to such perceptions (if any) over time; and whether the 2000 Olympic Games have any impact on such perceptions. To focus on the inter-group character of respondents' images of Australia we deployed a modified version of Walter Lippmann's notion of stereotypes (Jandt 1995:54) to describe negative or positive judgements made about others on the basis of their membership of another group—in this case the other group is 'Australians'.

The Three-Year Study: Looking in from the Outside

Our comparative study examines the extent to which current overseas perceptions of Australia/ns will shift in line with global media promotion of Australia/ns in the Sydney 2000 Olympics. It mobilises a number of critical themes in international communication and media studies such as mediated representations of 'reality', mediated cultural stereotyping, and their impact on perception and attitude formation.

The research question is to what extent will media coverage of the Sydney Olympics shift perceptions of Australian society overseas. Our study addresses this question by developing an empirical, cross-cultural profile of foreign perceptions of Australia/ns from 1999 to 2001 in various countries to see if responses differ, and/or if similar patterns of change can be observed across cultures at different points in time (pre- and post- Olympics). In parallel, the study monitors media coverage of the 2000 Olympics (and Australia) in each of the countries being studied. In this way, if any attitude or image shift is detected from 1999 to 2001, explanations can be sought from the recorded media coverage.

This study is an extension of a 1992 project which monitored (amongst other things) the way Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain tried to promote themselves using the Barcelona Olympics as a platform and how these messages were

received around the world (Moragas, Rivenburgh & Larson 1995). There were three findings in particular from that study, and prior study of the Seoul Olympics (Chalip 1989), relevant to our interest in mediated perceptual change:

1) While surprisingly little specific *knowledge* about the host culture and setting is recalled after the finish of an Olympic Games, there is a generalized, but increased perception of 'modernity' and positive *impression* associated with cities that successfully host an Olympic Games;

2) Repeated media presentation of key visual icons in the host city or Olympic 'moments' (e.g., a dramatic lighting of the Olympic flame) do find their way into audience recall of the host city after the Games are complete, and;

3) There is an extreme disparity in the attention different international media (press and broadcast) give to the host city/country setting and culture—ranging from abundant to virtually non-existent—in turn affecting audience exposure to new information.

From qualitative data collected before the Sydney Olympic, we hope to learn more about the factors that contribute to mediated perceptual change. This, in turn, may provide a vehicle for the future testing of the media's effectiveness in international public relations campaigns. More broadly, the study will be able to comment on the effectiveness of 'spectacular event' strategies in international affairs, such as hosting U.N. summits or the Olympic Games, in order to shift peoples' perceptions in the global arena (Deutsch & Merritt 1965; Giffard & Rivenburgh 2000). Finally, the project will contribute to what currently is scarce empirical literature on cross-cultural perceptions of Australia/ns overseas.

While a full analysis of the relationship between media representations and attitudes held towards foreigners will only be possible once the three-year project is complete, some interesting findings are evident at this stage of the project.

Pre-Sydney Games Survey

Existing images of Australians were collected in the United States, South Africa, Malaysia and Hong Kong during 1999[1]. Significantly, even this first stage of

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[1] It is intended to examine at least one country from each continent, but the results from the United Kingdom, Spain and Mexico studies are not yet to hand when writing this article.

exploring foreign notions of 'Australianess' generated some interesting attitudinal patterns, and produced some early indicators of the media's influence in generating stereotypes about distant peoples and places. It is these early findings that this paper presents.

Questionnaires were distributed to 867 undergraduate communication students[2] across six universities in November 1999[3] in the United States, South Africa, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Random focus group discussions and personal interviews were included.

The South African sample was drawn from two universities—Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) and the University of Zululand (UZ). UZ students were all black South Africans and have overwhelmingly rural peri-urban backgrounds. RAU has a mixed student profile, mostly drawn from the highly urbanised Witwatersrand area. RAU students are 45 percent white-Afrikaner, 38 percent white-Anglo and 17 percent black. The South African sample was also skewed in favour of female students (74 percent); the mean age of the South African sample was 20 (mode = 19). The home language of 44 percent of the overall South African sample was English, 39 percent spoke a black-African language at home (90 per cent of these were Zulu), and 17 percent spoke Afrikaans. All South African respondents were multi-lingual. Thirty nine percent of the sample had travelled outside South Africa (23 percent outside Africa; 5

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[2] Focussing upon undergraduate communication students had the advantage of creating some sample 'homogeneity' across the different countries. On the other hand, this necessarily skewed our sample in favour of those privileged enough to have access to higher education, and a sample that was young and hence more limited in terms of life-experience. We would none-the-less expect our sample to have imbibed the same set of stereotypes as their parents and the wider media-consuming public.

[3] The survey sample sizes varied to some degree across countries (USA = 573; Malaysia = 100; Hong Kong = 50; South Africa = 144). The focus group/interview sub-sample size was more consistent for each country (approx. 20 students). It's important to note that the smaller focus group results, as well as a test of a randomly sampled sub-set of 50 surveys, in the USA were a near exact reflection of the larger survey size in terms of the range and frequency of image content. This should alleviate concerns about sample disparities across countries significantly affecting the observations presented here.

percent had visited Australia). 48 percent of the South African sample cited television as the media form they most commonly used (43 percent cited radio).

Australia as Place

Students across the four countries commonly associated Australia with 'Crocodile Dundee' and the rugged outback with the following descriptors: 'beautiful, hot, dry, scenery, plants, lots of animals, far away'. 'Crocodile Dundee' and the 'Bush' featured especially prominently in the consciousness of Americans.

South African respondents expressed consistent images of sheep farms, surfing, beaches and the desert with some referring to the hole in the Ozone layer over Australia and to 'the big red rock in the middle' (Ayers Rock/Uluru). Anglo and Afrikaner South Africans were inclined to see Australia's geography as 'the same as South Africa', while most black South Africans had no image whatsoever of Australia's geography or what it looked like. Most black respondents could construct an image of Australians as a people, but not of Australia the place (although virtually all mentioned that they had learned at school that Australia was 'an island'. Some said it was a 'big island').

In an overall assessment of the scaled responses (positive—negative) on a variety of characteristics, South African students were positive overall with regards to the levels of economic development, quality of education and political stability.

The Australian Personality

There was a widespread view amongst all South Africans that Australians were a happy and friendly people. The most common positive attribute was Australians were seen to be a very friendly people. One said: 'I have an image of Australians as a happy people who get on well with each other'. Others said: 'They know how to enjoy life' and 'they're a laid back lot'. (However, at least two Anglo South African respondents tied the idea of being 'laid back' to the notion that Australians had a 'poor work ethic'.)

Beyond this, South Africans lived in different worlds. The most representative comment from an Anglo South African was 'they are sort of like us, but just not as cultured as us'. South African-Anglos commonly used the following terms to describe Australians: 'brash, loud and not very refined', 'boisterous', 'not very cultured' and 'Aussie women are loud and rough'. One

Anglo said: 'they're an average sort of people. You never hear of Aussies doing anything. I mean they're not famous for anything ... so they must be sort of average'. The Australian accent was constantly referred to by English speakers as 'funny' and/or 'irritating'.

Overall, Afrikaners were less negative about Australians, identifying them as friendly, easy-going, sporty and good rugby players. The generally positive feeling many Afrikaners felt towards Australians appeared to be derived in no small measure from the fact that Australians (like Afrikaners) were identified as keen rugby players. One Anglo South African actually likened Afrikaners with Australians. She said: 'They're a lot like Afrikaners ... Australians have conservative attitudes'. However, interestingly, many of the white South Africans who had actually met an Australian (in Australia, South Africa or Zimbabwe) made comments such as 'their stereotype of us, is that we are all racists', 'they don't really like us', and 'they are not very friendly to South Africans'.

All the black South Africans who had met an Australian described them as 'friendly people' or 'good people'. In fact, during this study only two black respondents (both RAU students) expressed real negativity towards Australians. One said: 'Australians are racists' and the other said, 'Australians are racist conservatives'.

Australia as a Destination

Anglo South Africans were the most keen of all South Africans to visit Australia, often to see friends or family who had migrated. (Amongst Anglos, it was common to know someone living in Australia, and many of Anglo students had parents who had travelled to Australia to 'check it out' as a possible migration destination). Five percent of the South African respondents (all Anglos) had travelled to Australia. The group least keen to visit Australia was Afrikaners, who often commented that if they were going to travel overseas they would want to go somewhere 'different' and not 'like South Africa'. Those who did not want to travel to Australia generally felt very strongly about not wanting to visit, commonly because it was perceived as a bland place. One respondent said: 'Why would I want to go there? What can you do there?'

However, when it came to migration a high proportion of South Africans wanted to move to Australia. Sixty-seven percent of black respondents said they would like to migrate to Australia; 61 percent of Anglos said the same; as did 58 percent of Afrikaners. During focus groups and interview sessions the South African respondents who expressed a desire to migrate, linked their desire to

migrate to a perception of Australia as 'peaceful', 'safe', 'has less crime', 'well-governed' and having a 'good economy' (which was continually contrasted with the situation in South Africa). The sort of responses from black South African students that were most representative of this sample were: 'People are leaving South Africa to go to Australia so it must be good'; 'lots of South Africans are migrating there'; 'many people are moving there'; 'from what I hear it sounds like a peaceful place, with little crime'; and 'it sounds like a nice place because there are no wars there'.

Some Anglo South Africans commented on Australia as being 'too far away' and 'too isolated'. One said, 'It is a small isolated country in the middle of nowhere', another as 'an isolated place where nothing happens'. This appeared to derive from a general Anglo tendency to see Europe and North America as the centre of the world, and to see proximity to this centre as important. (South Africa was seen to be closer to this centre than Australia).

Australian Sports
The majority of black South Africans also had little knowledge about what sports Australian played, in part because black South Africans are mostly soccer fans, a sport in which Australians have little profile. White South Africans cited cricket, rugby and surfing as typically Australian. Overall, South Africans ranked themselves better at sport. There was widespread knowledge of Sydney as 2000 Olympic host (probably because Cape Town put in a failed bid to host the 2004 Games, which gave media prominence to the successful Sydney bid).

Culture and History
South Africans perceived Australia as having little in the form of unique cultural or artistic traditions. There were no associations with the arts, music, cuisine, cultural traditions, or architectural styles However, students at the University of Zululand (i.e. rural South Africans) were more upbeat about Australia as an exciting culturally vibrant place. Images of Australia were extremely ill-defined in the minds of Zululand students, and of black South African students in general. During the interviews many said 'I have no picture of Australia in my head'.

Surprisingly, few South Africans mentioned Australia's penal colony past. However, among Anglo South Africans, Australia's penal origins surface obliquely in the form of comments about Australian being 'like us' but 'less classy'. During focus groups it became clear that Australia's penal past was

'common knowledge' amongst white South Africans. Only a minority of urban blacks was aware of this past.

Economy and Politics

Among Anglo South Africans, Australia is seen as a strict dichotomy in terms of development: with modern cities on the coastal fringe, and vast, uncivilised expanses just beyond those city limits. The majority of the landmass is seen to be an undeveloped and sparsely populated 'outback'. While all new it followed a democratic system, no one in South Africa knew the name of Australia's Prime Minister or the party he belonged to. There was no knowledge of Australia's right-wing opposition group Pauline Hanson's One Nation, the politics of migration, the political struggles of Aborigines, or the significance of Green issues in Australian politics

Most South African respondents saw Australia as more economically developed. Black South Africans believed South Africa was politically freer than Australia, while white South Africans ranked both Australia and their own country in the same neutral band for freedom. Black South Africans were especially positive and viewed Australia as a highly developed country with many employment opportunities. Frequently they used terms like 'a prosperous country', 'a rich country' and 'well developed'. An almost universal feature of the South African responses was that Australia was a peaceful place with a low crime rate, in contrast with the breakdown of law and order in South Africa. Australians were described as lucky to live in such a peaceful place.

Race and Culture

South Africans perceived Australia as predominantly white and culturally homogenous. One respondent said: 'It is a very English kind of place'. Many used the term 'British' to describe Australia. During the interviews and focus groups most South Africans were bemused when told Australians described themselves a multicultural nation. One said: 'Let them come here and see what being multicultural is all about'. Although South Africans scored themselves as more racist and less tolerant than Australians, they did not regard Australians positively on racism and tolerance for minority groups (see also Mersham 2000; 2001; Lange 1997).

All white South African respondents knew about Aborigines, it being a 'common' perception that (as one Anglo respondent said) 'the Aussies, unlike us,

killed off their natives'. Not all black South Africans knew of the existence of Aborigines and even those who did were unclear what to name them. One black respondent said, 'I know there are black people, but I don't know what you call them ... apparently they are fading away now'. During the focus groups the majority of black South Africans were greatly surprised to hear that there had ever been conflict between whites and blacks in Australia.

The following sorts of comments were in fact common amongst South African respondents: 'I've never heard of problems there'; 'one never hears anything about Australia. It all seems so quiet'; 'They are easy going and laid back with no problems. I've never heard or seen anything to counter that perception'; 'It [Australia] doesn't appear on TV'; and 'The Australians must be tolerant towards abos now because if they weren't we would have seen it on TV'.

Mediated Australia
Evidence from the pre-Olympics (1999) study appeared to demonstrate at least some correlation between the dominant media imagery and discourses about Australia/Australians.

There was virtually no indication of impressions of Australia derived from hard news sources or topics. Television and movie images of nature, tourism and 'Crocodile Dundee'-type characters roaming the bush have filled the mental void left by the absence of societal-images of Australia. Several respondents mentioned the fact that 'we never hear about Australia in the news'. Many prefaced their answers to interview or focus group questions by saying, 'I don't really know, but my image is...'.

South Africans and Australians constantly compete in cricket and Rugby Union matches. Regular television coverage of these matches are considered important media events. These matches receive live ball-by-ball coverage on both television and radio services. In addition, these sports events are important items on both television news and the Press. Consequently, for non-black (white, Indian and coloured) South Africans, Australian cricketers and rugby players are media celebrities, and 'Australia' has acquired something an on-going media-'presence' through these sporting fixtures. For these sports fans, Australia and Australians have become 'familiar'—and it is a familiarity that has bred something of a trans-Indian Ocean 'kinship'—a sense of 'they are like us, but over there'.

This sense of kinship with Australians has not developed for black South Africans who are overwhelmingly soccer fans. Because soccer is not a sport Australia excels in, there are no regular SA-Australian soccer matches that means

no regularised media imagery of Australian sports teams and players ever reaches black South African television viewers. Hence, for black South Africans, Australia remains an exotic and foreign place; whereas for non-blacks it is 'ordinary' and almost 'home-like'.

Discussion of migration to Australia has become commonplace in South Africa both by those wanting to emigrate and those who try to dissuade others from joining what they disparagingly refer to as 'the chicken-run'. Not surprisingly, the topic of migration in general, plus stories of migrants in Australia feature in the South African media. This has generated something of a binary opposition that the South African media exacerbates—namely, the economic problems, lawlessness and violence of South Africa are juxtaposed to an image of a prosperous, peaceful and law-abiding Australia. Hence even those who do not want to migrate made comments like 'People are leaving South Africa to go to Australia so it must be good'. Many Anglo South Africans said migration to Australia was an on-going topic of conversation in their households, or that they remained in contact with friends or family who had already migrated. A number said one or both of their parents had travelled to Australia to 'check it out' as a place to move to.

Australia has a narrow media presence in South Africa and the picture presented is strongly skewed in favour of sport. Anglo South Africans are often reasonably knowledgeable about Australian social and political issues, a knowledge derived not so much from media-coverage, but rather what they have heard from friends and relatives in Australia.

In addition to the media presence, black South African students commonly cited personal contact with Australians (as aid workers or tourists) as having influenced their (positive) view of Australians. A number of black respondents said, 'I met an Australian once and ...'. In a number of cases 'second hand contact' was reported, such as 'my niece went to an Australian University and she said Australians were very nice people'.

The 2000 Olympics: Media Opportunity or Media Stereotyping?

Many Australians saw the Games as a great public relations extravaganza that could promote Sydney as a cosmopolitan global city. The tourist industry certainly saw the Games as a golden opportunity to sell Australia as a multifaceted destination catering for a range of tastes including those wanting Green tourism, outback ranch visits, glitzy beach resorts, Aboriginal cultural sites, or sophisticated urban culture. During the lead-up to the Games, Australian

websites clustered around the Olympics were already promoting the idea of Sydney as a huge cosmopolitan and multicultural city, deemed to be as exciting as any in the world.

It might be expected that the success of the 2000 Games and the Opening and Closing ceremonies countered the 'Crocodile Dundee' and 'laconic Aussie' stereotypes cited by students from the USA, Malaysia, Hong Kong and South Africa. However, the extent to which the Games will ultimately influence the way Australia is seen overseas is yet to be tested. It might be that visiting media crews, through their reports on Australian idiosyncrasies, simply reaffirmed the old stereotypes already existing in their respective countries. If that proves to be the case, it would represent a failure for the publicity machine that promoted Sydney and Australia over the period of the Games.

As the Games commenced, visitors to Sydney would on the one hand have witnessed Australia's self-perception as a 'clever country' of creative citizens in an open, tolerant, free, egalitarian society, yet on the other hand would have encountered a group of people often sensitive to criticism, and culturally cringing when exposed to the outsider's gaze. Such paradoxes and ironies remain a part of the on-going invention of an 'Australian' identity (Mersham 2000). It is possible that during the Sydney 2000 Olympics, some foreign media may have relayed such paradoxes in their non-Olympic sidebars. The next stage of this project is currently in the process of exploring what portrayals were, in fact, beamed overseas and already it is clear from some of the reporting, that hosting a successful Olympics does not necessarily guarantee positive media portrayals[4]. As this project proceeds into 2001, it will seek to answer the questions—did the 2000 Olympics impact on how others view Sydney, Australia and Australians? If so, what was the nature of the impact? And to what extent can any perceptual-shifts that are identified be attributed to media-representations?

Communication Science
University of Zululand

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Science
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

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[4] For example, the history of white-Australia's repression of Aborigines was a feature of South African media coverage over the period of the 2000 Games.

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