Opinion

More work to do: How Chinese-Australians perceive coverage of themselves and China in Australian media

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Australian media have significantly increased their reporting on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Chinese-Australian communities in the past few years.

But how fair is that coverage? The Lowy Institute asked 2,000 Australians exactly this question in 2022. In response, 61 percent said it was 'fair and balanced', while 10 percent of respondents said it was 'too positive'. Only 26 percent said it was 'too negative'.

Lowy then asked the same question of Chinese-Australians. In 2022, 42 percent of Chinese-Australian respondents said Australian media reporting about China was 'too negative'. By contrast, in the previous year's poll, 57 percent had said such reporting was 'too negative'.

What accounts for the striking difference between the assessments of mainstream Australians and Chinese-Australians?

Lowy's survey of Chinese-Australians included individuals of various backgrounds: different histories and trajectories of migration, and countries of origin.

The 2021 Census found just under 550,000 respondents were born in China. This makes up 2.2 percent of the entire Australian population, with 227,414 (41 percent) of these PRC-born individuals reporting Australian citizenship.

This raises another question: in what ways are people who have immigrated from China similar to, or different from, Chinese-Australians in general? And do they typically maintain closer ties with mainland China than other diasporic Chinese?

Our new research for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney sought to answer these questions by conducting three focus groups, a quantitative survey of 689 respondents and 20 in-depth interviews.

Three broad questions were pursued:

(1) how Australia's PRC migrants see themselves and their community portrayed in the media

(2) how they see the PRC portrayed in the media

(3) what impact they think such portrayals have on Australia's general public.

The rationale behind this research is simple. Social cohesion is fundamental to our national interest, and research tells us the media play an important role in building social cohesion.

Key findings

Interviewees generally expressed more trust in Australian media than in Chinese state media. Both focus group discussions and in-depth interviewees perceived a high level of professionalism in the Australian English-language media's reporting on domestic issues. They acknowledge that Australia's English-language media have different news values from Chinese state media, and so tend to adopt a critical stance on the issues they are covering.

At the same time, a substantial majority (78 percent) of survey respondents believed that when Australia's English-language media report on Australia's Chinese communities, they tend to lack balance, depth and independence.

Just over half (51 percent) believed Australia's English-language media were either 'relatively distrustful' (42 percent) or 'completely distrustful' (9 percent) of Chinese-Australian communities. Seven in 10 (70 percent) believed the media tended to portray them, both collectively and individually, as objects of suspicion and risks to national security.

These findings point to a widespread feeling among respondents that their community is substantially more likely to be mistrusted, misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Australian English-language media now than in the past.

There is a widespread perception among survey respondents that Australian English-language media reporting on PRC-related issues has led to a low level of acceptance of their community by the Australian public. About six in ten (63 percent) respondents reported feelings of emotional and mental anguish in response to the media's biased reporting.

Somewhat consistent with Lowy's surveys of Chinese-Australians, more than half of survey respondents (53 percent) believe Australian English-language reporting on the PRC has been 'too negative'.

Interviewees emphasised they did not have a problem with 'negative' news about China. However, they frequently perceived a particular news-making agenda in Australian English-language media that frames the PRC and Chinese-Australians as hostile entities.

This in turn has posed serious challenges for PRC migrants in their efforts to be accepted into Australian society.

The majority of survey respondents (58 percent) believe they are better informed about the PRC than both Australia's English-speaking public and the Chinese public living in the PRC. This in turn makes them feel better positioned than either group to assess the accuracy of the Australia's media reporting on the PRC. They were also acutely aware of the widespread public perception that they had been 'brainwashed' by PRC propaganda.

Around six in 10 (63 percent) reported feelings of powerlessness in relation to having their voices heard by the media. While 14 percent reported having lodged complaints about media reporting by writing either to politicians (8 percent) or the media (6 percent), most reported they tended to process such daily feelings by airing them within their own community and through their own networks. This might mean discussing them with family and friends (55 percent) or sharing in their social media networks (23 percent).

There is a high level of ambivalence and uncertainty towards both Australia and the PRC when questions about belonging were discussed.

On the one hand, respondents seem to remain strongly committed to making Australia home. Compared with five years ago, one in three (33 percent) reported no change in their sense of belonging. Another 38 percent reported a stronger sense of belonging. Another 10 percent reported having a substantially reduced sense of belonging to Australia, while only 2 percent say they no longer have any sense of belonging.

On the other hand, 46 percent of respondents either strongly agree (17 percent) or are inclined to agree (29 percent) that reading media stories about the 'China threat' has diminished their sense of belonging to mainstream Australian society.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (91 percent) are concerned by the Australian English-language media's tendency to engage in speculation about war with China. This is primarily because they believe such speculation could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They are equally concerned about how Chinese-Australians would be treated if Australia found itself at war with the PRC.

Given that social cohesion and inclusiveness are crucial to national interest, these findings offer an important insight into Australia's bid for social cohesion. They may also ask questions of Australia's media in regard to their role in promoting or damaging that cohesion.

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