

**Issue 30 *Public Administration Today*  
'Public Administration and the Media' – DIAC national communications manager Sandi Logan on how media helps and hinders in Immigration matters, submitted February 17, 2012.**

**A matter of trust – Immigration and the media**

Some government agencies will experience months or, indeed, an entire year without ever hitting the front pages of the daily newspapers or the lead story in the local news bulletin. This is a luxury which the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and its past iterations, has never had in its 67-year history. While the volume of media coverage waxes and wanes, it is always present. For Immigration officers, media awareness is a *sine qua non* of their public administration responsibilities.

This level of media attention isn't surprising when you consider the department's key role in building the nation, through managing the movement and settlement of people to Australia. Our officers have facilitated the permanent migration of more than seven million people since the department's establishment, our visa programs contribute to Australia's future workforce needs, and the future population; and our multicultural policy is the envy of many nations then world over.

Given how many lives we touch through our work, it is no wonder that some of the issues we deal with every day generate an incredible amount of debate in the Australian community and the media. Whether through focus on political and policy issues in the portfolio or by highlighting individual cases, media attention has the ability to significantly affect our work – and the way our staff feel about their jobs. It's understandably important, then, that our voice is heard through the media.

How the department has chosen to manage the media over its long history has been shaped by various factors including government and ministerial attitudes, the views of the secretary and executive, available resources, and whether a defensive or proactive media policy was favoured.

In recent years, DIAC has been committed to open and positive engagement with the media, providing a personalised response service and establishing itself as a trusted source of information, however sensitive or controversial the issue.

As many would recall, in 2005 the department went through a series of major crises which not only shocked the entire nation, but severely damaged the department and its standing in the community. Then-newly appointed secretary Andrew Metcalfe, with the support of the then-minister Amanda Vanstone, decided that as an organisation, we needed to give a great deal of focus to rebuilding our public image and public trust, so an early priority of the overall reform strategy was to strengthen our communications capability.

The National Communications Branch was established, a new leader was recruited as the spokesman and National Communications Manager, and our media response function overhauled and boosted. This expanded capability allowed us to place ourselves on the front foot more often – building new relationships with our external stakeholders, including the Australian public and especially, the media.

The department's media team provides a 24-hour seven-day-a-week media response service to a diverse range of regional, national, international and ethnic media, including radio, television, print, social and online media. It supports me by producing media releases, talking points, articles, video news releases, tweets, Facebook posts, blogs, digital stills, multimedia output, audio packages and other internal and external communication products that present the department's point of view.

One of the challenges that we faced in 2005 was getting the media “onside” again, to build relationships and win their confidence – not as sycophants, but as interlocutors with whom we could work, and who would have trust in us. We chose to do this through the delivery of quality product in a timely manner. This meant answering calls, listening to queries from journalists and delivering a response that had substance - not spin, in less than 60 minutes.

These days, the media know that when they call, we'll respond. In 2011 alone, we received around 6000 media enquiries. In response we produced more than 2000 sets of media talking points and we also prepared some 350 media releases for the minister, parliamentary secretary and the department. But we don't have an army of media officers handling this volume of work. Indeed, the NatComms media team is one of the leanest media outfits in the public sector when you take into account the size of the department and the number of enquiries we receive. Further, I probably take/make and/or have at least a dozen calls a day, including weekends, with journalists, producers, editors and other media representatives.

Our open approach does have some unwelcome side effects. By always being available, even if there's 'nothing' occurring, there's an expectation we are there to answer questions on everything. If a big issue affects a number of government agencies or crosses portfolios, we are still the first port of call for many journalists. Or, over that quiet news period post-Christmas, we take enquiries from journalists on fishing expeditions which have nothing to do with our business – like how many Australians have to postpone planned overseas holidays because they realise their passports expire in less than six months? But we still ensure we take the time to speak with the journalist and direct them to the right agency – because we want them calling back when it is a matter for us.

Another key move in re-establishing our media relationships and reputation was to establish a network of public affairs officers based in the department's state offices around Australia. We recruited locally, either experienced journalists or PR experts, to capitalise on their knowledge and contacts. This means we can be there engaging with the media on the ground, where

situations are unfolding and travel to crisis spots to provide media support to operational staff on high-profile or sensitive matters such as compliance field operations, Christmas Island, immigration detention centres and court cases where departmental staff are witnesses.

Our state-based media officers provide a personalised response which caters for the local media's specific needs and interests. Their presence in the state offices also means we are plugged in to our staff networks, get the early mail on potential issues and can get the information quickly when we need to respond to journalists.

The effectiveness of our media management hinges on trust – this trust is in several forms.

It's between me and the journalists, especially those whom I know are the heavy hitters, who are opinion-leaders, with substantial and influential audiences and readers. One of the first rules of the game is to never lie: sometimes I am economic by withholding the full story, but I do not lie. If I cannot tell them something, even though they have a source and they claim to know something, which I know is true, but which I cannot confirm, I will simply say: I cannot go there, for whatever reason (often because the material is classified or has not yet been decided by government).

The trust comes in the fact that it's known my phone never sleeps. It gives me the chance to know what the media thinks it knows, and a little time then to prepare a response. The influence I can then bring to the story is varied: a comment, a rebuttal, or better still, the story's killed because I've had enough influence to disabuse the journo there even is a story.

One of the keys to the role I fulfil as the official spokesman is enjoying a high level of confidence from the secretary. This trust has been earned over many years of working closely together, responding to the complex and sensitive matters involving our portfolio. The secretary and his deputies don't want to be bothered clearing talking points every day. They need to trust me. They need to trust that the influence I – and my team – have within and without, is effective and valuable.

As the reforms to our media approach began to take effect, I saw a change in staff attitudes towards NatComms and our role. Senior executive staff were working closely with us on improved media responses. This translated into more balanced media coverage. As the media began to trust and believe us, followed then by more balanced and even positive reporting, it had a welcome flow-on effect. The business areas which traditionally saw the media as the "bad guys" began to recognise that NatComms were the good guys, bringing a measure of difference to how we were being perceived in the public's eye.

While much of our effectiveness and influence is based on personal relationships and trust, we have also ensured that where necessary, there are formal policies and procedures in place which give the media a clear framework in which to operate.

For instance, given the ongoing intense media interest in the detention environment, last year we recast the department's previous detention media access policy, which was dated, given the size and scope of the current network of 20 facilities around Australia. This policy has received extensive media attention in itself, with many media outlets claiming that DIAC is seeking to "censor" the media. Despite objections from some quarters, more than 25 media representatives from every major metropolitan TV and newspaper outlet have now signed the deed and toured our detention facilities. Many of these media operators commented afterwards that the deed was not, in fact, as restrictive as they thought it would be. The department has never made the deed out to be something it is not. This access is about giving media the opportunity to see the facilities, their level of amenity and the programs that are offered, but not about the individuals in detention, whose privacy the department has a duty of care to protect so as not to jeopardise the safety of their family or friends back home.

At the same time, we have offered our views on the protection of asylum seekers' privacy and identification of our vulnerable clients through a submission to the Australian Communications and Media Authority's review of privacy guidelines and engagement with the Australian Press Council on its standards project.

The revised media access policy and our engagement with the media watchdogs all seek to strike the right balance between two very important ideals: the freedom of expression and freedom of the press on one hand, and the right to privacy of all people including immigration detainee clients.

Acknowledging that media attention in our portfolio is unavoidable, whether the media hinders or helps the department in its work usually depends on how we respond – we take on the obligation to find ways the media can assist us in doing our business. This doesn't always work. There has been – and will continue to be – successes and failures in taking this approach. It also means there's an expectation we'll be available to provide a departmental or operational perspective when the going gets tough. Whether it's our longstanding working relationship with the highly successful Network Seven TV series *Border Security*, or our talent identification and research assistance for the ground-breaking Cordell Jigsaw *Go Back To Where You Came From* series which broke all records for SBS-TV in 2011, we are keen to help provide accuracy and reality to the media's coverage of our portfolio.

If you are proactive and positive, then nine times out of ten, your organisation's point of view will be given as much airtime or ink, as your bad news. In the midst of a crisis, we never leave an information vacuum and we focus on the positive things that are being done to improve the situation. An occasion that demonstrates this is last year's disturbance and fires at the Villawood immigration detention centre. The April disturbance occurred against a backdrop of intense media focus on detention facilities and asylum seeker policy, following on from earlier disturbances on Christmas Island.

First, we worked with departmental officers at the detention centre to establish the facts. As a priority we developed media talking points that covered issues such as when the incident began, how many people were located on the roof, when the fires started and how many buildings had been destroyed and the criminal investigations and consequences.

As the departmental spokesman, I drove through the night to Villawood to coordinate the media and provide comment and interviews live on air for national morning TV shows. This also meant our operational staff didn't have to devote any of their time to managing media.

There was considerable coverage of this incident and while a lot of it would not have been characterised as positive, most of it was controlled and included the department's position, by providing a spokesman who was at the scene with up-to-date, accurate and timely information. Our messages, delivered through the media, made it clear to the public and our detention clients that violent behaviour would not be tolerated.

Being transparent and on the front foot also means we have the relationships and techniques in place to use the media to reach people when we most need to. Following tragedies involving asylum seekers travelling by boat, including the April 2009 boat explosion off Ashmore Reef and the SIEV 221 tragedy, the department has used the media as a key channel to provide contacts and information to concerned family members and friends of victims and survivors.

While DIAC doesn't need to go looking for media coverage, we do work very hard to promote the areas of our portfolio which are sometimes overlooked in favour of the political issue of the day or the headline-grabbing nature of the detention environment. One of the most important events on our calendar of proactive media is the annual Refugee Week celebrations in June. This is an opportunity for us to focus on the nation's long and proud tradition of helping those in humanitarian need. Australia has resettled more than 750 000 refugees and other people in humanitarian need since the end of the Second World War. Many of those resettled have spent years outside their home countries and in refugee camps. In 2011, the media was consumed with asylum seekers arriving by boat and claiming protection. With so much ink and air-time devoted to heated debate on irregular maritime arrivals, it appeared unlikely we would be successful in securing earned media focusing on our offshore humanitarian programs and world-renowned settlement services. In the face of this challenge, we decided to leverage our state PAO network and their relationships with regional and suburban media to pitch events and refugee talent, personalising the media opportunities and supporting information to their local areas. Metropolitan media was targeted through ministerial media releases, reaching a range of outlets but without the same demand on resources. This strategy paid off – as Refugee Week progressed, a growing number of stories appeared featuring celebratory events and profiles of refugees. And I was pleasantly surprised at not only the positive tone of these pieces but also that the major metrops as well as local media recognised the news value of this occasion and also made space for prominent stories. We followed up all this coverage with personal calls or

emails to the reporters and editors, to thank them for their role in increasing awareness and understanding of Australia's humanitarian programs. This was universally well-received, further cementing our relationships and creating new opportunities for positive media interactions into the future.

I've also ensured we've capitalised on the opportunities to improve our media engagement created by social media and digital technology. Social media has added considerably to our transparency and accountability. People can receive news from us on an almost immediate basis and have confidence that what they are hearing is the truth.

Youtube was our first venture into social media and in May 2008, we launched our own channel – *ImmiTV*, with endless opportunities for us to post our professionally produced video clips about coming to Australia, living in Australia, stories about the department, and educational resources. We're getting close to a million views with well over a thousand unique views each week. At the time of our TV "station" launch, this was bold and perhaps even a little revolutionary, as we were in essence, breaking the mould on how a government agency communicates.

Then about a year ago, we established a new channel, again on YouTube called *No To People Smuggling*. The messages on this channel are very blunt, targeted at diaspora communities in Australia who might be considering funding their relatives, friends and associates to jump on a people smuggler boat and try their hand at making it safely to Australia to claim asylum.

We've got a *Facebook* page, I run a very active *Twitter* account as the department's spokesman, we post photos to *Flickr*, we have a skilled migration blog on *GovSpace*, and we maintain an online newsroom for the media which provides broadcast quality vision, photographs and audio for subscribed media representatives.

These new channels give us the opportunity to present our positive messages to a global audience on an immediate basis with no gate-keepers, a result that traditional media could never provide.

While I would never be able to prevent media coverage of the complex and sensitive issues the department manages (and indeed, would not wish to, given their importance to the nation and its community), through trust, technique and technology, we are able to control its impact on our work and influence a positive outcome for the agency.

Externally we've got a core group of stakeholders and others with whom we communicate with influence; and internally, we're considered an equal and important partner helping to solve business problems.

(2884 words)

**ENDS//**