Uluru Statement from the Dis*heart*ened: A Critical Discourse Analysis of How Australian Online News Media Helped Defeat the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that media framing plays a powerful role in shaping public attitudes towards Indigenous-state relations in Australia, yet little attention has been paid to how mainstream online news media influenced the collapse of support for the 2023 Voice to Parliament (Voice) referendum. While misinformation has been studied, there remains a gap in understanding how hegemonic narratives were actively encoded and decoded into public common sense, shaping the way they voted. This dissertation addresses that gap by applying Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory to a critical discourse analysis of mainstream online news coverage and Indigenous media platforms. Using combined textual and content analysis, it traces how No-supporting media forged a fear-based chain of equivalence linking democratic instability, economic threat, and racial division to reframe the Voice as a threat to settler national sovereignty. Meanwhile, Yes-supporting media framed the Voice through historical redress, policy efficiency, and national identity, but failed to build a coherent counter-hegemonic discourse, leaving these narratives vulnerable to distortion. Indigenous media provided some of the most authentic and resistant voices in favour of the Voice, yet their impact was marginalised within the mainstream discourse. Polling data revealed how these narratives were decoded, highlighting how public support fractured during the lead-up to vote, with fear-based narratives of division being prominent and saturation of engagement with Indigenous reconciliation, both foreclosing the possibilities of hope and justice before votes were cast. Media discourse hence not only shaped the referendum, but it also helped to close the political space in which reconciliation might have meaningfully occurred. This dissertation hopes to contribute to settler-colonial studies by demonstrating how even the most modest attempts at recognition can be destabilised by fear-based hegemonic discourse. It calls for future research to centre Indigenous storytelling on its own terms and challenges Australia to confront the everyday structures of denial that the Voice campaign so clearly exposed.

Word Count: 9,968

"A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice"

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2023: 4).

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List of Abbreviations

AEC – Australian Electoral Commission

Uluru Statement – Uluru Statement from the Heart

Voice – Voice to Parliament

Chapter One: Introduction

Time of death called at 19:25 AEDT, 14th October 2023. The Voice to Parliament (Voice) referendum was declared defeated even before polls closed, having failed to achieve a double majority needed to amend its Constitution to include permanent representation and formal recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Unable to secure a national majority with 60.06% of the population voting No and failed in all six states, where at least four also needed a majority Yes, it was clear that Australia overwhelmingly stood against the Voice (Maguire, 2023).

The proposed law was to enshrine in the Constitution a permanent, independent advisory body – the Voice – that would be community-led, culturally informed and importantly without veto-power (Australian Electoral Commission, 2023: 4). It would have provided substantive legal reform and enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide advice on laws and policies affecting them (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023: 32). The Voice originated from the Uluru Statement from the Heart, a document drafted by Indigenous leaders at the 2017 First Nations National Constitutional Convention. The Voice would have been the first step in a broader reconciliation process, which would later attempt to include a *Makarrata* Commission – a Yolŋgu word meaning "coming together after a struggle" (Referendum Council, 2017: i) – to promote truth-telling about the impacts of colonisation and ultimately strive for greater equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Despite these long-anticipated aspirations, the proposal failed at the first, simplest hurdle.

The quality and quantity of information available to the public, and how voters process it, plays a critical role in referendum outcomes (Hobolt, 2005: 89). Hence, this dissertation investigates how Australian online mainstream news media shaped public discourse in the lead-up to the referendum. By drawing on a tiered framework of critical discourse analysis, I examine both the micro-level meaning-making strategies used by media producers and the macro-level ideological formations that contributed to the referendum's failure. My central thesis is that the media's amplification of non-Indigenous fears, combined with the sidelining of Indigenous perspectives, fractured support for the Voice and ultimately helped secure its defeat.

Following this introduction, Chapter Two reviews existing research on the Voice, media framing, and Indigenous-state relations, positioning my research within current debates and identifying a gap in the analysis of how online news media discourse influenced public opinion. Chapter Three outlines my analytical framework, combining Hall's encoding/decoding model with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to map how meaning was produced and contested, before explaining and justifying my methods and data collection parameters. Chapter Four examines how No-leaning media outlets encoded narratives of fear, division, and threat to delegitimise the Voice. Chapter Five evaluates Yes-leaning media and how encoded narratives of unity and recognition became a double-edged sword. Chapter Six investigates how these competing narratives were decoded by the public, drawing on polling data to show how media influenced the national shift from Yes to No. Collectively, these empirical chapters critically analyse how media contributed to the referendum's failure and shaped broader discourse around Indigenous rights in Australia, followed by my concluding remarks on this research.

Throughout, I use the term Indigenous to refer specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, while recognising the limitations of this collective label.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lack equal access to self-determination and the collective rights that non-Indigenous Australians take for granted (Hobbs and Jones, 2022: 132). Once original inhabitants and now making up just 3.2% of the population, Indigenous Australians continue to face lower life expectancy, poor health, poverty, and are proportionally the most incarcerated globally (ABS, 2022; Holland et al., 2024: 4). The cause is clear in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Uluru Statement): legacies of colonisation and persistent powerlessness (Referendum Council, 2017: i). Indigenous communities have been campaigning for recognition since their dispossession (Gavin, 2023: 37), gaining the right to vote by 1965 but without substantive reform to address these inequalities (Robbins, 2010: 263; Vass 2012). The Voice to Parliament (Voice) was championed by scholars like Nakata and Bray (2023: 121) as an opportunity to "build new connective tissue" between the state and Indigenous peoples and framed by Bradfield (2024: 779) as a step toward "decolonising consciousness". Reconciliation Australia's (2022: 7) Barometer found that 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders wanted constitutional recognition, 93% wanted a voice in matters affecting them, and 86% supported a treaty. Therefore, rejecting the Voice reflects wider issues of their representation and exclusion (Biddle et al., 2023: 82-83).

Australia's national identity and Indigenous-state relations are still shaped by the racial hierarchies of Social Darwinism and White Australia, whose afterlives justify settler dominance today (Francis, 1996). The Stolen Generations (forced removal of Indigenous children from their families) and exclusionary White Australia immigration policies persisted until the 1970s (Moses, 2004; Davies and Davis, 2023: 17). 'Australia Day' continues to be celebrated on 26th January (commemorating its British invasion in 1788), reflecting the state's reluctance to confront its settler-colonial legacy, even with rallies and protests yearly led by Indigenous Australians who label it 'Invasion Day' or 'Aboriginal Day of Mourning' (commemorating the loss of sovereignty) (Coe, 2022: 48-52; Moreton-Robinson, 2007: 99). Key reconciliation efforts like the 1992 Mabo case revoked the myth of *Terra Nullius*: that Australia had no prior history before colonisation and that Aboriginal history was fabricated (Robbins, 2010: 263-264; Koerner, 2015: 89). This acknowledged land rights but failed to provide political

recognition and cultural inclusion, issues the Uluru Statement later sought to rectify. Importantly, opposition to Mabo was fuelled by fear-based campaigns, using conspiracy theories and fearmongering tactics pitting Indigenous land rights against white homeownership (Boese, 2021: 349). My dissertation investigates whether such legacies were reflected in the Voice's media coverage, using fear-based language to sway voters.

Australia remains one of the only settler colonies without a formal treaty for Indigenous recognition. The Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand and Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act demonstrate how settler-colonial nations can share power and address historical injustices with corrective legislation (Hokowhitu and Devadas, 2013; Blackburn, 2009). Australia's failure to follow suit meant the Voice was expected to resolve complex legacies without altering structures of governance. Australia has also yet to ratify the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, the only international treaty specifically outlining Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, land, and participation in decision-making processes (International Labour Organisation, 1989). Ratification of this treaty has been a key step toward genuine Indigenous recognition in Norway, Mexico, and Bolivia (Aylwin and Policzer, 2020: 1-2). Australia's refusal shows a serious lag behind global norms on Indigenous sovereignty (Hanna and Vanclay, 2013: 151; O'Sullivan, 2024: 2-4). Therefore, the Voice was framed as a safe substitute for internationally recognised rights mechanisms (Wensing, 2021: 116).

Key No campaigner Aboriginal Independent Senator Lidia Thorpe, who recently publicly 'heckled' at King Charles (Watson, 2024), echoes Coulthard's (2014: 7-8) decolonial critiques of recognition by arguing the Voice was an assimilationist measure. Thorpe's critique highlights the need for a decolonial treaty to accurately recognise and address Indigenous rights, grounded in Indigenous sovereignty. However, there is even divide within Indigenous communities about this radicalism versus conformism. Amos (2024: 202) excellently analyses Aboriginal Liberal Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price's individual portrayal in the media, raising important questions about the visibility of minority Indigenous opposition in public discourse. My research examines whether mainstream media disproportionately amplified these dissenting voices over the majority who supported the Uluru

Statement. This tension highlights the fragility of Australia's reconciliation efforts, where symbolic mechanisms like the Voice are seen as inadequate, yet their rejection prevents any grasp of future Indigenous recognition. The Voice's failure underlines the multifaceted challenges to achieving structural reform in settler-colonial contexts.

Referendums are uniquely vulnerable to media influence because they compel voters to decide on singular issues, often outside established partisan structures (de Vreese, 2007: 2). The Voice was specifically called upon as a referendum rather than a non-binding plebiscite (which Australia used for marriage equality) due to fears of reversal after the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was abolished (Psycharis, 2022: 219; McAllister and Biddle, 2024: 145; Crumpen, 2024: 8). Thus, this referendum represented a rare and historic moment: an attempt to constitutionally enshrine Indigenous rights and to require sustained, open-minded public engagement with one of the nation's most deeply contested issues.

Recent polling and studies provide a base for understanding the media's impact. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) found Australia to be already on a trajectory towards polarisation, driven by distrust in media and the government – conditions under which high-stake constitutional reforms are rarely successful (McCoy et al., 2018: 34-35; Evans and Grattan, 2024: 9). Biddle et al. (2023: vi) found that online news sites were the most common source of information for voters, with 59% of Australians paying some or a good deal of attention to them during the campaign. This supports my study's exclusive focus on online mainstream news outlets. Biddle et al. (2023: ix) also found that 66.1% of No voters believed the Voice would divide the nation and that partisan alignment was a key factor in voting behaviour. These findings underline the need to explore how media narratives connected the Voice to broader anxieties about national unity and ideological division.

While misinformation was widespread on social media during the campaigns, the literature has often focused narrowly here. Graham (2024: 2) identified a 'Trojan horse' conspiracy theory on X, where the Voice was framed as a UN plot to erode sovereignty, a narrative formed in right-wing echo chambers. Fielding et al. (2025: 3-4) expand on this, showing how such narratives filtered into News

Corp media outlets, creating a conservative feedback loop. Carson et al. (2024) and Fielding (2024: 14) similarly explore misinformation and moral panic in the mainstream press, but focus primarily on debunking rather than analysing the ideological function of these narratives. Much like studies of Brexit, academics like Renwick et al. (2018) and Graham (2024) tend to analyse misinformation retrospectively rather than interrogating the conditions of its acceptance during the campaign (Fielder, 2025). Hence, this dissertation addresses that blind spot, finding why these conspiracy narratives became prominent and how they were legitimised in the public discourse leading up to the referendum.

Therefore, despite online news media's clear presence in the referendum campaign, few studies critically engage with how news content was constructed and received. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory offer essential yet underused frameworks for understanding these processes. My dissertation offers an original critical analysis of how mainstream media discourse influenced public attitudes about the Voice by constructing, reinforcing, and contesting hegemony. By combining critical theory with empirical content and textual analysis, it traces the ideological mechanisms behind the referendum's failure. It answers Macoun et al.'s (2019: 390-391) call for deeper engagement with political discourse production in contemporary settler Australia.

Chapter Three: Analytical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Analytical Framework

My research applies a tiered analytical framework, performing a critical discourse analysis of how online mainstream news media contributed to the failure of the Voice to Parliament (Voice) referendum. Critical discourse analysis is not treated here as the distinct theoretical school but rather as a general analytical approach that elevates surface-level textual analysis to interrogate how dominant narratives are strategically produced, legitimised, and internalised within society (Fairclough, 2003: 2). Mainstream media are embedded within structures that privilege certain worldviews while marginalising others, ultimately influencing public attitudes and, in a referendum, shaping political decision-making (Van Dijk, 2020: 306).

My study is grounded in two complementary post-Marxist frameworks: Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory. Both build on Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony but extend it in different directions. Gramsci framed hegemony as a historical bloc where different social groups unite around a dominant ideology (Colpani, 2022: 225). Hall (1980: 130) provides a micro-level framework for analysing how media producers encode ideological messages and how audiences decode them, either reproducing or contesting dominant ideas. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 105–114) offer a macro-level framework conceptualising discourse as a site of ideological struggle, where meaning is constructed through articulations, nodal points, and chains of equivalence.

Hall's (1980: 133–134) model revolutionised the traditional sender-receiver understanding of communication, showing that meaning is actively negotiated between producers and audiences. Encoding refers to how media producers frame narratives, selecting which voices and issues to amplify in ways that serve ideological goals (Hall, 1980: 130–132). Encoding shapes how political issues are understood, reinforcing narratives that support dominant political interests (Ni, 2024: 4). Hall simultaneously argues that audiences are active participants, interpreting meanings differently

depending on their ideological positions. He identifies three decoding positions: a hegemonic reading (accepts the intended message), a negotiated reading (partially accepts it—especially relevant for undecided swing voters), and an oppositional reading (actively resists it) (Shaw, 2017: 593; Obare, 2018: 72, 81). While Hall's model is robust for analysing meaning-making, it does not fully explain how certain discourses become dominant over others.

Here, Laclau and Mouffe extend Hall's model at the macro-level. They conceptualise discourse as a site of ideological struggle, where meaning is constructed through articulations, nodal points, and chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 105–115). A chain of equivalence links disparate grievances into a coherent bloc, stabilised around key nodal points such as 'democracy', 'economy', or 'sovereignty'. Hegemony emerges by forging these articulations, often through constructing an antagonistic frontier between an in-group and an out-group (Oksanen, 2023; Robertson, 2024). Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 127–134) argue that hegemonic struggle turns on two competing logics: the logic of equivalence (stressing unity through a common threat) and the logic of difference (emphasising positive identities without necessarily creating adversaries). This dynamic is key to understanding how the No discourse consolidated hegemony by forging clear antagonisms, while the Yes discourse fractured by attempting to appeal to difference. Together, these analytical tools structure the core of my critical discourse analysis, allowing for an examination of both micro-level meaning-making and macro-level hegemonic constructions across mainstream news media.

Building from Laclau and Mouffe's (2001: 113–115) theory of hegemonic narratives, I integrate two additional frameworks for culturally specific insights. First, Markiewicz's (2023) theory of vulnerability in securitisation explains how No-supporting media relied on culturally embedded settler fears to frame the Voice as a threat to national identity. Markiewicz (2023: 201–203) argues that securitisation relies not only on top-down power but also on culturally constructed perceptions of vulnerability, making resistance to reform a defence of the in-group's identity (Markiewicz, 2023: 214). This lens helps explain how non-Indigenous Australians were discursively positioned as under threat by the Voice, allowing No-supporting media to frame resistance as national self-preservation.

Second, Coulthard's (2014) critique of liberal recognition politics provides a decolonial framework for analysing the Yes discourse. Coulthard (2014: 7–8, 152–153) demonstrates how settler recognition reproduces colonial power relations by subordinating Indigenous identities within settler-approved frameworks. Here, the very act of putting Indigenous recognition to a national vote — allowing non-Indigenous Australians to determine whether Indigenous Australians deserve formal recognition — inherently limited transformative potential. While many Indigenous leaders embraced the Voice as a step forward, Coulthard's framework reminds us how symbolic gestures risk reaffirming the structures they claim to reform.

Thus, my tiered analytical framework allows for a critical analysis of how meaning was both produced and legitimised within mainstream media discourse leading up to the referendum. It reveals how narratives of Australian identity were framed, Indigenous perspectives were marginalised, and hegemonic power was reinforced during the campaign period — contributing to the Voice referendum's failure.

3.2 Methods

I used a combination of methods for my desk-based research into mainstream online news articles, combining qualitative textual analysis with quantitative content analysis. Textual analysis was chosen to examine how media producers encoded meaning through narrative framing and the selection of voices (Hall, 1980: 130). It reveals not only how issues were framed but also why, by linking media strategies to broader hegemonic struggles through nodal points and chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001).

News reporting is rarely neutral; media organisations are shaped by commercial interests, writers' political affiliations, and audience expectations (Entman, 2007: 165–166). As print media declines, online news increasingly relies on attention metrics like clicks and shares, often prioritising controversial narratives over neutral reporting (Petkova et al., 2012: 866). Textual analysis therefore allows an unpacking of how ideological narratives were constructed for engagement, helping explain why fear-based narratives dominated.

I imported the articles into NVivo, coding them into frames, then systematically categorised and later quantified through content analysis (Araujo et al., 2018: 7–9). This streamlined the transition from qualitative insights to empirical verification. Content analysis confirmed which frames recurred across the dataset, illuminating how certain ideological narratives dominated public discourse.

Table 1 categorises the political alignment of the ten most-visited mainstream news outlets (see Table 5.2 in Parks et al., 2023: 80) alongside additional mainstream sources quoted in the textual analysis. I cross-referenced the publications' editorial stances (Richardson, 2023: n.p.) and their audience political orientations (Parks et al., 2023: 35) to determine overall ideological leanings. This reflected both encoding and decoding perspectives in line with Hall's model, allowing me to track patterns of partisan influence on the referendum debate. The findings evidenced a clear polarisation along ideological lines and a disproportionate influence of right-leaning media in shaping public understanding of the Voice.

	Online news site	Political Alignment
Top 10 most visited mainstream sites	ABC News	Centre-left
	News.com.au	Centre-right
	9News	Centre-right
	The Guardian	Left-leaning
	7News	Centre-right
	BBC News	Centre
	The Australian	Right-leaning
	SBS News	Centre-left
	Sky News	Right-leaning
	Daily Mail	Right-leaning
Additional mainstream sites quoted in analysis	The Sydney Morning Herald	Centre-left
	The Herald Sun	Right-leaning
	The Advocate	Centre-right
	Australian Financial Review	Centre-right

Table 1. Political alignment of Australia's mainstream news media sites

Finally, I analysed public opinion polling data before, during, and after the referendum to explore how media narratives may have shaped audience decoding. While polling cannot establish direct causality, it offers valuable insights into how hegemonic narratives filtered into public consciousness (Hanke, 2007: 74). This final stage applies Hall's decoding model to gauge reception and strengthens the link between media discourse and referendum outcomes.

Thus, my mixed methodology ensures both depth and breadth, combining detailed textual analysis with empirical data to critically analyse the online mainstream media's influence on the Voice referendum.

3.3 Data Collection

My research focused exclusively on online news articles, both a practical and empirical decision. In 2023, 51% of Australians accessed news through online platforms – second only to television at 58% – making it a highly significant platform for shaping public understanding (Park et al., 2023: 75). Geographical limitations (conducting research from the UK) made television archives inaccessible, justifying this focus.

My time frame for data collection was from 1 January 2023 to 13 October 2023, the day before the referendum. This period captures the critical window when public opinion shifted decisively from Yes to No (Biddle et al., 2024: 28). Articles were sourced using Boolean search operators ("Voice to Parliament", "Voice referendum" or "Indigenous recognition") to ensure relevance and consistency across the different searches conducted.

Only articles that actively swayed readers toward either a Yes or No position were included in the final dataset of 175 articles. The few neutral or purely descriptive news acticles were excluded. My research is concerned not with the volume of neutral reporting, but with how news media discourse constructed meaning and pushed ideological narratives. In a high-stakes referendum, the encoding of persuasion mattered, not passive information. By focusing solely on positively or negatively framed articles, this study can expose how the media fought to define the Voice's meaning.

I conducted research in three stages to have a diverse sample of mainstream and marginalised voices, backed by data from the *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*. Firstly, I searched the top 100 news results on Google Search, reflecting how 30% of Australians access news stories via search engines without filtering by author or outlet (Park et al., 2023: 83). Secondly, I reviewed 50 more articles from Australia's ten most-visited online news outlets (see Table 1). This was due to that 23% of Australians primarily rely on just one or two trusted online news brands for their news consumption (Park et al., 2023: 81). Some of these outlets required a paid subscription to access, so I used Factiva to bypass these paywalls. Thirdly, I incorporated 25 articles from the top four Indigenous-run media platforms: NITV, Koori Mail, National Indigenous Times, and IndigenousX. These were the most popular among Indigenous Australians (Forde, 2024: 64) and included to counterbalance the marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives in mainstream reporting, a dynamic that is itself analysed later in this dissertation.

3.4 Limitations

The media landscape in Australia is very fragmented, with multiple platforms each shaping how users access and decode information in different ways. Social media had become the third most used source of news during the referendum, accessed by 45% of Australians (Park et al., 2023: 75). However, due to the scope of this study, social media was excluded alongside TV. Although the Voice remains under-researched, social media has surprisingly already received decent scholarly attention (see: Graham, 2024; Phillips et al., 2024), so simply focusing on online mainstream media ensures my originality. While I acknowledge that my study captures only one dimension of the broader media landscape, this focus enables a deeper, more rigorous analysis of how hegemonic narratives were produced and circulated within the mainstream online news media sphere.

Chapter Four: Encoding the *No* Media Narratives

The overwhelming success of the No vote reflected how mainstream media discourse shaped public perceptions of the risks a Voice to Parliament (Voice) posed to Australia. This chapter examines how No-supporting media framed its arguments, constructing a narrative that resonated with fears of national division, economic threat, and democratic instability, rooted in settler insecurity. Applying Hall's (1980) encoding model and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, this chapter explores how these messages were encoded in media articles, identifies which sites were responsible for amplifying them, and shows how they contributed to a hegemonic discourse that positioned the Voice as threat to the nation. The chapter also draws on Markiewicz's (2023) argument that political actors construct vulnerabilities to legitimise security threats.

4.1 Textual Analysis

4.1.1 Encoding strategies: buzzwords of *'instability', 'threat'* and *'division'*

The No-supporting mainstream media constructed a discourse that positioned the Voice as a destabilising force, encoding messages that evoked fear and insecurity. Four primary encoding strategies emerged, coded into frames for analysis: democratic instability, economic threat, racial division, and fearmongering.

The first frame found was that the Voice would create democratic instability. Right-leaning news sites *The Australian* and *Australian Financial Review* warned the Voice would give out "*special privileges*" (Tomyn, 2023: n.p.; Downer, 2023: n.p.) casting it as an undemocratic institution that would position Indigenous Australians above others. This framing relied on the ideological interpretation that there is already equality of opportunity in Australia, ignoring the real historical and structural inequalities that constitutional recognition sought to address. The few Indigenous voices that agreed were amplified to support this discourse. For instance, Nyunggai Warren Mundine wrote on Indigenous-run media outlet *NITV*:

"*The Voice is a response to times and conditions that no longer exist, a product of a time warp and of the personal ambition of a select few*" (Mundine, 2023: n.p.).

While this is presented as a grassroots Indigenous critique, Mundine is a Liberal-aligned political figure (Torre, 2025). His rhetoric echoed the dominant right-leaning portrayal of the Voice as illegitimate and exclusionary, justifying claims it would undermine democratic governance. Even though the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) (2023: 14) clarified in its referendum pamphlet that the Voice would only have advisory powers and could not veto legislation, media misrepresentation persisted. This highlights how ideologically misleading messages can be encoded as "common sense" (Mouffe, 2008: 4; Hall, 1980: 132), which reinforces hegemonic perspectives under the disguise of neutrality. Here, the language of democracy was co-opted as a nodal point (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 113) through which the No-leaning outlets constructed a discourse of exclusion around its Constitution. Democracy was anchored to majority rule and political uniformity. Hence, the Voice was positioned as a deviation from democratic norms, where the Voice's 'special treatment' spoils the imagined neutrality of the Australian Constitution. This demonstrates how neoliberal democratic values can be strategically deployed to resist transformative change (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 127–134; Coulthard, 2014: 101-103). When articulated to defend the status quo, democracy (the baseline of inclusion) becomes a tool of obstruction; one that hides the ongoing inequalities of power behind an appeal to fairness. Thus, the No-supporting sites rearticulated what the Voice would bring for Australia to reassert settler authority, portraying Indigenous participation not as an extension of democracy, but a rupture from it.

Secondly, *The Australian*, *The Advocate* and *Daily Mail* strategically framed the Voice as an economic threat, being a financially irresponsible and an unaccountable policy. Headlines claimed the "*exorbitant cost of Voice to Parliament referendum is exposed*" (Chain, 2023a: n.p.) – "*wasting $364.6 million*" (Johnson, 2023: n.p.) – which embedded the Voice within a narrative of wasteful governmental excess, "*spending too much time and effort on an issue that lags well behind the issue of cost of living*" (Shanahan, 2023: n.p.). The Voice was framed as leeching on taxpayer resources, positioning the government to be ignoring the remaining 97% of Australians struggling with bills. Another article asserted:

> "*Billions of dollars would be thrown into the bureaucratic 'black hole', with very little reaching those who really need it*" (Fleming, 2023: n.p.).

This 'black hole' metaphor encoded the Voice as a binding economic burden, positioned around the nodal point of economic responsibility. Markiewicz (2023: 204-205) highlights why this nodal point was anchored within a cost-of-living crisis, as securitisation relies on the formulation of shared vulnerabilities. In this context, economic fragility was constructed to justify rejecting constitutional reform. Rather than treating economic hardship and structural reform as parallel but unrelated national issues, the media framed that affirming Indigenous rights would come at the direct expense of struggling households. This conflation, fusing the unrelated crises into a zero-sum logic, reflects a discursively embedded vulnerability narrative (Markiewicz, 2023: 208), which constructs fears of the dominant hegemonic in-group (non-Indigenous Australians) going into economic turmoil. As Mueller (2021: 162) highlights, these narratives naturalise settler exceptionalism, portraying Indigenous justice as an external threat to the neoliberal economic order, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies of entitlement and funding allocations.

The third key frame discovered was portraying the Voice as a source of racial division. High-profile No campaigners Peta Credlin claimed on *Sky News* the proposal was "*not about recognition but power and racial division*" (Credlin, 2023: n.p.), while Andrew Bolt on *The Herald Sun* took this further:

> "*Making whites your enemy isn't a way to win […] it was Albanese who decided we should vote on a change our constitution to forever divide Australians by race*" (Bolt, 2023: n.p.).

Bolt placed the blame directly onto Prime Minister Albanese, framing him as the architect of this racial divide. By framing the inclusion of Indigenous voices as inherently exclusionary to whites, Bolt positioned recognition as another zero-sum game, where any gain for Indigenous Australians is constructed as a loss for the non-Indigenous – wilfully ignoring that the dominant group already have complete access to everything the Indigenous peoples are hoping to gain. This weaponised any hopes for inclusion and reinforced a racial binary that denies the possibility of shared sovereignty or mutual

recognition (Akena, 2012: 615-616). Many similar claims of "*separatism*" (McHugh, 2023: n.p.; Ergas, 2023: n.p.) were found from *The Australian*, constructing the Voice not as a step toward justice, but as a threat to national unity. This framing draws on a long history of denying how race has structured Australian political life – from 'terra nullius' to the White Australia policy (Boese, 2021: 349; Francis, 1996) – which exposes the dominant society's vulnerability when whiteness is no longer left unspoken. Here, Indigenous recognition was reinterpreted as showing racial preference and calls for self-determination were encoded as demands for special treatment (Pedersen et al., 2011: 93; Breen, 2023). These right-leaning articles reveal either a deep ignorance of, or a wilful disregard for, the structural racial divisions that have defined Australia since colonisation. This rhetorical move allowed the No-supporting media to promote a colourblind narrative that positioned itself as inclusive, while reinforcing existing racial hierarchies. It mirrors Hutchinson's (2019: 9) "Alt-Patriotism": how nationalism is disguised in the language of fairness and unity, which legitimises the idea of a shared culture being under threat when a minority group tries to infiltrate. This sentiment fits neatly within Markiewicz's (2023: 208) vulnerability of securitisation, where even modest efforts at recognition become existential risks to the national order. It also reveals when appeals to unity fail, it works to uphold the racial status quo, disincentivising Indigenous peoples to seek reform (Robbins, 2007: 326). Hence, the media's framing of the Voice as racially divisive was more than a political tactic; it was a deeper expression of resistance to reckoning with Australia's colonial foundations.

The final dominant frame identified was fearmongering, where outlets encoded the Voice as a covert threat through many conspiracy theories (see Southwell, 2023; Huitson, 2023). *Sky News* Peta Credlin led one of the most powerful conspiracies that the government and Indigenous supporters had coerced a secret agenda, after supposedly uncovering an additional "*26 pages of the Uluru Statement*" (Davis, 2023: n.p.). As these conspiracies have been thoroughly debunked by Fielding (2024: 14) and Carson et al. (2024: 14), their significance here is not about integrity but their utility; how they gained legitimacy through emotional and ideological appeals. As the vote neared, *Sky News* amplified the 26-page conspiracy, framing the Uluru Statement's supposed 'extra pages' on colonisation as a personal attack on today's non-Indigenous Australians:

"*Every hateful utterance expressed against the colonial British by the document [is aimed] towards today's non-Aboriginal Australians, because, by their sheer existence, non-Aboriginal Australians perpetuate the law's violation*" (Voltz, 2023: n.p.).

This rhetoric reverses efforts of historical redress into a current threat, by repositioning non-Indigenous Australians as victims of a vengeful, racially motivated movement. Through this conspiracy framing, right-leaning media drew on its readers' pre-existing anxieties about the Voice, implying their Labour government had deceived them in this vengeful plot, hence positioning the Voice as a threat to democratic sovereignty (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999: 497; Nai, 2018: 219). Crucially, the No-leaning media reframed the dominant group as the vulnerable subject, invoking what Markiewicz (2023: 214) calls reconfigured vulnerability: a way for actors to legitimately resist change by claiming victimhood based on their insecurities. These right-leaning articles' frames were constructed around fragility, positioning the Voice as a threat to the governance and to the ontological security of the majority non-Indigenous nation. This fear-based discourse provided a reference point for a broader chain of equivalence: linking the Voice to democratic instability, economic insecurity, and racial division. Conspiracy theories, by nature, only gain traction when other pre-existing fears are amplified and can offer a seemingly coherent explanation for the many perceived threats; it fuses the frames together (Chayinska and Minescu, 2018: 991). Therefore, these distinct nodal points (democracy, economic responsibility, and equality) were bound together through a fear of losing their hegemony, of being second importance to just one component of the government's agenda.

Although it was not always coherently articulated, this combined fear-based discourse transformed a proposal for justice into an existential threat. It was legitimised because it tapped into a broader settler-frontier anxiety: "imagined threats posed by the indigenous people to the security and safety of the settlers" (Chouchene, 2020: 443). As Chouchene (2020: 456) highlights, this anxiety reflects the fragility of settler security, as being a settler-frontier categorically places them as an outsider. This vulnerability is rooted in the historical tension between occupation and legitimacy of belonging to a nation. Skrynsky (2024: 33-36) and Woollacott (2009: 11.3-11.4) build on this, showing how settler unbelonging fuels a collective in-group appeal; by invoking shared notions of a new national

identity and a new belonging – simultaneously also their collective fear of losing it – they reinforce their dominant power. Thus, linking Markiewicz's (2023: 214) reconfigured vulnerability, the narratives surrounding the Voice helped to consolidate a hegemonic discourse of fear, closing space for reasoned deliberation and reinforcing the racial and cultural boundaries of the nation.

4.1.2 Indigenous Skewed Anomalies

The media amplified Indigenous opposition to the Voice, combining two polarising critiques led by Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Senator Lidia Thorpe, all while flattening the spectrum of Indigenous support.

Heavily endorsed by the Liberal opposition, Price emerged as the political figurehead for a small Indigenous group of opposers to the Voice, but mainly served the interests of non-Indigenous liberal campaigns (Kenny, 2023). Leading the Liberal Fair Australia campaign, she took a similar stance of Nyunggai Warren Mundine, that the Voice was "*divisive, dangerous, expensive and not fair*" (Hussain, 2023: n.p.). *Daily Mail* took the lead on pushing her narratives – 18 articles on her alone in the referendum's lead up – where she was framed as a symbol of rational dissent among the Indigenous community, serving to legitimise the Liberal opposition.

> "*[Price] believes Aboriginal children from dysfunctional families should be allowed to stay with and be raised by white families*" (Airs, 2023: n.p.).

Price justified the rationale behind the Stolen Generations: the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by the government until the 1970s (Moses, 2004: 17). Here, *Daily Mail* gave uncritical coverage, offering Price a platform for her sweeping statements and presenting her stance as 'legitimate' news. The outlet played a key role in shaping public perceptions of how Indigenous communities felt about their colonisation, despite her position being vastly unrepresentative of the overall Indigenous consensus (Bradfield, 2024: 779). The outlet contributed to reinforcing a narrative that stigmatises Indigenous communities and erases a vast part of their structural cause of their inequality. Her image became a nodal point for anchoring Indigenous

dissent with Liberal values, becoming a discursive tool to legitimise these non-Indigenous fears of losing power under the illusion of broad Indigenous support.

On the contrary, Thorpe's opposition to the Voice was unique, stemming from a decolonial critique of the modern Australian state, crucially not a rejection of Indigenous rights. Her opposition was built on her political beliefs of needing radical change for Indigenous Australians outside of Western structures, as a Voice would only embed Indigenous perspectives within, and be second to, a Western political framework that continues to marginalise First Nations people. Left-leaning *the Guardian* outlined her stance:

> "*[Thorpe describes the Voice] as a 'powerless advisory body', 'window dressing for constitutional recognition' and an 'insult' to First Nations people's intelligence*" (Canales, 2023: n.p.).

Thorpe's critique closely aligns with Coulthard's (2014: 14) argument that state-led recognition of Indigenous identity can operate as a settler strategy of domestication; incorporating Indigenous demands into existing liberal frameworks without changing any structures of power. For Thorpe, being included within the Western legislation meant they government had legitimised their settler power under the illusion of consultation. As the pamphlet stated the Voice would have no veto power (AEC, 2023: 14), originally intended to reduce fears that it would have too much power, it simultaneously confirmed that the proposal did not go far enough for Thorpe. She rejected symbolic recognition, but importantly for real structural transformation, through truth-telling and treaty, not absorption into neocolonial governance.

Despite the fundamentally different logics behind Thorpe's decolonial critiques and Price's Liberal alliance, right-leaning media collapsed the two into a single narrative of Indigenous dissent. In headlines such as *"Thorpe erupts at Labor for 'whitesplaining' as she joins Jacinta Price"* (Chain, 2023b: n.p.), *Daily Mail* manufactured a unity between the two women, despite their clear political disagreements. In fact, Price publicly dismissed Thorpe's recent political activism – when she 'heckled' at the King – as *"an embarrassing attempt to seek attention"* (Brennan, 2024: n.p.). Left-leaning *The Guardian* also clarified Thorpe's stance during the campaigns, as Thorpe publicly criticised the No campaign for appropriating her statements, clarifying in its headlines that *"Thorpe brands leading no*

group 'deceptive' for using her quotes" (Butler, 2023a: n.p.), and reaffirming her status as an independent voice, not aligning with any party built from colonial structures. Yet the right-leaning media's framing positioned both figures as the core figureheads of Indigenous opposition, bolstered in the media to falsely suggest to voters that the overall Indigenous opinion of the Voice was deeply divided. This simplification served as a hegemonic function: chains of equivalence linked these disparate discourses under a common signifier, in this case, 'racial division' to produce hegemonic meaning. The media's use of Thorpe and Price as nodal points allowed it to project an image of widespread Indigenous rejection, erasing their complete ideological differences in its media portrayals. In flattening these differing perspectives to a single hegemonic anti-Voice narrative, the media reassured non-Indigenous Australians that Indigenous people could not even collectively decide if they wanted the Voice.

4.2 Content analysis

To complement the qualitative textual analysis, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to situate my findings within the broader context of my research into all mainstream media coverage of the Voice. Having identified and analysed my most common negative frames found above, this quantitative layer strengthens my argument that these frames were widely deployed in the mainstream discourse and provides broader evidence of ideological bias looking at the editorial stance of the publications. Many articles combined frames together to consolidate a broader narrative of fear and instability.

Frames	Number of articles using frame	Percentage of those articles from right-leaning media sites (1 decimal place) (%)
Democratic instability	31	74.2
Economic threat	34	79.4
Racial division	61	86.9
Fearmongering	41	85.4
Total articles encoding these frames in dataset	87	
Total No-leaning articles	90	

Table 2. Content analysis of negative-swaying rhetoric in Australian mainstream online news media.

Note: Articles often employed more than one frame, so figures reflect overlapping use and do not sum to 87.

Table 2 shows that out of the 90 No-leaning articles, 87 encoded one or more of the dominant negative frames identified, showing just how tightly orchestrated the No discourse became. The most employed frame was racial division, appearing in 35% of the overall dataset, with an overwhelming 86.9% of those articles coming from right-leaning outlets. This was expected as racial division was weaponised in two ways: portraying the Voice as exclusionary towards white Australians and using minor Indigenous dissent to push the narrative that the whole Indigenous community was divided. Each frame appeared in at least one in six articles across the dataset (175 articles), and every frame was encoded predominantly through right-leaning outlets (all over 74%). This confirms a clear ideological pattern. With 59% of Australians paying some or a good deal of attention to online news during the campaign (Biddle et al., 2023: vi), the scale of this discursive dominance cannot be ignored. The data strongly supports the claim that right-leaning media were central to shaping and circulating hegemonic narratives of fear, loss, and instability. By linking the Voice to fears of democratic instability, economic threat, and racial division, No media narratives powerfully primed voters toward rejection.

Chapter Five: Encoding the *Yes* Media Narratives

The sheer loss of the Yes vote reflected not only the strength of the No-supporting media rhetoric but also the limitations of mainstream media discourse in reshaping public perceptions of what a Voice to Parliament (Voice) could bring for Australia. This chapter examines how Yes-supporting media framed its arguments – more often its counterarguments to the No narratives – by constructing vision centred on historical redress and policy efficiency, to collectively push for a stronger national identity. Still applying Hall's (1980) encoding model and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, this chapter explores how these messages were encoded in media articles, which news sites pushed these narratives the most and ultimately how these scattered discourses ultimately failed to consolidate a singular hegemonic position in the public sphere. The chapter also draws on Coulthard's (2014) rejection of Indigenous recognition politics, as the Voice's "substantial legal reform" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023: 23) limited potential for transformative change. Fundamentally, narratives of recognition became a double-edged sword: what was framed as unifying ultimately undermined the Yes-supporting media's credibility and unintentionally undercut its impact, exposing it to critique from both radical ends of the political spectrum.

5.1 Textual Analysis

5.1.1 Encoding strategies: pursuing *'redress', 'efficiency'* and *'identity'*

From the outset, the Yes-supporting media revealed a key weakness: unlike the No narratives, its coverage lacked a strong, centralised set of encoding strategies. Much of the pro-Voice discourse was reactive; it focused on rebutting misinformation rather than having a unified, hegemonic vision. While fact-checking helped correct false claims, it also inadvertently amplified them by keeping them in news circulation. As Park et al. (2023: 81) note, 23% of Australians get their news from just one or two online media sources, so these Yes-supporting sites are unlikely to reach their intended No-supporting targets. Those most drawn to fear-based conspiracy narratives are, by nature, often entrenched in echo chambers that reinforce their existing beliefs, leaving little space for alternative interpretations to be received, let alone accepted (Lackey, 2021: 207-210; Chayinska and Minescu, 2018: 991). Instead, it introduced

these fear-based narratives to its readers who might not have encountered them otherwise. As a result, Yes-supporting media, at best, circulated the fear-based discourse without offering a compelling counter-hegemonic alternative. Still, three primary encoding strategies emerged from pro-Voice coverage, coded into frames for analysis: historical redress, policy efficiency, and national identity.

Firstly, the Voice was framed as a route to historical redress. Left-leaning *The Guardian* presented the referendum as a moral obligation to recognise Indigenous Australians in its headlines: "*Historians urge Australians to be on the right side of history*" (Butler, 2023b: n.p.). By temporarily moving away from politicians' jargon and using historians to prove fact from fiction, it presented the Voice as a clear corrective to Australia's colonial legacy. articulated around the nodal point of recognition, with associated signifiers like justice, truth-telling, and reconciliation. However, this vision of unity through positive difference was scarce without it being a part of rebutting the No narratives, meaning it struggled to dominate a discursive field increasingly shaped by antagonism. *The Guardian* and *ABC News* spent much time rebutting No narratives historical misinformation:

> "*Indigenous people 'disgusted' by Jacinta Nampijinpa Price's 'simply wrong' comments on colonisation*" (Rose and Canales, 2023: n.p.).

> "*Don't know, vote no slogan is a poor shadow of the spirit which drew up our Constitution*" (Tingle, 2023: n.p.)

By basing their efforts to correct the wrongs of the No narratives with historical redress, recognition became a floating signifier with no fixed definition in the discourse, as different groups tried to give them meaning in ways that suit their agenda (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 112). The Yes-supporting media tried to give recognition a unifying, moral meaning, but it was quickly reinterpreted by the No-supporting media. Figures like Bolt (2023) portrayed it as a dangerous threat to national unity, while Thorpe saw it as symbolic and ineffectual (Canales, 2023). Australia's polarised media landscape – as shown in the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) – made it even harder to reach agreement on what recognition meant. As Lee et al. (2017: 355–356) argue, trying to appeal to both sides in a polarised environment often pleases neither. Therefore, although recognition was intended as a nodal point for the Yes discourse, it remained unstable and too easily reshaped and hegemonised by others.

This is central to Coulthard's (2014: 151-153) rejection of liberal recognition politics under settler colonialism; recognition rarely disrupts dominant power and more often reabsorbed or subordinated to maintain existing hierarchies, whilst claiming they have made progress. Recognition hence became a floating signifier. This left the Yes-supporting media's historical redress narrative vulnerable and unable to compete with the stronger, fear-based narratives. Higgins (2025) emphasises that the referendum's defeat exposed a lack of political will to address Indigenous inequalities.

The second dominant frame encoded in Yes-supporting media was policy efficiency, presenting the Voice through practical reform aimed at improving outcomes and reducing financial waste in Indigenous policy. As evidenced in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

> "*Research indicates that Indigenous-controlled community health organisations [...] are more effective at improving our health, and see more significant health benefits per dollar of expenditure*" (Gittins, 2023: n.p.).

Here, the Voice was articulated around the nodal point of inclusion, countering No campaign narratives of waste and inefficiency using the example of cost-effective Indigenous-led health services. However, in the wider media landscape, this nodal point was directly in tension with the No media's articulations of democratic instability and economic insecurity. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 127–134) argue, hegemonic struggle emerges where there is a clash of competing logics: the logic of equivalence versus the logic of difference. Where the No media discourse formed a chain of equivalence (linking a range of fears into a singular message of threat), the Yes media discourse followed the logic of difference, focusing on a discourse of positive outcomes and practical improvements. While undoubtedly more constructive, the frame of policy efficiency lacked the emotional, fear-based ties stemming from settler insecurities, which much of the Australian population can relate to. As there was not a unified counter-hegemonic discourse, the nodal point of inclusion also became more of a floating signifier. Small wins in policy were no match for deeply rooted fears about sovereignty and settler-frontier anxiety.

The final frame found was how the Voice could reshape national identity, attempting to articulate a logic of difference between the nodal points of recognition and inclusion, to include

Indigenous peoples into institutions that still oppress them. Early in the campaign period, *The Guardian* reported on Australia Day itself as a key moment to link the Voice to national transformation. Enoch (2023: n.p.) proposed reframing Australia Day into the Aboriginal Day of Mourning: *"three days for Indigenous reflection, colonial truth-telling, and survival"*, offering a powerful reimagining of national belonging. Hours later, Murphy and Butler (2023: n.p.) described Australia Day as *"the obvious springboard to next steps"* for the Voice campaign, to anchor constitutional change to a broader process of cultural healing. These narratives prove the initially bold attempts by the Yes-leaning media to rearticulate national identity around recognition and inclusion. However, by pushing the Voice to later bring transformative change, the Yes-leaning media unsurprisingly received backlash as the No-leaning media reinterpreted this as racial division. Deploying fearmongering tactics, the No-leaning *Daily Mail* headlined: "*Australia Day amid fears national celebration is being 'delegitimised' by endless toxic debate*" (Day et al., 2023: n.p.). Instead of consolidating a hegemonic position, they retreated in fear of losing broader support. The referendum pamphlet later clarified that the Voice would hold no veto power (AEC, 2023: 14), and by June, *The Guardian* headlined:

"Indigenous voice is not about 'culture wars' such as abolishing Australia Day" (Butler, 2023c: n.p.).

By trying to appease its audience, the Yes discourse lost coherence, backtracked on its original ambitions and traded off its radical supporters to secure broader moderate electoral interest. This outcome lays bare Coulthard's (2014: 17-19) warning that liberal recognition politics under settler colonialism does not deliver real structural change. Instead, recognition is swallowed up into colonial frameworks, stabilising existing hierarchies while tokenising inclusion as progress. The Yes media's initial attempt to reimagine Australian national identity without truly confronting the settler structures that still sustain dispossession inevitably failed. By simultaneously avoiding direct challenges to colonial power, they left their discourse frail and fragmented. Far from building a counter-hegemonic movement, the Yes narrative was diluted into symbolic gestures that could not compete with the No campaign's emotionally fear-charged appeals to loss, sovereignty, and existential threat. Thus, the Yes-supporting media's narrative was a double-edged sword, sabotaging itself with weak claims of national unity.

5.1.2 The Sea of Indigenous Media Support

Despite the mainstream No-supporting, right-leaning media's portrayal of Indigenous voices as dissenting, the Indigenous-owned media overwhelmingly supported the Voice. Reflecting the 93% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that wanted a voice in matters affecting them (Reconciliation Australia 2022: 7), the Indigenous media coherently advocated for the transformative potential the Voice could offer. This was not in the Voice mechanism itself, but what this first step of recognition could later become. These articles were not among the most visible or widely circulated; the fact that they had to be separately and specifically researched outside my initial scope reflects broader issues of Indigenous political marginalisation and structural exclusion in the media landscape (Biddle et al., 2023: 82–83). Nevertheless, Indigenous outlets consistently pushed back against the frame of democratic instability, not by directly engaging with the No discourse's jargon, but simply by proving the need for constitutional permanence. *NITV* amplified the words of Torres Strait Islander Tanya Hosch and Aboriginal Alyawarre woman Pat Anderson:

> "*[Hosch] acknowledged the coming and going of other Indigenous advisory boards that have been defunded and disbanded by the changing hands of government*" (Howarth, 2023: n.p.).
>
> "*There is no Voice that exists now that represents who we are and what we want*" (Pat in Saphore, 2023: n.p.)

NITV provided a platform not for historians or non-Indigenous politicians, but for First Nations peoples to speak for themselves. They demonstrate the fundamental need for constitutional permanence and real representation. Had this narrative been correctly hegemonised within the broader discourse through greater mainstream legitimisation of Indigenous media and subsequently getting broader public engagement, it would have been far harder for fearmongering liberal political figures to rebut.

In their attempt to gain more online presence, these Indigenous sites amplified each other's platforms. *National Indigenous Times* interviewed with Karla Grant's Living Black, *NITV*'s TV show, about joining their voices to strengthen Indigenous-led advocacy against the No narratives:

> "*Grant encourages all Australians to listen to the First Nations peoples and steer away from the politicising of the issue*" (Whaler, 2023: n.p.)

Together, the Indigenous media attempted to construct a counter-hegemonic position to recentre Indigenous authority within the national conversation that was constantly objectifying and problematising them. Yet, despite this coordinated effort, their media does not receive the same view-count as these larger mainstream news sites, with no Indigenous-run media featuring in the *Digital News Report: Australia 2023* (see Park et al., 2023). With lack of visibility, they were miniscule compared to the dominant mainstream narratives that amplified settler anxieties and manufactured the illusion of Indigenous division.

IndigenousX offered perhaps the most powerful framing of the stakes involved in historical redress:

> "*Every time a First Nations child is stolen, locked up, put in cages, abused, ripped from country or country ripped from us we are reminded of the mere reality that our existence does not matter*"
> (Turnbull-Roberts, 2023: n.p.)

IndigenousX published the raw reality for Indigenous peoples. Turnbull-Roberts (2023) framed historical redress not as a radical demand but as the bare minimum, after generations of dispossession, racism, and erasure of their systems and knowledge. The inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are well scoped and published in reports, proving lower life expectancy, poor health, poverty, and being proportionally the most incarcerated in the world (ABS, 2022; Holland et al., 2024: 4). Yet, when it comes to actually rectifying these statistics, there is a relentless denial of Indigenous disparity when it threatens the comfortable thrones of settler privilege and power. The very decision to put Indigenous recognition to a national vote – instead of leaving it to be decided by those who live its consequences and understand what is at stake – exposes the asymmetry of power. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were made to seek permission for their own political existence from those who benefit from their exclusion. Coulthard's (2014: 7–8, 151–153) warning bells are loud; state-mediated recognition would not have even dismantled neocolonial power, it simply repackages domination in the language of reconciliation. Even had it passed, the Voice risked being swallowed by the same settler frameworks that continue to marginalise Indigenous sovereignty. Makarrata – the end dream of "coming together after a struggle" (Referendum Council, 2017: i) – was

always deferred, always conditional. The defeat of the Voice exposed too clearly the unfinished business of Australian neocolonialism. In a media environment where Indigenous voices were systematically sidelined and fear-driven narratives prevailed, true transformative change was foreclosed long before ballots were cast.

5.2 Content Analysis

This quantitative content analysis complements the earlier textual analysis, contextualising how Yes-supporting media narratives were constructed and circulated. It strengthens my argument that while attempts were made to frame the Voice positively, these narratives lacked coherence and widespread reach across the media landscape.

Frames	Number of articles using frame	Percentage of those articles from left-leaning media sites (1 decimal place) (%)
Historical redress	30	60.0
Policy efficiency	22	63.6
National identity	19	84.2
Total articles encoding these frames in dataset	52	
Total Yes-leaning articles	85	

Table 3. Content analysis of positive-swaying rhetoric in mainstream online news media sites.

Note: Articles often employed more than one frame, so figures reflect overlapping use and do not sum to 52.

Table 3 shows that while 85 articles leaned toward the Yes campaign, only 52 of these could be encoded into one of the three dominant frames identified. This shows the fundamental weakness of the Yes media's discursive strategy: fractured, unfocused, and unable to build a singular counter-hegemonic vision. While historical redress was the most common frame (appearing in 30 articles), its association with left-leaning outlets was comparatively weak at 60.0%. It was most common in Indigenous-run media, which were politically neutral in my coding. Indigenous media cannot and should not be forced

into a Western left–right political spectrum. There is also no data that credibly places their audiences into ideological camps, and it feels fundamentally wrong to categorise Indigenous voices through settler-colonial political binaries. For this reason, Indigenous media were excluded from the left/right split, hence the lower overall political alignment scores. National identity had the highest partisan alignment (84.2% left-leaning) but was the least deployed. Combined with the scattered presence of historical redress and policy efficiency, this proves that Yes-supporting media failed to consolidate a coherent, emotionally resonant hegemonic discourse. Positive appeals were too easily drowned out by the No campaign's chain of fear, loss, and existential threat.

Chapter Six: Audience Decoding; How Fear Overwhelmed Identity

This shorter chapter uses polling data to trace how Australians decoded these media narratives during the Voice to Parliament (Voice) referendum, mapping how public opinion shifted as fear eclipsed hope. Applying Hall's (1980) decoding model, it evidences how this hegemonic messaging found from textual analysis fractured initial support for the Voice and secured its defeat.

6.1 The Skyrocketing *No* and The Fading *Yes*

In February, Yes had a clear lead by 58-37 (Newspoll in Beaumont, 2023a). Yet by referendum week, 60% intended to vote No (Newspoll in Beaumont, 2023b). Hard No voters grew from 24% in March (Essential Research, 2023a) to 42% by September (Essential Research, 2023b), as the online news discourse shifted sharply. With 59% of Australians relying on online news to inform their voting (Biddle et al., 2023: vi), media framing of the Voice was likely to be a decisive factor.

Hall's (1980: 133–134) model captures the collapse through three decoding positions. Hegemonic readers initially accepted the Yes campaign's moral vision but negotiated readers (more uncertain and most influenced) seemed to have fallen for the fear-based frames. Biddle et al. (2023: 82) found 42% of early Yes voters switched sides by October. Meanwhile, oppositional readers entrenched their rejection. By voting week, eight in ten Australians prioritised the cost of living, while just one in ten ranked the Voice as a priority (Coorey, 2023). As the Voice became a battleground for settler identity and the Yes discourse lost coherence, the electorate moved decisively with it.

6.2 Rise of Division and Collapse of Engagement

Fear of "racial division" dominated decoding. Days before the vote, 42% decided they were going to vote No because the Voice would "divide Australia in the constitution on the basis of race" (Essential Research, 2023c: n.p.), up from 34% in June (Essential Research, 2023d). The ANU study similarly found 66.1% of No voters feared national division (Biddle et al., 2023: ix).

Meanwhile, there was a clear collapse of genuine engagement. In December 2022, 39% of Australians believed the Voice "would unify Australia, allowing us to reconcile with our country"

(Essential Research, 2022: n.p.), but by August 2023, 58% agreed that "the decisions Indigenous Australians experience are the result of personal decisions they make" (Essential Research, 2023e: n.p.). 67% of Australians either had not heard of or had not read the Uluru Statement in June (Essential Research, 2023f) just after the Yes/No pamphlet was delivered to every household stating it.

While the cause cannot be wholly credited to the online news media, polling data suggests Australians were swayed less by the Voice itself than by the anxieties it came to embody. In the end, fear-based discourse did not need evidence, only repetition. Voters decoded fear and distrust, not hope which foreclosed the future before a single vote was cast.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has shown how mainstream online news media helped shape the failure of the Voice to Parliament (Voice) referendum. Through a critical discourse analysis, forming textual and context analysis alongside polling evidence, it traced how fear-based narratives from the No-supporting media (democratic instability, economic threat, and racial division) were strategically encoded and decoded, fracturing initial support for the Voice and ultimately helping secure its defeat. These narratives stitched together a powerful fear-based chain of equivalence that resonated deeply with an electorate already primed by distrust in government, cost-of-living anxieties, and settler-frontier anxiety. What was framed by Indigenous leaders as a pathway to reconciliation was transformed into a zero-sum game over identity, sovereignty, and belonging.

At the same time, Yes-supporting media narratives, while morally compelling, struggled to cut through. Appeals to historical redress, policy efficiency, and national identity were too fractured and reactive, often rebutting misinformation rather than building a coherent counter-hegemonic discourse. Positive visions of unity and justice became floating signifiers, easily reinterpreted by opponents or lost in the noise of fear-based discourse. Without a unified emotional resonance to match the No's chain of existential threats, the Yes narrative could not secure the momentum it needed.

Indigenous-owned media provided some of the most authentic and powerful advocacy, consistently confirming the Voice as a necessary first step toward structural reform. But these voices were systematically sidelined. The media flattened Indigenous support into a false narrative of division, elevating a few dissenting figures while muting the overwhelming majority who endorsed the Uluru Statement's vision. In the battlefield for hegemony, Indigeneity was marginalised once again.

Aboriginal Australians have an excellent word for those who refuse to listen: *binan goonj* (from the Gunggar language) (Lucashenko, 2009: 5). Judging by the national conversation around the Voice, many non-Indigenous Australians' ears were simply not working. Faced with an invitation for truth-telling and recognition, the mainstream media fed back narratives of fear, vulnerability, and existential

threat. The Voice became less about improving Indigenous lives, and more about preserving settler-frontier anxieties.

There are limitations to this dissertation. The first is more of a consideration. I did not want to Indigenous-run media place into a Western left–right political spectrum as forcing it into settler categories would only repeat the structures this referendum tried to challenge. I treated Indigenous outlets as politically neutral, but they were not neutral in importance. Even on a smaller scale, they offered vital spaces for Indigenous voices to resist mainstream narratives. More research must centre Indigenous media on their own terms through their own storytelling and visions of sovereignty, to importantly learn how to convey meaning away from these settler epistemologies. Secondly, while this dissertation traced clear patterns of media influence, it cannot claim total causality for the referendum's defeat. Audience decoding is always partial, and voters' choices are shaped by overlapping fears, hopes, and histories that media alone cannot fully determine. Nevertheless, I have conveyed online news media's vivid contribution.

Looking ahead, the defeat of the Voice creates difficult questions for Australia's future. It has left Prime Minister Albanese weakened ahead of the next election, facing growing pressure both from the Liberal opposition and disappointed Indigenous advocates. It also raises doubts about how any future moves toward treaty, truth-telling, promotion of Indigenous knowledge, or if Makarrata – "coming together after a struggle" (Referendum Council, 2017: i) – can succeed in an environment where even modest recognition is framed as a threat.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, the issue of Indigenous representation in the media is ultimately fitted within a singular hegemonic position of who gets to speak, who gets listened to, and whose fears are allowed to shape national identity. Without confronting the fear-based narratives that hardened into public common sense during the Voice referendum, Australia risks locking itself further into polarisation. Recognition is not just about constitutional amendments; it is about dismantling the everyday structures of denial and exclusion.

If there is any hope for real reconciliation, it must start by reopening the ears that refused to hear, and recognising that without removing colonial truths and facilitating transformative justice, there can be no coming together after the struggle. Only by breaking the chain of fear can Australia ever hope to close the gap, or even begin to see it.

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