

The Australian's coverage of Zachary Rolfe verdict condemned as 'a national disgrace'

News Corp paper published multiple negative stories about Kumanjayi Walker and body camera footage from night he was killed



The Australian newspaper's coverage of Zachary Rolfe being found not guilty of murder in relation to the shooting death of Kumanjayi Walker has been described as 'reprehensible'.

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Several high-profile Indigenous journalists have condemned the Australian newspaper's coverage as unethical, victim-blaming and insensitive following the acquittal of Northern Territory police officer Zachary Rolfe in relation to the shooting death of 19-year-old Kumanjayi Walker.

A jury acquitted Rolfe of murder and related charges on Friday over the 2019 shooting of Walker in Yuendumu. The court heard Walker was shot three times, with Rolfe arguing he acted to protect his and his partner's safety.

The ABC's Indigenous affairs editor, Bridget Brennan, said the News Corp broadsheet published a number of "reprehensible pieces" at the weekend.

"This paper has published details of Kumanjayi Walker's final moments," Brennan said on Twitter. "This is the utmost cruelty when we know his family were locked outside the police station, holding out hope, while he died of gunshot wounds."

The Weekend Australian published an on-camera interview with Rolfe, conducted in late 2019, in which he said the NT police leadership “sacrificed me to appease a crowd, which is not what a good leader would do”. In it Rolfe says the footage from the body cameras shows he and his colleagues tried their best to stop the bleeding after Walker was shot and to keep him comfortable.

The interview is interspersed with graphic scenes of Walker on the floor of the police station as police administer first aid. The newspaper published several negative stories about Walker, including a description of him as “a very scary man” and an unwanted baby, and a headline that read: “Kumanjayi Walker’s family told cops where to find him”.

Studio 10 and 10 News First presenter Narelda Jacobs, a Whadjuk Noongar woman, also criticised the coverage.

“They portrayed him as an unwanted baby; as a criminal in every single thing that he did; they painted a picture of someone who deserved to be killed to justify the police actions on that day,” Jacobs told Guardian Australia. “Whereas the thing that was on trial was the second and third shots that were fired [by Rolfe].”

Brennan, who was in the NT to cover the trial, called on Australian journalists to join her in condemning the coverage.

She was particularly critical of an hour-long documentary published by the Australian, which featured extensive footage from the body cameras of the police officers as Walker was shot in his home, as well as when he lay dying and crying out in pain on the floor in the police station.

The family has not seen the footage.

“This is traumatising, unethical and appalling reporting that should never have been published by The Australian,” Brennan wrote. “If you work there, if you are a former employee, if you’re a leader in this industry, say something – loudly.”

The Indigenous affairs officer at Media Diversity Australia, Gomeroi woman Madeline Hayman-Reber, said the reporting was “a national disgrace”.

“The coverage has breached and ignored cultural protocols that were clearly set out by Kumanjayi Walker’s family prior to the commencement of Zachary Rolfe’s murder trial,” Hayman-Reber told Guardian Australia.

“Media Diversity Australia wonders if the coverage would have been the same if the victim was a white man.

“This unethical journalism has only inflicted more trauma on an already grieving community.

“Our hearts go out to Kumanjayi Walker’s family, the Warlpiri community and First Nations communities across the country, who have lost so much and continue to suffer because of appalling media coverage.”

Jacobs, who is also a member of the Walkleys board which oversees journalism standards, said: “They have portrayed him as a criminal who deserved to die.

“It’s like they’re trying to justify the actions of the police.

“The community didn’t need to hear these things because Kumanjaya Walker was loved. He was an active member of his community and his family. He wasn’t this monster that they painted him.

“There are two standards. There’s a standard for Bipoc [Black, Indigenous and people of colour] people in this community and there’s a standard for everyone else.”

The Australian described the video as a “subscriber exclusive” on its website with the headline: “Watch the video: moment cop Zachary Rolfe shoots teen Kumanjaya Walker”.

The federal political editor for the West Australian, Lanai Scarr, who used to work for News Corp, criticised the paper’s reporting of domestic abuse in relation to Walker as “grossly irresponsible”.

The Australian’s editor-in-chief, Christopher Dore, declined to answer questions but referred Guardian Australia to Wednesday’s editorial in which he justified the reporting as the “unvarnished truth”.

The editorial argues that Walker’s death should not be “wilfully misconstrued as a new chapter in the culture wars” and says a similar outcry greeted the Australian’s reporting of domestic violence in communities in 1994.

“Romanticising life on remote communities does not make it less bad for those who are experiencing neglect or terror,” the editorial says. “The unvarnished truth is what is needed to protect the innocent and bring about change.”

On Wednesday the Australian’s Indigenous affairs reporter, Paige Taylor, wrote an opinion piece acknowledging the “disgust and anguish” among Indigenous people about the jury’s decision, while referring to the paper’s reporting on Walker as “a violent and deeply troubled person who was often impossible to be around”.

“I see [the response] in the context of a litany of miserable and tragic interactions between white authority and Indigenous people,” Taylor wrote.