

Asian angst story highlights magazine's 'sloppy hatchet-job'

North & South feature writer Deborah Coddington caused a stir in the media with her controversial article discussing the effect of rising Asian crime on New Zealand communities. But as **ELOISE GIBSON** reports, the article has angered some media commentators for being heavily biased.

Last year, *North and South* magazine ran a cover story by Deborah Coddington entitled "Asian Angst: Is it time to send some back?"

Commentators slammed the article for lacking journalistic rigour and balance.

"Asian Angst" provoked complaints to the editor and the Press Council, but neither Coddington nor *North and South* have apologised.

So what was wrong with the article, and why didn't *North and South* spot the problems before publishing?

The article begins: "Welcome to New Zealand, the new home of Asian drug runners, illegal suburban brothels, health cheats, student P-pushers, business crooks and paua smugglers."

Coddington argues New Zealanders are at risk from a "gathering tide" of Asian crime. She quotes from Statistics New Zealand, saying that between 1996 and 2005, Asian crime increased by 53 per cent.

Media commentator Keith Ng responded to Coddington in a Public Address website post on November 14.

Ng went back to the statistics Coddington used and found that Asians are only about a quarter as likely to be convicted of a crime as the average New Zealander.

He pointed out that the 53 per cent increase in Asian crime quoted was less than the increase in the Asian population over the same time.

In other words, Asian crime is comparatively low, and on average it's going down not up.

By not giving readers all the information, Coddington had made it seem as though the statistics supported her argument.

Coddington responded to her critics in a *Herald on Sunday* column on November 19. In that column she said that in 2003, four out of five pregnant Asian women aborted their babies.

In fact, as Keith Ng said in a *Listener* column two weeks later, that's the figure for Asian women under 20, not the figure for all Asian women. Coddington later corrected the abortion figure, but she did not apologise.

Critics also attacked "Asian Angst" over its lack of balance and fairness. The article quoted just two members of the Asian community.

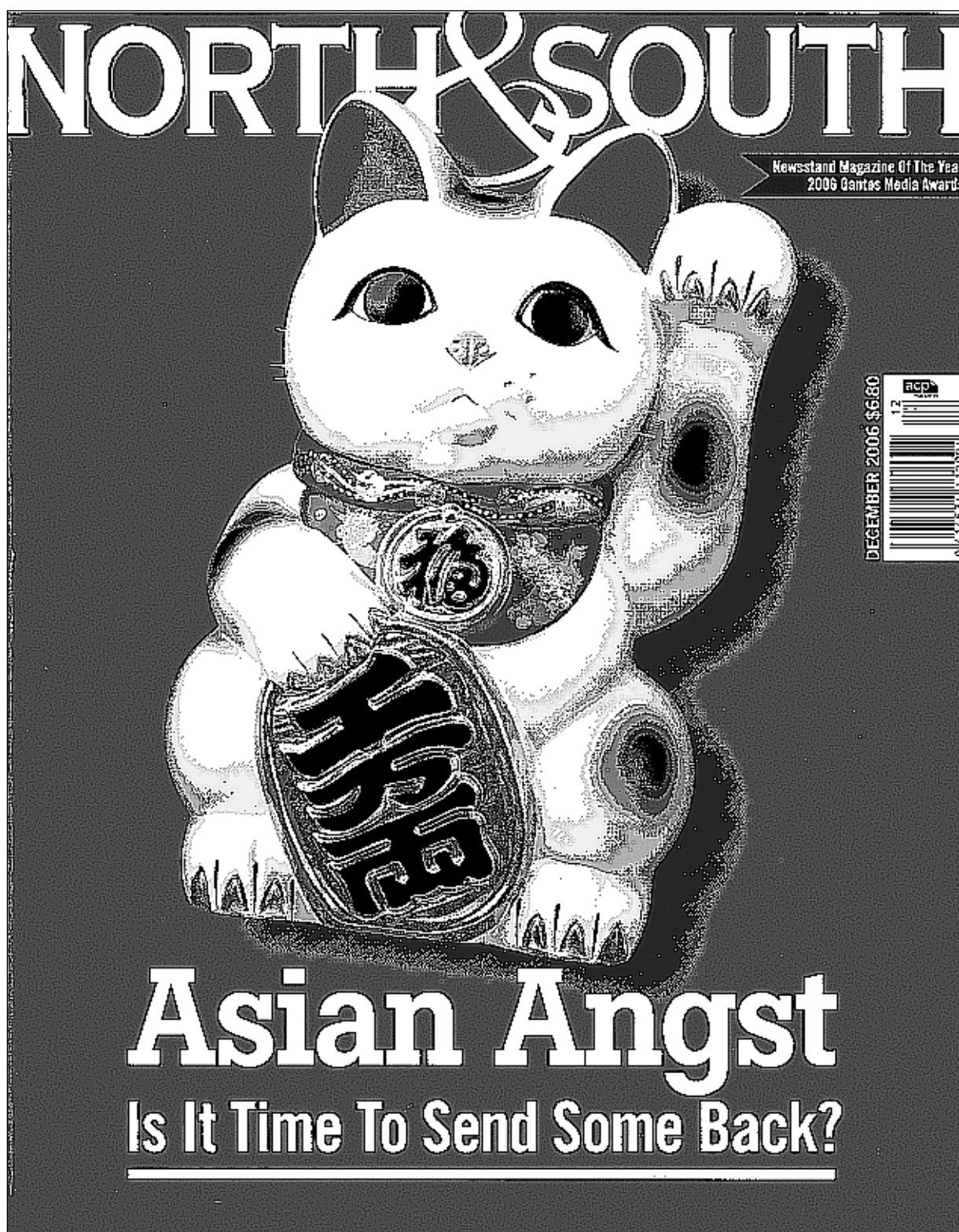
The first, Rosemary Jones, is a long term resident who was keen to distance herself from more recent arrivals. In the article she explains that her children are Asian only on "the outside".

The second, *New Zealand Herald* columnist Lincoln Tan, was interviewed for the article but his interview was not quoted. Coddington chose instead to quote from one of his *Herald* columns.

Charles Mabbett, of the Asia New Zealand Foundation, was one of the people who complained to the Press Council about balance. He was concerned about the lack of Asian voices in the article.

"Can you imagine a journalist writing a piece on the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process and not including a range of Maori voices?" he says. "It's elementary journalism."

Keith Ng puts it another way. "It just seems obvious that if there was a gathering Asian crime tide, Asians would know about it. It's like doing



CONTROVERSIAL: The December issue of *North & South*.

a story on crime in Hamilton, but failing to ask anyone who actually lives in Hamilton."

Coddington says in the article that "New Zealand has imported an alien, ruthless and secretive crime culture committed by educated, profit-driven individuals and gangs."

Mabbett says Coddington used "every negative feature she could include from the news reports in the last two or three years".

Coddington used a 13-year-old Korean boy who brought tuberculosis to his school, a 66-year-old Chinese woman who fraudulently obtained free healthcare, and a case of wrongly-labelled sheep placenta, all as evidence of a

"growing crime tide".

She also quoted John Sowter, head of the Auckland drug squad:

"Is it the responsibility of editors to pick up on and rectify instances where writers misuse statistics? Hell yeah."

"Making it even more difficult for police, says drug squad boss Sowter, is that 'they all look the same to us so you wouldn't know [they're gang members] if you passed them in the street. We've got Asian cleaners and I look at them sometimes and wonder'."

What seems to have riled critics as much as Coddington's argument is *North and South's* failure to pull the article up on its lack of accuracy, fairness and balance.

Jim Tully, a media ethics researcher and head

of journalism at the University of Canterbury, says it's part of the editorial process to check that facts and figures are correct, and that an article is fair.

"At a magazine like *North and South*, everything would pass through the editor, especially for a cover story. Any issues like fairness should be picked up early," he says.

But he says New Zealand publications do not have the resources to check and re-check articles the way a publication like, say, the *New Yorker* would.

He says proposals like the one by APN to outsource its sub-editing will make matters worse. He says mistakes are more likely when you have someone who is not part of the newsroom doing the subbing.

"As an editor it's always a leap of faith that the reporter has got it right...in this particular case I think the onus was on Deborah to get it right," he says.

But Ng says the problems with "Asian Angst" should have been apparent even without checking the source statistics.

"Is it the responsibility of editors to pick up on and rectify instances where writers misuse statistics? Hell yeah. And they should have," he says.

But Ng agrees that lack of resources is a problem.

"In New Zealand's under-resourced media it's simply not reasonable to expect 100 per cent fact-checking on articles. Editors assume that, when writers present concrete, verifiable statements of fact, they really are verified facts," he says.

Charles Mabbett says the editorial process at *North and South* did not do its job.

"I think we're looking at a situation where a magazine is under pressure to increase readership and has been flying fast and loose with its journalism," he says.

Mabbett is not the only one accusing *North and South* of putting profit before fairness. *The Listener* pointed out in its December 2-6 issue that *North and South's* circulation had slid 10 per cent at the last circulation audit.

Chief human rights commissioner Rosslyn Noonan said in the *Sunday Star Times* that robust, even opinionated debate is part of a healthy democracy.

"But", she said, "when a responsible publication like *North and South*... tars a whole community with the actions of a few, then it's open to the accusation that it's done so for sales."

Ng says, "Editorial calculation in these sorts of matters is often very cynical. The publicity value of an article is weighed up against legal risks and potential damage to reputation."

"My personal opinion is that *North and South* thought they could get away with a sloppy hatchet-job because they believed that the response would only generate publicity, but not damage their reputation."

Commentator Jim Tully says he does not think *North and South* did anything so cynical but acknowledges that "editors in any competitive market are trying to guess what will attract readers".