



FALUN DAFA
ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

Falun Dafa Association of Australia

Formal Complaint on the ABC's Foreign Correspondent and
Background Briefing programs

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Executive summary

The Falun Dafa Association of Australia wishes to acknowledge the importance of following the Complaint Process set out by the ABC. We value this mechanism, which ensures that the public is given an opportunity to voice concerns about ABC programming with the aim of attaining a mutually acceptable resolution. This is particularly significant when the disputed content has resulted in serious harm (physical and psychological) to a group or individuals.

This document was compiled by the Falun Dafa Association of Australia, a representative body of the Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) faith community in Australia. Its key role is to represent the community in public, including to media, governmental, and non-governmental bodies. It is an informal, volunteer-run body and does not solicit monetary contributions.

This complaint will focus on the series of programmes that were aired on the ABC platforms in July and August, detailed below. It is concerned with the following:

1. Serious breaches of the ABC Code of Practice (Code) that were apparent in the programmes. The Code of Practice states that the broadcaster must never “gratuitously harm or offend,” and should “avoid the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice” (Code 7.7). The Code also states that “Where there is editorial justification for content which may... exacerbate serious threats to individual or public health, safety or welfare, take appropriate steps to mitigate those risks, particularly by taking care with how content is expressed or presented” (Code 7.6). The ABC’s programming clearly fails to adhere to these standards and a number of others listed in Section 8 below.
2. The numerous factual errors in the reports, suggesting a highly flawed fact-checking process by the journalists, researchers, and ultimately producers involved.
3. The unprecedented level of hostility that has occurred towards the Falun Gong community in Australia since the airing of the programmes. Reports of physical and verbal assaults have been reported around Australia, which has put the safety of Australian residents and citizens at risk. Many of these victims are refugees who fled vilification and persecution in China.
4. The fact that the above reports have been weaponised by over 50 Chinese government media platforms to further the persecution of Falun Gong. It is alarming that a taxpayer-funded national broadcaster has created content so useful for a totalitarian regime to further its cruel suppression of religious freedom.

1. Background and introduction

Beginning on the week of July 20, 2020, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published a series of extremely misleading reports about the Falun Gong faith community, which appear to have the specific intent of inciting hostility and mistrust toward the group, and of deliberately undermining any sympathy that viewers and readers may have for the persecution that practitioners of Falun Gong are suffering in China.

We believe that the ABC's editorial processes have severely broken down, and that the institution has failed in its mission to inform the Australian public using truthful, impartial and balanced reporting principles. Instead, it has been used by a small number of staff who engaged in motivated reasoning, selective sourcing, and poor fact-checking, to unfairly vilify and spread propaganda against a little-understood spiritual practice. The ABC allowing itself to be used as a platform for a few of its staff to pursue an ideological crusade has done tremendous damage to public trust and confidence in the institution.

This document outlines how the program material severely misrepresents the beliefs and practices of Falun Gong, breaches the ABC's own Code of Practice and editorial guidelines, and shows how it has already begun to have an extremely harmful impact on the Falun Gong community in Australia and around the world, many members of which are traumatised refugees fleeing religious persecution. It is quite likely that it will lead to emboldened persecution and torture of practitioners in China. The programs have been widely promoted by Chinese Communist Party organisations responsible for persecuting Falun Gong, and have been held up as justification for the imprisonment, torture, and forced conversion of Falun Gong practitioners in China.

The compilation of this document has been challenging. The ABC's work involves over two hours of audio, a thirty minute television segment, and over 4,000 printed words. The ABC's Code advises against "the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice." Yet substantially all of the recent content was single-minded in its attempt to depict Falun Gong as dangerous, harmful, strange, foreign, and 'cult-like,' playing precisely to unjustified stereotypes and prejudices. The ABC's work contradicts decades of scholarship and the lived experiences of tens of millions of people. It is difficult to know where to begin in rebutting such radical misrepresentations.

This document draws from and updates the Falun Dafa Association of Australia's letter of 17 July 2020 to David Anderson, Managing Director ABC.¹ It provides illustrative excerpts from ABC's reporting, and demonstrates how misleading those reports are – and how concerted ABC's efforts were to misrepresent Falun Gong – via references to third-party scholarship.

This complaint pertains to the following ABC program material broadcast or published in July and August:

- Foreign Correspondent: Dark Karma / The Power of Falun Gong / Who are the Falun Gong?
- Background Briefing (parts 1, 2, 3): The Power of Falun Gong
- ABC News: When Anna was 14, her mother set up a 'special appointment' with The Master / Insiders reveal the opaque world of Falun Gong / The Power of Falun Gong

Due to the overlapping nature of the content in the programs, we submit this as a single complaint covering all of them.

¹ Falun Dafa Australia Information Centre. "Falun Dafa Association's Letter to ABC on Its Harmful and Unfair Reporting." 17 July 2020. <http://falunau.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FXH-Letter-to-ABC-Management2020.pdf>

2. Basic lapses in journalistic ethics and procedures

Almost all of the egregious misrepresentations about Falun Gong committed in the program material are due to the highly selective, biased, and crusading approach taken by the journalists. There are only two explanations for the products they created: a failure to do their research, or an intent to tell a one-sided story. In the event, it seems they committed both.

Failure to contact Anna's parents, leading to numerous material inaccuracies

Attached you will find a letter of grievance from the mother of Anna, the young woman interviewed extensively in several of the programs (see Appendix A). She has also submitted this complaint separately to the ABC. We have verified her identity. Anna's mother's complaint shows the following:

1. ABC made no attempt to contact her, or her husband, at any time, either to get her side of the story or to even do basic fact-checking about the numerous material claims made by Anna about her mother, their family, and their relationship to the Falun Gong practice. Many of the claims made by Anna are shown to be simply false.
2. The supposed "exorcism" never took place. Moreover, there was no hint of deception in the reason for the trip to Dragon Springs. Anna flew across the country with her oboe and music sheets, which makes clear that she knew full well the purpose of the trip. The ABC's reporting on this incident is false.
3. Anna's mother and father had residences on both US coasts since 2005, pursuing their respective careers, since Anna was 10. This had nothing to do with the Falun Gong beliefs of Anna's mother. There were no tensions in the family except those between Anna and her mother – common for children of first-generation ethnic Chinese immigrants. The claim that Falun Gong tore the family apart is false.
4. Anna's mother sent Anna to hospital after she found Anna had anorexia in 2008. The mother decided *together with the medical team* on a less invasive treatment plan for Anna after several hospitalisations. This choice had nothing to do with her mother's Falun Gong beliefs, and pharmaceutical remedies were always on the table if the medical team agreed. Thus, the ABC's claim that Anna's mother refused medical treatment for Anna due to Falun Gong is false and defamatory.
5. After being pulled out of Catholic school, Anna and her sister were put in the best public school in the area, and then went on to prestigious high schools. Anna's education was in no way affected by her mother's belief. ABC's claims that Anna's mother was willing to forgo Anna's education are false.
6. Anna's mother did not quit her job to sell Falun Gong books. She had to leave that position due to a company restructuring, and then she established a start-up. There is not even a profitable business model to be had as the reseller of Falun Gong books. ABC's claim here is entirely false.
7. Anna's mother never taught Anna that she was different to other children due to her being of mixed race. This claim is false. Moreover, Anna was not the only interracial child at the dance audition, as ABC falsely claimed.

The failure to do even the most basic fact-checking – like speaking to the primary adult witness and accused party in several of the programs – is an appalling breach of journalistic procedure and ethics. ABC's journalists here relied entirely on the recollections of a young woman who struggled with her relationship with her mother, and other personal problems, and who was recalling incidents from 17 years ago when she was as young as eight-years-old. Anna's mother regards this as exploitation of a vulnerable young person.

There could be no clearer demonstration of the reckless disregard for the truth on the part of ABC's journalists, and of their cynical and single-minded pursuit of any testimony they could use to make Falun Gong look unsympathetic and (in their words) 'cult-like'. Having Anna's mother correct the record on all of the above – and much more – would have prevented most of the material about Anna and her family from being aired.

ABC's failure to even contact one of the main accused parties, leading to numerous material inaccuracies and outright falsehoods, is one of the primary reasons that all material referring to Anna's mother (i.e., all material with Anna in it) should be retracted. It is false and defamatory and flagrantly violates substantially all of the ABC's key editorial guidelines.

It should also be noted that the ABC did not attempt to contact Anna's father, either. This further makes clear that the journalists had no interest in actually verifying the stories told by Anna.

Failure to investigate Colleen's relationship with daughter and properly explain the circumstances preceding her death

We believe that the following points are highly relevant to the ABC's program material, but it does not seem that any of them were investigated or noted. We are still attempting to understand the full circumstances of Colleen's death and the nature of her relationship to her daughter Shani, but at present we understand the following to be the case. None of this was reflected in ABC's reporting, and it seems that the reporters made no efforts to pursue any of these lines of inquiry. Yet these findings would significantly alter any honest account of the relevant content:

1. Colleen and Shani May had a strained relationship for many years, long preceding Colleen's practice of Falun Gong. To her friends, Colleen described Shani as unstable, abusive, and highly controlling. Her diary, accessed and referenced by ABC journalists, may also have reflected this. If so, their choice to leave out such context shows that they only sought evidence for the story they wished to tell.
2. According to Colleen's friends, Colleen sold her house and used her savings to pay off Shani's debts. In part due to this, in her 60s and 70s she worked for Shani's real estate management company to earn money, often using harsh chemicals to clean rentals.
3. Colleen's use of these cleaning chemicals coincided with her developing a nasty cough before she was hospitalised.
4. Colleen spent three months in hospital and nursing home before her death and received medical treatment there. This is a piece of critical information that is left out of the ABC Foreign Correspondent program, leaving viewers with the impression that Colleen did not receive medical treatment until she died.
5. Colleen had a stroke, from which we are informed she recovered in the hospital. We were also told Colleen had a fall while in hospital, from which she suffered brain damage. We do not have access to her death certificate or medical records, and have only been offered this account second-hand by one of Colleen's friends, so we present it in qualified form.
6. As far as we are aware, Colleen largely stopped taking her blood pressure medication not long after she began practicing Falun Gong (in 2000) and passed away 17 years after she began the practice. The ABC cited Shani to make the absolute claim that Colleen died due to her practice of Falun Gong. Yet the causal relationship between her apparent cessation of blood pressure medication and her subsequent death is not absolute. It is a matter of risk. While such medication is intended to reduce the risk of stroke, one may still have a stroke while taking such medication.

7. We understand that Shani denied Colleen access to the main Falun Gong text, *Zhuan Falun*, after she was hospitalised. This is similar to denying a Christian access to the Bible, or a Muslim access to the Quran. ABC viewers were not informed of this deprivation of religious freedom.
8. Separately, we understand that Colleen was a smoker for many years before she practiced Falun Gong, and drank after the death of her husband. She quit smoking and drinking shortly after she began the practice. These factors may have improved her health and life expectancy.

The ABC did not inform its audience of *any* of the above, all of which would give a very different colour to its narration of the relationship between the mother and daughter and the circumstances surrounding Colleen's death.

This is yet another refusal to fact-check highly inflammatory claims from a single source, where such fact-checking may have called into question the one-sided anti-Falun Gong narrative the journalists sought to tell.

Failure to explain background of other sources

In investigating this complaint, the ABC should also examine a key source in the stories: Ben Hurley, a former Falun Gong practitioner who has increasingly come to behave as an anti-Falun Gong activist. He has proactively reached out to a number of Falun Gong practitioners enquiring as to whether they are still practicing Falun Gong, and asking them to speak out against the practice publicly. He also maintains a blog where he posts solely anti-Falun Gong content. Journalists must of course cultivate sources, but the ABC should examine whether in this case the reporters were *unduly* influenced by Ben Hurley's personal antagonism against Falun Gong, and allowed him to guide the stories, as he claims in his article "The ABC is right: Falun Gong has some dangerous teachings" on ABC's website.

The ABC should also have informed its readers that Hurley was from 2015 to 2016 an editor of a bilingual magazine "Higher View Business", sponsored by Chinese Communist Party United Front-linked entities,² which has featured the Chinese Ambassador, and which is endorsed by the Chinese Embassy in Australia.³

Reckless disregard for or ignorance about the context of Falun Gong's human rights activism

The ABC journalists were either ignorant about or deliberately neglected to mention a great deal of information that audiences would require in order to make sense of Falun Gong in its historical and cultural context. For instance, they do not properly inform audiences that Falun Gong was celebrated in China prior to the persecution, and that the persecution took place because it became *too* popular and outnumbered the Communist Party membership.

Benjamin Penny writes for instance: "the leader of the National People's Congress, Qiao Shi, led a further investigation into Falun Gong, concluding that 'Falun Gong has hundreds of benefits for the Chinese people and China, and does not have one single bad effect.' Also opposing the Public Security Ministry's position were two sporting organisations, the national body in charge of athletics and the National Sports Bureau, which praised Falun Gong's health benefits in May and October 1998 respectively."⁴ This shows that Falun Gong enjoyed official support and was praised for its positive effects on health.

² Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Inquiry into the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017.

³ https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/EspionageFInterference/Submissions
<http://au.mofcom.gov.cn/article/wtojiben/wtoxieding/201412/20141200835698.shtml>

⁴ Penny, Benjamin. 2012. *The Religion of Falun Gong*. University of Chicago Press. 55-56

The ABC did not inform the audience that Falun Gong is one of the largest faith groups in China, and one of the largest and most severely persecuted religious groups. In 2006, a report by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Torture noted that 66 percent of the reported torture cases in China were of Falun Gong practitioners. The US State Department has noted reports that roughly half of the labour camp population – prior to the Xinjiang internment campaign – were Falun Gong.⁵

The widely documented organ harvesting of Falun Gong is presented in passing, as mere “claims” by practitioners (Background Briefing 1). In Background Briefing 3 Hagar Cohen says: “Some human rights advocates argue that Falun Gong followers have been victims of organ harvesting.” This downplaying of a major human rights atrocity completely ignores the June 2019 judgement of the China Tribunal, led by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC. The China Tribunal's “unavoidable final conclusion” was that: “Forced organ harvesting has been committed for years throughout China on a significant scale and that Falun Gong practitioners have been one – and probably the main – source of organ supply.”⁶

All of the activities that the ABC misleadingly reports on – including media corporations, dance companies – were founded in *response* to the persecution described above. Audiences were not informed of such basic information, i.e. the scale and severity of the persecution, and the fact that these entities were responses to it.

Finally, audiences were not informed as to how Falun Gong is actually organised: that there is no single centralised global structure, that no collection of money is permitted, and that Falun Gong practitioners are like every other member of society.

Here is how David Ownby describes Falun Gong:

“It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Falun Gong as practiced by Chinese in North America is a bourgeois movement; the stereotypical practitioner lives in the suburbs and drives a Ford Taurus to her job in computers or finance. Those still in school share similar orientations and aspirations to those already in the workplace.”⁷

Much of the same pertains to Falun Gong practitioners in Australia – along with a large number of traumatised refugees – though this picture is hardly the one that ABC viewers were informed of.

More generally, there are over a thousand Falun Gong practitioners in Australia. The ABC did not report, and as far as we can tell has never reported, a single positive story about why so many people choose to practice Falun Gong, actively support human rights campaigns for Falun Gong and refuse to give up the practice despite being persecuted. Yet the ABC has dedicated hours of programming to negative stories from a handful of former practitioners who hold grievances against the practice. This is patently one-sided and unfair.

It is inevitable that in any large religious group there will be cases of family fall-outs, health problems, moral issues, deaths, and those who leave the practice or religion dissatisfied with their experiences. Despite the strenuous efforts of the journalists involved, the ABC has not shown that Falun Gong practitioners have engaged in any coercion, violence, personal control, money-collection, surveillance, exploitation, or any of the numerous other ills associated with organised religious groups' abuse of power.

⁵ U.S. State Department 2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China, 11 March 2008, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100518.htm>

⁶ Short Form Conclusion of The China Tribunal's Judgment, June 2019, <https://chinatribunal.com/final-judgment/>

⁷ Ownby, David. 2008. Falun Gong and the Future of China. Oxford University Press, USA. 138

There is no particular reason that a few unrepresentative, unhappy cases should be combined in such a one-sided, emotionally manipulative way – except to discredit and defame the spiritual practice and belief in question.

3. Misrepresentation of Falun Gong's beliefs and practices

ABC's journalists portrayed Falun Gong as a group that should be regarded with suspicion and contempt on account of its allegedly "dangerous" and foreign beliefs (Falun Gong is a faith practice whose teachings are rooted in the Buddhist and Daoist traditions), and by portraying Falun Gong as a monolithic, powerful, and tightly controlled organisation, which it is not. The reports were single-minded and one-sided in advancing this depiction of Falun Gong, and were intended specifically to persuade the viewer to come to this understanding of Falun Gong. All of these portrayals are based on representations of Falun Gong beliefs and practices that are so selective and distorted as to be recklessly inaccurate and in some cases completely false.

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice of the Buddhist tradition, indigenous to China. It consists of a set of five meditative qigong exercises and a body of religious teachings which have been described as "profoundly moral,"⁸ and which include discussion of a large range of metaphysical phenomena and ideas. The primary text of the practice is the book *Zhuan Falun*, which Falun Gong practitioners read regularly and take as a guide to ethical practice. The auxiliary teachings, all of which are publicly available online, run to over a million words.

At the heart of Falun Gong's belief system are the values of *Zhen, Shan, Ren*, which translate as honesty/truthfulness, kindness/compassion, and tolerance/forbearance. These qualities are taken by Falun Gong to represent the Dao or Dharma – the essential law and quality of the universe. Practitioners of Falun Gong strive to embody these principles while letting go of worldly attachments and concern for fame, reputation, or gain. We also try to overcome tendencies toward jealousy, anger, and other negative emotions, and to put others' interests ahead of our own. This is the essence of Falun Gong moral cultivation.

Falun Gong does not have a centralised administration, hierarchy, system of membership, or tithing. Practice is entirely voluntary and without compulsion, and Falun Gong activities around the world are carried out by volunteers and available free of charge. Falun Dafa Associations around the world are, like ours, grassroots, voluntary, and loosely organised.

Although the majority of Falun Gong practitioners remain in China, the community of Falun Gong practitioners outside China is estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands of people. Practitioners come from all walks of life, spanning diverse ages, occupations, and ethnicities, and holding a diverse range of social and political views. What they share in common is simply a desire to improve themselves through meditation and a practice of individual moral rectitude.

This background is necessary in order to explain how misleading and misrepresentative the depiction of Falun Gong's beliefs are in the ABC reporting. Practitioners of Falun Gong would scarcely recognise their practice based on the depictions in those reports.

The ABC programs' investigation of Falun Gong's beliefs focuses on four ideas: our attitudes toward homosexuality and "mixed races", Falun Gong teachings on extra-terrestrial beings, our relationship to modern medicine, and views on the Donald Trump presidency.

⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission. "Backgrounder - Tribunal finds Falun Gong a protected creed under Ontario's Human Rights Code." January 25, 2006. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/backgrounder-tribunal-finds-falun-gong-protected-creed-under-ontarios-human-rights-code>

The first three topics above are not core elements of Falun Gong beliefs: collectively they comprise an extremely small portion of the corpus of Falun Gong teachings. Donald Trump is not part of Falun Gong teachings. An excessive emphasis on marginal or non-existent teachings would appear to contradict ABC's standards, which state that "no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded *or disproportionately represented*" (emphasis added). Setting aside questions of fairness and proportionality, the ABC's depiction of our beliefs on these topics is heavily prejudicial and misleading, betraying a deep religious and cultural illiteracy and, in some cases, a reckless disregard for accuracy.

Generally, the ABC programming also neglects almost all relevant context about Falun Gong practitioners' overseas activism, and the role of the persecution in China in transforming the peaceful lives of practitioners. Witnesses complain that their family members spent undue time on Falun Gong – but the ABC does not explain that this time was in fact spent mostly on human rights activism to highlight the human rights abuses of Falun Gong by the Chinese Communist regime, not Falun Gong religious practices as such.

A representative sample of how the ABC represented our beliefs is below, followed by an explanation of how it is inaccurate.

On homosexuality and persons of "mixed race"

The ABC's reports repeatedly insinuate, and in some cases outright claim, that Falun Gong holds intolerant racist and homophobic views. These statements are misleading, reckless, and divisive: rather than promoting understanding, they expose gays and lesbians, persons of mixed race, and Falun Gong practitioners themselves to needless anguish.

Among the statements in the ABC reports to this effect are:

Another former insider says the movement promotes intolerant teachings which are racist and homophobic. (Foreign Correspondent)

"I'm mixed race. I am quite possibly just homosexual. And those are the two kinds of people that are purportedly causing the end of the world," says ex-devotee Anna, now in her 20s and living on the US west coast. (Foreign Correspondent)

Anna felt she needed to hide her deepest thoughts. She had started having crushes on female friends and classmates. Li Hongzhi's teaching that homosexuality was wrong, and creates negative karma, played on her mind. (ABC News)

ANNA: The leader of Falun Gong claims that race mixing in humans is part of an alien plot to drive humanity further from the gods. My mother read that part of the texts to me when I was about 11, which was a lot to take in. To hear that coming from not only the religion or practice that you're believing in, but from your own mother, it was very damaging. (Foreign Correspondent)

These and other statements are false and inflammatory. Falun Gong does not teach that homosexuality and interracial marriages are "causing the end of the world," and ABC knew, or should have known, that the effect of these misleading statements would be to incite hostility and contempt towards the Falun Gong faith community. The ABC made no attempts to present Falun Gong teachings within their religious and cultural context. Furthermore, the ABC relied on the interpretations and recollection of one young woman ("Anna") who studied Falun Gong as a child. No attempts were made to compare her interpretation against those of other Falun Gong

practitioners.

Falun Gong welcomes individuals of any sexual orientation or gender identity, and it does not promote or condone hatred or discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, or identity. To the contrary, Falun Gong teachings stress that all people have an immortal soul, have inherent dignity, and should be treated equally, with tolerance and compassion.

Like most world religions, Falun Gong espouses conservative sexual ethics. As a practice of the Buddhist tradition, it encourages practitioners to relinquish attachments to lust and sexual desire, and only sanctions sexual activity within the confines of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Any sexual relations that fall outside marriage are understood to create negative karma. However, this does not translate into a discriminatory attitude toward the gay community. Same-sex attracted individuals are counted among the community of Falun Gong believers, and they are treated no differently from anyone else. Moreover, Falun Gong does not seek to impose its ethical precepts on anyone.

With respect to persons of mixed race, Falun Gong's cosmology includes a belief that human ethnicities are created in the image and likeness of gods, and that different ethnicities have their own caretaker deities. Falun Gong also teaches about reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, and holds that a person's soul is not bound to any particular ethnicity (e.g. a person may reincarnate into a Chinese family in one lifetime, and into a white, black, or interracial family in another). Far from encouraging racism or discrimination, these teachings actually discourage it: Falun Gong teachings emphasise the inherent divinity of all people, and are fundamentally incompatible with racial prejudice.

It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of Falun Gong practitioners in the West belong to mixed-race families or are themselves of mixed race. Had the ABC wanted to give a balanced and fair treatment to this topic, they could have easily found any number of mixed-race couples and children of mixed race in the practice, who could have reported they felt no conflict between this and the teachings of Falun Gong on the subject. However, the ABC ignored the opportunity for balanced interviews on this topic and chose to report it in a one-sided and misleading way. In fact, four of the fourteen volunteer staff at the Falun Dafa Information Center are in interracial marriages. Several of Shen Yun's lead dancers are interracial, including Miranda Zhou-Galati and Madeline Lobjois, whose interview videos and images are easily accessible on Shen Yun's web site for ABC researchers or others to review.

The journalists were either ignorant of these facts, which they should not have been if they'd done their research, or they deliberately omitted them because this information would have undermined the false narrative they were trying to depict to the audience about Falun Gong's supposed opposition to interracial families. Such basic realities about the Falun Gong community – well-known to anyone who actually practices it, or understands it – cannot be reconciled with ABC's claim of discrimination or intolerance towards people of mixed race. It appears that the journalists wished only to dramatically highlight Anna's personal views, and convey to the audience that these were representative of Falun Gong. This use of emotional manipulation to distort what Falun Gong practitioners actually believe is so false and misleading as to border on the malicious.

On medicine

The ABC claims that Falun Gong has “cult-like abhorrence of modern medicine that's claimed lives.” This is an inflammatory, misleading, and reckless claim. It is also one of the primary ways that the Chinese Communist Party has sought to justify the imprisonment, torture, killing, and forcible re-education of Falun Gong practitioners, and so deserves to be interrogated more closely.

These quotes are representative of how ABC presents Falun Gong's beliefs on medicine:

As she struggled with her illness, Anna says her mother rejected doctors' attempts to put her on medication, quoting Falun Gong teachings. (ABC News)

Like Anna, Shani's anger with Falun Gong runs deep. She blames the movement's teachings on modern medicine for the death of her mother, who stopped taking her blood-pressure medication after joining Falun Gong. Shani May's frustration turned to despair when her mother Colleen fell ill but refused to see doctors or take medicine. (ABC News)

ERIC CAMPBELL, Reporter: So people are dying because of [Falun Gong's founder] Master Li?

"If it wasn't for Falun Gong, she'd still be with us. (ABC News; Foreign Correspondent)

COLLEEN'S NIECE SHELLEY: Oh, the part that really got me was you do not go to doctors. You do not go to hospitals. (Background Briefing 1)

Colleen would still be with us if she hadn't been brainwashed by Falun Gong to stop taking Western medicine. (Background Briefing 1 and 3)

HAGAR COHEN: Do you blame Falun Gong for the death of your mum?
Shani May: Oh, a hundred, hundred and ten per cent – or is it more a million per cent. (Background Briefing 1)

These quotes are representative of an extremely emotionally manipulative framing, demonstrating a complete lack of religious understanding or cultural sensitivity, the absence of fact-checking, and making minimal efforts to present the views and opinions of people who actually practice Falun Gong.

In the case of Colleen, the viewer is told through Shani that her death was due to Falun Gong and Colleen's refusal to take medicine, yet no evidence is provided of this.

Falun Gong views illness and misfortune as manifestations of negative karma, which is incurred from doing wrong, including in past lives (e.g. negative karma is produced when a person behaves in ways that are contrary to the moral principles and precepts of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance). Pain, illness, and other hardships are considered an inescapable feature of the human condition, and some suffering is deemed necessary to pay off one's karma. Falun Gong's teachings in this respect are hardly unique among religious and faith traditions, particularly in the Buddhist tradition⁹ to which Falun Gong belongs.

Crucially, how a person interprets these teachings and applies them in their lives is entirely a personal choice: Falun Gong has no prohibitions on seeking medical treatment, and the Falun Gong community does not apply social pressure to discourage individuals from seeking medical treatment. To the contrary, its teachings state that hospitals and Western medicine can be effective at treating illness, and that people experiencing severe illness should seek medical care. Within the Falun Gong community there are a number of medical doctors and nurses. Western scholars and researchers who have conducted extensive field work with the Falun Gong community confirm that the group does not prohibit practitioners from taking medicine or apply social pressure to that end.

⁹ "Buddhism on Health and Illness", Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/buddhism-on-health-and-illness>

For instance, the ethnographer Noah Porter writes that:

“My findings are contrary to the allegations made by the Chinese Government and Western anti-cultists in many ways. Practitioners are not encouraged to rely on Western medicine, but are not prohibited from using it.”

“While a Christian Scientist who goes to a hospital may find himself or herself denied the services of Christian Science practitioners [], Falun Dafa practitioners, as I have shown, will not pressure a practitioner who wants to get medical treatment not to do so.”¹⁰

It is further worth noting that Falun Gong’s popularity, particularly in the 1990s in China, was largely attributable to its efficacy in *improving* health and promoting healthy lifestyles (e.g. through daily practice of meditation, self-reflection and moral rectitude, and by eschewing drugs and alcohol). The Chinese government is known to have praised Falun Gong publicly and initially supported its spread in China precisely because it was said to be healthy, and to save the government on healthcare expenditures¹¹. Evidence of this phenomenon¹² – both statistical and anecdotal – abounds, and features prominently in ethnographic studies of Falun Gong. Any even-handed treatment of this subject would include a discussion on the reported physical and mental health benefits of Falun Gong, such as accounts of how the practice helped people overcome health problems, addictions, and family troubles.

As evidence that Falun Gong’s alleged abhorrence of medicine has “claimed lives,” the ABC relays the story of Colleen May. Colleen died at the age of 75, a full seventeen years after she began practicing Falun Gong, during which time she stopped taking blood pressure medication. The report contains an assertion from Shani May, Colleen’s daughter, as if it were a bald fact: “if it wasn’t for Falun Gong, [Colleen] would still be with us.” (Background Briefing 1) There is no evidence for this assertion. The claim that Colleen’s death was caused by her belief in Falun Gong is reckless and inflammatory, denies her own agency and choices, and is not supported by the evidence.

A similar flaw is apparent in the inflammatory and extremely leading question Eric Campbell poses to another interviewee, Ben Hurley, “So people are dying because of Master Li?” The logic here is identical to a disgruntled critic of modern medicine who points to evidence that hospitals are major vectors for the transmission of infectious diseases, to which the reporter follows up with: “So people are dying from hospitals?” Such an exchange would be so bereft of balance, objectivity, or common sense that it would never even make it to air. That it did so in this case is simply illustrative of the overall intent of ABC’s reporting.

The ABC also quotes Anna as claiming that her mother discouraged her from taking medicine to treat her anorexia. According to the account given by Anna’s mother, who was never contacted by the ABC, this claim is misleading. She says that she took her daughter to the hospital precisely to seek medical treatment. Anna’s mother discussed the various options presented by the medical team, including the pros and cons of various levels of medication. In the end, she, together with the medical team, decided upon an approach, and the medical team implemented it.

Anna refers to a claimed “exorcism” at some stage, allegedly administered by Li Hongzhi. But this incident never took place. It was an oboe lesson, not an exorcism. Anna flew across the country

¹⁰ Porter, Noah. 2003. *Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study*. Universal-Publishers. vi; 176

¹¹ Bay Fang, “An Opiate of the Masses? Millions of Chinese embrace a mystical exercise movement”, *U.S. News & World Report*, 14 February 1999,

https://web.archive.org/web/20120509002028/http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/990222/archive_000322_2.htm

¹² Sarah Cook, “The Battle for China’s Spirit--Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping,” *Freedom House*, February 2017, p.110. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_2017_BattleForChinasSpirit_Falun_Gong_0.pdf

with her oboe and music sheets specifically for the lesson, as her mother attests. The ABC did no fact-checking on this, and thus aired reckless falsehoods.¹³

ABC's reporting was unfair in the many ways it used the interpretation of Falun Gong's teachings on medicine from a few disaffected individuals to suggest that such views were how most Falun Gong practitioners understood those teachings. The ABC made no attempt to signal to its audience whether or not the interpretations and experiences of their interviewees were common to the practice, or how they established their representativeness. Appropriate 'balance' may have included cases in which practitioners of Falun Gong attribute health improvement to the practice and/or cases in which practitioners take medicine in accordance with their interpretation of the teachings. Cases of both sorts are in abundance in the Falun Gong community. The ABC presented an incomplete, biased, and misleading picture about the relationship between Falun Gong and medicine and used this false account to claim the practice is 'dangerous' and that it causes deaths by forbidding practitioners from taking medication.

Views on extra-terrestrial beings

Falun Gong texts occasionally make reference to the existence of beings living on other worlds and in other physical dimensions, which is similar in many ways to other religious traditions. Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, holds that this planet is only one among an inhabited "three thousand worlds." Modern Christian theologians discuss the issue of extra-terrestrial life as well, including in official settings such as Vatican-sponsored publications. Influential philosophers and scientists, from Immanuel Kant to Stephen Hawking, have also expressed belief in the existence of alien life, and this view is shared by a majority of the general public. The U.S. Department of Defense recently made public footage of alleged UFOs. At the time that Falun Gong was being taught in China, the study of UFO phenomena and extra-terrestrials was not considered a fringe or pseudoscientific field, but was treated as a mainstream and legitimate topic of inquiry.

Among the ABC's characterisations:

"The leader of Falun Gong claims that race-mixing in humans is part of an alien plot to drive humanity further from the gods." (ABC News; Foreign Correspondent)

ERIC CAMPBELL, Reporter: In New York state we'll visit the base of its reclusive leader, Master Li, a former government clerk who believes aliens walk the Earth. (Foreign Correspondent)

ANNA: The leader of Falun Gong claims that race mixing in humans is part of an alien plot to drive humanity further from the gods. So he believes in aliens. And he believes that they walk the earth and use technology and disguise themselves as people to help corrupt mankind. And part of this, he alleges, is interracial marriage and the children of them. (Background Briefing 1)

HAGAR COHEN: People told her that the world was being invaded by aliens and that forces of evil in the cosmos were manipulating sections of humanity. (Background Briefing 1)

The ABC's reporting gives the false impression that the issue of alien life features prominently in Falun Gong's teachings and cosmology (it does not); and that this is evidence that Falun Gong is

¹³ It is worth noting that this was already an extremely unusual claim, for many reasons. Falun Gong's teachings explicitly describe practices such as exorcism as "not good" and state that "practitioners of our Dafa should not use them since they carry very low and very bad messages." That the teacher of the discipline would therefore perform such a procedure on appointment makes very little sense. If the journalists responsible for the programs had been doing their jobs, they would have known this and sought to properly fact-check such a novel, unexpected claim.

strange and undeserving of respect. Mention of alien life has been taken out of context and presented in a misleading way. If ABC's goal was sensationalism, it may have succeeded. If the goal was to present Falun Gong beliefs accurately and in the appropriate cultural context, it failed.

Relationship to Donald Trump

The ABC reporting claims that Falun Gong is "one of the most determined backers of Donald Trump," that Falun Gong has become a "powerful player in America's conservative media landscape," and that "the group" has promoted Trump's presidency. These statements demonstrate a reckless disregard for truth or accuracy.

Among ABC's characterisations:

It comes at a time when media outlets linked to the movement are becoming serious players on the conservative side of America's media, throwing their weight behind Donald Trump and his tough stance on China. (ABC News)

This investigation reveals how the group has harnessed social media, spending millions through made-up groups and fake identities to promote Donald Trump and his anti-Beijing policies. (Foreign Correspondent)

"This is a matter of cosmic importance to them that Trump gets re-elected", says one member of nearly ten years, who has now left the Falun Gong. (Foreign Correspondent)

But you probably haven't heard that Falun Gong has also become one of the most determined backers of Donald Trump. (Foreign Correspondent)

BEN HURLEY: Seeing Trump's aggressive stance with China and his openness to socially conservative beliefs which Li shares, he has just decided to push the button and get the whole movement on board with Trump. (Foreign Correspondent)

KARISHMA VYAS: Mr. Lee, what is your link with the Trump administration? Why did you spend so much money on advertisements to promote the President's re-election? (Background Briefing 2)

Falun Gong takes no official position on Donald Trump. Contrary to claims made by the ABC, Donald Trump is not part of Falun Dafa's teachings. It is indeed the case that a number of Falun Gong practitioners have, in the last few years, come to see in Trump's policies on China some welcome hope for reduced persecution of Falun Gong there. But support for Trump is not a matter of Falun Gong's faith, and views of the Trump presidency vary widely within the Falun Gong community. As a faith system that aims at transcendence of worldly concerns, Falun Gong's teachings discourage an excessive interest in politics.

The ABC programming erroneously conflates the actions or beliefs of individual Falun Gong practitioners, or media companies founded by practitioners, with the faith community as a whole. The effect is to incite hostility toward the group, and to present it as a tightly organised, homogenous organisation, which it is not.

The Falun Dafa Association of Australia represents the interests of Falun Gong practitioners in Australia. We don't speak on behalf of any corporation or other non-profit entity, including media corporations, established by people who practice Falun Gong. We thus are not in a position to address in detail the potential mischaracterisations of those businesses by the ABC. We do know, however, the context of the founding of these media companies. Most of them were established to combat state propaganda against Falun Gong soon after the campaign began, when all other

Chinese-language media were under the control of the Chinese Communist Party.

Jonathan Lee of Dragon Springs is, like us, obviously unable to speak about the business decisions of a private company, notwithstanding its founders sharing the same faith. Putting such questions to him either again shows ABC's ignorance of the relationship between the practice of Falun Gong and the ventures that practitioners engage in, or else it reflects a deliberate effort to misleadingly conflate the two things in the viewer's mind.

The ABC engages in fallacious reasoning by attributing to an entire religious group the behaviour of a small number of the individuals who practice that faith. In this case, the fact that some Falun Gong adherents support Donald Trump is taken as evidence that an entire faith community does. Typically, when this form of reasoning is applied to groups of people (in particular vulnerable populations) it is condemned for what it is: bigotry and discrimination. When it is applied to people who share the same race, it is called racism. When it is applied to those of the Islamic faith, it is called Islamophobia. When applied to gays and lesbians, it is called homophobia. Why does the ABC think it is appropriate to apply this bigoted form of reasoning to Falun Gong?

The ABC also failed to inform its audience of some of the basic facts regarding the composition of Falun Gong: almost all of the individuals who practice it are ethnically Chinese; the vast majority are in China; the vast majority of those outside of China speak English as a second language (if they speak it at all). The Westerners who practice Falun Gong and are engaged in the mentioned media companies probably number in the dozens, an extreme minority relative to the total population of Falun Gong practitioners in and outside China. Yet ABC has them represent the entire population of those who practice.

Dragon Springs complex

The ABC coverage focuses on the Dragon Springs temple complex in New York, which it identifies as Falun Gong "headquarters." Dragon Springs is the site of several Tang Dynasty-style temples, two classical Chinese dance and music schools, and Shen Yun Performing Arts.¹⁴ We agree that these endeavours are an important part of Falun Gong's advocacy efforts, but Dragon Springs does not speak for the global Falun Gong community, nor does it manage the global Falun Gong community.

Among ABC's characterisations:

She [Anna] is revealing for the first time the secretive world she discovered at The Mountain, also known as Dragon Springs. (ABC News)

Few outsiders are allowed inside Dragon Springs. (ABC News)

GRACE WOODARD: There's no transparency. They're doing their own thing. It's like the Forbidden City, only certain people can go in. (Foreign Correspondent)

HAGAR COHEN: In this episode of Background Briefing, I'm going to take a close look at the power wielded from inside this compound. I want to know what is Falun Gong trying so hard to hide, and just how far is the group prepared to go to achieve its aims? To find out, I'll speak to people who've been behind the compound's locked gates, and follow the activities of the group's disciples across the world, from their base in New York to Vietnam and back to Australia. (Background Briefing 2)

The ABC implies that the fact the Dragon Springs complex is guarded and not open to the public is

¹⁴ This information is available on the Dragon Springs website: www.dragonsprings.org

evidence of something nefarious. Yet Falun Gong practitioners and artists who live at Dragon Springs have received credible threats on their lives from agents of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Why would the site's proprietors invite curious onlookers and agents of the CCP to invade the privacy of the people who work and study there? Common sense precautions in the face of a totalitarian police state willing to project power abroad is not evidence of anything sinister. One could say many of the same things with regards to secrecy and security about any piece of private property, family home, corporation, or indeed the ABC itself.

With regard to Anna, she did not live at Dragon Springs, and it is unclear how she could have discovered a "secretive world." Apart from the dance and oboe auditions (not "exorcism" as ABC falsely reported) Anna went to Dragon Springs on weekends for band practice for a few months.

The ABC's reports seek to portray all this – apparent violations of building codes (which the reporters did not even fact-check for themselves, instead relying solely on a disgruntled neighbour), common sense security, weekend band practice – in the most dire terms possible. It is again part of an attempt to portray Falun Gong as strange, secretive, and undeserving of sympathy, based on no actual evidence but instead deceptively framed innuendo from a very small number of motivated witnesses.

4. Bad faith in attempting to get the perspective of the local Falun Gong community

The ABC's content guidelines state that the ABC "requires that reasonable efforts must be made to ensure accuracy in all fact-based content," and further requires that, when allegations are made about an organisation, they are provided a fair opportunity to respond. We do not believe this standard was met. Moreover, we believe the ABC failed to set out different sides of the issue fairly and proportionally, and neglected to seek comment or rebuttals from the Falun Gong community itself, or any of the Falun Dafa Associations, which represent the community.

The Australian Falun Dafa Association first became aware of the ABC's investigation after a practitioner doing meditation in Hyde Park, Sydney, on July 10 informed John Deller, a member of the Association, that an ABC crew was filming them. Mr Deller telephoned the reporter, Lisa McGregor, who called him back the following Monday (July 13). Mr Deller offered to speak to Ms McGregor, and was informed that she had no need to interview him for the documentary.

The following day, July 14, Hagar Cohen from ABC Background Briefing called and interviewed Mr Deller – the same day that the online promotions titled "Dark Karma, the Power of Falun Gong" were being aired on ABC. After raising concerns about the promotions and program material, Dr Lucy Zhao, President of the Falun Dafa Association of Australia, was interviewed by Eric Campbell at a public rally commemorating the 21st year of the persecution of Falun Gong (July 20, 1999). However, despite Dr Zhao clarifying Falun Gong's teachings on medicine and healing, which were contrary to Eric Campbell's understandings, none of this content from her interview was included. Neither Mr Deller, nor any other Australian representatives of the Falun Gong community, were invited for a sit-down interview.

The Falun Dafa Association of Australia subsequently contacted the Falun Dafa Information Centre, a volunteer-run organisation in New York that handles media requests related to Falun Gong. The Falun Dafa Information Centre informed us that they were never contacted by the ABC.

The belated interaction with the community here, primarily aimed to gather footage and conduct last-minute adversarial questioning, suggests that the ABC may have had an almost single-minded interest in speaking with critics of Falun Gong and with people who no longer practice it, rather

than speaking with current practitioners or volunteer representatives in the local community. Again, this appears to contravene ABC's Code of Practice.

5. The ABC report echoes CCP propaganda used to persecute Falun Gong

The content of the ABC's programming closely tracks with the propaganda narrative that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to advance for the last two decades. The CCP's purpose has been to undermine sympathy toward Falun Gong in the West, so that it can continue to imprison, torture, forcibly re-educate, and kill Falun Gong practitioners on a mass scale with impunity (including via organ harvesting).

The CCP's allegations include, *inter alia*, claims that Falun Gong is an 'evil cult', that it is a danger to public health, that it has a hidden political agenda, and that it operates based on a highly centralised, hierarchical structure. These claims have been rejected by researchers, academics, and human rights groups, and yet all of these claims are advanced in ABC's reporting.

The Foreign Correspondent program shows Eric Campbell's visit to the Masanjia labour camp — one of the four journalists invited to do so.¹⁵ Masanjia is notorious for its well-documented physical torture, psychological abuse, and forced labour of Falun Gong practitioners in an effort to coerce them to renounce their beliefs.¹⁶ The show-tour was arranged and permitted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), intended to whitewash the torture and abuses there against Falun Gong practitioners and to defuse human rights criticism as Beijing sought to host the 2008 Olympics. Clearly, the CCP controlled what Campbell could film or record, and the material vilified Falun Gong practitioners and sought to justify the persecution in China.

Despite this context, Campbell said at the time: "During our brief visit, we saw no evidence of torture or beatings. The rooms seemed comfortable."¹⁷ Campbell was also quoted in an article by the Xinhua News Agency as saying "It [the camp] is extremely open, and I am surprised that we are allowed this close access to the re-education camp."¹⁸ The following year, Campbell was given special permission to visit the Tibetan plateau to view the construction of the world's highest railway.¹⁹ The CCP is known to punish journalists who report on topics, and in a manner, they find displeasing. Despite the apparent conformance to Western journalistic standards in the Masanjia report, if it truly displeased the CCP it is unlikely that Campbell's access to Tibet would have been extended.

We make no claims about Campbell himself. Yet it is vital to highlight the overall context in which this reporting is being created. Journalists can serve the interests of the CCP even if they do not feel they are doing so. The CCP has become more aggressive and sophisticated in its overseas propaganda efforts in recent years, including by offering financial incentives to Western journalists and media producers to create anti-Falun Gong content. We know from a 2017 document²⁰ leaked from the CCP's Leading Group on Preventing and Dealing with Heretical Religions (also known as the 610 Office — an extra-legal agency set up in 1999 to lead the persecution against Falun Gong) that the CCP has a strategy of cultivating foreign sources to report on Falun Gong in a manner that more closely matches Beijing's own demonisation of the practice. The document states:

¹⁵ https://www.journeyman.tv/film_documents/1034/transcript/

¹⁶ Andrew Jacobs, "Behind Cry for Help From China Labor Camp," *The New York Times*, 11 June 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/12/world/asia/man-details-risks-in-exposing-chinas-forced-labor.html>

¹⁷ https://www.journeyman.tv/film_documents/1034/transcript/

¹⁸ "Cult Re-education Camp Opens to Foreign Media," Xinhua, 23 May 2001, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/DO-e/13340.htm>

¹⁹ Eric Campbell, "The End of the Line — Tibet," ABC, 2002, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-06-15/the-end-of-the-line-tibet/4037860?nw=0>

²⁰ Key Points in the Work of Leading Group on Preventing and Dealing Heretical Religion-Related Issues of the CCP Henan Provincial Committee in 2017, 31 March 2017, (河南) 省委防范和处理邪教问题领导小组 2017 年工作要点 2017-03-31, <https://www.adhrrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/henan-20170405.pdf>

By ... cultivating non-governmental forces, we can fight heretical religions such as “Falun Gong,” thereby mobilising influential and friendly people such as experts, scholars, journalists, and overseas Chinese community leaders to speak up. We should strive to have foreign media take a tone more favourable to us [on Falun Gong].

Since those instructions were issued, there have emerged multiple reports of Chinese agents offering money to Western YouTubers and local media in countries like Argentina²¹ to publish content demonising Falun Gong. While we are obviously not accusing the ABC of colluding with the Chinese Communist Party, the fact that ABC’s reportage so closely echoes the discredited narratives of a violent, totalitarian regime should have given producers pause.

The questions that the public, politicians, and ABC news executives must ask include: Did the producers and journalists reach their conclusions about Falun Gong after conducting an open-minded and culturally sensitive exploration of Falun Gong’s teachings and the dynamics of the diaspora community? Or did they instead reach this conclusion in advance, and then selectively seek out evidence and perspectives that would confirm their beliefs? What prompted the producers to pursue the lines of inquiry that they did? How did they decide on the framing of their story, and which views and perspectives are worthy of inclusion? Did they consider whether their program would expose members of a religious minority to hatred, discrimination and contempt, or that it would re-traumatise refugees who faced similar, dehumanising propaganda in China? What did they do, if anything, to mitigate such well-founded concerns?

6. The harms caused to the Falun Gong community by these mischaracterisations

The ABC has used a dishonest and selective framing to depict Falun Gong beliefs as divisive, alien, threatening and “cult-like,” and to thereby cause viewers to regard Falun Gong with contempt, hostility, and hatred. This is an extremely unfair, uncharitable, and negligent approach to news coverage: it has already caused misunderstanding about a culturally foreign faith practice, and has exacerbated the trauma of Falun Gong practitioners in Australia who have fled political persecution as refugees.

The ABC’s work has already been used by Chinese Communist Party agencies in its anti-Falun Gong propaganda efforts, and practitioners of Falun Gong in Australia have begun reporting abusive and discriminatory incidents from members of the public who attack the practice in the same manner as presented in the ABC programs.

To illustrate further: consider whether the ABC would have felt it appropriate to run a documentary and podcast series on the “dangerous” religious beliefs and cultural practices of Uyghur Muslims. Like Falun Gong, Uyghur Muslims hold conservative views on sexuality, and like many Falun Gong practitioners, many Uyghurs support Donald Trump’s hard line approach to the Chinese Communist Party. Yet such a program would, rightly, never be allowed to go to air due to the religious intolerance it would exhibit, and the violation of individuals’ rights to practice their own faith without fear of vilification.

7. Use of ABC’s material by the CCP to further the persecution of Falun Gong in China

On July 17, the website run by the 610 Office, an extra-legal Gestapo-like security organisation

²¹ “News Outlets in Argentina Offered Cash to Publish Articles Defaming Falun Gong,” Falun Dafa Information Center, 27 April 2020, <https://faluninfo.net/news-outlets-in-argentina-offered-cash-to-publish-articles-defaming-falun-gong/>

established to carry out the persecution of Falun Gong, published a report promoting the ABC's then-forthcoming documentary attacking the practice. The report said, among other things: "Since July 1999 China has publicly attacked and dealt with the 'Falun Gong' evil religion, warning the world about 'Falun Gong's' evil religious essence. Now a whole 21 years later, Australia's national broadcaster has just begun to face up to and expose the 'Falun Gong' evil religion and the grave harms it brings to the spiritual and physical health of the country's people. Such harms include the deaths of citizens who refuse medication after becoming infatuated with 'Falun Gong's' preposterous heresies."

A series of follow-up reports on the same website, and other state-controlled websites, echoed the same ideas. Anti-Falun Gong propaganda agencies in China have thus seized on the ABC's reporting to justify the persecution of the practice in China.

The ABC's reporting works so well as anti-Falun Gong propaganda for the Chinese government because it contains nothing at all that challenges Chinese official narratives on Falun Gong, and everything to endorse them. It is in fact almost *identical* to official state propaganda, and has been directly translated and circulated to that end.

8. The sections in the ABC Code of Practice and editorial guidelines violated

Because substantially all of the programming violates a large number of the articles in ABC's Code of Practice and editorial guidelines – apparently designed to avoid the production of exactly this sort of content – it would be unhelpful and tedious to attempt to match each problematic item of content with a specific policy violated. All of the programs need to be assessed holistically for their adherence to the spirit and intent of ABC's Code of Practice and editorial policies.

We believe that among the articles violated are:

Code of Practice

2.1 Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.

4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality.

4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective.

4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

5.3 Where allegations are made about a person or organisation, make reasonable efforts in the circumstances to provide a fair opportunity to respond.

7.6 Where there is editorial justification for content which may lead to dangerous imitation or exacerbate serious threats to individual or public health, safety or welfare, take appropriate steps to mitigate those risks, particularly by taking care with how content is expressed or presented.

7.7 Avoid the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice.

Item 3.1 was also violated: "Acknowledge and correct or clarify, in an appropriate manner as soon as reasonably practicable: a. significant material errors that are readily apparent or have been demonstrated; or b. information that is likely to significantly and materially mislead."

The ABC received our initial letter informing them of many of the above misrepresentations and falsehoods about Falun Gong before their shows aired, but the broadcasts proceeded nevertheless.

Editorial Guidance Note/ Policy:

Inappropriate media coverage can encourage copy-cat behaviour and propagate ideas that can cause significant harm and offence. It can also increase prejudice and stigmatisation of vulnerable communities and individuals.

Opportunity to respond

Standard 5.3 Where allegations are made about a person or organisation, make reasonable efforts in the circumstances to provide a fair opportunity to respond.

9. Summary

The ABC's Code of Practice states that the broadcaster must never "gratuitously harm or offend," and should "avoid the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice." The ABC's programming clearly fails to adhere to these standards.

We do not oppose, and in fact are open to journalists and researchers reporting on Falun Gong. We believe, as individuals and as a group, that we can learn from criticism. Yet we also believe that any public broadcaster – and particularly Australia's national broadcaster – has a moral duty to treat their subjects in an open-minded, fair, balanced, and accurate manner. This duty is even more important when reporting on an already vulnerable and persecuted minority group, so as to avoid causing undue harm or exacerbating the group's marginalisation.

International legal experts have concluded that crimes against humanity have taken place against Falun Gong in China, along with the acts enumerated in the genocide convention.²² Many of the Falun Gong practitioners in Australia fled persecution, imprisonment, and torture at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party. They have spent the last two decades as targets of a massive propaganda campaign, orchestrated by the Communist Party, that aims to vilify and dehumanise them, and present them as undeserving of sympathy. To be targeted by the same types of propaganda in Australia has already re-traumatised them and caused tremendous pressure and harm.

Falun Gong practitioners are not quick to take offence. But the ABC's programming on Falun Gong is gratuitous in the extreme offence it engages in. The ABC is claiming that Falun Gong is "cult-like," "intolerant," that it causes deaths, and that its teachings are "dangerous and divisive." These are reckless, misleading, and unsubstantiated allegations, and any reasonable person would conclude that these labels would encourage prejudice, hatred, and contempt towards Falun Gong. They expose Falun Gong religious refugees to discrimination, hostility, and potential trauma and re-victimisation.

In the case of all details related to Anna's mother as well as the death of Colleen May – two of the most prominent components of the material – the stories were told without basic fact-checking. This resulted in numerous material inaccuracies and falsehoods, and is the clearest demonstration that the reporters involved in the programming were not interested in getting the full story.

It should by now be clear what has happened. The ABC has been used by a few of its staff, who

²² Cheung, Maria; Trey, Torsten; Matas, David; and An, Richard (2018) "Cold Genocide: Falun Gong in China," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1: 38-62. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol12/iss1/6/>

appear to be highly ideologically motivated and utterly convinced of their cause, to prosecute a crusade against Falun Gong. Their reporting was selective and biased, and used cherry-picked, propagandistic emotional testimony to falsely represent Falun Gong and many individuals associated with it. They were apparently so committed to their crusade that they did not even do the basic journalistic task of fact-checking, or finding out crucial context, in the case of Anna's mother and Colleen.

The date of the broadcast is also noteworthy: ABC chose to air the "The Power of Falun Gong" report, which smears Falun Gong, on July 21, a day after the anniversary of the persecution's launch. Falun Gong practitioners around the world – including torture survivors in Australia – were faced with the demonising content as they mourned those killed in one of the worst crimes against humanity of our times. The decision on the timing of when to air the program alone betrays a complete lack of sensitivity on the part of ABC to the victims of persecution in China and the Falun Gong community in Australia. By contrast, it matches a common pattern of behaviour within China, when CCP officials and security agencies escalate harassment and detentions of Falun Gong practitioners and their families around the tragic anniversary.

We ask that this complaint is treated extremely seriously and expeditiously, due to both the high likelihood for harm from the program, and the tendency of the material to severely mislead the audiences (considerations set out in 1.2 and 1.6 of the *ABC Complaint Handling Procedures*).

We submit that the only fair and right outcome is for the ABC to retract all of the program material mentioned above and issue a public apology to the Falun Gong community for its erroneous content, bias, discrimination, and incitement to hatred presented in the material. Even those steps would not begin to undo the incredible harm and injustice caused by these programs, because so many people have already seen the false, defamatory content, and not all will see the apology. It is, nevertheless, the least the ABC can do.

Public broadcasters have a responsibility to the public. They should not be used as a platform for a few of their staff to conduct political and ideological propaganda, gathering only evidence that suits their narrative and jettisoning basic journalistic ethics and procedures. Still less should they be using taxpayers' money to spread falsehoods and incite hatred against a peaceful religious group, let alone one that is already marginalised and highly persecuted.

Appendix A Letter of Grievance from Anna's mother

Mother of "Anna"

Letter of Grievance

9 August 2020

To ABC

As the mother of "Anna", featured in ABC's recent documentary series "The Power of Falun Gong", I was shocked and deeply offended at the numerous misrepresentations contained in the ABC reports (online articles, Background-Briefing podcasts and Foreign-Correspondent TV broadcast). ABC's presentation is an outright assault on me and my belief - Falun Gong, a spiritual and meditation group with the principles of Truth, Compassion, Forbearance. I demand that ABC retract its misleading reports and issue a public apology for the harm done through spreading falsehoods without checking any facts with me.

My daughter, whom I refer to as Anna below, was still a child (age 8 and 14) during the events covered. ABC used Anna's limited understandings and scattered memories, which appear to have been altered over the passage of time and filtered through her later experiences. I can only conclude that ABC preyed on Anna's vulnerability.

Below I describe the most egregious falsehoods in ABC's reports.

ABC falsely stated that I took Anna for a supposed "exorcism" at Dragon Springs (a Falun Gong temple site in upstate New York, which also houses two performing arts schools). Furthermore, ABC falsely stated that I tricked my daughter into going by saying that we were merely running an errand, and that I only told my child that I loved her after the supposed "exorcism".

- The trip to Dragon Springs was for an oboe audition for the Fei Tian Academy of music.
- Falun Gong does not involve the practice of exorcisms, and no such event occurred.
- Exorcisms are mentioned only once in Falun Gong's teachings, where it is discussed as an example of something that is *not* sanctioned or endorsed in the practice. The purported statement that Mr. Li Hongzhi performs exorcisms on appointment would be ridiculous to anyone with knowledge of Falun Gong.
- Anna was fully aware of the purpose of the visit to Dragon Springs and was not at all tricked or misled about the nature of the visit. She traveled across the country with her oboe and sheet music, knowing full well that she was going to attend a music audition.

ABC's statement that I only told my daughter I loved her after the non-existent "exorcism" is false. I love my daughter unconditionally, and any implication to the contrary is hurtful and misleading.

ABC falsely reports that I rejected the hospital's treatment plan when Anna developed anorexia, because Falun Gong does not allow medical treatment.

- Anna was hospitalized multiple times due to anorexia starting in the fall of 2008, and during the first incident, I flew from the East Coast to California where Anna lived. She was rushed to Emergency where I discussed various treatment options presented by the medical team. Due to potential side-effects associated with medication, a less invasive treatment approach for Anna was agreed upon between everyone involved, and this was implemented by the medical team.
- There was never a situation of my rejecting the medical team's proposed drug treatment because of my Falun Gong beliefs. Falun Gong does not prohibit medical treatment.

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The statement that our family was "torn apart" due to Falun Gong is false.

- I am chilled to the bone that ABC exploited my daughter's health struggles to depict my family as "torn apart" to defame me and my belief.
- Due to professional careers, we are a bi-coastal family with residences on the US East and West Coast.
- My relationship with Anna only recently became strained and her alienation from me appears to coincide with ABC's reaching out to her. Meanwhile, I consider my relationship with the rest of my family to be in good standing.
- I admit that I am a "tiger mom": I was strict with Anna holding her to high standards in her academic and artistic endeavors, as well as in her character development. For me, this is a manifestation of my love and concern for Anna. I am deeply saddened that Anna interpreted it differently, and felt anxiety and pressure growing up. Such issues do sometimes arise between first-generation immigrant parents and their American-born kids, but this dynamic has nothing to do with Falun Gong.

ABC's statement that I became "absorbed" with practicing Falun Gong, to the detriment of my work, my family and Anna's education, is false. ABC reports that "Anna watched as her mother gradually became absorbed in Falun Gong. She pulled Anna out of a Catholic school and quit her job to take up selling books for Falun Gong. Her time was increasingly spent doing exercises, meditating, and reading the movement's teaching."

- These statements are completely fabricated and malicious. ABC's narrative to depict me as obsessed with Falun Gong to the neglect of my family, is false and slanderous.
- Anna was 8 years old at the time and did not mind leaving the Catholic school to enroll in a top public school in the area, preparing her for a prestigious private high school. This choice offered the greatest level of academic rigor and enrichment for Anna.
- I did not quit my job to sell Falun Gong books. My employment was eliminated in a restructuring and this became a unique opportunity for a career change, and, in fact, I co-founded a startup on the east coast.

The statement that Falun Gong promotes discrimination against persons of mixed ancestry is false; ABC's implication that I conveyed this to my young daughter is recklessly slanderous.

ABC falsely states that Anna was taught that she was "different to other children" because her mother was Chinese and her father European, and quotes Anna saying that according to the teachings of Falun Gong "when a child is born from an interracial marriage, that child does not have a heavenly kingdom to go to." ABC wrongfully reports I told Anna at age 11 that "race mixing in humans is part of an alien plot to drive humanity further from the gods."

- I have never said that "the race mixing in humans is part of an alien plot to drive humanity further from the gods".
- I never taught Anna that she was different because of her mixed race, or that interracial children do not have place in heaven. On the contrary, I assured her that her ancestry was irrelevant in spiritual matters, in keeping with Falun Gong's teachings, which hold that peoples' true identity is represented by their immortal soul, not by ethnic identity.

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- The ABC report also describes a dance audition at Dragon Springs, stating that Anna was the only child of mixed race at the audition. This is false: several other children attending the same audition were also of mixed race. Inter-ethnic families are very common within the Falun Gong community, and Falun Gong does not discriminate.

The statement that I wanted Anna to forego her education and career aspirations for Falun Gong is false: ABC falsely reports that I intended to sacrifice Anna's career and aspirations in order to have her live and study at Dragon Springs. It defames me and other parents and young people who study at Dragon Springs.

- Dragon Springs houses two schools: middle and high school - Fei Tian Academy of the Arts - and Fei Tian College, a degree-granting college. Both are registered with the state of New York, conforming to, and even exceeding state standards. Students routinely perform at a very high level academically without foregoing their professional or academic ambitions.
- If Anna had chosen to attend Fei Tian Academy, I believe she would have excelled personally, academically, and as an artist. Since she chose not to, she enrolled at prestigious schools in California. I was, and remain, very invested in her success in whichever manner she would choose.

Conclusion

ABC's reporting is a flagrant attack on me and the entire Falun Gong community. It has taken a completely unethical approach and contains numerous falsehoods and misrepresentations to support the narrative that Falun Gong is "abusive," "cult-like," strange, or dangerous. ABC did not contact me to fact-check statements attributed to Anna, recollected from when she was a child, more than 17 years ago. I can only conclude that ABC had no interest in the truth or fairness but was only looking for material which would confirm its bigotry against Falun Gong.

My grievance about this is especially heartfelt. ABC has exploited my own daughter, someone I still consider young and psychologically vulnerable, in order to attack me and my faith. Around the time of ABC's contact with her, she appears to have cut off all contact with me, without forewarning or explanation.

I again demand that ABC retract all content referencing me which is recklessly false, misleading, and defamatory as described above.

Anna's Mother
August 9, 2020
United States of America