‘…and in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society’: the contemporary role of SBS’

August 2011
Doctorate of Cultural Research Portfolio

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Dedication

For Billie, may you always be curious.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

(Signature)
Acknowledgements

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**Maintaining Relevance: Cultural Diversity and the Case for Public Service Broadcasting**
- **March 2008**

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- **September 2008**

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**Online Insights: SBS Current Affairs Online Participation**
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- **March 2011**

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- Guest lecture ‘SBS and Multilingualism’ University of Melbourne, May 2008
- Presentation to CPRF Conference 2010

### Overarching Statement

### Additional outcomes
- SBS submission to 2011 Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee review of Australian multiculturalism
Overarching Statement

Our concern with the media is always at the same time a concern for the media. We want to apply what we have come to understand, to engage with those who might be in a position to respond, to encourage reflexivity and responsibility. The study of media must be a relevant as well as a humane science.

(Silverstone, 1999: 5)

Introduction

This portfolio is submitted in the context of a professional doctorate degree in Cultural Research (DCR), intended to serve both organisational interests and interdisciplinary fields of academic scholarship. As Manager of Policy, Research and Community Engagement at the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) – Australia’s national broadcaster providing multicultural and multilingual radio, television and online services – I have a grounded perspective on the challenges of cultural diversity in public broadcasting. The title of this set of Doctorate of Cultural Research projects is ‘...and in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society: the contemporary role of SBS’. This title quotes the principal function of SBS under its Charter, which is:

...to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society. (SBS 1991)

The four studies comprising this portfolio, and the reports and articles they have generated, explore the ‘doing’ of SBS: the ongoing work of a media organisation with cultural diversity at the core of its public remit. The projects describe various elements of this work – policy decision making, cultural representation, website moderation and relationships with multicultural communities. They provide new understandings of SBS’ relationship to its Charter and measures of audience engagement beyond ratings. The first project explores the conception of cultural diversity implicit in various models of public service broadcasting. The final three projects draw on case studies from each of SBS’s platforms: radio, television and online. The case studies provide opportunities to explore the challenges and conditions of engagement with cultural diversity through media. The analysis, grounded in theory and drawing on a range of methodologies, has been conducted from a vantage within the organisation, mindful of the pressures, limitations and everyday operations of SBS.

Each of the projects in this portfolio explores, in various ways, the work of SBS as a resource for cultural citizenship. This theme has emerged gradually, from a range of influences and findings encountered through the development of the doctorate. My analysis suggests that SBS supports pluralist cultural citizenship in multiple ways, by:

- Structurally centralising difference to develop an inclusive mode of address;
- Creating cultural texts which represent cultural difference and provide common points of reference from which to negotiate responses to diversity;
- Encouraging participation and connection between forms of cultural difference in the Australian public sphere; and
- Providing formal recognition and legitimation of Australian cultural diversity – most obviously through in-language radio services.

The conceptualisation of media as a resource – for audiences to use, critique and respond to in individual ways – draws on scholarly work about audience agency without discounting the importance of media (and media power) in contemporary forms of citizenship. The studies of SBS’s work – and audiences’ uses of it – move between policy frameworks and scholarship, developing new relationships between different forms of knowledge in the ever-changing world of media work.
The Projects
SBS offers a dynamic case study of some of the current challenges and opportunities faced by public service broadcasting and multicultural policy. These issues have claimed more urgency in the context of the contemporary crisis in cultural citizenship (Stevenson 2003; Miller 2007). The four projects are:

1. An analysis of various international models of public service broadcasting and their relationships to cultural diversity. This uses case studies from the UK (the BBC and Ch 4) and the Netherlands (the ‘pillarised’ model of public broadcasting) to explore the crisis of legitimacy affecting public broadcasters (Jakubowicz 2007) in culturally diverse societies. The analysis draws on policy documents, interviews with commentators and media workers and on European ‘culture versus commerce’ debates (Costera Meijer 2005; De Bens 2007) in referencing international arguments about public broadcasting.

2. An exploration of audience responses to *The Circuit* and *East West 101*, SBS TV drama series which centralise cultural diversity in their representations of contemporary Australia. This project constitutes a theoretically engaged ‘read’ of audience responses, particularly as they relate to representations of cultural diversity (using, among others, Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1993; Shohat and Stam 1994; Gillespie 1995; Hall 1997; Toynbee and Gillespie 2006). The study findings described significant ambivalence about forms of cultural representation, although participant responses indicated that TV dramas can be ‘usable texts’ (after Mepham 1990) for developing understanding of, and negotiating anxieties about, diversity.

3. An analysis of online participation on the SBS *Insight* current affairs chat and comments sections. This study used NVivo coding software for qualitative analysis of the large volume of naturally occurring data. It explored the kinds of comments users posted on these sites and the forms of exchange in the online conversations. The study, using debates about discursive democracy and the online public sphere (Papacharissi 2002; Dahlgren 2005; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Bird 2011), found evidence of ‘multicultural sociability’ in which participants engaged with one another to develop better understandings of issues, or others’ perspectives on them, in a moderated public forum.

4. An engagement with the challenges of developing multilingual services in an environment in which language use is becoming more complex and a range of factors are challenging the concept of ‘community language’ audiences, including transnational media use (Madianou 2011). Drawing on understandings of the complexity of ‘communities’ and identifications in multicultural policy frameworks (Baumann 1999; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Young 2002), this project argues that SBS needs to strategically utilise concepts of language communities and contemporary understandings of audience to develop services relevant to changing multilingual societies.

While the breadth of research areas has been far more extensive than would be found in a more traditional form of PhD, the range has been important to sustain traction and engagement within a changing media organisation over four years. As reports and articles have been published at different stages of my research, they evidence evolutions of thinking and argument over time.
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Overarching Statement

Key themes

Cultural citizenship, belonging and participation
A central theme running through these portfolio projects is the relationship between media and participation in public life, analysed through the framework of cultural citizenship – defined as a social form of citizenship, centring on self-representation, participation and the right to ‘know and to speak’ (Miller 2007: 35). Cultural citizenship is tied to identity, belonging and forms of knowledge. Toby Miller claims that cultural citizenship is being threatened – in part because of a trend away from “discourse and the active audience” in mainstream (neo-liberal, American) media towards “ideology and the passive recipient” (110). He categorises public service broadcasting as a counterforce to this trend. Miller prefaces his arguments with the warning that “we are in a crisis of belonging, a population crisis of who, what, when and where. More and more people are seeking to belong and more and more people are not counted as belonging” This crisis, he says, is “…both registered and held in check… through practices of government, consumption, risk and moral panic in popular culture, specifically television” (Miller, 2008: 1). In essence, media discourses, cultures and modes of address can make you feel that you belong, or can prevent you from doing so.

Joke Hermes developed a relational understanding of cultural citizenship tied to media uses and belonging, defined as: “the process of bonding and community building and reflection on that bonding… that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture” (Hermes 2005: 10). These processes imply ‘imagined’ connections with others within media audiences – a symbolic as well as material community (Silverstone 1999: 98). Indeed, individuals cannot escape the broader impact of media – whether they chose to listen, view or log on or not – as media’s integration into daily life is central to contemporary citizenship (Morley 1992: 197). Processes of identification and community building through media are central to the development of notions of belonging. In the context of the increasing fragmentation and commodification of media forms internationally, attention has turned to the role of public service broadcasting – traditionally aligned with the development of a ‘national identity’ and a national audience (Scannell 1989; Hall 1993; Morley 2000).

Born has noted that, in recent times, “each term of the phrase – ‘public’, ‘service’ and ‘broadcasting’ has been cast in doubt, undermined by social and technological changes” (2004: 7). The re-shaping of ‘publics’ and modes of broadcasting through technology, is intimately tied to their transformation through new forms of social relations and changing societal conditions. Opportunities for participation are now a ubiquitous element of media experiences. This participation is, of course, uneven and contingent in societies where people have vastly differing access to power and social capital (see, e.g., Hopkins 2009). The platforms explored in this study represent varying forms of openness which navigate the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion which are a central concern of cultural citizenship (Stevenson 2003). They also represent differing degrees of openness in the resources they offer up to audiences, facilitating various forms of participation: access to information and ‘common knowledge’; cultural products with which to identify and engage in sense-making; and opportunities for self-representation.

Belonging and participation are two themes that run through both academic work on cultural citizenship and contemporary multicultural policy frameworks. They describe both the key premises of agency and engagement amongst citizens and are at the core of the legitimacy of contemporary systems of government (see Barnett 2003;
Jakubowicz 2007). They are also seen as twin, interrelated challenges in the development of more inclusive and cohesive societies.

The analysis in this portfolio develops and evidences the argument that media which reflect and critically engage with diversity enhance belonging and cultural citizenship as they enable audiences to negotiate responses to cultural difference in constructive ways. SBS content, forums and multilingual information programs set, for Australians of a range of backgrounds, common frames of reference and common starting points for talk and engagement which contribute to multicultural sociability and participation. I use a broad definition of participation, drawing on understandings of ‘active and productive’ responses to media (Morley 1992) including the notion of ‘TV talk’ developed by Marie Gillespie (1995) as well as more obvious forms of participation, such as contributing to online forums or talk-back, and formal modes of civic engagement such as voting. A distinction developed by Daniel Dayan (in conversation with Elihu Katz) is whether media is “about, by or for” a “minority or a majority” in society (1999: 21). This framework is set out in the table summary of findings at figure 2 below as aligned with, respectively, the current manifestations of television, online and radio platforms. Ideally multilingual and multicultural media engage with all three of these elements in the modes of address and interpellation, production and participation they facilitate.

SBS resources are, of course, not used in consistent ways. Some of the complex and at times contradictory responses to SBS content and platforms are explored in the case studies described in this portfolio. Some central findings of each of the projects around these key themes are outlined in summary form in figure 2 (below).
Key Findings
This table sets out, in a very brief overview, the project findings in relation to key areas of inquiry (audiences, content, citizenship, cultural diversity, what the platforms offer and media as resources)

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<td><strong>Audiences</strong></td>
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<td>Increasingly disengaged (‘crisis of legitimacy’) from public institutions which fail to address cultural diversity.</td>
<td>Complex, emotional responses tied up with social and political contexts and personal identifications.</td>
<td>Seeking engagement, looking to exchange information and learn about each other.</td>
<td>Not simplistic ‘communities’ but able to draw on strategic identifications in various contexts.</td>
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<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
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<td>Can be irrelevant and exclusionary if relying on traditional ‘modes of address’.</td>
<td>‘Difficult’ subjects representing cultural diversity carry a ‘burden of representation’.</td>
<td>Frustration is expressed about the limitations of traditional genres (including TV current affairs).</td>
<td>Now required to address listeners as sophisticated media audiences.</td>
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<td><strong>Citizenship</strong></td>
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<td>Forms of citizenship, and categories of citizens, are constructed and addressed by differing models of public service broadcasting.</td>
<td>Experiences of ‘conditional’ citizenship influence readings of cultural texts and generate heightened vigilance about representation.</td>
<td>Online conversations can generate participatory forms of cultural citizenship, or ‘technologies of citizenship’.</td>
<td>Multilingual services construct categories of citizens in addressing the social and policy needs of a culturally diverse society.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Platform</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Generation of forms of sociability</td>
<td>Interpretation and identification</td>
<td>Participation and self-representation</td>
<td>Accessibility of information</td>
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<td><strong>‘Resource’</strong></td>
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<td>Differing models of PSB are based in different conceptions of their role, imagined as different kinds of resources.</td>
<td>Drama can offer resources for talk, emotional responses and discussion and debate about cultural diversity.</td>
<td>‘Trusted’ moderated platforms enable inclusive conversations which can promote mutual understanding.</td>
<td>Multilingual services offer crucial ‘building blocks’ for citizenship and more complex forms of participation.</td>
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<td><strong>Primary relationship to cultural diversity</strong></td>
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<td>Interpellating - addressing as citizens “hailing”</td>
<td>Normalising, representing and interpreting “about”</td>
<td>Constituting as agents in discourse “by”</td>
<td>Naming and addressing with information “for”</td>
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Methods and theoretical context


These theorists have all been influential in my thinking and analysis. I have not attempted to forge entirely new theoretical positions, rather I have sought to apply many of the key theoretical frameworks to practical and actual problems for SBS. Conceiving of multicultural media as a resource for cultural citizenship aligns the analyses in this doctoral work with a certain understanding of media power and audience agency. My interpretations recognize audience power in the generation of meaning around cultural texts (Livingstone 1998), while acknowledging the influence of dominant discourses and ‘moral panics’ (Cohen 2002) about cultural difference. I draw on understandings of the power held by media institutions in the construction and presentation of sources and texts (Morley 1992) and their role to ‘name, construct meaning and exert control over the flow of information’ (Stevenson 2003) – particularly as public media frame ‘social problems’ in policy solutions (Flew 1997).
‘Embedded’ Research
I work at SBS in the Strategy and Communications team. As part of my role, I coordinate research projects and contribute to ‘telling the story’ of SBS for government and stakeholders. I also assist with engagement with culturally diverse ‘communities’ on behalf of the SBS Board and management. I’ve been with SBS in various roles for almost eight years. As such I have a strong professional investment in its work and a personal belief in its value. In an attempt to manage this bias in my academic work, I have actively situated myself in my writing, attempted to ground my work in theory and questioned my own assumptions about findings. I have had to develop a new awareness about the line between (‘sympathetic’) critical engagement and advocacy – the ‘selling’ of the SBS story that is part of my everyday work. The work has encouraged a level of reflexivity in which SBS can question the ‘story’ we tell ourselves in relation to the ‘selling’ and production of media. Jostein Gripsrud (1999) noted that media organisations, as well as academic institutions, are in themselves knowledge-producing environments – although the two tend to occupy quite different forms of habitus (after Bourdieu 1990). This work has attempted to find points of engagement between these differing environments and contexts of knowledge.

The delivery of reports to SBS and academic articles for peer reviewed journals from the same research projects has required significant amounts of translation between different ways of understanding media, audiences and cultural diversity. Zygmunt Bauman (1989) has noted that the group he calls (‘postmodern’) intellectual ‘interpreters’ – as opposed to expert ‘legislators’ or ‘technicians of knowledge’ (Sartre 1972) – are required to translate “statements made in one communally based tradition, so they can be understood within systems of knowledge based on another tradition” (quoted in Gripsrud 1999: 50). While I do not claim the lofty place of ‘intellectual’ described by Sartre or Bauman, I have had to do similar work of interpreting. Academic understandings of terms such as audience, reception and even research require substantial translation to resonate within an organisational context. Kuhn has criticised ‘engaged research’ as a buzz word in the field of communications which, he says, “reduces knowledge to that which can be packaged and understood in a form understandable to the other and which may be ‘sold’” (Kuhn 2010). In some ways, this ‘packaging’ may be the price of the form of relevance advocated by many in media scholarship attempting to converse directly with media practitioners (Livingstone 1999; Silverstone 1999; see also range of authors referenced in Kuhn 2010). Most of my colleagues are unlikely to read scholarly journals or engage with debates within academia about audiences, for example, however they may still benefit from insights emerging from these approaches. SBS, like many other media organisations, tends to draw on market research segmentation and ratings to understand audiences and uses forms of measurement and evaluation within the frameworks of performance indicators, strategic objectives and corporate planning. The projects in this DCR suggest alternative forms of audience research that, it may be argued, have clearer links to the social policy objectives of the SBS Charter. These had to be presented in ways that shorthanded academic arguments, however. Many of my colleagues’ eyes glaze over at the use of terms such as ‘discourse’; I am sure many academics’ do likewise at the detailed strategy powerpoints that are now ubiquitous in the managerial audit culture that is part of what Nolan and Radywyl (2004) have described as the ‘de-governementalisation’ of state agencies. The DCR work required negotiations between different worldviews and approaches to apply research insights in very different contexts.

A key difference in cultures between the worlds of academia and media practice is in expectations of timing. As Gripsrud notes, “most journalism [and media work] is a
day-to-day activity, while scholarly work is normally conducted within a perspective of years, decades and even generations” (Gripsrud 1999: 39). A media organisation will tend to anticipate research results within months or even weeks. This expectation works against long-term in-depth studies, although I have attempted to manage this with staged delivery of topline initial findings and more complex readings of them in the more detailed academic work. The findings have been used as ‘evidence’ in a range of corporate documents, analysed in relation to academic theory and developed into consolidated reports (using terms familiar to media practitioners) and situated more directly in fields of scholarship for journal articles requiring academic peer review.

Shortly before I commenced this doctoral work, a senior manager at SBS said to me: “the thing about these academics is, you give them all this money and all they tell you is that it’s complex”. I relayed this to a respected academic and she replied: “well, we tell them how it’s complex”. Complexity is, in fact, at the heart of the major challenges facing organisations like SBS. Major changes contributing to this ‘complexity turn’ – involving fragmentation of mass audiences; the ‘unfixed’ nature of content intellectual property; and the ‘virtuous cycle’ of escalation in technologies and audience applications of media – have radically transformed the broadcasting environment. Concurrently, increasingly complex demographies, identifications and forms of citizenship have been transforming and challenging contemporary nation states (and with them ‘national’ audiences). These new complexities are difficult to translate into policy or strategy frameworks applied by media organisations. Policy ‘solutions’ tend to be expressed in terms of categories, stakeholder groups and guidelines for action. While critiques of cultural reification and critical analysis of multiculturalism have begun to influence cultural organisations like SBS, theorists’ aversion to essentialism in descriptions of communities makes application of theory in practice difficult. According to Vertovec (2007: 974), many theorists “harbour anxieties over being labelled as ‘essentialist’ if they dare describe almost any characteristic of a group or category”. Regardless of this impasse in the world of theory, practical interventions need to be found in the ‘crises’ in contemporary liberal democracies, and public institutions need to act to deliver on their public remits. Material circumstances continue to generate the need for media information and services, even if their uses and contexts are unique and individual. Ien Ang (2011) proposes the use of ‘strategic simplification’ to address complexity with responsive solutions. Ang suggests that complex problems call for cultural intelligence to address them, employing creativity and risk-taking rather than deterministic or formulaic solutions. The result, she says, would be flexible processes which allow for contingency and variability, acknowledging complexity without being paralysed by it. This has, in many ways, been the aim of this doctoral work.

My ‘embedded’ situation has imposed certain limitations. I found that I could not pursue one of the areas of investigation originally conceived as part of this doctoral portfolio. I did not proceed with one of the initially planned projects – an analysis of SBS organisational culture – as I was unable to find a vantage from which to write about it given my ongoing relationships with colleagues, decisions and practices. This was a form of self-regulation rather than any imposition by SBS. As an ongoing employee (bound, it must be noted, by an HR code of conduct as well as basic research ethics), I was not seeking to ‘expose’ practices or, indeed, individuals within my workplace. I could not conduct the kind of ethnographic ‘fieldwork’ described by Georgina Born which, she says, “makes it possible to explore the differences between what is said in publicity or in the boardroom and what happens on the ground in the studio, office or cleaning station” and analyses culture by “probing the gaps in between principles and practice, management and ordinary working lives” to get a “fuller grasp on reality” (2004: 15). To do so in my position would be to confuse
my role within a working context and potentially betray the trust of colleagues. As part of the Strategy and Communications team at SBS I work with confidential information it would be unprofessional to disclose. Mine was not a study for which access can be restricted by an organisation, as it could with a project like Born’s (2004: 14-19) – the terms of participation and access are negotiated differently. In her detailed anthropological ethnography of the BBC, Born declares her intention was to “wade in and feel the currents of the cultural turmoil that is the BBC” (2004: 12). As a practitioner researcher I was already deeply immersed and could not ‘wade in’ as an outsider, maintaining critical distance from what is, ultimately, my job, not time-constrained fieldwork. As a result, most of my project research was outward facing, mindful of the possible applications for SBS.

Colin Robson notes that, for practitioner-researchers, the “reduction of individual freedom is balanced by an increasing likelihood of implementation” (Robson 2002: 535). The position I occupied also had some important benefits. This doctoral research was born out of long-term working relationships with different parts of the organisation. Occupying a management position within the corporate arm of SBS requires regular engagement with key decision makers across the organisation. This access ensured a natural understanding of the everyday contexts of decision-making. The proximity enabled negotiations between different worldviews and approaches to interpret research insights for a range of contexts. Beyond the direct applications outlined in the ‘output’ sections of this statement, it is impossible to know how much influence the reports have had within the ‘knowing-in-action’ – the “spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life” and “tacit knowing” (Schon 1983: 49) – of professional work at SBS.

The reports and articles in this portfolio have been created over a four year period, a time of considerable change for SBS and the broadcasting and multicultural policy landscape (briefly summarised in the ‘background’ section of this opening statement; see below). Certainly there has been tremendous change at SBS throughout the period of this doctorate and a clear refocusing on issues of cultural diversity. This may be attributed to a range of factors, as suggested in the background section to this report. One thing is evident, though, complexity is now a word and concept frequently used as part of the story of SBS (see, e.g., SBS 2010).

As an employee, manager and researcher within a public media organisation, I am acutely aware of the multiple forces of government funding, audience numbers, commercial pressures and questions of relevance facing media institutions. The challenges facing SBS emerge from complex issues which require the application of cultural intelligence and alternative forms of knowledge. It is hoped that some of the perspectives offered in this doctoral work stimulate new ways of thinking about these challenges.
Outcomes
The doctorate projects have provided SBS with access to different ways of thinking about audience engagement and measurement. The work has contributed arguments for the importance of continued government funding for SBS, including SBS’s 2009 triennial funding submission. The comparative analysis of international public broadcasting models formed the basis of a submission to the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy’s review of public service broadcasting in 2008. The findings of the drama study were provided as feedback to producers of the programs and contributing to plans for future series. Elements of the TV drama report and initial languages research were used in the 2009 SBS triennial funding submission. The online work has been presented within the organisation and to its community advisory committee. The multilingual services work has explored different ways of thinking about a live policy issue currently before the SBS Board. The doctoral work overall informed the SBS submission into the 2011 Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Multiculturalism.

I have contributed research to the international academic community via publication in scholarly journals *Media International Australia, Continuum*, and *The International Journal of Communications* (and potentially the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* – pending peer review). I have also attempted to engage with and contribute to the fields of research and policy throughout my doctorate with a series of presentations at conferences including:

- CRESC ‘Cultural Citizenship’ conference at Oxford, 2008;
- Centre for Creative Industries ‘Creating Value: Between Commerce and Commons’ conference in Brisbane, 2008;
- Centre for Cosmopolitan Civil Societies ‘Reconciliation, Rights, Respect and Responsibility’ conference in Sydney, 2008;
- Network Insight ‘Communications Policy and Research forum’ Sydney 2008;
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation ‘Australian Content’ conference, 2008;
- Australia and New Zealand Communications Association conference in Canberra, 2010;
- Network Insight ‘Communications Policy and Research forum’ 2010; and
- Presentation to ‘Media, Marginality and Diversity’ Conference Townsville 2011

In 2009 (while on maternity leave from SBS) I organised with visiting scholar Dr. Ben O’Loughlin from Royal Holloway at the University of London, a two day workshop with cultural researchers and media practitioners entitled ‘Precarious Citizenship’ on media and citizenship. Workshop participants included Professors Tony Bennett, David Rowe and Ien Ang from the UWS Centre for Cultural Research; Dr Hari Harindrinath of the University of Melbourne; Dr Tanja Dreher from the University of Technology Sydney; Dr Liza Hopkins and Dr Aneta Podkalicka from the Swinburne University of Technology; and several SBS ‘media workers’. The workshop was supported by Royal Holloway Society, the UWS Centre for Cultural Research and SBS and comprised brief papers and collaborative discussions about media discourse, audiences and citizenship.

SBS is currently attempting to position itself as a ‘thought leader’ on Australia’s cultural diversity as it focuses on defining its distinctiveness in a digital environment (see SBS 2010). Ideas are the currency of a media organisation: it is hoped that the ideas in these projects contribute to the ongoing development of SBS, a unique and ‘special’ broadcaster whose work is of vital importance in an increasingly culturally complex society. In a period during which multiculturalism has been broadly questioned, and during which SBS (as well as public service broadcasting more generally) has been frequently described as being in ‘crisis’, a doctorate exploring the work (the ‘doing so’) of multicultural public service broadcasting is timely.
Background and Context

SBS, multiculturalism and the media landscape

This doctorate does not attempt a commentary or defence of the changes, internal politics or controversies of SBS, many of which have been covered in Australian media over the last four years. Rather, it is an attempt to use case studies and research to offer new understandings of the role of SBS in the context of changing audiences and a changing society.

According to Toby Miller, “traditional views of naturalised citizenship have been thrown into confusion by late twentieth-century immigration and multiculturalism… This is a matter of cultural belonging and material inequality” (Miller 2007: 54). Citizenship has become a new framework of the ‘haves and have-nots’ or, as Seyla Benhabib termed it, ‘members and non-members’ amongst the great migrations of “aliens and strangers, immigrants and newcomers, refugees and asylum seekers”, movements of people which have become essential to contemporary international economies (Benhabib 2004). These trends in contemporary citizenship pose major problems for public institutions attempting to service increasingly fragmented demographics and media attempting to grapple with increasingly complex issues and problems of representation. Multicultural policy frameworks for service delivery and national self-definition, never without controversy, have again been called into question in recent times.

In early 2011, the Australian Government recommitted to a federal multicultural policy after several major European liberal democracies (Germany, France and the UK) dismissed their own as having ‘failed’. This is important but not as stark a contrast as many may assume. As Will Kymlicka (1995) pointed out: “the term ‘multicultural’ covers many different forms of cultural pluralism, each of which raises its own challenges… Generalisations about the goals or consequences of multiculturalism can therefore be very misleading”. The past decade has also, however, been a problematic time for Australian multiculturalism. Pilloried under the Howard Government as ‘mushy and misguided’ (Gordon and Topsfield 2006) and, prior to February 2011, neglected under the Rudd and Gillard governments, the term ‘multiculturalism’ and its policy frameworks had, until recently, appeared to be out of favour despite a history of bipartisan support in Australia.

Australia’s is one of the most diverse national populations in the world (Jupp 2002), with a rich indigenous heritage augmented by successive waves of immigration. This immigration has largely constituted a form of social or economic ‘engineering’ – building a larger population and a skilled, or at least able-bodied, workforce – however it also brought with it the benefits and some of the challenges of a diverse society. By the mid-1970s, following the official end of the White Australia Policy, it had become evident that immediate integration into Australian cultural life was not an inevitable, or easy, step for most migrants. Ghassan Hage (2011) has noted that it was in the context of policies of assimilation that ‘ethnic groups’ became a powerful force and began to mobilise for access and equity, an example of ‘ungovernable’ publics operating outside official policies. In part, the adoption of identifications with ethnic groups was an element of a sense of alienation and distance from the Australian mainstream (O'Regan and Kolar-Panov 1993). Hage notes that “far from ‘creating’ ethnic communities, multiculturalism emerged as a reaction to their growth” (2011: 158). Multicultural policies were implemented in 1975 formally to redress the socio-economic disadvantage associated with non-English speaking backgrounds and officially recognise the continuing diversity of the Australian population, as part of a system of the ‘management of minorities’ practiced by governments in nations of immigration (Kymlicka 1995).
The Special Broadcasting Service, Australia’s ‘second’ public broadcaster, which commenced operations as a small-scale radio experiment in 1975, extended to television services in 1980 and online in 1991, has been one of the most visible products of Australia’s multicultural policies. The evolution of SBS has been aligned with social and political trends in multiculturalism. In ‘The SBS Story’ (2008), Ang, Hawkins and Dabboussy outline three orientations of multiculturalism in Australia:

- ethno-multiculturalism, characterised by ethnically based political movements and agitation for special interests;
- cosmopolitan multiculturalism, encouraging an openness to cultural diversity for all Australians; and
- popular multiculturalism, diversity as an accepted part of everyday life.

In the 1970s and early 80s era of ethnopolitics, the emphasis was on “discrete ethnic communities whose integration into Australian society was to be facilitated by policy” (Nolan and Radywyl 2004). For many Australian migrants, the inclusion of cultural and linguistic diversity in state-sponsored media via SBS was an important symbolic recognition (see O'Regan and Kolar-Panov 1993). The new services offered important resources for participation in public life for many culturally and linguistically diverse Australians. They relied, however, on the assumption of discrete, homogenous communities which did not allow for internal diversities in identification. The move in the late 1980s and 1990s to a ‘cosmopolitan’ approach in SBS television programming, in which diverse cultural products were valorised as conveying a ‘worldly’ status, echoed the mainstreaming of multicultural policies for ‘all Australians’ under the Hawke/Keating governments (see Nolan and Radywyl 2004; Ang, Hawkins et al. 2008). This kind of approach sought to generate popular support for multicultural policies and was framed as a kind of celebration of diversity (especially around food cultures, films and festivals). This kind of consumption of difference has been criticised as reducing diversity to “costumes, customs and cooking” (Vasta and Castles 1996) and a de-politicisation of cultural difference via top-down state management (Jakubowicz 1984; Stratton 1998). Under the conservative Howard government (1996-2007), an era characterised by ideological opposition to previous forms of multiculturalism, the policies were shifted away from ‘special interests’ (Nolan and Radywyl 2004) to an emphasis on common values and a core national identity under ‘Australian multiculturalism’. The ‘natural’ diversity of popular multiculturalism was seen to have become a fait accompli (with some troubling margins and basic settlement issues to address). Some commentators had begun to argue that SBS, like previous multicultural policies, had become redundant (Sheehan 2007). During this period, SBS increased its commercial activity and emphasised growth and content for ‘all Australians’. These trends occurred alongside the ‘de-governmentalisation’ of the state agencies and increasing obligation to self-regulate according to market-driven norms of accountability. Some have argued these moves concurrently left SBS’s multicultural identity on ‘more precarious footing’ and de-emphasised its public service credentials (Nolan and Radywyl 2004). In 2003, the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) had threatened to withdraw its support for SBS, as it was “running the risk of losing the audience it was established to serve”, according to then FECCA Chair Abd Malak, who warned “if [SBS] doesn’t start listening to its constituency, it will lose what remains of its credibility with many ethnic communities” (Enker 2004). There followed a period of ‘bridge-building’ and consultation between SBS and FECCA, although it was not until a new orientation emerged at the broadcaster that the concerns of FECCA were fully addressed.
Following the 2007 change of Government, new Board appointments and the commencement of a new SBS Chair, SBS has turned again to its multicultural Charter, relationships with ethnic communities, and public service role to redefine its purpose. These changes began to be felt prior to the announcement of the 2011 ‘People of Australia’ federal multiculturalism policy, in the context of a different political climate and lower than expected revenues from commercial activity. Increased commercial aggressiveness (AdNews 2008) had failed to deliver projected levels of financial autonomy and SBS has shifted emphasis on defining its public value, evidence of a shift to a heavier reliance of government funding. Under its revised current corporate plan, SBS now seeks ‘to be a catalyst for the nation’s conversations around diversity and social inclusion’ (SBS 2010). The SBS directors have now aligned the organisation with different kinds of accountability and measures of relevance than previously emphasised: not just to numbers, but to the kinds of public discussions its content facilitates and inspires. The emphasis on distinctiveness seeks to offer a ‘point of difference’ among the seemingly endless sameness of the choices now available through digital media proliferation.

The past five years have also been a time of great change in broadcasting in Australia. There have been significant changes to the media environment, including the introduction of digital broadcasting for radio and television and the consequent multiplication of channels; new audience expectations for interactivity; technical advances facilitating new forms of engagement; the escalating number of devices on which to receive media content; near-ubiquitous catch-up viewing and new forms of content. Amidst a new range of ways for audiences to access media, public broadcasters have had to define the public value of their services more vigorously. Facing competition for audience share from new channels, many commercial broadcasters have joined a ‘rush to the middle’ to more popular or ‘event’ content. The dilemma of this proliferation has been noted in more advanced digital markets in Europe where the ironic consequence of more channels is less choice and less difference between cultural products (see De Bens 2007). Concurrently, audiences are fragmenting around ever more niche taste cultures and are becoming increasingly complex demographically. In this context, many public broadcasters have sought to define their relevance in terms of the distinctiveness of what they offer as well as the ‘public goods’ public service broadcasting has been long associated with: universality, accessibility, impartiality, diversity of perspectives and independence (Costera Meijer 2005; Jakubowicz 2007). These ‘goods’ are seen to benefit all in society by building citizenship and facilitating democracy rather than simply offering users a market-based consumption choice.

SBS is uniquely positioned to contribute to these goods in the context of a complex culturally diverse society. SBS has enshrined official recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity as important elements of the national broadcasting project. SBS commissioners and programmers have generally been encouraged to use cultural diversity as a starting point for exploration and, as a result, SBS has long been associated with content that is remarkably different to that offered by more mainstream media channels: unfamiliar, challenging and ‘foreign’, often in languages other than English (see Ang, Hawkins et al. 2008). The centralisation of diversity within a national public broadcasting framework creates an important set of resources for a multicultural society. These resources – be they multilingual news services, television dramas or chat room conversations – offer a common set of reference points and common vocabulary for exchange between differing viewpoints that form important preconditions for ‘multicultural sociability’. This kind of sociability, which comprises exchange between differing perspectives within and between cultural groups, predicated on a shared framework of openness to difference, is important to social cohesion in a complex culturally diverse society.
It is no easy task to convert the achievements and values of SBS into contemporary services which retain relevance for audiences in an internationally networked, digital environment. The projects in this portfolio explore some of the possibilities and obstacles currently facing SBS. The most significant of these is the continual questioning of SBS’s future. SBS has been experiencing a protracted crisis in funding over many years, with the failures of successive Governments to effectively fund content on the network while also allowing it to keep pace with new digital platforms – real limitations outlined in successive triennial funding submissions (see SBS 2009). As a supporter of SBS and its Charter ideals, I hope my research helps to make a case for why SBS matters by evidencing its role in building pluralist and inclusive forms of citizenship.

The findings in each of these studies resonate for the international field of audience and media studies by engaging with some of the major concerns facing these areas of scholarship: media ‘work’, cultural diversity, citizenship, participation, new media platforms, and the fragmentation of the public sphere. The embedded approach offers a model for addressing challenges of relevance for scholarly research and an opportunity to respond to the call to action set out by Silverstone (1999) quoted in the opening to this statement: ‘We want to apply what we have come to understand, to engage with those who might be in a position to respond, to encourage reflexivity and responsibility.’ My motive for undertaking the ongoing processes of negotiation, translation and reflection which have shaped these doctoral projects has been to find new ways of connecting the principles of multicultural and multilingual media with their changing uses and applications amongst diverse audiences. I hope that this work contributes to ensuring that the valuable resource we have in SBS maintains relevance and viability in coming years.
references


Abstract

Public broadcasters internationally are facing challenges from technology, competition in multi-channel environments and criticisms of being out of touch with audiences. Some public broadcasters, such as the United Kingdom’s BBC and the ‘pillarised’ public broadcasting system in The Netherlands, were founded almost a century ago. Their models, based on particular views of the public interest and audiences, now struggle to maintain relevance in rapidly changing, culturally diverse societies. Pure market models do not cater well for the complexities of cultural diversity. Public broadcasters with specific remits to represent diversity, such as Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, Nederlandse Programma Stichting (NPS) in The Netherlands and Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), although themselves products of specific historical moments and policy contexts, allow for more responsive relationships to multicultural societies. Although traditionally seen as more marginal, these newer models may find themselves central to arguments for ongoing funding of public broadcasting.

Introduction: Public broadcasting and national contexts

Public broadcasters (also known as public service broadcasters, or PSBs) are the focus of much debate in liberal democratic nation-states. The debates reflect core questions about the nature of contemporary democracy. Each of the many existing models of public broadcasting is a product of the historical and political context in which it was formed. These contexts carried certain understandings of nationhood, imagined audiences and the public sphere. The legitimacy of each model continues to be negotiated. Public broadcasting internationally is threatened by a lack of resources and declining audience shares. In multichannel television environments and amidst increased use of online media and non-linear broadcasting on other platforms, the national public sphere is increasingly fragmented and compartmentalised into niche markets.

Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) had its genesis amongst the radical social policies implemented in Australia in the 1970s. Its inception promised a departure from the parochialism of Australian media and the cultural xenophobia of the official national self-image. SBS was set up to communicate
with and represent the diversity of Australian society. In doing so, it symbolically and practically recognised the range of cultural groups residing in Australia as a part of the national public sphere. SBS has been lauded as an innovative model for engagement with diversity. It has also, however, been the subject of heated public debates, most recently over the relationship of public policy to multicultural society and the purpose of public broadcasting. As one of the last surviving multicultural organisations, with the term ‘multicultural society’ embedded in its charter, the broadcaster has been a site of its own ideological battles. In its first year in office, the Rudd government appears more comfortable with multiculturalism than its predecessors, but it is yet to announce a multicultural policy framework.

This paper reflects on the origins and development of SBS, and forms of public broadcasting internationally, to give context to policy debates about public broadcasting and digital media environments. Later sections describe the evolution of SBS’s relationship to Australian multiculturalism. Several different models of public broadcasting are described: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); the United Kingdom’s younger, diversity-focused Channel 4; and the ‘pillarised’ model of public broadcasting in The Netherlands, which comprises 22 discrete public broadcasters representing religious, political or ‘lifestyle’ groupings, including Nederlandse Programma Stichting (NPS, the Dutch Programming Foundation), which is charged with reflecting Dutch diversity. I examine some of the challenges each of these models is facing as it tries to engage with and represent the cultural diversity of the United Kingdom and The Netherlands. These models were chosen because they represent different approaches to audience and the challenges of representing cultural diversity. The United Kingdom and The Netherlands have been described as the ‘standard bearers’ of multiculturalism in Europe, although this has been downscaled in recent years (Joppke, 2004: 247).

This article does not seek to offer a comprehensive review of the different organisational models, audience shares or public remits of each broadcaster. Rather, it explores some of the issues that each one faces in relation to cultural diversity. For this reason, I have confined my exploration of Australian public broadcasting to SBS, rather than including a comparison with the ABC (which is similar to the BBC model), and have not sought to compare the broadcasters with other services in each market.

**Broadcasting ‘nationhood’: The development of early twentieth century public broadcasting**

The BBC, now the largest broadcasting organisation in the world, commenced operations in 1922. It quickly sought to broadcast to all regions of the United Kingdom and, in 1932, to the British colonies via the British Empire service (later the World Service). John Reith, its first head, developed the charter ideal to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ for the greater good of ‘improving’ the population. According to Stuart Hall, the BBC ‘produced the nation which it then addressed: it constructed its audience by the ways in which it represented them’ (Hall, 1993: 32). The BBC represented an important tranche of nation-building, and created a
communicative notion of Britishness that included a sense of public education and a formal mode of address. It created the ‘BBC voice’, conveying issues of national importance, which became hugely significant in wartime Britain. The BBC’s role enacted and constructed British culture, both in the sense of a national culture and highbrow cultural forms. Funded by a licence fee paid by television set owners, the BBC has recently increased its accountability to licence fee payers through increased consultation and the BBC Trust’s Public Value Tests, which weigh up public interest and market impact considerations for new services.

The Dutch started radio broadcasting in 1919, and the ‘pillarised’ model was developed in the 1920s. This model was structured around membership-based broadcasting associations aligned with affiliations of religious (Catholic, Protestant) or political persuasion (socialist, liberal) in order to provide media that reflected the then perceived groupings of Dutch society. The system represents an entirely different approach to public broadcasting, broadly decentralised and constituting a ‘sociopolitically compartmentalised system’ (Bardoel and d’Haenens, 2004: 170). It is based on the idea of discrete sets of interests grouped through broadcasting associations whose members produce media in parallel public spheres. While complex and administratively dense, it could be argued that this system is the most direct democratic model of civic engagement with media. The broadcasting associations, funded by a mix of membership fees and government appropriations, encourage and rely on active investment in public broadcasting. The model acknowledges a level of pluralism in society beyond the universal public sphere nation-building project of classic public broadcasting models like the BBC. A plural civil society is cultivated, although the categories of programming and assumed audience only allow for officially recognised forms of pluralism.

For decades, these national public services were the only broadcast media offered in each country. They did much to link the geographic reaches of the nation-state in the public consciousness and create a sense of twentieth century cultural and political life. They were aligned with the development of national institutions of civic engagement and democratic citizenship, although they did this in very different ways.

Adding new voices: Late twentieth century public broadcasting models

The Channel 4 (C4) service in the United Kingdom was established in 1981. It is required to provide a broad range of programming, to ‘appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society’ and to ‘exhibit a distinctive character’. C4’s inception followed ITV, founded in 1955 as the BBC’s first commercial competitor, and preceded Five, launched in 1997. C4 is provided with a licence and spectrum to fulfil its public remit, but is fully commercially funded. It was founded to add diversity both to the media landscape and to forms of representation appearing on British television. Unlike the BBC, C4 started in television and has only in recent years branched into online radio. It was awarded the second national commercial digital radio multiplex licence in 2007.
The Netherlands public broadcasting environment still comprises over 20 organisations. These include large membership-based associations and several smaller directly government-funded, mainly religious and educational organisations such as a Buddhist, Hindu and two Muslim organisations. There are three overarching, non-membership-based organisations: NOS, the Dutch Broadcasting Federation responsible for news, sports and national events; Educom, a private non-profit organisation licensed for education programs; and NPS, which is required to complement other broadcasters’ services with cultural, educational and youth programs, and programs for and about ethnic minorities. Now one of the largest public broadcasting organisations in The Netherlands, NPS was created by the Dutch government in 1995. It draws funding from government and advertising. A new independent broadcasting company, it took over some of the programming requirements previously assigned to the NOS. Quotas for types of NPS programming are set by legislation: 40 per cent of airtime must be ‘cultural programming’ (including 50 per cent for arts) and 20 per cent ‘multicultural programs’.

SBS, like C4 and NPS, began more than 50 years after the advent of public broadcasting. Initiated in 1975 to promote access and equity of services for Australia’s diverse migrant communities, it is a visible product of state-sponsored Australian multiculturalism (Smaill, 2002: 395). These groups were identified as some of the most disadvantaged in the country by the Whitlam government’s 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty. The Commission’s reports recommended migrant communities be provided with better access to information, including by radio and television. This led to experimental radio services 2EA in Sydney and 3EA in Melbourne, initially broadcasting in seven and eight languages respectively, to inform non-English speaking communities of new national health care services.

‘Ethnic’ communities became an increasingly influential lobby in Australian politics during this time. Initially this relationship was strongest with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) under Whitlam, the first Australian political party to adopt a multicultural policy. Support for the services was maintained and expanded, however, by Fraser’s Coalition government, under which SBS television broadcasting commenced in 1980. The Hawke ALP government came close to merging the SBS with the ABC in response to recommendations of a 1984 review of the SBS (Connor Report). Mass protest by ethnic community organisations defeated the proposal. The same ALP government initiated legislation giving SBS the ability to carry advertising, limited to five minutes per hour, in 1991, enabling the current hybrid funding model of both government funding and advertising revenue.

The SBS model, which privileges reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australia’s multicultural society as central to its public purpose, is based on an alternative model to broadcasters like the BBC or the ABC. SBS has not been easily aligned to the traditional nation-building role of public broadcasting (Smaill, 2002: 394). When difference and diversity are the broadcaster’s starting point, representations tend to be associated with the unfamiliar as well as the familiar, and tend to challenge rather than reaffirm notions of a definable national culture.
Each of these younger networks — C4, NPS and SBS — had a specific brief to present multicultural programs, and each was developed as a policy response to the changing nature of the society it was intended to reflect.

Public broadcasting and the crisis of legitimacy

Whether funded by a licence fee (the BBC), advertising and commercial revenue (C4), a hybrid of commercial revenue and government funding (SBS) or a combination of broadcasting association membership and general tax revenue (Dutch public broadcasting), public broadcasting services are understood to contribute to the public interest.

The fundamentals of public broadcasting have been described as making quality programs, supplying good information and involving people in democratic culture (Costera Meijer, 2005: 27). These are seen as essential underpinnings to democratic civil society. The same rationales tend to be applied to support early (BBC, ABC, ‘pillarised’ Dutch public broadcasting) and later (C4, SBS or NPS) models of public broadcasting. ‘Pure’ public broadcasting tends to be conflated with the public sphere, so the virtues of the public sphere — strong citizenship, public debate and informed commentary — are conferred on public broadcasting. This is then contrasted with bland commercial offerings and individualist consumerism (Barnett, 2003: 165).

This citizen–consumer binary is problematic, however. Greater accountability to taxpayers or licence fee payers is required of contemporary public broadcasting, and audience preferences do not always align with the worthy. This sets up a tension with another fundamental public broadcasting principle: universalism of services, which requires them to be accessible and inclusive. It is now generally acknowledged that the fundamentals of public broadcasting are better achieved if public service broadcasters consider audience appeal and consider impact as an element of quality programming. As Costera Meijer notes: ‘There are … few people in broadcasting, including public broadcasting, who deny the relevance of attracting viewers.’ (Costera Meijer, 2005: 27–28)

This shift indicates greater recognition of audiences as consumers with multiple choices on offer and an increased sense that ‘programmes should not only have quality but also attractiveness’ (Jakubowicz, 2007: 119). In an increasingly personalised media use environment, if audiences — particularly younger and culturally diverse audiences — are not choosing to engage with public media, the result can be a ‘crisis of legitimation’ (Jakubowicz, 2007).

Cultural diversity and ambivalent relationships between citizens and national public life pose some of the biggest challenges to public broadcasting. If not responded to effectively, public broadcasting claims to public value, legitimacy and relevance are undermined.

These challenges to public broadcasting have added fuel to complaints from the commercial sector about continued state support for public broadcasting. They argue that unfair policy interventions into the media markets and funding support for public broadcasting are no longer required in an era of choice for audiences.
The European commercial television sector, for example, has repeatedly put the argument to the EU that public broadcasting no longer deserves public subsidy because it is producing similar content and performing similar social and market functions to commercial broadcasters (Jakubowicz, 2007: 126).

Concerns have been expressed that public interest considerations, including cultural diversity, would not be reflected in media left entirely to the market. This is because ‘not every niche is a market niche, commercial networks only serve the commercially attractive audience groups, not the population as a whole’ (Costera Meijer, 2005).

The Amsterdam Protocol of 1997 and the European Commission’s 2001 Communication on the Application of State Aid Rules to Public Service Broadcasting were designed to resolve the question of the compatibility of public broadcasting with ‘the principles of fair competition and the operation of a free market’. The Communication accepted a wide definition of public broadcasting:

entrusting a given broadcaster with the task of providing balanced and varied programming in accordance with the remit, while preserving a certain level of audience, may be considered, in view of the interpretative provisions of the Protocol, legitimate … Such a definition would be consistent with the objective of fulfilling the democratic, social and cultural needs of a particular society and guaranteeing pluralism, including cultural and linguistic diversity. (European Commission, 2001, emphasis added)

Based on this new policy focusing on pluralism, the EU has ruled in favour of public service broadcasters against commercial broadcasters’ complaints of anti-competitive regulation.

Preserving a certain level of audience while maintaining distinctive services in new media environments has proved a challenge for public broadcasting internationally, as broadcasters face new technologies, rapidly globalising media and the rejection of traditional patterns of media usage, particularly among younger generations.

**Cultural democracy and the diversity challenge**

**The United Kingdom**

In Building Public Value, the BBC refutes proponents of the increasing individualisation of media, claiming that ‘broadcasting is a civic art. It is intrinsically public in ambition and effect.’ (BBC, 2004: 10) This strong alignment of broadcasting with the public sphere asserts a central place for public broadcasting in British cultural democracy.

Channel 4’s Next on 4 strategy document quotes YouGov research revealing that ambivalence to diversity, particularly immigration, persists in the United Kingdom. Next on 4 describes television’s social and democratic role as central to its case for increased government support: ‘By representing diversity and alternative viewpoints, [television] allows viewers to form opinions on groups of people they have never met.’ The continued relevance of PSB is also emphasised
in that it can be used for exposing mainstream audiences to alternative views and lifestyles — to ‘challenge prejudices and promote understanding’ and ‘can play an important role in helping different communities understand and relate to each other’ (Channel 4, 2008).

Promoting cultural diversity and fostering familiarity with difference have become central arguments for the continued policy and funding support for public broadcasting in the United Kingdom. The public broadcasters are increasingly realising how important these roles are for their continued existence. They are making concerted efforts to address their relationship to British cultural diversity through quota systems and initiatives such as the Cultural Diversity Network, focusing on employment and representation.

These efforts have not necessarily resulted in engaged relationships with culturally diverse audiences, however. Recent research by the United Kingdom’s communications regulator Ofcom revealed low use of public broadcasting amongst culturally diverse Britons, though somewhat higher use for C4 than the BBC. The Ethnic Minority Groups and Communications Services Report (2007) found these groups spend far more time with satellite services and less time with public broadcasting than the national average.

Former Director General Greg Dyke described the BBC as ‘hideously white’ (Born, 2004: 470). In a speech to the Race Media Awards in April 2000, Dyke proclaimed: ‘I want a BBC where diversity is seen as an asset … a BBC open to talent from all communities and all cultures, a BBC which reflects the world we live in today … Young Britain buzzes with the energy of multiculturalism, yet most broadcast media do not reflect [this].’ (Born, 2004: 470)

Mary Fitzpatrick, Editorial Executive for Diversity at the BBC says: ‘[W]e have such a history of programming which is not intended to offend in any way. It’s intended to be a warm, cosy blanket that you slip under in the evening with a cup of tea.’ (interview) This level of comfort may exclude non-white audiences, because it addresses a particular kind of Britishness. C4’s Manager of Diversity, Ade Rawcliffe, describes the role of their network in terms of exposure to the unfamiliar: ‘Look, this is how these people live. Gosh, didn’t that surprise you! Gosh, didn’t that shock you!’ (interview) Shock programming is precisely what Channel 4 has been accused of, especially in relation to the 2007 Celebrity Big Brother incident in which Indian actress Shilpa Shetty was subject to racial taunts from other participants. This was broadcast unchecked for several weeks, sparking outrage from the Indian community, around 54 000 complaints, chastisement from Ofcom and accusations of tabloid programming.

Both approaches — the comfort of the BBC’s dominant British public sphere, managed by a large bureaucracy with a complex array of compliance requirements, and C4’s provocative approach, for which it has been accused of crude populism and voyeurism — need to balance cultural sensitivity with an effective engagement with audiences to achieve greater relevance to diverse societies.

A recent report commissioned for C4 by Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, found that ‘most white viewers felt broadcasters were doing a satisfactory job in representing multicultural Britain,
but all other ethnic groups felt their performance was “very poor”. Members of ethnic minority groups interviewed in the research resented what they perceived as tokenism and stereotyping, and felt that most broadcasters failed to reflect ethnic minority culture. The report states that ‘broadcasters and producers have to develop a new respect and understanding of their audience in a superdiverse society’ and ‘cultural institutions, the media in particular, can play a major role in providing a society with that awareness of its own diversity, in a way that is not divisive and fragmenting’ (The Leading Edge, 2007). The report criticises the failure of quota systems to promote non-white Britons to positions of influence in media organisations and recommends a levy on British commissioning funds to divert resources to diversity objectives.

The Netherlands

When commercial television entered the Dutch market in the 1980s and public television’s audience share declined, the complex structure of broadcasting was seen as failing. The Media Act was altered several times, gradually changing the organisation of Dutch public broadcasting. The autonomy of the separate broadcasting organisations was reduced, and in 1988 more power was vested in an independent, central Board of Directors to coordinate and oversee programming. In 2000, the Concessions Act was introduced to further improve the responsiveness of public broadcasting to audiences by requiring the board to ensure the sum total of the broadcasts ‘comply with the statutory remit to provide a high quality, varied range of programmes that reach large and small sections of the Dutch population’. There has been significant resistance to these moves towards centralisation amongst the existing associations, leading to rolling strikes which sent TV screens black on several channels (Bardoel interview).

The complex structure was based on the idea of the ‘caring state’, but has also promoted segregation — or, as Bardoel calls it, ‘social apartheid’: ‘Of course public broadcasting has a real problem everywhere in Europe and also in this country. They represent the diversity of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, but not the diversity of the twenty-first century.’ (Bardoel interview) Cultural diversity is challenging the model of the representative ‘pillared’ society, because the pillars are based on assumed static categories in Dutch society.

Even the new smaller minority broadcasters face problems in relation to the groups they are intended to represent. For example, the Muslim broadcasters are expected to represent the interests of Muslims from the Middle East, Surinam and Indonesia: ‘They’re all very different, and they have big problems talking to each other, let alone uniting and doing something together.’ (Bardoel interview) Identities and interests are not necessarily aligned within officially constructed social or cultural groups.

In addressing the requirements for the NPS to dedicate airtime to multicultural programs, CEO Carel Kuyl believes diversity must be represented as an issue of national concern rather than focused on ‘ethnic’ subjects: ‘It’s important that you show yourself on TV, that you’re not just someone who can speak in your
own language but to also report on the society we’re living in. Not necessarily about your own group, but about society.’ Given around half of the population of cities in The Netherlands aged under 21 has a multicultural background, Kuyl says: ‘It’s our future and our market, so to speak.’ The organisation interprets its quota requirement for multicultural programs in the following way: ‘The program should either reflect minorities’ views, made from a multicultural viewpoint by a minority, sometimes for a minority, but not exclusively … in my time we shifted our focus from programs which were specifically made for the minorities towards more general programs that included minorities.’ (Kuyl interview)

The fixed groupings of The Netherlands system must somehow change to incorporate the new sub-groups and increasingly mixed identities of Dutch society. It seems doubtful that this can be catered for by increasing the fragmentation of the model. Instead, the broadcasters are seeking greater involvement from culturally diverse Dutch media producers in order to transform the system from within.

There are some significant problems with this, however, as Kuyl notes:

Public broadcasting in Holland — but also commercial broadcasting: newspapers, journalism — is a white occupation. It’s not a very sexy thing for young minority groups to become a journalist. For us, white people, it is sexy, it is something you can talk about at parties. For young Moroccans or Turks, whatever, they want to become lawyers, doctors … professions, so their parents can say, ‘My son is a doctor!’ instead of, ‘My son is a journalist’. He’s a shmuck! It’s not something you want your son to be. (Kuyl interview)

A real transformation will require changes in perception about media as a career, and a new sense amongst younger culturally diverse Dutch citizens that the broadcasting associations or platforms are for them.

**SBS and evolving multiculturalism**

In addressing a culturally diverse society as a broad audience worthy of state-funded media, SBS provided a crucial politics of recognition by including diverse communities in the national public sphere. The organisation’s principal function, set in the charter, is to ‘provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society’. SBS continues to treat diverse cultural content as relevant to ‘all Australians’.

Recent SBS brand project audience research, commissioned from market research company The Leading Edge, revealed that multiculturalism was still highly valued by SBS audiences. The type of multiculturalism with which they identified, however, was evolving. Early 1970s multiculturalism was seen to prioritise the ‘safeguarding of minority cultures’, emphasising anti-racism in the context of discrete national or ethnic identities (Phillips et al., 2007). It is now a more layered experience. This finding aligns with analysis by Ang, Hawkins and Dabboussy for *The SBS Story*, the product of an Australian Research Council-
funded industry linkage research project with SBS. Independently of the brand research, the authors identified orientations of multiculturalism, which they have called ‘ethno-multiculturalism’, ‘cosmopolitan multiculturalism’ and ‘popular multiculturalism’.

In the first version, ethno-multiculturalism, the focus is on ‘catering to the special needs and interests of migrants and ethnic communities, who have historically been the key constituencies of multicultural policy in general and SBS in particular’ (Ang et al. 2008). Instead of a single audience, SBS has traditionally catered to a ‘multitude of linguistic and cultural audience fragments’, particularly in radio (Smaill, 2002: 392). Early 1980s manifestations of the SBS model saw languages on television, as on radio, scheduled according to the size of language community in Australia. SBS’s initial television services had a strong emphasis on aggregating international content and ‘bringing the world back home’. In this early phase, SBS displayed a form of multiculturalism in which minority identities were managed in a sphere separate from the ‘non-multicultural majority’ (Jakubowicz, 2002). Some early manifestations of multicultural policies homogenised ethnicities by treating diverse groups as single, coherent ‘communities and … reified the opposition between mainstream and minority, and thus pigeonholed “the migrant” as permanently marginalised, forever ethnicised’ (Stratton and Ang, 1994: 153).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, attempts to create an environment of tolerance and celebration of diversity for broad audiences were exemplified in what has been termed ‘cosmopolitan multiculturalism’. This was associated with the ‘the world is an amazing place’ SBS brand campaign. Ang describes this orientation as having ‘a more universal emphasis on encouraging all Australians — of whatever background — to open up to and embrace global cultural diversity’ (Ang et al., 2008). There is, in this iteration, a focus on performing the more colourful and consumable forms of diversity, such as ‘multicultural’ food, dance, festivals and film. This understanding of multiculturalism was described in the SBS brand focus groups as ‘unifying’, ‘self-confident’ and ‘about identity’ (Phillips et al., 2007). It is important to note that this ‘stage’ required gains in access and equity — products of ‘ethno-multiculturalism’ — as preconditions for the acceptance of diversity as a positive experience, rather than a source of social disadvantage.

SBS has been both praised and criticised for promoting ‘cosmopolitanism’. It has positioned Australia as an active part of an international community and encouraged a level of openness to difference (Hawkins, 1996), although it has also been equated with elite privilege. SBS has been criticised for privileging an Anglo audience interested in consuming worldly representations of difference, a kind of aesthetic spectatorship, at the expense of minority services, thereby distancing itself from its traditional base of political support (Lawe Davies, 2002: 286).

There is reason to believe, however, that the polarisation of ‘Anglo and other’ Australians may no longer be relevant to understanding cosmopolitanism. SBS audience segmentation research (Roy Morgan Research, 2007) found that the outward-looking groups described as ‘cosmopolitan’ — in this research termed ‘cultural information seekers’ — tend to be one of the most culturally diverse audience groups. This challenges traditional interpretations of the communications
needs of culturally diverse Australia. They are not limited to watching homeland programs or hearing their own language, especially for second- and third-generation Australians who have developed new forms of identity based on ‘multiple belongings’ in which ethnicity forms one part of a series of connections (Ang et al., 2006).

Early attempts to bring the world back home or lead people to understand that the world is an amazing place are now considered insufficient to fulfil the SBS charter obligation to reflect Australia’s multicultural society, as they do not represent the diversity within Australia. Multiple online and subscription services now make it easy to access international content, particularly news and world movies. Additionally, community broadcasters on local radio and television are providing immediate, self-referential services for particular communities. Within this changing media landscape, SBS has to re-establish its distinctiveness in relation to international and in-language services.

The new brand position and on-air expression of the tag line ‘six billion stories and counting’ emphasises the stories of everyday Australian diversity despite the global reach of the concept. The SBS Story describes it as ‘popular multiculturalism’:

In this version, cultural diversity no longer has to be actively promoted as such but is treated as a taken for granted and ordinary feature of everyday life. This is multiculturalism as part and parcel of mainstream culture — an undeniable element of Australian society in the 2000s … (Ang et al., 2008)

To recognise that multiculturalism has become mainstream is not to present a socially cohesive society as a fait accompli. An inclusive society requires work. While privileged at different stages of policy evolution, these three orientations of multiculturalism do not form discrete phases which replace one another. Each creates a foundation for the next layer of multicultural experience.

SBS has anchored its recent public profile in its ability to tell diverse local Australian stories for a larger audience in a way no other broadcaster can. The statement of SBS’s purpose included in the 2007–12 Corporate Plan reads: ‘SBS leads in the exploration of the real, multicultural Australia and our diverse worlds … for all Australians … independently, distinctively and courageously.’ The premise of this statement is that SBS is the broadcaster best able to reflect the realities of Australia’s contemporary multicultural and multilingual society, an area in which other Australian media organisations, particularly in the free-to-air and other professional broadcasting spheres, are seen to be failing.

**Conclusion: The continuing case for public broadcasting and the SBS model**

The evolution of SBS, tied as it has been to the larger multicultural project in Australia, has been politically mediated and practically negotiated over time. The brief to deliver national media promoting a socially cohesive multicultural society...
has been continually reinterpreted and tempered by limitations of funding, political will and the need to build and maintain relationships with audiences.

It is timely to reflect on the SBS model as an innovative mid-point between the universalist broadcasting and niche narrowcasting options described in the international examples examined here. With a fundamental commitment to multiculturalism entrenched in its charter, yet with national reach and ambition, the SBS model is a vehicle for diversity in the public sphere. It enables greater intercultural understanding and promotes a more expansive national identity.

As Australia becomes an increasingly plural and globalised society, requiring new levels of cultural and linguistic competence, the SBS ‘experiment’, cobbled together on limited funds and the politically won moment of public multicultural policy more than 30 years ago, remains a salient response to the challenge of diversity.

Public broadcasters, particularly those with remits to reflect diversity, must constantly challenge the comfort or ossification of assumed national modes of address and representations of nation. The pluralist public sphere will never be perfect and will always be incomplete, in a state-of-becoming, similar to that of the official multicultural state. Georgina Born, in her analysis of the BBC, describes the importance of including diversity in the public sphere: ‘the goal must be to ensure the existence of channels for counter-public to speak to counter-public, as well as their integration into an (always imperfect) unitary public sphere’ (Born, 2004: 515).

Public broadcasting must respond to the continual requirement for reinvention with curiosity and creative vigour or be relegated to irrelevance as a relic of a past era. Some broadcasters carry a heritage that makes realignment to contemporary audiences more difficult, moving from the comfort of traditional forms of address in myopic nation-building or realigning long-understood categories of society in reductive niche services. The younger models of public broadcasting with an explicit brief to reflect diversity must ensure that this reflection is real and responsive rather than purely populist or simplistic. Rigorous, creative engagement with pluralism develops stimulating and distinctive content, which tends to be in short supply in thinly resourced digital markets, despite their offer of apparently endless choice.

Whatever the platform or delivery mechanism, media which provide access to good information, a sense of being part of a national culture and opportunities to engage with public life are still required to empower audiences as active citizens. The qualitative difference in services offered by public broadcasting is often centred on the fundamental ideals of universal access, impartial information, diversity of views and the chance to be part of a national conversation. These ideals are not tied to specific content genres or any particular funding or organisational model. The challenge is to create services that deliver truly distinctive content which contributes to the public interest, and to make that content accessible, watchable and compelling.
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Maintaining Relevance:
Cultural Diversity and the case for Public Service Broadcasting

Report produced for the Special Broadcasting Service, March 2008

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Preface: About this report

This report forms part of a project for a Doctorate of Cultural Research, conducted with the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney and produced from within the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). This, first, doctorate report engages with debates about public broadcasting to form part of the context for the future projects, which will focus on the operations of SBS, its self definition and its relationships to its audience.

SBS faces a moment of significant change in the media environment – Australia is on the eve of a move to digital broadcasting, multichannelling and possible transformations brought the promised ubiquitous broadband. Audiences have already started taking up satellite services in earnest. In this moment it is useful to look at different markets and contexts in which these changes have already taken effect and the impacts and responses these developments have provoked. The changing forms of media, and the uncertainty of the role public service broadcasting plays in their midst, have emerged amidst an increasingly complex national and international environment in which globalisation and increased cultural diversity have created new challenges for traditional state organisations and nation-states themselves.

This paper describes several different models of public broadcasting and the capacity of each to respond to the increasing cultural diversity of contemporary liberal democratic societies. In engaging with current arguments about the role of public broadcasting and the impact of cultural diversity, I have chosen to explore:

- the BBC and Channel 4 in the UK; and
- the ‘pillar’ based model of public broadcasting in the Netherlands – including NPS, the broadcaster with the most direct cultural diversity remit.

These case studies are enlightening because they represent different approaches to public service broadcasting (PSB) and because their proponents have developed unique responses to the multicultural societies they are charged with reflecting.

This report does not seek to offer a comprehensive review of the differing organisational models, audience shares or public remits of each of the broadcasters, rather to canvass some of the issues that have been faced by each model in relation to cultural diversity. For this reason, I have confined my exploration of the Australian public service broadcasting context to SBS and have not sought to directly compare any of the broadcasters with other services in each market. While I have referenced major challenges faced by PSB in different contexts – commercial lobbying, loss of audiences and the ‘unknowns’ of the digital environment – I have not sought to present a comprehensive comparison to ‘competitors’, be they other public service broadcasters, free-to-air commercial networks or subscription services.

Academic work has been done exploring the contemporary role of PSB and comparing shifts in responses to multicultural policies in the UK, the Netherlands and Australia. I will draw on this work along with the opportunities open to public media as described in recent PSB strategy documents and a series of interviews conducted in June/July 2007 with media professionals and academics in London, Amsterdam and Utrecht.

The debates about public broadcasting are well progressed in Europe and may prove enlightening to the current pressures being experienced in Australia.
* This report was produced six months before the announcement of a review of public service broadcasting in Australia by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE). The DBCDE discussion paper ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future set out the objectives of public service broadcasting (also known in Australia as national broadcasting) in a summary of the relevant statutes, as follows:

### Objectives of national broadcasting

*Universality*—enabling all Australians to access broadcasting services, regardless of geography or capacity to pay, to allow them to participate in society and its institutions.

*Localism*—allowing people with similar interests to communicate and participate in local communities.

*Australian content*—strengthening Australian identity through the provision of programming that reflects Australia’s unique character and characteristics, and promotes diversity and understanding of other cultures.

*Comprehensive and diverse programming*—ensuring Australian audiences have access to a comprehensive range of content that is relevant to, and representative of, the range of groups within society.

*Diversity of news and information*—ensuring an informed public debate about key issues affecting Australian society and the nation, free from commercial or other interests.

*Education*—enhancing the intellectual and creative capacity of Australian society and supporting the development of Australia’s human capital.

*Innovation and quality*—providing informative and thought-provoking content that enriches society, and encouraging creative endeavour and the development of new talent.

Executive Summary

Aims
This report aims to provide international context to debates around public broadcasting, especially in relation to:

- Questions of relevance in multicultural societies;
- Market failure arguments;
- Diverse models of PSB and their respective configurations of audience; and
- The ability for PSB to evolve with changing media markets and societies.

It seeks to provide some context for SBS’s considerations of its future position in an Australian market on the eve of changes to a digital market, multichannelling and new forms of competition for eyeballs, audiences and policy favour. This information will provide useful resources for a critical examination of public service broadcasting in Australia.

Methods
These findings are based on a triangulation of analysis of guiding documents, engagement with theory and writing about PSB in the European context and interviews conducted with European media professionals and commentators on international public broadcasting.

Limitations
This project explores media from the vantage of models of PSB and their policy contexts. It relies on organisations’ self description in the form of strategy documents, promotional materials and first hand interviews with staff. It does not include audience feedback or any detailed ethnography of the work of the organisation. As such, the insights contained herein are related to policy evaluation, rather than audience data. Such descriptions reveal what organisations say about themselves and their audiences. They can also reveal something of the responses developed to challenges in each context.

Summary of Findings
The research reveals:

- In developed digital markets, the rationales for PSB become increasingly focused on public interest and public value ideals, including the facilitation of better engagement with national culture and debates.
- Cultural diversity and relevance provide strong rationales for publicly funded media. Not all markets are niche markets and not all providers create opportunities for engagement with public life in a local environment.
- Genuine engagement with contemporary cultural diversity has proved to be one of the major limitations of traditional PSB models, contributing to a ‘crisis in legitimacy’.
- The European Union has recognised that PSB should provide a range of content and services, rather than being confined to ‘market failure’ positions.
- Satellite services are attracting ever higher numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) audiences, especially where in-language, culturally relevant local content is not available.
- Quota targets and compliance requirements can create greater awareness of diversity issues; however, they do not guarantee outcomes with audiences.
- Shocking or sensationalist portrayals of difference can create significant rifts between broadcasters and communities.
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Introduction
SBS’s Charter, enshrined in legislation in the *Special Broadcasting Services Act 1991*, requires SBS to reflect Australia’s multicultural society and contribute to meeting the communications needs of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians. This role is constantly evolving, as SBS’s Charter responsibilities are interpreted, with differing emphases, by successive SBS boards of directors and management teams. SBS has a hybrid funding model, with advertising and sponsorship currently making up around 17.4% of SBS overall funding (see attachment 1). This revenue is projected to grow substantially in coming years. SBS’s position as a ‘partially’ commercial public service broadcaster with an explicitly multicultural remit has been the source of much recent debate.

Current debates around SBS
SBS is the subject and protagonist of some key stories of Australian self-definition. Long heralded as a ‘bold experiment’ and understood as ‘special’ for its unique Charter and the extraordinary diversity of the content it broadcasts, SBS has outlived all other multicultural institutions created amongst the radical social policy changes that took place in Australia in the 1970s. Its inception promised a departure from the parochialism of Australian media and the cultural xenophobia of the previous official national self-image (Ang, Hawkins, & Dabboussy, 2008). SBS was set up to communicate with and represent the diversity of Australia’s society, and recognised the range of cultural groups residing in Australia as a part of the national citizenry.

In recent years, SBS has been the subject of heated public debates which have been simmering over the relationship of public policy to multicultural society and the purpose of public service broadcasting. The previous Coalition Federal Government distanced itself from multicultural policy, a move based on an equation of Australian multiculturalism with cultural relativism and a threat to common understandings of Australian mores and ‘values’. The emphasis shifted in this era towards the centralist, functional and economic models of citizenship, integration and ‘productive diversity’ rather than the ‘softer’ policies of access and equity or culturally relevant services. In the midst of all this sat SBS. One of the last surviving multicultural organisations, with the out-of-favour term ‘multicultural society’ embedded in its Charter, the broadcaster has been positioned somewhat uncomfortably. Reliant on government funding, with a government appointed board, the broadcaster could not take on a strident advocacy role. Perhaps of more direct concern, the benefits of multicultural broadcasting were seen by many as more closely aligned with the softer social policies of inclusion than with a set of economic arguments, and some argued it had become redundant (Sheehan, 2007). It would appear that the ‘bold experiment’ was losing favour.

Change, commercial activity and controversy
Since 2005, SBS has made significant changes which have demonstrated it is prepared to be entrepreneurial and to seek efficiencies and greater opportunities to extend its revenue streams. These have included the full outsourcing of production (except for news and sport) and, more recently, attempts to outsource presentation and playout; changes to contracting conditions for staff; increasingly proactive relationships with sponsors and, most controversially, changes to the placement of breaks in programs. Along with these structural and operational changes, there has been an increased emphasis on relevance as a key priority for the organisation, to be measured and evidenced primarily by ratings. Managing Director Shaun Brown has placed an emphasis on the part of the SBS Charter’s principal function that directs the organisation to provide services “for all Australians”, and has sought to create programming on television that is likely to appeal to larger audiences; in order, he
says, to ensure more Australians feel that SBS offers ‘something for them’. (Brown, 2007)

Some commentators and critics have cited changes at the broadcaster as being representative of a wholesale departure from the values of public broadcasting (Kell, 2007; Simper, 2007). The commercial activity, new sense of populism, the drive for larger audiences and the emphasis on broadcasting for ‘all Australians’ have raised concerns amongst media commentators and some vocal stakeholders. Alongside this, the engagement with new genres of television content such as reality formats, quiz shows, car shows and more English language content in prime time – and, potentially, on radio – have all raised questions about the distinctiveness of SBS services and whether a public service broadcaster should be funded to broadcast material that, on the face of it, feels somewhat more like commercial content than ‘worthy’ ethnic broadcasting.

SBS argues it must be allowed to reinvent itself, to find new ways of delivering on its Charter which are engaging and attractive to audiences. After all, multicultural society is not static, and many younger culturally and linguistically diverse Australians are largely uninterested in old models of multiculturalism and cultural representation. The statement of SBS’s Purpose included in the 2007-2012 Corporate Plan reads: “SBS leads in the exploration of the real, multicultural Australia and our diverse worlds... for all Australians... independently, distinctively and creatively”. One of the premises of this statement is that SBS is the broadcaster best able to reflect the realities of Australia’s contemporary multicultural and multilingual society – an area in which other Australian media organisations, particularly within free-to-air and professional broadcasting spheres, are seen to be failing – and that it is able to reach more Australians as it broadcasts relevant content (often in relevant languages) to diverse national communities, engaging both national and ‘niche’ audiences. MD Shaun Brown has emphasised the facts that SBS’s commercial activity directly funds local content and better services instead of enriching shareholders (differentiating the activity from purely commercial approaches) and contends that it is essential to sustaining the broadcaster and serving the Charter (Brown, 2007).

These debates and challenges are not unique to SBS or to Australia. PSB in many contexts is facing a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ as it struggles to retain audiences in the face of new technologies, rapidly globalising media, and the rejection of traditional patterns of media usage, particularly among younger generations. Debates around commercialism and the role of PSB in the market also continue in Europe, despite the plurality of models and funding arrangements. Public broadcasters have also faced accusations of irrelevance in catering to limited, familiar audience groups. This is particularly the case in relation to cultural diversity, as old models of representation, universalism of access and nation-building are unable to keep pace with increasingly complex and diversifying societies.

PSB models in the UK, the Netherlands and Australia provide interesting case studies of divergent responses to these challenges. Each nation has had its own ‘crisis’ in relation to multicultural policies (as set out in section 3 of this report) and has responded in quite different ways. Each of the PSB models canvassed is facing ‘crises of legitimacy’ in terms of their assumed, and actual, relationships with audiences and their ability to engage with changing social environments and patterns of media use. The following sections explore the assumed ‘crisis’ facing public broadcasting, and the relationships of the public service broadcasters to cultural diversity in each context.
International Contexts

The public sphere and the market

According to the Recommendations on Public Service Broadcasting, adopted by the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe in January 2004, PSB is under threat. It is challenged by political and economic interests, increasing competition from commercial media, media concentration, globalisation, new technologies and financial difficulties. The purpose, value and continuing relevance of the public broadcasting model have long been debated internationally. This has recently crystallised around the value of regulation for the ‘public interest’ in a contemporary media context. Can the market now entirely provide what public or state broadcasters did in the era of their monopoly, or oligopoly, of the airwaves?

In their analysis of Dutch public broadcasting Bardoel and van Cuilenburg noted that “To make the media take on their democratic and cultural mission, governments will have to intervene through policy measures whenever the market proves to be failing” (De Bens, 2007: 19). This was supported by the UK Independent Review Panel’s rationale for PSB, which claimed: “the second principle is that some form of market failure must lie at the heart of any concept of public service broadcasting. Beyond simply using the catch-phrase that public service broadcasting must ‘inform, educate and entertain,’ we must add ‘inform, educate and entertain in a way that the private sector, left unregulated, would not do’” (Davies, 1999: 10)

Public value

The BBC, in their Building Public Value White Paper prepared for the 2006 Charter Review, claimed a much loftier place for PSB than the ‘market failure’ position. They claimed that PSB generated ‘social capital’ because “a programme may make me more likely to vote, or to look at my neighbour in a more positive light. Public value is a measure of BBC’s contribution to the quality of life in the UK” (BBC, 2004).

Catherine Orton, Strategy Analyst and Public Value Test Coordinator at the BBC Trust, claims that public value tests are useful because “it is no longer appropriate to claim that public service broadcasters are simply filling a market void. It should not be the role of public service broadcasters simply to absorb the functions other media organisations will not pursue because they are not viable” (Catherine Orton interview). The BBC has argued that ‘public value’ is a much better measure and is needed to justify a broader service of public interest and contribution to media overall. BBC ‘public value tests’, initiated following the 2006 Charter Review, balance out public interest considerations and impact on media markets related to the UK broadcasting environment. This notion of measurable public value (further explored in section 4 of this report) is based on framing broadcasting as a ‘public good’ requiring policy intervention, as explained in the BBC’s Building Public Value:

Broadcasting can create collective value in the world precisely because it is a public good... But public goods like broadcasting or national defence or clean air are not handled well by conventional markets. To be delivered efficiently to those who would benefit from them – which, by definition, is the whole population – they require public intervention. For all these reasons, the politicians and the public decided very early on that broadcasting should be placed in the public sphere of our national life. They believed that everyone has a right to high quality broadcast services, regardless of income, age, sex, race, religion or where they live. (BBC, 2004: 7)

Universality of access, fairness and equity and accountability (often managed through reporting and compliance mechanisms and recently formalised at the BBC through the public value test) are the core principles underlying the public service or welfare model of service delivery.
In 1970s Europe, the welfare model of public interest broadcasting offered an obvious contrast to the commercial market model of the US. Throughout the 1980s the protected European public service broadcasters were faced with new competition from commercial networks, which were seen by many as being fundamentally different to PSB offerings, because:

Commercialism refers to the pursuit of profit as the primary goal, while non-commercialism in the media is associated with pluralism, diversity, and all kinds of public interest obligations that are often at odds with the profit motives that are inherent in the market oriented model. (De Bens, 2007: 9)

Although theorists may acknowledge that privatisation has stimulated creativity and innovation, the claim remains that “...it should be obvious that those media that appertain to the public service model (e.g. public broadcasters) or that profess to embrace quality (e.g. quality newspapers) will show a much stronger propensity to preserve culture against gross commercialism” (De Bens, 2007: 9).

Despite their perceived role in ‘preserving culture’, public service broadcasters internationally have competed in similar territory, most obviously for ratings, with their commercial rivals. In the UK, this has been attributed to a desire for status as much as revenue, because the financial viability of public service broadcasters does not depend wholly on audience share (Norris, 2000: 106). Despite this, purists have lamented that “today the ‘public’ and ‘market’ models are bleeding into one another” (De Bens, 2007: 11). Increased emphasis on ratings in public media has been seen by many as leading to the perceived ills of homogenisation, globalisation and ‘tabloidisation’.

The evolution of public service broadcasting

There is a tendency in these debates to conflate traditional public broadcasting with the public sphere and all its assumed virtues of strong citizenship, public debate and informed commentary addressing a ‘citizenry’, and to contrast this with bland commercial offerings and individualist consumerism (Barnett, 2003: 76). The public service and market models are based, as least in terms of the funding and business models, on different views of the audience, but how different are the content, schedule and services provided under the two frameworks?

One set of theories on the evolution of PSB describes it as changing from:

(i) ‘public service’ in the sense of public utility to
(ii) broadcasting in the service of the public sphere to
(iii) broadcasting in the service of the listener/viewer, that is to say broadcasting whose prime purpose is to satisfy the interests and preferences of individual consumers rather than the needs of the collective, the citizenry. (Jakubowicz, 2007:120)

The shift described above may signify more attention to the audience as consumers, and an increased sense that “programmes should not only have quality but also attractiveness” (Jakubowicz, 2007: 119). Costera Meijer notes “There are… few people in broadcasting, including public broadcasting, who deny the relevance of attracting viewers” (Costera Meijer, 2005: 27) and adds that the notion of enjoyment has to be added to the citizen-consumer framework. She notes that ‘quality’ is ostensibly the signifier of public broadcasting but questions what happens when this quality does not coincide with public appreciation: “what then should be the distinctive characteristic of public television?” (Costera Meijer, 2005: 37).

The ‘fundamentals’ of public broadcasting – making quality programs, supplying impartial information and involving people in democratic culture – are, it is now
generally acknowledged, better achieved if public service broadcasters pay more attention to their audiences and consider ‘impact’ as a hallmark of public value programming (Costera Meijer, 2005: 27). The idea of creating pure, ‘worthy’ content in a vacuum without concern for appeal, accessibility or programming schedule has lost traction amongst those who work in media, although it still recurs in commentary on PSB.

The question of relevance
The evaluation of media content in terms of popularity, appeal and ratings, however, tends to raise questions of relevance for PSB. If, in an increasingly personalised media-use environment, audiences, particularly younger and culturally diverse audiences, are not choosing to engage with public broadcasting, the result is a ‘crisis of legitimation’ (Jakubowicz, 2007: 124). Why should taxpayer money or television licence fees subsidise services used by the few, those often described as ‘elite audiences’? This question echoes the crisis of welfare capitalism described by Habermas as a “dual crisis, of legitimacy of the state and motivation among citizens” (Barnett, 2003: 56-57). Could it be that our institutions no longer serve or reflect our interests (if they ever did) and that we as citizens are caring less and engaging with the public sphere only in a series of consumption choices? If so, why not simply allow publics to consume media with unregulated content and allow the market to pick up any elements of existing PSB schedules as part of increasingly niche offerings?

The European commercial television sector has repeatedly put the argument to the EU that PSB is no longer necessary, and no longer deserving of public protection or subsidy, because it is producing similar content and performing similar social and market functions to commercial broadcasters (Jakubowicz, 2007: 126). In these arguments, there is an alignment of the positions of advocates of ‘purist’ PSB, producing ‘worthy’ quality content in the public interest untainted by market forces, and the pro-market lobbyists, who wish to see public service broadcasters operating only where the market has no interest.

The Amsterdam Protocol of 1997 and the European Commission’s 2001 Communication on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting were designed to resolve the question of the compatibility of public service broadcasting with ‘the principles of fair competition and the operation of a free market’. The Communication accepted a ‘wide’ definition of PSB:

…entrusting a given broadcaster with the task of providing balanced and varied programming in accordance with the remit, while preserving a certain level of audience, may be considered, in view of the interpretative provisions of the Protocol, legitimate… Such a definition would be consistent with the objective of fulfilling the democratic, social and cultural needs of a particular society and guaranteeing pluralism, including cultural and linguistic diversity. (emphasis added) (Jakubowicz, 2007: 133)

Based on this new policy, focusing on pluralism, the EU has ruled in favour of public service broadcasters against commercial broadcasters’ complaints of unfair advantage and anti-competitive regulation.

In its Building Public Value document, the BBC refutes advocates for the increasing individualisation of media, claiming that “broadcasting is a civic art. It is intrinsically public in ambition and effect”. This is echoed by the European Science Foundation which, in the Declaration of the Club of Nice, has urged Governments not to lose sight of the public interest: “The notion of the public sphere remains vital in this debate and the pursuit of ‘democratic media’ is alive… the democratising and cultural role of the media is the backbone of democracy” (De Bens, 2007: 20).
Views of the role of PSB can be grouped into three main camps:

- **Market failure** – characterised as ‘liberalism with a human face’, allowing for a place for ‘unpopular’ services and the notion that not all niches are profitable;
- **Quality and diversity of voices** – in which the public interest is perceived to be served by content of a range or calibre higher than that produced for profit;
- **Public value and democratic principles** – the vision of a desired public culture, greater participation in public life and genuine cultural pluralism

(Jakubowicz, 2007: 115)

The final role provides perhaps the most compelling argument for public broadcasting in an increasingly fragmented and individualised multichannel media environment and has been emphasised in recent strategy papers developed by UK public broadcasters. It is also tied to a set of outcomes that is extremely difficult to measure. This argument requires that public service broadcasting is genuinely engaged with the diversity of views and voices in society and provides platforms for greater participation in national (and international) public life. The plurality, including cultural difference, must be real, rigorously identified and credible. The centrality of this issue is explored in the following section of this report.

**Cultural diversity and public service broadcasting**

The inception of PSB was based on a ‘fundamentally democratic thrust’ in that it made public life accessible to all and created a space for universal public debate about issues. Niche or specialist services fail to achieve this hoped-for universalism. It is clear, though that the model of ‘nation-building’ does not cater well for cultural diversity in that it tends to ‘speak to’ audiences in ways that are often normative, assuming common cultural backgrounds and understandings (Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000). Classic PSB modes of address to audiences tend to attract accusations of elitism, and attempts to create a ‘mainstream’ accessible space for debate often render the margins of, or differences within, societies invisible.

Cultural and linguistic diversity are key arguments for the maintenance of the regulation of media.¹ They are understood to be poorly catered for in an open market (Barnett, 2003: 162). The promotion of cultural diversity is dealt with in the European Parliament’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2007² through provisions which encourage the distribution and production of European and independent television programs (updating the Television Without Frontiers Directive of 1997). The new policies claim to “better meet the needs of a fast-moving and dynamic industry while maintaining high consumer protection standards. There will be less regulation, better financing for content and greater visibility for cultural diversity and the protection of minors”. Article 1 of the Directive emphasises ‘respect for cultural and linguistic diversity’. It is telling that, in the less regulated framework, cultural diversity (along with the protection of children) are the areas noted as worthy of policy intervention. This is because, as stated in Article 3:

Audiovisual media services are as much cultural services as they are economic services. Their growing importance for societies, democracy – in particular by ensuring freedom of information, diversity of opinion and media pluralism – education and culture justifies the application of specific rules to these services.

The 2007 Directive draws from the resolutions of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (adopted by the European Parliament in April 2006) which states “cultural activities, goods and

¹ See the European Commission’s 2001 Communication on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting
² The AVMSD directive has jurisdiction in the UK and other nations of the EU.
services have both an economic and a cultural nature, because they convey identities, values and meanings, and must therefore not be treated as solely having commercial value.” The conception of cultural diversity referred to in these directives emphasises intra-national diversity and specific national identities.

Internationally, in the context of complexities of religious and cultural diversity and the panics around segregation, mobilisation against the liberal state and ‘home-grown terror’ threats, public broadcasters have increasingly recognized that the assumed national culture does not reflect or have relevance for many. Cultural diversity challenges the idea of a common identity to reflect.

As a result, rather than watching, for example, nostalgic dramas about pastoral villages and vets, which tend to be popular with national audiences, urban ‘ethnic’ audiences are spending much of their television viewing time with satellite services. The fragmentation of the public sphere and the implications of this for contemporary citizenship, particularly in relation to political and religious division, are of concern for public institutions. Major efforts have been applied by European public broadcasting organisations to increasing their relevance and responsiveness to diverse communities. Ed Klute, head of Mira Media, an EU funded organisation that lobbies for greater cultural diversity in European broadcasting, reflects on the efforts at the BBC:

That’s what the BBC did after 7/7, and also after 9/11, when they found out that the Islamic community didn’t watch, or trust, the BBC anymore… in Britain everybody’s complaining, the ethnic minorities, about the BBC, but they made a huge turnover there… in the BBC, you can see that things are changing. (Ed Klute interview)

The Amsterdam Protocol specifically refers to the “democratic, social and cultural needs of a particular society and the importance of guaranteeing pluralism, including cultural and linguistic diversity.” This reflects concerns that, left to the market, this diversity would not be reflected in media, because “not every niche is a market niche, commercial networks only serve the commercially attractive audience groups, not the population as a whole” (Costera Meijer, 2005: 20). This assertion is based on the concern that, if content production is left entirely to the market, “only a relatively small number of marketable groups will ‘profit’ from television” (Costera Meijer, 2005: 20). Smaller, less economically powerful cultural groups are far less likely than larger demographic clusters to be recognised in market-driven visions for ‘audience growth’.

Cultural diversity is, then, an important rationale for PSB overall, as well as a significant challenge for individual organisations. If they do not effectively engage with increasingly cosmopolitan societies, there is a danger that public broadcasting organisations will become relics of past perceptions of nations and publics well out of step with the multicultural realities of their audiences.

**Multicultural policies in differing contexts**

Multiculturalism is not simply another term for pluralism. It is both a policy and a lived experience. The policy can be interpreted as referencing all forms of diversity including, for example, sexuality; however; it most often refers to inclusiveness of diverse cultural identities and equity of services for cultural groups. The premise of multiculturalism is that inclusive societies cannot be left to chance, rather, they require active work on the part of the state to foster inclusive participation in public life.

The UK and the Netherlands were thought of as the ‘standard bearers’ for multiculturalism in Europe (Joppke, 2004: 247). Their multicultural policies have

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3 Ofcom EMG report 2007
largely been strategies for the management of migrant communities, in contrast to the experience of ‘settler societies’ like Australia where multiculturalism has been directed to ‘all Australians’ and intended to recognise the diversity of a population as a whole. In recent years, there has been some recognition of the limitations of existing multicultural models. Social disadvantage (and, in some cases, institutionalised racism) continue to impact on the ability of minorities to fully participate in national public life and benefit fully from residence in prosperous countries. There has been a movement, in recent times, towards individualism and renewed calls for integration.

The ‘downscaling’ of multiculturalism

Official multiculturalism has been ‘downscaled’ in the UK, the Netherlands and Australia due to three main factors:

- A claimed lack of public support for multiculturalism;
- perceived shortcomings of multicultural policy in managing social inequality, marginalisation and segregation; and
- concerns about religious fundamentalism which have led to a “new assertiveness of the liberal state in imposing a liberal minimum on its dissenters” (Joppke, 2004: 252).

The question of how much difference can be ‘absorbed’ in a state-initiated notion of national inclusivity is a difficult one, particularly where that difference runs counter to principles of liberalism or secular democracy. However, whether multicultural policies for the social and practical management of cultural difference are successful or not, cultural diversity remains a contemporary reality for most modern nations, and must be considered and addressed in national policy initiatives, particularly those that seek to reflect contemporary society.
Case Study (i)

The UK

Ofcom (Office of Communications) was brought into being by the Communications Act, 2003 and has responsibility for communications regulation. Under the Act, Ofcom is required to review the effectiveness of public service television broadcasting, which assesses the performance of the PSB sector against the Ofcom ‘purposes and characteristics of PSB’ (see attachment 2). Providing the regulator with a more active role in evaluating these functions has tied into significant debate about the evolving role of PSB in the contemporary British media environment. Digital developments and the new proliferation of media offerings have created a need to reassess the funding and outputs of PSB and, in the face of market driven diversity of offerings, build a case for whether policy interventions should continue in UK media markets. The Ofcom purposes and characteristics of PSB seek to set out a clear description of what public broadcasters provide citizens as consumers, and are applied to the main terrestrial TV channels, including all channels funded by the TV licence fee (BBC), ITV1, Channel 4, S4C (Channel 4 Wales) and Five.

Ofcom’s Review tested these broadcasters’ output against the following measures:

- **Output**: Have the main elements of programming, as set out in the Act [The Communications Act 2003], been provided by the relevant broadcasters?
- **Impact**: Have they reached their target audiences?
- **Value**: Are they appreciated by their target audience, and do they deliver benefits to society as a whole?

Ofcom’s initial finding was that UK PSB were “partially, but not completely, fulfilling the requirements of the Communications Act.” ‘Significant achievements’ were noted, although there were also “important shortcomings in effectiveness” which were “partly due to the actions of broadcasters, and partly because viewers have drifted away from the more challenging types of programming, traditionally thought to be at the heart of UK television.”

The Communications Act requires PSB overall to provide a wide range of subject-matter to ‘meet the needs and satisfy the interests of as many different audiences as practicable’, achieve a balance and maintain high standards in content, quality and editorial integrity. The requirements for the manner of fulfilling the purposes of public service television broadcasting under the Communications Act include information dissemination, education and entertainment as well as support for UK cultural activity and the facilitation of ‘civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate’. Meeting these goals requires some creative strategies, especially as the challenge is to engage a public turning away from ‘worthy’ or challenging television. The Ofcom review compared ratings in analogue and digital television homes and found that viewers who make the switch from analogue to digital TV “tend to move away from more challenging content towards that which is more accessible”.

The BBC and Channel 4 have both claimed to offers ‘challenging programming’ for the digital market. The BBC has emphasised the quality and integrity of its services (particularly news) and Channel 4 has emphasised its ability to challenge norms and expose viewers to difference. Both the BBC and Channel 4 have put forward strategy documents to argue their cases for continued support and public policy intervention based on equity and universality of access, diversity of programs and services and opportunity for engagement in public life and cultural democracy.
The BBC

BBC’s contribution to the 2006 BBC Charter Review was a White Paper *Building Public Value* which argued for an audience-focused, agile and responsive national broadcaster to address the challenges of the digital environment. The BBC has argued that public value in broadcasting – access, choice, diversity of programming and quality – is essential to ensuring a democratic and civic ‘dividend’ for UK society. This dividend works towards connecting communities and ensuring greater participation in public life (BBC, 2004). The emphasis on the public value of the BBC centred on the principles of universality, fairness, equity and accountability.

An ability to fulfil these principles includes the need to be inclusive in the services it delivers and the ‘needs and interests’ those services cater to. The BBC’s public purposes (see attachment 3) require it to support civic life and national debate, enrich British cultural life and develop cohesive communities. These goals are tracked, reported on and measured in a complex reporting and compliance structure.

Performance is measured under the categories of: reach, quality, impact and value for money. The BBC collects data against these standards based on audience approval, appreciation indices for programmes, measures of programme memorability and impartiality surveys, together with standard ratings data. A set of measures (including ‘points of impact beyond broadcast’ – eg uses in education and awards) which include, but are not limited to, ratings is outlined below:


In characterising the programming and services that build public value the BBC emphasises ‘connected communities’ as a core element of the cultural democracy facilitated by its services. One of the priorities outlined in *Building Public Value* is to:

faithfully reflect modern Britain’s diversity in mainstream as well as specialist programmes; set new targets for the on-air portrayal of ethnic minorities, those with disabilities and those from other minorities; monitor usage of, and attitudes to, the BBC
by the UK’s minorities, listen to their concerns and priorities, and reflect those concerns in the future development of services (BBC, 2004).

The BBC’s Purpose Remits (flowing out of its Public purposes) include the requirement to “represent the different nations, regions and communities of the UK: across the range of its output, the BBC should portray and celebrate the range of cultures and communities across the UK at national, regional and local level”. To this end, the BBC has a diversity policy that applies across all its services and requires that “All newly submitted programme proposals have a diversity statement attached highlighting how, where appropriate, the programme will fulfil the BBC’s commitment to reflecting the diversity of the licence fee paying public, both on and off screen”. A new Diversity Editor, Mary Fitzpatrick, works with a Diversity Executive (which include the Director-General and the Director of BBC Vision) to improve both on-screen representation and employment quotas for diversity. The task to improve the on-screen diversity in terms of talent has proved to be a difficult one – not one of the BBC’s top 100 talent list for 2006 was of a non-Anglo background. The targets for diversity amongst staff were not met in 2007, triggering the BBC Diversity Executive to forego their annual bonuses.

Channel 4

The public service remit for Channel 4 (see attachment 4) is more explicit in its brief to represent difference and incorporate cultural diversity, as it requires “…the provision of a broad range of high quality and diverse programming which, in particular… appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society”. Channel 4 claim they set out to commission programmes with ‘specific multicultural subject matter’, although this has proved difficult to define. It also compiles an ‘audit’ of ethnic minority representation on and off screen. It has prepared a ‘Guide to On Screen Diversity’ which consists of lists of culturally diverse talent for use in independent production. Channel 4 also makes attempts to feed into this pool of talent via ethnic minority training schemes. In 2007, they launched a ‘Race Debate’ website on race issues and multiculturalism in the UK.

Channel 4 recently published Next on 4, a strategy paper positioning the broadcaster in its bid for new funding opportunities in the digital era. The licence (issued by government tied to a public service remit - see attachment 4) is no longer offers sufficient commercial opportunities to sustain the business model due to the proliferation of spectrum and channels in the digital environment. This document claims that the purpose remits (see attachment 4) have not changed, although it notes:

> Some genres have disappeared over time, in response to broader changes in the television industry and in society more generally. For example: …Programmes made specifically by and for minority groups have become less relevant as people from these groups (in particular, those from different ethnic backgrounds, and gays and lesbians) have become more visible in society, and their portrayal more common, in mainstream programming. (Next on 4)

Locating ethnic diversity (among other kinds of diversity) as part of an unproblematised ‘mainstream’ can, however, mask ongoing inequalities and problems of cultural difference. A range of faces and accents in media normalises the diversity of contemporary societies; but it does not explore the more problematic social issues related to cultural diversity. Channel 4’s own ‘YouGov’ audience

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research (see below) reveals that ambivalence towards diversity, particularly the role of immigration in producing diversity, persists in the UK, and that the notion that in Britain diversity is mainstream does not end the work required to reflect and champion diversity for the purposes of community cohesion.

The Next on 4 strategy document describes ‘television’s social and democratic role’, as central to its case for funding, arguing that television continues to be an important force for social change, influencing and reflecting attitudes and ‘allowing viewers to form opinions on groups of people they have never met’. The continued relevance of PSB is also emphasised:

- As social and familial structures fragment, television’s role as a mass medium exposing mainstream audiences to alternative views and lifestyles – to challenge prejudices and promote understanding – becomes increasingly important
- Given the increased diversity in British society, along with the changing mix of nationalities coming into the country, television can play an important role in helping different communities understand and relate to each other. (Next on 4)

Cultural diversity and familiarity with this difference, then, are central arguments for the continued policy and funding support for PSB. Programming which reflects or caters to cultural diversity is used to evidence the importance of PSB in providing what the market will not, and in promoting greater cultural democracy in UK society.

The catch: research and evaluation

Channel 4, along with the BBC, Sky and other networks, is a members of the UK Cultural Diversity Network, a network of UK broadcasters promoting cultural diversity on and off-screen. Its activities have focused on encouraging diversity targets for employment at broadcasters, developing ‘portrayal monitoring systems’, increasing diversity in casting and production and attempting to ensure news coverage is sensitive to the needs of diverse communities. These efforts have centred on on-screen representation rather than a direct tracking of audience engagement. However, there may not necessarily be a link between the on-screen representation of minorities and appeal to culturally diverse audiences. This raises more challenges in relation to public broadcasting’s engagement with cultural difference.

Despite all this activity, recent Ofcom research revealed low use of public broadcasting (although higher for Channel 4 than the BBC) amongst culturally diverse Britons. Ofcom’s Communications Market Special Report, *Ethnic minority groups and communications services* released in June 2007, reported that Ethnic

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5 http://www.cdnetwork.org.uk
Minority Groups (EMGs) in the UK watch less television, and less PSB programming in particular. EMGs watch much less BBC, especially BBC1, and ITV1 than the general population. This was true for both a sample of the largest ethnic minority groups in the UK⁶ as well as EMGs as a whole. The research was conducted for the annual report on Public Service Broadcasting in which broadcasters are collectively assessed against the Ofcom Purposes and Characteristics for PSB (attachment 2).

The Ofcom EMG research also revealed that “of all households that do have multichannel television EMG households are more likely to take a cable or satellite subscription service and a greater proportion of their viewing time is spent watching non-terrestrial channels”. However, there are no figures available to indicate what proportion of this usage was in language. The British ratings agency, the Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB) doesn’t produce ratings for smaller channels and many specialist channels, such as those aimed at EMGs, are not included, representing a significant gap in the data. No British news programs were listed on EMG households top programs lists, in contrast to the top programs for the general population (Ofcom, 2007), while British PSB news services are watch by two-thirds of non-EMG Britons. Of course media services are not consumed in isolation and audiences have critical agency in choosing how they understand the information they are exposed to. However, the editorial approaches, modes of address and kinds of information offered by the services have the potential to inform very different worldviews, divided along ethnic lines, within the UK.

Representations of Britishness: comfort and shock

One of the reasons for the disengagement of culturally diverse audiences may lie in the ways they are interpellated or excluded by UK PSB programming. Fitzpatrick describes the difference between Channel 4 and the BBC in the following way: “Channel 4’s *raison d’etre* is really about ‘we want to be inclusive, we want to explore different communities’, and it’s able to take risks and do really cheeky programming in a way that the BBC is not.” She also says:

The BBC is much more conservative, and it has a different audience for a lot of its programs, and I think that... we’re in a different position to Channel 4 because we have such a history of programming which is not intended to offend in any way. It’s intended to be a warm, cosy blanket that you slip under in the evening with a cup of tea, and you enjoy whatever it is you’re going to do… we hope to bring interesting, exciting things to you and get you to think about things differently but we do not expect in any way to repulse you or make you angry.” (Mary Fitzpatrick, interview)

So, does the level of ‘comfort’ equate to more traditional representations of Britain and Britishness which exclude non-white audiences? Fitzpatrick concedes it may be the case, although she also claims that lower uses of BBC services by EMGs cited in the recent Ofcom study may be attributed to the fact that these groups tend to be younger and more ‘inquisitive’, engaging with less traditional media use patterns than the general population. Others have suggested that low usage of PSB by EMGs relates to the kinds of programming offered up by the BBC and its exclusive ‘mode of address’ which assumes a white, middle class audience (Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000). Former Director General Greg Dyke described the BBC as ‘hideously white’ (Born, 2004: 470). In a speech to the Race Media Awards in April 2000, Dyke proclaimed: “I want a BBC where diversity is seen as an asset…a BBC open to talent from all communities and all cultures, a BBC which reflect the world we live in today. …Young Britain buzzes with the energy of multiculturalism, yet most broadcast media do not reflect [this]” (Born, 2004: 470).

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⁶ Indians, Pakistanis, Black Caribbeans and Black Africans
Ade Rawcliffe, C4’s Manager of Diversity, claims that Channel 4 has much more of a connection with this ‘buzz’. She describes the brief of the network this way:

> the biggest thing is about giving voices to people. And I think that we don’t want to be censorious, but to enlighten people so they can make their own decisions... and, I think, promote awareness, so that [others] know that these people exist and how they are... as opposed to sort of saying “we want everyone to live happily ever after”... I don’t feel comfortable with that notion... But exactly what I do feel comfortable with is saying ‘Look, this is how these people live. Gosh, didn’t that surprise you! This is how these people live. Gosh, didn’t that shock you.’”

(Ade Rawcliffe, interview)

Channel 4’s connections and credibility with EMG communities, as well as the limits of this intention to shock, were tested in early 2007 when one of its programs *Celebrity Big Brother* was the subject of controversy around racial vilification. One of the program’s ‘housemates’ – well known Indian actress Shilpa Shetty – was subject to racial taunts from other participants and this was broadcast unchecked for several weeks. The *Celebrity Big Brother* ‘incident’ gained high ratings for the program (an average of 4.5 million viewers) and attracted accusations of ‘shock programming’. It also spawned several reviews of Channel 4’s operations; an internal review of the way the complaints had been handled, and an Ofcom review based on Channel 4’s Codes of Practice. The programs were not found to have breached the Codes, but several criticisms were made, and Channel 4 made some internal changes to improve their responsiveness to community concerns, including the appointment of a ‘Viewer’s Editor’ and better tracking of complaints. Rawcliffe says:

> I think we live in a different age than twenty five years ago...I don’t think you can just say ‘Oh it’s supposed to be controversial. That’s it. Turn it off if you don’t like it.’ Now, there has to be more two-way acknowledgement... It’s complicated territory.

(Ade Rawcliffe, interview)

Both the ‘comfort’ of the BBC’s dominant British public sphere, managed by a large bureaucracy with a complex array of compliance requirements, quotas and targets, and Channel 4’s ‘cheeky’, provocative approach, for which it has been accused of tabloid shock programming, need to balance cultural awareness and an effective engagement with cultural diversity in order to achieve greater relevance to diverse communities beyond comfort zones or cultural voyeurism.

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7 *Shetty speaks of Brother ‘racism’* http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6272585.stm
Case Study (ii)

The Netherlands
The public broadcasting system in the Netherlands is broadly decentralised and constitutes a “sociopolitically compartmentalised system” (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004: 165). This system is based on the notion of discrete sets of interests categorised by groups who, through membership-based broadcasting associations self-manage to produce relevant media via parallel public spheres. Jo Bardoel explains it in this way:

Of course, this is a country of minorities. There is no dominant group whatsoever, no religion, no ideology, so therefore we have invited this whole system of what I usually call “social apartheid” because it’s a kind of segregation of several groups that all organise themselves. You can also say we have a civil society, also we have a tradition of a strong civil society and a very weak state that only does some co-ordination at the top, but it's civil society and all the organisations who do it, and broadcasting was only part of this...but of course, this whole system has, in a way, eroded because the whole sociological basis behind it, in a way, has faded away. The institutions are still there, but the whole ideology, is...in the past you could say, “I'm raised Catholic,” and then you could say exactly how I would vote and which groups I belonged to. Now you can’t, because people have a more mosaic identity.

( Jo Bardoel, interview)

Bardoel explains that this is in a sense based on the traditional Western European welfare model, developed through the 1960s and 1970s, the model of the ‘caring state’, but acknowledges this has created its own problems in the form of segregation or, as he calls it, ‘social apartheid’: “of course public broadcasting has a real problem everywhere in Europe and also in this country. They represent the diversity of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, but not the diversity of the twenty-first century” (Jo Bardoel, interview). The Dutch Media Act (1988) requires the broadcasters to reflect cultural diversity, both on the screen and in program production, through public remits and reporting requirements. However, cultural diversity is challenging the the model of a society resting on representative institutional ‘pillars’, because this model relies on assumed static categories in Dutch society.

The model
There are now twenty-two public broadcasters in the Netherlands including the member-based associations (based on paid membership) and several smaller directly Government-funded, minority-based media organisations (including, for example, a Buddhist, Hindu, and two Muslim organisations). Broadcasting time on public radio and television channels is shared by a large number of broadcasting associations and several other non-profit organisations, which are granted broadcasting licences either because they are deemed representative of a particular section of the population, or on the basis of a specific program remit.

To be assigned a licence, broadcasting associations must have at least 150,000 paying members and demonstrate they will add a new kind of program to the public channels. For many years, these organisations operated under a self-appointed general management. The main broadcasting associations are:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>KRO (Catholic)</th>
<th>EO (Protestant)</th>
<th>TROS (family)</th>
<th>VARA (progressive)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCRV (Protestant)</td>
<td>AVRO (neutral)</td>
<td>BNN (the young),</td>
<td>VPRO (progressive)</td>
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The Dutch system under the *Media Act* also includes three larger non-members based organisations with a specific program remit:

- **The Dutch Broadcasting Federation [NOS]** is responsible for news, sports and national events.
- **The Dutch Programming Foundation [NPS]** complements other broadcasters’ services, with cultural, educational and youth programs and programs for and about ethnic minorities.
- **Educom** a private non-profit organisation is licensed for education programs.

Each organisation produces content which, along with 25% of airtime commissioned from the independent sector (to promote a national audiovisual industry), is scheduled and broadcast on several shared public channels:

- **Netherlands 1**, the flagship broad news and major national channel;
- **Netherlands 2**, an in-depth current affairs channel; and
- **Netherlands 3**, directed towards a younger audience.

There are also multichannel and regional channels in the system although, due to funding limitations, they generally broadcast re-runs from the main three channels. A small part of airtime on the public channels is also open for use by churches and other ideological organizations, political parties and the Government.

It could be argued that the Dutch PSB system, albeit complex and administratively dense, is the most direct democratic model of civic engagement with media. The fee-based broadcasting associations encourage and, indeed, rely on active investment in PSB media and acknowledge some level of pluralism in society beyond the ‘universal public sphere’ nation-building project of classic PSB models like the BBC.

**Centralising the pillars**

When commercial television entered the Dutch market in the 1980s and public television’s audience share declined, this complex structure of broadcasting was seen as failing. The *Media Act* was altered several times, gradually changing the organisation of Dutch PSB. The autonomy of the separate broadcasting organisations was reduced, and, in 1988, more power was vested in an independent, central, Board of Directors to coordinate and oversee programming. In 2000, the *Concessions Act* was introduced to further improve the responsiveness of PSB to audiences by requiring the Board to ensure the sum total of the broadcasts “comply with the statutory remit to provide a high quality, varied range of programmes that reach large and small sections of the Dutch population”. The Board has gained power over spending, production and programming (The Netherlands Ministry of Education, 2006). There has been significant resistance to these moves towards centralisation amongst the existing associations, leading to rolling strikes which sent TV screens black on several channels when the scheduling was centralised (Jo Bardoel, interview).

Each of the national public service broadcasters is required to produce a five year policy plan detailing production, programming and distribution projections. The Board and the Government then sign a performance agreement, with specific goals relating to local drama quotas (to meet EU requirements) and audience reach targets. An independent commission reviews the functioning of the national public broadcasting system every five years. The programmer for each of the main channels now commissions content (based on projected audience shares) from the various broadcasters and allocates funding for this content. This funding adds to the base state allocation for each broadcaster to sustain their organisation, now sourced from general revenue. The system is based on a hybrid funding model of Government funding and 25%-40% commercial revenue from block advertising placed between
programs on all channels. A not-for-profit advertising bureau (STER) sells advertising airtime on all public radio and television and the distinction between editorial content and advertising is maintained. Under the Media Act it is not permitted to interrupt programmes with advertising breaks, and advertisements may only run between programs for a maximum of 6.5% of total radio and television airtime.

Critiques of the model
The broadcasting association model has been seen to be failing because younger people are not prepared to pay to join broadcasting associations. According to Dutch media theorist Irene Costera Meijer, “Young people under forty do not relate to the separate broadcasters anymore... They think every public broadcaster is a Christian broadcaster”. She claims that “broadcasters have to reinvent themselves in terms of public service. There is a necessity to reinvention, yes, and to be creative about it” (Irene Costera Meijer, interview). Media policy maker and academic Jo Bardoel agrees: “You have to be at least forty and of good background to see the differences, in a sense, and now there’s a kind of schedule that’s more, let’s say, to European standards” (Jo Bardoel, interview).

There has been a shift towards market research and programming targeting audiences-as-consumers focused even amidst the civic emphasis of the associations:

The new style of broadcasting [based on light programming and attractive programme guides] was obviously no longer oriented towards citizens, but instead towards consumers of television and radio programmes. Programmes and programming were increasingly tailored to preferences discovered through market research, and not the influence of democratic associations. (Bardoel and d’Haenens, 2004)

Having developed a complex set of structures to reflect and manage difference in Dutch society, the model is challenged as the society becomes more complex and culturally diverse. Even the smaller ‘minorities’ broadcasters face problems in relation to the groups they are intended to represent. For example, the Muslim broadcasters are expected to represent the interests of Muslims from the Middle East, Surinam and Indonesia: “they’re all very different, and they have big problems talking to each other, let alone uniting and doing something together” (Jo Bardoel, interview).

Multilingual services and the ‘haemorrhage’ to satellite
The new engagement with diverse cultural groups in Dutch media tends to happen in Dutch language, and sometimes creoles, rather than in other languages spoken in The Netherlands. According to Klute, the Dutch Government oppose providing services in languages other than Dutch as they believe that if there are multilingual services available, minority groups “...are not really encouraged to learn Dutch.” In-language programs are still broadcast on some Dutch radio services, which Klute claims are suffering from benign neglect as the Government is “just waiting until nobody is listening anymore”. Costera Meijer claims that multilingual television programs rated so poorly that “…it wasn’t worth the trouble doing it anymore. It didn’t work”. In-language broadcasting ceased on Netherlands television: “Why? Because the satellites came.” Klute claims this is ironic given the complex PSB model was maintained despite the arrival of commercial broadcasters:

...of course it’s completely contradictory because what’s coming through satellite is information from the countries of origin and not about what’s happening in the Netherlands. So, they stopped the [language] programs broadcasting, but strangely, at the same time, the commercial broadcasters came up...[which] caused public broadcasting to start broadcasting in a commercial way, ‘because the market was changing’. They did not do that when, say, the Turkish satellites came. That did not mean that they had to make efforts to reach the Turkish community in a different way. So what
happened after that... people could not find their information anymore in the Dutch media, and more and more they started moving to satellite, Al-Jazeera, whatever. Now, there's 250 satellite programmes. At the same time, more and more people came in who don't speak the Dutch language... We can see that things are starting to move again on the internet, but mostly because of the initiatives of the groups themselves, so young people can start seeing things coming back in their own languages, and some broadcasters are getting a little bit of money again, but very often in the educational sense. It's very difficult to get it back to the situation that it used to be. (Klute, interview)

Satellite poses one of the most significant challenges to reaching these audiences, perhaps because it offers linguistic diversity. The ‘haemorrhaging’ of culturally and linguistically diverse groups to satellite services described in Ofcom’s recent studies in the UK is also occurring in The Netherlands. According to Netherlands-based academics Christina Slade and Ingrid Volkmer:

Globalisation is transforming the political landscape and public discourse in both international legal terms and in terms of transnational media. Whereas only decades ago, the ‘public’ was conceived as a sphere of national sovereignty, today’s flows of political communication are reshaping both the conception of the nation state and the understanding of the role of transnational media... In this new European transnational public sphere the European media environment has been utterly transformed: no longer monolingual it has become a fragmented set of sub national publics in self referential spheres. (Slade & Volkmer, 2007)

Attempts to realign these relationships based on exchange between communities may be, as Klute notes, very difficult. The self-referential nature of the new transnational flows of media can further alienate ‘different’ audiences and publics from the national ‘public sphere’.
Key Findings

The policy frameworks, theoretical context and perspectives of commentators and practitioners reviewed in this report have led to the following key set of findings:

- In developed digital markets, the rationales for PSB become increasingly focused on public interest and public value ideals, including the facilitation of better engagement with national culture and debates.

- Cultural diversity and relevance provide strong rationales for publicly funded media. Not all markets are niche markets and not all providers create opportunities for engagement with public life in a local environment.

- Genuine engagement with contemporary cultural diversity has proved to be one of the major limitations of traditional PSB models, contributing to a ‘crisis in legitimacy’.

- The European Union has recognised that PSB should provide a range of content and services, rather than being confined to ‘market failure’ positions.

- Satellite services are attracting ever higher numbers of CALD audiences, especially where in-language, culturally relevant local content is not available.

- Quota targets and compliance requirements can create greater awareness of diversity issues; however, they do not guarantee outcomes with audiences.

- Shock or sensationalist portrayals of difference can create significant rifts between broadcasters and communities.

Applications for SBS

In light of recent developments and debates around public service broadcasting internationally, this report makes the following recommendations for decision making and communications related to SBS services:

- Develop an emphasis in SBS strategy (and messaging) around the public value of SBS.

- Highlight SBS’s role in fostering national debates, particularly those around cultural diversity.

- Emphasise the importance of public service broadcasting in catering to the needs of an increasingly culturally diverse and complex society.

- Reject pressures to develop a ‘market failure’ position for SBS.

- Highlight issues of social and civic fragmentation caused by transnational media.

- Avoid the assumption that quotas or targets for CALD representation in staff or on-screen content can address issues of diversity in ways that will have resonance with diverse audiences.

- Maintain an inclusive ‘mode of address’ that conceives of the SBS audience as culturally diverse.
Conclusion

Public broadcasting internationally comprises a huge range of models and structures for funding and public service remits and complex systems of accountability based on varying understandings of the programming’s relationship with audiences.

Cultural diversity and increasingly complex relationships between citizens and national public life have the potential, along with other forms of fragmentation amongst contemporary audiences, to pose one of biggest challenges to public broadcasting in all these models. If not managed effectively and engaged with creatively, claims to ‘public value’, legitimacy and relevance, as well as claims on public funds, are undermined.

As evidenced in the case studies outlined here, large bureaucratic public broadcasters struggle to engage with the ‘energy of multiculturalism’ in a meaningful way, and smaller niche broadcasters struggle to maintain relevance in a society where identities and behaviours of ‘target audiences’ shift and change. Internationally, culturally and linguistically diverse audiences are turning to international satellite services or the multiple offerings of cable for programming more relevant to them and more engaged with their interests. This both compromises the reach of national broadcasters and has the potential to divide the public sphere along cultural and linguistic lines – which has significant implications for contemporary national citizenship.

The public value of PSB, which defines its worthiness for policy intervention, increasingly includes the valuing of cultural democracy and civic engagement. Public broadcasters must, then, reinvent themselves as audience-focused organisations in which the pluralism of those audiences is recognized. In this context, the notions of community engagement and universalism are even more relevant.

More sensitive measures for assessing performance against the cultural diversity obligations of public broadcasters are required. Crude quota levels do not provide qualitative understanding of the ways in which diversity may be represented or of the interactions of audiences with the content. Public broadcasters must engage critically and seriously with evolving social realities of the societies they seek to represent in order to maintain cultural relevance and must find ways of making this engagement appealing to broader audiences. This reflection and engagement should be incorporated into organisational policy and into thinking about audiences, should inform consultation with communities, and should be integrated into the stages of content generation and evaluation.

In the long heralded digital future, consumer ‘intelligence’ technologies and direct-to-user on demand services may well take the place of the curatorial function of traditional public broadcasters. The reinvention of PSB needs to be based on strategic thinking about what PSB services offer in the age of multi-platform, multi-channelled and customised media. These ‘points of difference’ are often based in very basic ideas: universal services, public interest, media diversity, good information, opportunities to be part of a national conversation and, not least, the leadership role PSB can take in innovation afforded by developing content and ideas that do not rely on ‘proven market success’ and popularity as a starting point for development.

It is timely to reflect on the SBS model as an innovative mid-point between the universalist broadcasting and niche narrowcasting options. With a fundamental commitment to multiculturalism entrenched in its Charter, yet with national reach and
ambition, the SBS model offers a vehicle for the pluralisation of the public sphere, for inter-cultural understanding, and for the development of a more expansive national identity. The challenge is now to find a way of translating this pluralism into new distinctive digital services which maintain a clear vision of their public value and an unambiguous relationship to the SBS Charter. This will provide the most compelling arguments for continued funding and policy interventions into the Australian media market in the form of support for SBS.

Beyond the discussions around funding models, programming genres and ratings, all of which are much debated around public broadcasting internationally, the commitment to the SBS Charter remains a potent point of difference and strategic advantage. As Australia becomes an increasingly globalised society requiring new levels of cultural competence, it may be that the SBS ‘experiment’, cobbled together on limited funds and developed through the ‘politically won’ moment of public multicultural policy more than 30 years ago, is a crucial resource in Australia’s response to the challenge of diversity.

We can, however, learn from the debates in Europe and elsewhere, and can draw from measures developed in other frameworks, particularly tools for assessing performance based on audience engagement, distinctiveness and diversity. Such measures would assist SBS to make the case for the unique services it provides and would improve on organisational responsiveness to the ‘diversity asset’ SBS already possesses.
Interviews

UK

Ade Rawcliffe, Manager of Diversity, Channel 4, 28 June 2007

Azra Onur, Project Manager, BBC Trust, 28 June 2007

Catherine Orton, Strategy Analyst and Public Value Test Coordinator, BBC Trust, 28 June 2007

Mary Fitzpatrick, Diversity Editor, BBC, 29 June 2007

Candice Peres, Coordinator, Ethnic and Minority Groups Research, Ofcom, 29 June 2007

Netherlands

Jo Bardoel, Department of Communication, Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, (previously Senior Policy Advisor and Deputy Head of Strategy, NOS), 4 July 2007

Irene Costera Meijer, Professor of Journalism Studies, VU University, Amsterdam, (also consultant on diversity for NPS), 5 July 2007

Ed Klute, CEO, Mira media, Utrecht, 6 July 2007

Carel Kuyel, CEO, Dutch Programming Foundation, NPS, 4 July 2007
References


Georgie McClean, SBS Strategy and Communications | 23
Attachment 1: Overview of the ABC and SBS

(From the Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy discussion paper: ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future)

The Australian Broadcasting Commission was created in 1932; the first ABC radio broadcast took place on 1 July that year. It began television broadcasting in 1956 and became an independent corporation in 1983. The Special Broadcasting Service commenced broadcasting in 1975. It began television broadcasting in 1980 and became an independent corporation in 1991.

Legislation

The ABC and SBS are independent statutory authorities established by legislation and their roles and functions are set out in their respective Charters...

The SBS Charter states that the principal function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians, and in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society. SBS also has specific functions, including, to contribute to meeting the communication needs of Australia’s ethnic and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and promoting understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people.

Each corporation is governed by a board of directors appointed by the Governor-General on the recommendation of the Australian Government of the day. The Government has committed to implementing a new selection process for non-executive directors to the ABC and SBS boards that will increase transparency and provide for future appointments to be based on merit and assessed by a nomination panel.

The affairs of the ABC and SBS are managed by their respective managing directors, who are appointed by their boards. The boards are independent of the Government in determining policies relating to the functions of the broadcasters.

Funding

The ABC and SBS receive the majority of their funding from the Australian Government through three-year (or triennial) funding arrangements, as shown in the following figures. The ABC and SBS earn additional revenue through businesses activities, including merchandising, and (for SBS) advertising. The ABC’s total commercial revenue from goods and services in 2006–07 was $150.4 million and for SBS it was $50.5 million.

The SBS Act allows SBS to broadcast advertisements that run during periods before programs commence, after programs end or during natural program breaks. These advertisements must not run for more than five minutes in any hour of broadcasting.

...
Figure 5: SBS revenue 2006–07


Source: www.dbcde.gov.au/__data/.../0043002001_ABC-SBS WEB.pdf
Attachment 2: Ofcom purposes and characteristics of public service broadcasting

**PSB Purposes**

Informing our understanding of the world – To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas

Stimulating knowledge and learning – To stimulate our interest in and knowledge of arts, sciences, history and other topics through content that is accessible and can encourage informal learning

Reflecting UK cultural identity – To reflect and strengthen our cultural identity through original programming at UK, national and regional levels, on occasion bringing audiences together for shared experiences

Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints – To make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere

**PSB Characteristics**

- High quality – well-funded and well-produced
- Original – new UK content rather than repeats or acquisitions
- Innovative – breaking new ideas or re-inventing exciting approaches, rather than copying old ones
- Challenging – making viewers think
- Engaging – remaining accessible and attractive to viewers
- Widely available – if content is publicly funded, a large majority of citizens need to be given the chance to watch it

Attachment 3: BBC Public Purposes

The BBC creates public value in five main ways:

- **Democratic value**: the BBC supports civic life and national debate by providing trusted and impartial news and information that helps citizens make sense of the world and encourages them to engage with it.

- **Cultural and creative value**: the BBC enriches the UK’s cultural life by bringing talent and audiences together to break new ground, to celebrate our cultural heritage, to broaden the national conversation.

- **Educational value**: by offering audiences of every age a world of formal and informal educational opportunity in every medium, the BBC helps build a society strong in knowledge and skills.

- **Social and community value**: by enabling the UK’s many communities to see what they hold in common and how they differ, the BBC seeks to build social cohesion and tolerance through greater understanding.

- **Global value**: the BBC supports the UK’s global role by being the world’s most trusted provider of international news and information, and by showcasing the best of British culture to a global audience.

retrieved 1 December 2007

Attachment 4: Channel 4’s public service remit

The public service remit for Channel 4 is the provision of a broad range of high quality and diverse programming which, in particular:

a. demonstrates innovation, experiment and creativity in the form and content of programmes;

b. appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society;

c. makes a significant contribution to meeting the need for the licensed public service channels to include programmes of an educational nature and other programmes of educative value; and

d. exhibits a distinctive character.

Cultural threats, cop drama, and ‘community PR’: Diversity and security cultures in EastWest101

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Cultural threats, cop drama, and ‘community PR’: Diversity and security cultures in *EastWest101*

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This study seeks to explore the ways viewers generate meanings and understandings of ‘mediated reality’ through television drama. It tests out the idea that drama programmes intended to reflect contemporary cultural diversity can assist viewers to negotiate anxieties about cultural difference. The analysis draws on viewer responses to SBS drama series *EastWest101*, including from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. *EastWest101* is a cop show, set in Sydney’s west and based on a real (self-titled) ‘wog squad’ police team, which centralizes cultural difference as the context and, often, the source of the drama. Analysis of responses explores the ways viewers interpret fictionalized portrayals of issues of belonging, personal security, and state authority and use them to negotiate their own responses to contemporary security cultures.

SBS drama series *EastWest101* is a cop show set in Lakemba in Sydney’s west, based on a real multicultural police team. Its hero is a Muslim detective attempting to mediate between personal loyalties and policing during the ‘war on terror’. *EastWest* centralizes cultural difference as the context and, often, the source of the drama. According to Ang et al. (2008), ‘EastWest101 captured everything that is significant about SBS and its mandate to reflect Australia’s multicultural society’ (14) as its viewers ‘saw Australian drama that gave new expression to contemporary Australia, in which cultural diversity is an integral part of everyday Australia, warts and all’ (13). SBS commissioned focus groups with viewers from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Arabic-speaking Australians, to explore responses to the programme’s representations of diversity. The respondents used discussions of the drama to negotiate anxieties about representation, Australian multiculturalism, and contemporary security cultures.

The study is a new element of SBS’s audience research programme — cast somewhere between market research and a more complex understanding of media reception in the context of a culturally-diverse society. I was one half of the SBS research commissioning team and attended all groups as an observer. The results were developed into a set of topline findings by the contracted research agency (*Entertainment Insights*), which were used by SBS in a range of corporate documents to support its arguments for drama funding (see, e.g., the SBS triennial funding submission 2009). I reanalysed the transcripts for the purpose of this paper, seeking to understand some of the ambivalence in the participants’ responses to the representations. The findings were then discussed with the producers of the programme and their commissioning editor within SBS. These discussions provided

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some insights into the programme-makers’ intentions and their understandings of the assumed audience of the programme.

SBS has, inevitably, due to its Charter and perceived social role, the ambition that its content and services are seen to promote cohesion, recognition, and mutual understanding through media. Part of my role at SBS is to assist in ‘telling the story’ of the value of SBS in promoting Australian diversity – as such I am hardly a disinterested observer in this research field. I have attempted, in my analysis, to recognize the constructed nature of the conversations and the relationships implicit in each of these environments and explore some of the points of resistance and ambivalence as well as positive messages about SBS and EastWest101.

The participants in our Arabic-speaking groups would surely not have missed the groupings implicit in those with whom they were seated around a table, in being asked to share their views. While Arabic-speaking Australians – in our sample mainly first generation migrants from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan – could not be seen to form an uncomplicated ‘community’ (given their national and religious diversity and range of migration experiences), they have often been grouped as such by Australian media discourse in the post-9/11 environment. Media coverage and political discourse in Australia have criminalized ‘the Arab Other’ via a ‘series of cycles of moral panic which have centred around those of Arabic-speaking background and especially, but not exclusively, those of Muslim faith’ (Poynting et al. 2004, 11). Poynting et al. draw on Cohen’s (1973) formulation of a ‘moral panic’ in describing a process by which an entire cultural group may be ‘identified and made subject to public debate and sustained media coverage’ and cast as a generalized social threat (Poynting et al. 2004, 6). In constructing a ‘common sense’ of social reality via narrative accrual and the continual layering of discourses around violence, crime, and terrorism, Arabic-speaking Australians have been interpellated as a ‘cultural threat’.

Andrew Markus’ recent Scanlon Foundation research on social cohesion has found that there is now a higher level of ‘negative sentiment’ towards immigrants from the Middle East than with any other nationality grouping and similarly high levels of negativity towards Muslims ‘indicating that attitudes to Muslims in all likelihood inform attitudes to immigrants from these two countries [Lebanon and Iraq]’ (Markus 2010). Our respondents were keenly aware of this social context to representations of Islam and the Australian ‘Arabic community’ – this awareness permeated the way they positioned themselves in relation to EastWest101.

Audiences, diversity, and cultural citizenship

This analysis conceives of television drama as a resource for cultural citizenship, described by Toby Miller as the right ‘to know and to speak’ (Miller 2007, 35). Active cultural citizenship requires engagement with the public sphere, now almost entirely constituted by and through media (see Cunningham and Miller 1994, 38). Joke Hermes (2005) extends the notion of cultural citizenship into a series of connections and relationships ‘defined as the process of bonding and community building and reflection on that bonding . . . that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture’ (10). The experience of viewing and interpreting media carries with it a sense of an imagined community of others with whom to share the experience of watching, enjoying, and critiquing (Anderson 1991).

Self-representation, interpretation, and sense-making form a crucial part of the development of identity and ‘social self-understanding’ (Mepham 1990, 60). This social
self-understanding is based on a ‘process of comparison and evaluation’ which is ‘helped and inspired by popular media texts’ (Hermes and Adolfsson 2007, 12). We make sense of who we are, in part, through the cultural products we consume and the ways we position ourselves in relationship to them.

Media is now increasingly theorized as social, understood through interpretation and interaction. Marie Gillespie’s (1995) work on ‘TV talk’, in particular, has explored how meanings of media texts are negotiated and contested via interactions with others and how they assist in the generation of new identities. However, David Morley (1992) has warned against confusing the idea of power in interpreting texts (held by audiences) with the power over the construction and presentation of the text (held by media institutions). The range of options available to television audiences are circumscribed by the political, cultural, and economic contexts of production. He claims the focus on everyday consumption popular in recent audience theory tends to obscure the broader institutional frameworks of power – such that it is not so much ‘diffused’ (after Foucault) but ‘de-fused’.

The incomplete sense of belonging amongst diverse citizens in multicultural Australia is in part due to the failure of our ‘mediascapes’ to engage with cultural diversity. The ‘imagined community’ of nation, reflected and addressed by our media, is not generally imagined as diverse or polyglot. The lack of credible engagement with cultural diversity in Australian television storytelling has created a dislocated homogeneity in what Australians expect to see of themselves onscreen, divorced from experiences of everyday diversity. ‘Whiteness’ is still equated with the norm and, common to other societies where it symbolically dominates, ‘white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular’ (Dyer 1988, 44). As result, representations of cultural diversity are often experienced as jarring or disruptive, and carry a tremendous ‘burden of representation’ (Shohat and Stam 1994). Media portrayals of marginalized communities that have been either rendered invisible, essentialized, or demonized by prevailing discourses carry this burden, which is ‘at once religious, aesthetic, political and semiotic’ (81).

‘Interactive’ cultural diversity in a multicultural society (see Ang et al. 2006) requires common points of reference and mutual recognition in the mediated national imagination. These can be put to use by viewers in a range of ways, as evidenced by some of the responses in our study.

Methodology and study context
The findings of this study are, inevitably, limited by the approach. The methodology involved six focus groups, each of eight to ten respondents, held in Harris Park in western Sydney and Cammeray on Sydney’s north shore, Coburg in Melbourne, and the town of Griffith in NSW. Participants were grouped by broad identifiers (Arabic-speaking, culturally mixed) to explore tendencies in identification with representations of diversity. They were sourced in the various locations using snowball sampling through contacts in local migrant resource centres and cultural groups.

The model constructed a viewing experience and in doing so constructed an audience. Participants were sent the programmes and asked to watch them at home, in their usual domestic environments. They had time to reflect on them before the focus group discussions took place. Some had seen the series, at least in part, on SBS several months before the focus groups were held. Theorists have argued that being asked to reflect on a programme in itself transforms the audience experience (see Katz in Hay et al. 1996, 14).
As noted by Liebes and Katz (1993), ‘focus groups impel participants to think about and stay with the subject in a way that is surely not natural’ (28). As a result, the findings cannot claim to reflect situated and ‘everyday’ discussions of media or ‘TV talk’ in its true sense (see Gillespie 1995).

In a sense this analysis explores possible rather than actual engagement with television drama. It does not claim to provide a natural, contextualized reflection of ‘real’ audience responses to SBS programmes. It seeks to explore the kinds of sense-making, discussion, and relational understandings such programs can facilitate.

The ‘funnel’ method of open questions moving to specific discussions of programme content was used in the discussion guide. Initial questions about favourite programmes and whether participants tended to talk about TV programmes with others, were intended to encourage them to think about TV viewing in a social context. The facilitator prompted discussion of EastWest101 and, towards the end of the groups, raised more specific questions about cultural diversity on television, asking participants to describe a (real or imaginary) programme they felt represented Australian cultural diversity. Flow of conversation in a range of directions was encouraged, while the discussion guide allowed for some comparison between responses in different groups. No significant differences emerged based on location besides a tendency in the Melbourne and Griffiths groups to regard the ‘problems’ of Arab-Australians to reside in Sydney and excitement in the Sydney groups to see their city on screen.

Irena Costera Meijer and Joost de Bruin (2003) note that ‘even though TV fiction is fantasy, it does not stop viewers talking about it as if it were not’ (695). Understandings of social reality are mediated by fictional as well as factual content. In her analysis of audience responses to the soap opera Dallas, Ien Ang described the voluntary suspension of disbelief audiences use to engage with the situations and characters in a fictional text. She calls this engagement ‘emotional realism’ (Ang 1985). Jason Toynbee further describes how ‘through the development of story and character, fiction may show the social world with particular intensity and aptness’ which some ‘realists’ claim reveal truths about the underlying structure of society (Toynbee and Gillespie 2006, 190).

Drama allows for identification with characters and situations through the use of emotional realism, and an ‘entry’ in different worlds. Drama has the capacity to leave space for ambiguity, complexity, and ambivalent interpretations of characters’ motivations, flaws, and triumphs. The imaginary world allows for emotional connection and for viewers to empathize, shift loyalties, accept character reversals, and deal with complexity in developing individual ‘private’ interpretations of broader ‘public’ issues, such as issues of diversity and belonging in the context of the ‘war on terror’ covered in EastWest101.

‘The Enemy Within’: tragedy and tensions

The production team of EastWest101, Steve Knapman and Kris Wyld, have produced over 100 hours of crime drama for Australian television. When asked to do an SBS-type crime drama, they interpreted this as a brief to engage with cultural diversity, ‘to take risks and push boundaries’, and ‘to explore contemporary issues and conflicts in a fearless way’ (Wyld 2009). The writers on EastWest101 drew on culturally-diverse police ‘crime consultants’ and script advisors from Sydney’s west in a relationship that was ‘creative and fundamental’ to the series (Knapman 2008).

The police team in EastWest101, modelled on an actual (self-titled) ‘Wog Squad’ in western Sydney, comprises considerable cultural and gender diversity. According to casting director Christine King:
Casting EastWest101 was a very challenging experience, over 150 speaking roles from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. As a casting director I found it deeply satisfying to be able to empower so many non Anglo-Saxon actors by casting them in major roles, rather than in the background, and in stories which had some relevance to their own life experiences.

As Harvey May (2002) notes, continuing roles (rather than guest roles) allow for ‘multiple readings of character over time’ and mean that ‘a drama . . . may at different times ignore or explore the cultural histories of the diverse characters in it’ (12). Indeed, many of the backgrounds of obviously non-Anglo characters in the police team are left unexplored, hence naturalized, in EastWest101’s first series.

The casting, context, and settings of EastWest101 immediately reference a range of social and cultural issues. Street scenes filmed in Lakemba, showing shopfronts with multilingual signs, women in hijab, suburban trains passing in front of a mosque, constantly locate the narrative in the context of everyday Australian diversity. EastWest101’s handheld camerawork, unique point of view shots, urgent music, fast-paced editing, and intimate sound recording create a sense of the ‘hyper-real’ well known to crime drama viewers, described by Brunsdon (2000) as ‘grubby realism’ (209). Genre heightens what is different within familiar forms (Brunsdon 2000; Tulloch 2000). The casting of a Muslim detective, Zaine Malik (played by Don Hany, of Iraqi-Hungarian heritage), as the main hero character in EastWest101 disrupts the conventional cop show format, which tends to equate the source of threat or criminality with social ‘others’. Poynting et al. (2004) describe how, in Australian media, white police (protecting social order) are frequently represented in ‘clashes’ with Middle Eastern males (violent, inciting trouble) (34).

According to Tulloch (1990), the sense of realism in a police series is ‘offered up by moving between the public activity of policing and its private counterpart, the interior world of the police officer’s emotions’ (Tulloch 1990, 69–70). These dynamics ‘increasingly work to broker the relationship between the private and public spheres’ (Cunningham and Miller 1994, 14). Where this involves cultural dislocation, the contrast is heightened. EastWest101 moves between intimate family scenes and Malik’s work in law enforcement. According to actor Don Hany, ‘Detective Zane Malik is a conflicted man . . . he’s a father, a son, a husband and a detective and is also a Muslim working for an Anglo establishment. All of these things pull him in different directions’ (Hany 2009).

In ‘The Enemy Within’, episode one of EastWest101’s first series, conflict emerges from cultural confusion. Two young Lebanese teenagers, Talal Labban (Firass Dirani) and Ali Hussein (Fayssal Bazzi), are mistaken for armed robbers by police responding to a radio call for young men ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’. A scuffle ensues and one of the policemen is shot and killed. The young men run and are pursued by police who start rounding up all men of ‘middle eastern appearance’. Detective Malik attempts to use his links with the community to mitigate this heavy-handed approach, reassuring the missing Talal’s parents, ‘if he’s done nothing wrong, he has nothing to worry about.’

Malik tries to mediate between a community suspicious of authority and the disciplining power of policing. This meets the disgust of his fellow detective ‘hard’ Anglo Aussie cop Ray Crowley (William McInness) who accuses Malik of cultural bias: ‘they’re hoping their mate on the inside will get him off.’ Malik is constantly pulled between insider and outsider status. Ali warns Malik, ‘don’t they respect you, because at the end of the day you’re one of us.’

Frustrated by cultural and language barriers, initial police investigations uncover no witness accounts. Malik’s ability to communicate with an elderly Lebanese witness in Arabic provides a different account of the shooting, exonerating Talal, who is still on the
run from the police and increasingly desperate. When Malik literally ‘crosses over’ by speeding through a police line, he finds Talal cornered and fearful. Malik tells him, ‘You’re not a criminal,’ and Talal, clearer about his ‘criminalized’ position, replies, ‘I didn’t fly a plane into the World Trade Center either but they still think I’m a terrorist because I’m an Arab. They’ll never accept us, no matter what we do.’ Malik assures Talal he will be supported and coaxes him out of his retreat. Meanwhile, we hear a disembodied voice communicating with the police in the language of a hostage drama (‘we have a possible hostage situation’, ‘licence to use lethal force’). On stepping out of hiding, Talal is immediately shot and killed by police.

The cop who shot his partner in the initial melee and attempted to cover up by assigning blame to Talal and Ali, is disciplined. In a final scene which represents purification rituals at a mosque, Malik appears unable to reconcile his role in events, burdened by his failure to protect his community and his inability to make good his promise to Talal’s parents.

We don’t see in EastWest101 the kind of ‘sugar coating’ that much Australian television drama feels it needs to provide for audience when dealing with social issues (see Tulloch and Moran 1986). Nor do we see the triumph of uncomplicated ‘justice’ common to much crime drama. The programme offers a fragmented view of policing in a security culture in which police are enforcers, corruptors, and victims of power. The programme continually references suspicions of terrorism, as well as media coverage of the situation and pressure ‘from above’ in the police force. This portrayal reflects Hall’s description of the circularity of power, in which ‘everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power’s circulation. No one – neither its apparent victims not its agents – can stand wholly outside its field of operations’ (Hall 1997, 261). Even ‘good’ police are trapped by the limitations of ‘crime-fighting’ in a compromised civil society in which the ‘ends’ of security are seen to justify any means, including the excesses of disciplining power. These narratives provide exemplars of the Foucauldian theory of governmentality in which power is enacted through the bodies and self-regulation of citizens as ‘policing’ agents of state authority (Foucault 1979).

Charlotte Brunsdon claims a central question of contemporary crime drama is ‘who can police?’ (Brunsdon 2000). In ‘The Enemy Within’, Malik is confronted by his colleague Crowley’s aggressive assertion that ‘You’re either an Arab or a cop’. He is confined within an unresponsive system prone to racial profiling and undue force in the policing of marginalized communities in a post-9/11 world. Brunsdon (2000) notes that crime drama ‘stages the drama of the responsible citizen caught in the embrace of what increasingly seems an irresponsible state’ (197) in which ‘old fashioned certainties of law and order discourse’ are disrupted (198). Malik in EastWest101 embodies this crisis. He characterizes apparently irreconcilable tensions: of western systems of governance and heavy-handed ‘law and order’ on the one side; and Islamic faith, moral justice, family, and community on the other.

Responses: identification and recognition

There was, for some participants in our study, a sense of affirmation in having Australian diversity represented in the familiar form of a cop show, made ‘visible’ on screen. Several participants described their enjoyment of the programme as based on their ability to enter the worlds of the characters from different backgrounds furthering their understanding of practices of cultural ‘others’:

There’s… space there to introduce characters out of those communities…there’s also a scene were people are praying in a mosque, and washing themselves and all that
Many echoed this sentiment, expressing strong support for the normalization of everyday forms of difference, perhaps cued by the context of the discussion. Interestingly, representations of the rituals and practices of culture are here imbued with meaning and an ability to promote understanding in and of themselves, naturalized in the lives of sympathetic characters.

‘The Enemy Within’ also, however, continually reflects the precarious nature of Malik’s position in authority. Several of the participants of non-Anglo backgrounds in our groups expressed strong identification with this precarious and fragile identity and were moved to relate it to their own experience. The representation of a community treated harshly by law enforcement (including the family of one of the missing boys, Talal, forced out of their house in a raid) provided references with which respondents were able to construct subjectivities around their own experiences of cultural marginalization:

I’m an ethnic, so I relate to their stories.
Yes. I felt very upset, especially with the first episode. You can see there’s great stigma attached to these people in general, and being an immigrant, you don’t want it to happen to you, especially when they got this whole family to come out on their knees, that really touched me... (Females, Cammeray, mixed background and gender 40–65 age group, EastWest101)

The programme notes on the Knapman Wyld website state the intention of the series in narratively resolving the tension between insider and outsider through Malik’s ‘journey’:

‘In season one, Malik was confronted with a choice: “You’re either an Arab, or a cop. You’re either with them or with us.” Malik proved he was both.’ Some of the participants in our groups were not so confident with this resolution:

I think he represents the Arabic community. He represents Arabic men, because they’re very emotional.
When his friend said, ‘You’re either a cop or you’re an Arab,’ I totally agree. He cannot be both. He cannot be both... (Females, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking women 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

The claim that the character Malik ‘represents’ the Arabic community, specifically Arabic men, is interesting in the context of a group of Arabic-speaking women. This was not a consistently-held position in any group, and came in and out of discussions in all of the Arabic-speaking groups, perhaps due to a self-awareness of their position as grouped ‘respondents’ to a programme with a character of Arabic-speaking background. It is unexpected, however, that any of these respondents would identify with the position taken by the ‘racist’ character Crowley in denying Malik his place in authority, demanding he choose between his identities in occupying his role.

In another, younger, group, the tension represented in EastWest101 was in confronting a young (non-Muslim) female participant who worked for the police. She was clear in asserting her right to her position as a worker and citizen in a multicultural society:

And I was taken aback, in terms of, like, I’m a migrant, too, and I work for the police force. And if someone came up to me and said, ‘Look, you’re a migrant: you shouldn’t’ or ‘You have to be Australian to do what you’re doing,’ it’s like, ‘No. I don’t have to.’ (Female, Coburg, mixed background and gender 18–30 age group, EastWest101)

Many participants, such as the young woman referred to above, made comments which suggested they interpreted the programmes referentially, testing EastWest101 against their own understandings of social reality:
There is an air of realism, definitely, in the programme. It can happen. And because of what is happening... you can see it on the news, what’s happening in Lakemba. (Male, Cammeray, mixed background and gender 40–65 age group, EastWest101)

Referencing news and actual events have become part of the conventions of the television crime genre (Brunsdon 2000). EastWest101 continually nods to news media, in dialogue about headlines and visual references to events such as the Cronulla riots. It is intended to be read intertextually (see Hall 1997), against a backdrop of 9/11, Australian ‘terror’ raids, and the police shooting in a London subway of Jean Charles de Menezes. Many in our groups described the heightened drama of EastWest101 as apt or realistic when read against the current feeling of crisis between Islam and the West.

The over-reaction is real. That’s how the world is, reacting to a situation now. The Americans started it, and we’re exactly the same. So wherever there’s anything that could be potentially dangerous and if it’s to do with Muslims, it is over-reacting. (Female, Cammeray, mixed background and gender 40–65 age group, EastWest101)

The overt engagement with news discourses encouraged audiences to engage with questions of representation. In one scene, Malik despairs over a newspaper headline ‘Lakemba burns’ with an image of young Arab teenagers in front of a burning car, muttering, ‘Nothing like a favourable headline to help public relations.’ Many of our respondents from the Arabic-speaking groups seemed to have their own gauge of the ‘PR’ of their community front of mind in their responses to the programme.

Representation and ambivalence

Participants in our study were keenly aware that representations of Arab Australians in much media have been conflated with media panics about international terrorism and the ‘problems’ of cultural difference. As a result, there was a high level of vigilance about representation, particularly amongst Arabic-speaking respondents. Many felt their community had been ‘singled out’:

Yeah. Before September 11, it was worse. All people thought Arabs were Ali Baba, you know what I mean?... After September 11... there is terrorism, there is Iraq, and with Arabs it’s more than anybody else. (Male, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking men 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

Despite many endorsements of the ‘realism’ of the programme, some participants in our study from Arabic-speaking backgrounds expressed frustration with EastWest101. Several felt concerned by the failure of EastWest101 to offer a ‘positive enough’ representation of the Australian Arabic community. These men were keenly aware of the need for good ‘public relations’ for Arab-Australians:

I saw this, I felt that this is too much... because this is a big community, and professional people go to work, they don’t wear a scarf or anything. The media don’t want to focus on them. They focus on the things that people want to see. This is the way I don’t like it... I saw this one... They went with the stereotyping thing... Why do they have to... every time they go to this community, they see the Muslim community, they always have to show these people. They never speak English. (Male, Harris Park, Arabic speaking men 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

This man, an Iraqi-Australian self-described artist in his early fifties, expressed resistance to the depiction of a family who displayed obvious signs of Muslim faith and the elderly witness with poor English language skills. He appeared to feel uncomfortable with idea that ‘his’ community be represented by visible and notable signifiers of difference, as well as an equation between ‘Arab Australians’ and Muslim faith. He claimed this was not
‘representative’ and said he believed it was ‘racist’ to portray what he called a ‘vast community’ in this way. The same participant later said he felt the SBS satirical programme *Pizza*, which plays heavily on ethnic stereotypes, best depicted Australian diversity – perhaps indicating he was comfortable with selective representations in some contexts, but not others. Another participant in this group defended the representation:

I think because in the episode his character was someone who’s a practicing Muslim, he goes to mosque, and his wife is scarfed… which fits the stereotype, but it’s important because… an audience of different people see that… The message is not to give a polished image about Arab people, which is what we’d like to see, right? *(laughs)* (Male, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking men 31–55 age group, *EastWest101*)

It is interesting that, even in his defence of the programme, this respondent described (in a group of Muslim and non-Muslim participants) the representation of a Muslim family as a ‘stereotype’ and characters attending mosque and wearing hijab as challenging a preferred or ‘polished’ image of the Arabic community in Australia. Poynting et al. (2004) have noted how many non-Muslim Arab Australians have attempted to distance themselves from associations with Islam in the context of contemporary moral panics.

Many in the Arabic-speaking groups expressed concern for the way the programme may be viewed by others and the impact it would have on them. Several in the younger groups expressed dissatisfaction with the ending of the programme and Talal’s death, some saying it ‘ruined’ their experience of the programme. A couple of the younger participants expressed concern that the injustices represented would, while exposing them, have the effect of ‘increasing the hatred’ for those who saw Arab Australians and the authorities as inherently in conflict.

Well it’s good… because it’s showing a lot of things that happened in Australia between westerners and Muslims…. Our culture, yeah. Sad because…. what’s been happening between two cultures? You know what I mean… And I find that very bad because I wasn’t expecting something like that to be shown on TV… I think that it will increase the hatred between the two people. Yeah, because people think: they are treating the police officer like this because he’s an Arab, well what about us?…. so I think it will increase the racism between them. (Male, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking mixed gender 18–30 age group, *EastWest101*)

This concern reflected the sense of an ‘imagined community’ of others who were disenfranchised enough to be so influenced by the portrayals of injustice. These respondents identified with Zane in his experiences of discrimination even though he had made his way into a position of authority. A group of participants drew on the programme as evidence of situations they had ‘heard about’ through others.

Cops being racist. That’s what I’ve been told and the movie confirmed it. This thing could happen to you.
It’s life
Yeah it’s something normal.
Even though it’s sad. I don’t think these things should happen because after all we are all human beings. But it’s reality and you can’t change it. (Mixed respondents, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking mixed gender 18–30 age group, *EastWest101*)

The sense of futility and inability to change (mediated understandings of) reality suggest that these young participants felt disempowered in the context of media representations of injustice – however ‘true to life’ they believed they may be.

Some of the older female participants had a strong sense of the responsibility of media in this regard. They described concerns about cynicism and disengagement emerging
amongst younger Arab Australians if injustices, whether they occur in ‘real life’ or not, are represented on television:

When our kids, the youngsters I’m talking about – sixteen, seventeen, eighteen – see this programme, what do they think? ‘Oh, they hate me! Oh, they’re this and they’re that! What am I studying for? What the hell. I’ll take my degree and shove it against the wall. Why should I give this country more? Why should I give myself more?’

It shows real life, but we don’t want this. We need some change.

That’s why we need to act more positive. (Females, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking women 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

The desire for a happy ending, or a sense of optimism that could carry a message to a broader public, was carried throughout many of the groups. Despite the emphasis placed upon realism and credibility by many in the groups, there was a sense of a need to ‘act positive’, to imagine a way out of the frustration experienced in response to negative media portrayals.

(TV should show) the good things about these people…like, there’s thousands of Arab people, they have PhDs, Masters, whatever…I know it’s not interesting. Nobody’s going to watch it. (Males, Harris Park, Arabic speaking mixed gender 18–30 age group, EastWest101)

Participants in other groups concurred, describing a cynical awareness of the news- and drama-values that are used to address the assumed audience of television viewers. Several participants in these groups wearily noted that ‘nobody’s going to watch’ positive images of their community, assuming a disinterested or wilfully-puerile public.

The desire for positive portrayals amongst the Arabic-speaking groups is set against the broader desire for credibility through representations of social reality. Some participants rejected the call for more positive representations, such as this woman, who claimed that the ‘brave’ grubby realism of the series enabled a better representation of social reality than is normally filtered out in the ‘happy’ world of television:

What’s nice about this one is that it’s brave. It’s politically incorrect. They show the cursing and discrimination, ‘bloody Arab’ and things. Things that are happening but you won’t see it on the normal, ‘happy happy’. (Female, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking women 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

One participant expressed a passionate support for the ability of this kind of programming to convey a broader social message, while accepting the limitations of representations in television formats:

It’s about raising an issue so that people can talk about it, and discuss it…so that people can relate to it, you know. It might not satisfy us all, of course, and it won’t…look, at the end of the day, you’re not going to satisfy everyone. (Male, Harris Park, Arabic speaking men 31–55 age group, EastWest101)

Conclusion

EastWest101 is an example of what John Mepham (1990) has called ‘usable stories’ – stories which can assist us to ‘make imaginatively informed choices and responses to other people’ and to ‘articulate our feelings and aspirations’ (60). It provides an example, particularly important in a charged, culturally-diverse environment, of media as ‘resources for talk, for recognition, identification, and incorporation as we measure, or do not measure, our images and our lives against those we see on the screen’ (Silverstone 1999, 18).

The central tension in EastWest101, of Detective Malik navigating a personal moral position within the enforcement of state power, led, among our participants, to overtly political readings often related to their own experiences. General frustrations with media
representations amongst the Arabic-speaking respondents in our study had been continually compounded by negative portrayals in the climate of a ‘war on terror’. Responses from Arabic-speaking participants indicated they believed this context had a major impact on the way other Australians perceived them. Perhaps because of this value-charged and antagonistic media environment, our study revealed significant fears of the consequences of misrepresentation for Muslim participants and concerns about the readings others may take from EastWest101 (see also Costera-Meijer and de Bruin 2003 for correlations with a study of Dutch respondents).

Of course, ‘positive’ portrayals of diversity must be balanced with pleasure and engagement amongst highly media-literate audiences, as well as, in this context, the basic crime genre requirements for conflict. As these young Arabic-speaking respondents put it:

You can’t have nice all the time it gets boring…
I think if everything we show on TV is love and respect I don’t think that’s good TV. (Mixed respondents, Harris Park, Arabic-speaking 18–30 age group, EastWest101)

Others agreed that ‘no-one would watch’ TV drama that merely represented positive stories as it makes for unexciting content. Additionally, unproblematized ‘positive’ representations of easily-consumable, non-threatening difference can obscure social inequality (see the Jhally and Lewis 1992 analysis of The Cosby Show). Idealized representations of communities can mask discrimination. It may be that entertainment genres are unable to act as uncomplicated or idealized forms of cultural diplomacy. Often what engages us in drama – conflict and tension – are elements we may fear make for ‘bad PR’. The positive mundane elements of everyday experience may simply make for ‘boring’ TV.

The tendency to take issue with representations of cultural difference may be, according to Harvey May (2002) evidence of ‘the “hair trigger sensitivity” which surrounds the issue of representation and cultural diversity’ (11). Audience studies such as Jacqueline Bobo’s (1995) analysis of responses to The Colour Purple amongst black American women have revealed that audiences are able to use ‘imperfect’ texts to navigate their own personal histories. TV talk itself can be ‘active and productive’, even if it is around resources and within contexts which are not necessarily of the audience’s choosing (Morley 1992).

Participants in the non-Arabic-speaking groups were less preoccupied with the need for ‘positive’ representations of cultural diversity in Australia. They tended to focus on the possibilities for cross-cultural understanding generated through EastWest101’s representations of difference. Their responses to the programme generally emphasized the educative possibilities of TV drama, especially where an emotional connection to characters of different cultural backgrounds was made.

EastWest101, now winner of several Australian and international drama awards, is currently in production for its third season. Ang et al. (2008) wrote of EastWest101 in The SBS Story, ‘As long as SBS delivers programs such as this, it will prove that it can continue to play a leadership role in familiarising Australians with their own real diversity’ (14). The importance of normalizing, familiarizing, and exploring elements of diversity in media cannot be underestimated.

Dramatic treatments of difficult subjects create opportunities for viewers to work through anxieties about cultural difference. Even, or perhaps especially, in the context of dominant discourses about cultural ‘threat’, violence, criminality, and insecurity, the response must include telling stories which engage with the challenging elements of cultural difference. Such stories can provide a common vocabulary and set of references with which to discuss and connect with others about difficult issues. The ambivalent and sometimes contradictory responses that emerged in our focus groups provided useful
starting points for exploring the complex navigation of meaning in a media-saturated, multicultural society. For all the limitations of representation in ‘watchable’ television drama, SBS should continue to provide ‘usable stories’ via challenging multicultural content as they are valuable resources for participation and cultural citizenship.

Notes on contributor
Georgie McClean is the Manager of Policy and Research for SBS.

References
Usable stories:
Responses to cultural diversity in SBS dramas
*East West 101* and *The Circuit*

Report produced for the Special Broadcasting Service, September 2008

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About this Report
This summarises findings from a study of audience responses, focused on cultural diversity, to SBS commissioned drama series *East West 101* and *The Circuit*,

It draws on work by research agency Entertainment Insights (commissioned by SBS) who conducted the audience focus groups and interviewed the program producers. This research has already been:
- quoted in the SBS Triennial Funding Submission, speeches by the Managing Director and corporate documents;
- provided to stakeholders in abbreviated form;
- provided as a form of market research to the program producers; and

I have since re-analysed the original data in attempting an understanding of the responses which draws on audience theory. The initial stage of my analysis was provided to producers and circulated to content decision makers within SBS. These were discussed with the producers and commissioning editors in meetings towards the end of 2008 while the second series of both programs were still in production.

Findings Summary

- Audiences express strong support for representations of cultural diversity on screen.
- Representations of cultural ‘difference’ are seen as affirming and validating identities and personal experiences in culturally diverse Australia.
- Understandings of social reality are mediated by fictional as well as factual media.
- Audiences interpret and respond to drama through the lens of its relationship to reality.
- Representation of cultural diversity and ‘difficult’ subjects in drama contribute to audience perceptions of the ‘realism’ and impact of the content.
- Responses to culturally specific representations included high levels of ambivalence.
- Cultural diversity in Australian drama represents a disruption in what Australians expect to see of themselves on screen.
- Audience responses to dramas revealed individual and varying interpretations of characters’ motivations, flaws and triumphs.
- Drama has the capacity to activate thinking and feeling in powerful ways, frequently expressed in terms of understanding and empathy.
- Representations of cultural diversity in drama can offer a catalyst for discussion and debate about important issues in multicultural Australia.
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Study Context
According to its Charter, the principal function of SBS is to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ via multilingual and multicultural television and radio services and ‘reflect Australia’s multicultural society’. The Charter also contains specific obligations to promote ‘understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people’ and ‘increase awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of Australian society’. These requirements reflect social policy objectives to engender greater social harmony and mutual understanding through media. The SBS Charter has been interpreted in multiple ways over time. Most recently, there has been a new emphasis on development of Australian content, including drama, in order to reflect Australia’s multicultural society.

Australian television drama has generally been slow to engage with Australia’s cultural diversity. The Reporting Diversity research projects found that most representations of cultural diversity in Australian media conformed to “bad, sad or other” stereotypes (Phillips and Tapsall 2005). Harvey May in his analysis Broadcast in Colour: Cultural Diversity and Television Programming in Four Countries (2002) noted there has been a gradual shift from a ‘performed’ ethnicity to an ‘everyday’ portrayal in Australian television but this has not kept pace with the diversity of Australian society. Today almost a quarter of Australians were born overseas and, of the Australian-born, more than a quarter had at least one parent born outside Australia (ABS 2008).

This study, focused on case studies of SBS-commissioned drama series East West 101 and The Circuit, explored the way audiences respond to SBS content, particularly representations of cultural diversity. Drawing on a wide range of perspectives, including from ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ cultural groups represented in each series, the study sought to give a deeper sense of audience engagement than is afforded by basic ratings metrics. As far as possible, the study sought to ‘test out’ some of the social policy objectives implicit in SBS programming.

This report analyses some of the kinds of meaning generated around The Circuit and East West 101 by participants in a series of focus groups.
Program descriptions

The Circuit
Six part drama *The Circuit* was commissioned by SBS and produced by Ross Hutchens and Colin South for Media World Pictures. *The Circuit* is set in the Kimberley region and follows a travelling circuit court magistrate in the remote communities of northern Western Australia. *The Circuit* was co-funded by SBS Independent, ScreenWest and the Film Financing Corporation. At time of writing, it is in production on its second series.

The series explores the social problems of the area, including conflicts between white law and black lore in remote communities. The main character Drew Ellis (played by Aaron Pederson) is a ‘city black’ lawyer who arrives in Broome to ‘give something back’ but finds this is much more complex than he anticipated.

*The Circuit*, which screened on SBS Television from 8 July to 12 August 2007, is the first Australian drama series where Indigenous Australians have taken a lead in co-producing, writing, and directing. The production process saw the filmmakers engage with the local community, use Indigenous writers and co-producers and provide cross-cultural training to the cast and crew.

*The Circuit* won the 2007 HREOC Human Rights Television Award, awarded by the judges “because of the way the production remains engaging and educational, while addressing a range of social issues in a nuanced and powerful manner that does not preach to the audience”.

East West 101
SBS crime drama series *East West 101*, produced by Steve Knapman and Kris Wyld, ran for six weeks on SBS from 6 December 2007. It was commissioned by SBS Television with support from the Film Finance Corporation and the New South Wales Film and Television Office. SBS has committed to a second series of the drama.

*East West 101* is a fictionalised portrayal of an actual multicultural crime squad of detectives based in Sydney’s western suburbs, two of whom acted as script advisors on the series. The central character is Muslim detective Zane Malik (played by Don Hany) who struggles to balance his role as a police officer with the loyalties he feels to his family and community, his fellow detectives in the squad are played by, among others, William McInnes, Aaron Fa’aoso and Susie Porter. *East West 101* portrays conflict between cultures and personalities in the midst of the broader social issues of crime and law enforcement in multicultural Western Sydney.

*East West 101* has won various awards including: the 2008 AFI award for Best TV Miniseries, the 2008 Australian Writers’ Guild award for Best Mini Series Scripts, a Gold New York Film and Television Award for television drama and an Australian Humanitarian Award from Altruism Australia. The series has been sold on networks in Israel and countries throughout the Middle East.

While these programs differed from one another in content, production and approach, they each attempted to address contemporary social issues related to cultural diversity in dramatic form. Responses to both series have been grouped together thematically to attempt to tell a larger story about audience responses to representations of diversity and ‘difficult subjects’ more generally.
Approach

Study Model
This project involved several stages of development and analysis. The fieldwork was commissioned on behalf of SBS from research agency Entertainment Insights. I attended all focus groups as an observer. The initial findings from the focus group discussions, along with conversations with producers, were collated into a topline report for SBS (‘Audience and Industry Engagement report’). I then developed a secondary, more detailed analysis of the focus group transcripts drawing on theory and literature on audiences and television drama. This was shared with producers, who made comment. The final version has produced this report (for SBS and the Doctorate of Cultural research) and an academic article (published in the media, culture and policy journal Continuum in 2011). Findings from this study have been used in SBS corporate communications and arguments for greater funding for Australian drama. The findings also informed the development of subsequent series of each program.

Focus Group Descriptions
Twelve focus groups were used to gather audience responses, divided between the two case study programs. The age bands used in recruitment were relatively large (‘younger’ 18 to 30 years old and ‘older’ 31 to 55 years old), and groups tended to vary across the spectrum. Several of the groups were single gender and some were mixed. Three focus groups were recruited to a brief of ‘Arabic-speaking background’ to discuss East West 101. Three groups with Indigenous Australian participants – conducted by an Indigenous facilitator – discussed The Circuit. While ‘Arabic-speaking’ and ‘Indigenous Australian’ are not unproblematic categories – each contained diversities of experience and identification – they are frequently assumed to be a single category in media discourses about Australian diversity and social ‘problems’ (see Poynting, Noble et al. 2004) and this study sought to explore these issues of representation in relation to the case study programs. The remaining six

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1 SBS Commissioning team: Georgie McClean, Manager of Policy and Research and Emelia Millward, SBS Audience Insights Manager
groups, divided between the programs, included participants from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, many of whom were first generation migrants to Australia. Groups were held in Parramatta (West) and Cammeray (North Shore) Sydney, Coburg in Melbourne and Griffith in regional NSW.

Participants were recruited through random telephone surname samples, with the help of local Multicultural Resource Centres and via snowball sampling of contacts. The groups were held in focus group facilities in Sydney and Melbourne and at a conference centre in Griffith and an Aboriginal community centre in Sydney. The focus groups were based on a constructed viewing experience. The series had both aired on SBS several months before the research was commissioned, so it would have been difficult to recruit ‘natural’ audiences of the programs and impossible to conduct a non-constructed ethnography of their ordinary viewing practices. A week or so prior to each group, the participants were posted a DVD of two episodes of either series and asked to watch them and record their initial thoughts in a pre-task work booklet before attending the group. A percentage of each group had seen some or all of the content on television when it screened. Significant proportions of participants chose to watch (or re-watch) the DVD with family and friends, although others viewed it alone.

The focus groups each commenced with general discussion of television viewing practices and questions about whether the participants tended to talk about what they watched on television and who with. Conversations were then shifted by the facilitator to the program in question and responses to them, eventually moving to representations of cultural diversity on television and what kinds of programs do, or could, best reflect Australian cultural diversity.

One of the limitations of this study model was that it relied on self-description of reported discussions and constructed conversations in focus groups, rather than observation through a detailed ethnography, which may have provided a more ‘natural’ image of audience responses.

**Analysis**

This report applies some key scholarship in the field of critical audience theory in its analysis of responses in these focus groups to SBS drama series, particularly as they relate to representations of cultural diversity.

Audience theory tells us media is social. It is understood through interpretation and interaction. Marie Gillespie’s work on ‘TV talk’ has explored how meanings of media texts are negotiated and contested via interactions with others and how they assist in the generation of new identities (Gillespie 1995). Roger Silverstone asserts that “experiences are real, even media experiences” (Silverstone 1999: 9) and describes how narratives interact with ‘everyday discourses’ of gossip, rumours and casual interactions interdependently to ‘frame and measure experience’ (Silverstone 1999: 11). These frameworks are useful for developing understandings of what John Hartley has described as the simultaneously individual experience and collective behaviour of television viewing (Hartley 1992).

The experience of viewing and interpreting television is interwoven with social and political roles in a range of ways (Katz and Liebes, 1993: 20). Audiences draw on their own personal experiences, histories and identities in generating meaning out of television content. Drama provides audiences with the opportunity “to put the actions and interactions of human beings into perspective, both socially and culturally” (Costera-Meijer and de Bruin 2003) and relate them to actual political issues and
their own interpretations of social problems. This is important in thinking about how television representations of cultural diversity influence or motivate viewers in multicultural society. This report explores how participants in our studies related to portrayals of cultural diversity. In doing so, the analysis draws on the work on difference and representation of Stuart Hall (1997) and the concept developed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) of the ‘burden of representation’ imposed on ‘texts’ (programs) which disrupt dominant ways of portraying cultural difference.

Drawing on discussions in the groups, the analysis suggests that the programs provided resources around which audiences could develop understanding, empathies, identifications or reactions which assisted them to negotiate their responses to important social issues. The dramas in this study provide examples of media as “…resources for talk, for recognition, identification, and incorporation as we measure, or do not measure, our images and our lives against those we see on the screen” (Silverstone 1999: 18). These resources are particularly important around ‘difficult subjects’ in a complex multicultural society. John Mepham (1990: 60) has called such resources ‘usable stories’ which can assist us to “make imaginatively informed choices and responses to other people” and to “articulate our feelings and aspirations”. This study explored how audiences have articulated their responses to these programs as catalysts for conversations about multicultural society.
Key Findings:
- Audiences express strong support for representations of cultural diversity on screen
- Representations of cultural 'difference' are seen as affirming and validating identities and personal experiences in culturally diverse Australia

Normalisation
Australian television, in general, has failed to reflect the everyday cultural diversity of most Australian neighbourhoods (May 2002). When asked what an outsider might think after being exposed to Australian TV for one week, a young woman in a group in western Sydney said: “How come there are so many whites on TV but when you walk down the street there are so many people from different cultures?” (younger, mixed gender CALD group, Parramatta The Circuit)

One of the common supporting arguments for cultural diversity on TV is that it ‘normalises’ difference. The idea is that exposure to cultural difference both demystifies and develops understanding of cultural difference. This is supported by much audience theory, as writers about television frequently describe how it plays a critical role in the development of values and preconceptions in contemporary societies. According to David Hesmondhalgh (2007), media generate “meaning and understandings of an individual’s ‘lifeworld’ unrivalled by any other form of relationship, communication or production”. John Mepham (1990: 60) further argues that representations on television assist in the development of “social self-understanding” through interpretation and sense-making. Hermes and Adolfsson (2007: 12) have claimed this work of interpretation is based on an ongoing process of comparison and evaluation, which form a crucial part of the development of individual and collective identity.

Resources for identification and comparison and evaluation are limited when cultural diversity is under-represented or only represented in limited ways. Many participants in our groups expressed the view that there was a need to have the stories of migrant or Indigenous Australia represented as important and valid subjects of programming on Australian television. This was seen as essential to feeling ‘part of’ Australia and having the contributions of diverse Australians recognised, rather than marginalised.

Because that’s part of the community. We’re not just a tiny little speck in the corner. I think we’ve all probably had quite an impact on the community in Australia.
(older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray East West 101)

The kind of validation this respondent appears to be seeking can be understood as part of a ‘politics of recognition’ in which all cultures are designated of equal worth in a multicultural society (Baumann 1999). Recognition and validation are important for a sense of belonging in a diverse society. Toby Miller, in his work on cultural citizenship, warns “we are in a crisis of belonging, a population crisis of who, what, when and where. More and more people are seeking to belong and more and more people are not counted as belonging”. This crisis, he says, is “…both registered and held in check… through practices of government, consumption, risk and moral panic in popular culture, specifically television” (Miller 2007: 1). In essence, media discourses and modes of address can make you feel that you belong, or can prevent you from doing so.

It is still rare to see images of mosques or remote Indigenous communities on Australian television outside news and current affairs content, and as such they
reference ‘moral panics’ – discourses of criminality and dysfunction (Bullimore 1999; Poynting, Noble et al. 2004). Poynting, Noble et al. draw on Cohen’s (1973) formulation of ‘moral panic’ in describing a process by which an entire cultural group may be “…identified and made subject to public debate and sustained media coverage” and cast as a generalised social threat. (Poynting, Noble et al. 2004: 6).

An Aboriginal Australian woman in Griffith expressed a desire to see simply ‘normal’ representations of Koori families in a soap opera or familiar TV format to counteract common misconceptions (for example, perceptions that all Indigenous Australians are unemployed and dispossessed).

I’d like a show where it shows where our people do own our homes, we do work, we have deadly cars and things like that, cause they have all this…Home and Away, Neighbours and all that stuff, but where are the Koori families that live in them towns?
(older, Indigenous Australian women group, Griffith The Circuit)

Television content which ‘leaves out’ the cultural diversity of Australia was described by the CALD respondents in many of the groups in this study as leading them to feel excluded, or ‘not part of Australia’.

facilitator: What would happen if the only shows that were on Australian TV were things like Neighbours and Home and Away?
(It’d be) boring
I’d feel left out of the world.
…Not part of Australia. We are left out of the culture. The only part of Arab Australia is like, shown on the news when something [bad] is happening.
(younger, Arabic-speaking background group, Parramatta East West 101)

Others expressed the view that content which normalised representation of Arab Australians could counter negative representations of these communities as ‘terrorist threats’, a representation that is continually reinforced by many Australian media portrayals.

I thought it was sort of giving a different perspective … I think there’s a bit of propaganda coming in the Western world, where they say, you know… that all Middle Eastern people are terrorists, that kind of thing. And that episode seemed to be saying that not all people – Middle Eastern people – are [like] that. They’re just normal like everyday people.
(younger, mixed gender CALD group, Coburg East West 101)

The work of countering prevailing discourses is a heavy responsibility for dramas which engage with diversity. Shohat and Stam (1994) have described this as the ‘burden of representation’, a concept explored later in this report.

A young Muslim woman from Melbourne welcomed the everyday representations of Muslims East West 101 as lessening the pressure to continually explain or ‘speak for’ her community or religious practices, providing an example of media as a resource for ‘living together in difference’ (Ang 2008).

You’re just going to see that they’re ordinary people… It’s like my friends: they didn’t know any Muslims before I started working there, and now they understand Muslims way better, and, you know, it’s just something normal to them. Like, we have to pray five times a day, and whatever. And they see me go in a room and pray… So if you’re watching a person on TV… it becomes normal… No one is, like, ‘What is she doing?’
(younger, mixed gender CALD group, Coburg East West 101)
Several respondents in the Indigenous groups felt that *The Circuit* went some way towards filling the major gap in representations of Indigenous Australians, expressing support for the centralisation of contemporary Indigenous experience in the drama:

It’s good to get away from the whole “noble savage” issue that the media has with blackfellas.

(younger, Indigenous Australian group, Petersham *The Circuit*)

It’s contemporary, it’s about what’s going on now
Yes, about our people, instead of us watching *Underbelly*, or this ... some of them shows we can’t relate to them, but to this we can.
Yes, and all them Aboriginal faces, sometimes you see a couple sprinkled throughout the shows, but this was more.

(older, Indigenous Australian women group, Griffith *The Circuit*)

For some respondents, the obvious visibility of cultural difference in the programs was experienced as affirming and validating. When talking about *East West 101* this (Muslim) respondent voiced support for and described relating to anything constructive to do with Islam in Australian media, and voiced support for such programs:

I probably love it because it was about Muslims and that’s why I was interested in watching it. That would have been the main thing, for me. It’s because I can relate to it, and ... I do watch anything about Muslims. SBS gets a lot of that stuff, and *Insight*, or whatever: if it is about Muslims or Islam, I am interested and I do watch it.

(younger, mixed gender CALD group Coburg, *East West 101*)

Comments like the one above seem to go beyond the recognition of cultural diversity through normalisation. Such responses seem to reflect a strong desire for validation through content which is in some way ‘about them’. The following comment, from an Arabic-speaking woman, described a sense of satisfaction and ‘relief’ at finally seeing experiences she could identify with on Australian television:

I was satisfied watching it, because it’s an acknowledgement that things have happened to you, and you can talk about it. Like... if it happened to you, you must feel relief that someone is showing you some kinds of things, trauma you went through, and an acknowledgement of that.

(older, Arabic speaking women group, Parramatta *East West 101*)

There was a widespread sense, amongst the study participants, that popular media have a unique ability to validate experiences by portraying and interpreting them. This lends weight to the idea promoted by Joke Hermes that “for most of us, popular cultural texts (including television series) are far more real than national politics” (Hermes 2005: 1). Some of the respondents were reading these representations for how others would interpret them and imagining their possible impacts:

I think that it humanizes us. It brings us back to human beings, and our suffering as well, because lots of us suffer in different aspects... because as Arabs sometimes we could be discriminated against in schools or outside in the streets...

(older, Arabic speaking women group, Parramatta *East West 101*)

This notion that storytelling ‘humanising’ Others (or, in this case, the self) in a culturally diverse society so that diverse cultural groups can learn to live together is supported by Ghana-born philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in his work entitled *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of Strangers* (2007):

Why, you might ask, should we care how other people think and feel about stories?
Why do we talk about them in this language of value? One answer is that it is just part of being human. People tell stories and discuss them in every culture, and we know they have done so as far back as the record goes. The 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', the 'Epic of Gilgamesh', the 'Tale of Genji', the Ananse stories I grew up with in Asante, weren't just read or recited: they were discussed, evaluated, referred to in everyday life.

Beyond the impact of ‘diverse faces on screen’ in recognising and affirming cultural diversity, the following sections of this report explore how representations of cultural difference in drama may be “discussed, evaluated and referred to” by audiences negotiating responses to Australian multiculturalism. As Stuart Hall has noted “Difference has been marked. How it is then interpreted is a constant and recurring preoccupation in the representation of people who are racially and ethnically different from the majority population. Difference signifies. It ‘speaks’” (Hall 1997: 230). The centrality of cultural diversity to the programs in this study disrupts some of the usual approaches to story, character and the imagined audience, engaging with a range of problems of representation.
Key Findings:

- Understandings of social reality are mediated by fictional as well as factual media.
- Audiences interpret and respond to drama through the lens of its relationship to reality.

‘Realism’

‘Realism’ was frequently described by our participants as offering them a greater sense of connection with content. In fact, realism was consistently volunteered as one of the strongest elements of the programs explored in the focus groups. It was expressed as a kind of ‘test’ or benchmark for credibility, applied by audiences to determine their willingness to engage with the content, connect with the characters and reflect on the narratives and messages of the program.

For me personally, when I watch SBS programs I feel like I’m close to real life more than with other channels. Just like this program we watched. It’s like real life.

(older, Arabic speaking women group Parramatta East West 101)

I think making it real… captured my attention. I watched the first five episodes in one night, and I had to go to work the next day. I stayed up ’til about three in the morning. I wanted to see more and more and more, just because it was so real. Yeah, I think that’s what made this one so interesting too. It’s a real topic that I wanted to know more about.

(older, mixed gender CALD group, Coburg The Circuit)

There has been much debate amongst media theorists about the nature of ‘realism’ in media forms and the use of this term. Irena Costera Meijer and Joost de Bruin note that “even though TV fiction is fantasy, it does not stop viewers talking about it as if it were not” (Meijer and de Bruin 2003: 695). This was evidenced through the comments in our groups such as this one:

It was like you were watching something that was real. It wasn’t made up, or it didn’t seem far fetched. It was probably the real story of what happens every day…

(older, mixed gender CALD group, Coburg The Circuit)

In her influential analysis of audience responses to the then popular soap opera Dallas, Ien Ang described the voluntary suspension of disbelief audiences use to engage with the situations and characters in fictional television. She calls this engagement ‘emotional realism’ (Ang, 1985). Drama allows for identification with characters and situations through the use of emotional realism, and an ‘entry’ in different worlds.

The ‘switching’ between discussion of fictional worlds and reality – evidenced through many of our focus group discussions – was classified by Liebes and Katz (1993) as ‘referential readings’ in which viewers continually assess their responses to fictional content in relation to personal experiences. The ‘realist illusion’ is carefully constructed through media content (including news content) to maintain credibility with audiences. Jason Toynbee describes how these constructions can be taken by some as revealing ‘truths’ about society:

…through the development of story and character, fiction may show the social world with particular intensity and aptness…” which some ‘realists’ claim reveal truths about the underlying structure of society. (Toynbee and Gillespie 2006: 190).
This ‘intensity’ and ‘aptness’ highlights conflict, transformation and revelation in social relationships to create drama based on a kind of ‘heightened reality’. Some responses in our groups appeared to support this idea, describing the heightened drama of *East West 101*, for example, as appropriate to the current feeling of crisis between Islam and the West.

The over-reaction is real. That’s how the world is, reacting to a situation now. The Americans started it, and we’re exactly the same. So wherever there’s anything that could be potentially dangerous and if it’s to do with Muslims, it *is* over-reacting. People do, I think. That’s how it’s become. It’s like red lights coming on, flash! Danger! They do over-react.

(older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray *East West 101*)

Another acknowledged how the stories represented in *East West 101* intersect with messages from other forms of media:

There is an air of realism, definitely, in the program. It can happen. And because of what is happening… you can see it on the news, what’s happening in Lakemba.

(older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray *East West 101*)

Referencing news and actual events has become part of the conventions of the television crime genre (Brunsdon 2000). *East West 101* continually nods to news media, in dialogue about headlines and visual references to events such as the Cronulla riots. It is intended to be read intertextually (see: Hall 1997), against a backdrop of September 11, the police shooting in a London subway of Jean Charles de Menezes, Cronulla. *The Circuit*, similarly, references the Federal Intervention, the One Nation movement and common positions in public debates about social welfare for Indigenous communities.

The overt engagement with news discourses encouraged audiences to engage with questions of representation. In one *East West 101* scene, lead character Malik despairs over a newspaper headline ‘Lakemba burns’ with an image of young Arab teenagers in front of a burning car, muttering, “Nothing like a favourable headline to help public relations”. This overt intertextuality – in which a text draws on “an accumulation of meaning across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images” (Hall 1997: 232) – encourages audiences to engage with and interpret the programs in relation to familiar media discourses and their own personal experiences.

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2 Lakemba is a part of Sydney with a high Arabic-speaking population, often featured in news reports about the Sydney Muslim community.

3 The Cronulla ‘riots’ comprised violence between groups of (mainly) young men, one group identifying as nationalistic ‘Aussies’ and the other identified as of Middle-eastern heritage.

4 The ‘Federal Intervention’ was commenced in 2007, with Australian Federal police and medical teams taking residence in remote indigenous communities in response to concerns about widespread sexual abuse of children in these communities.
Key Finding:
- Responses to culturally specific representations included high levels of ambivalence.

Identification and Ambivalence
Some participants described identifying with characters they saw in *The Circuit* or *East West 101* because they touched on elements of their own experiences. For example, this Indigenous woman identified with the treatment in *The Circuit* of central character Drew Ellis, a ‘city black’ returning to country:

…I could see he was the outsider. When the Koori was in the pub in the cowboy hat and the other lawyer were calling him ‘coconut’ [black outside, white inside], I had a giggle to myself, because I have been called a coconut before… I’m blacker than they will ever be, but I am still not black in their eyes. It made me laugh.

(older, Indigenous Australian women group, Griffith *The Circuit*)

This form of identification extended across cultural groups to more general experiences of cultural difference. For example, young woman from a migrant background identified with the struggle of Drew to find and reconnect with his culture:

He was out of touch with his background, his culture…like, he doesn’t know anything about his culture, so he goes back there to figure out who he is, sort of thing. I find that, because I was born overseas but I came here so young that, like, I think the Australian way is great, but I sometimes get out of touch with my culture…

(younger, mixed gender CALD group, Parramatta *The Circuit*)

In some cases, this identification led to a sense of frustration, particularly where the injustices represented felt close to home. In response to the depiction of a police raid on the home of an Iraqi family in *East West 101*, a woman of a (non-Arabic) migrant background said:

I felt very upset, especially with the first episode. You can see there’s great stigma attached to these people in general, and being an immigrant, you don’t want it to happen to you, especially when they got this whole family to come out on their knees, that really touched me…

(older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray *East West 101*)

Some participants in this study expressed identification with *East West 101* based on their own experiences of conditional citizenship and frustrations with the experience of migration and settlement in a new society.

For me personally, I thought it was powerful, because we all are struggling here… with our trauma and torture background. We came here as a refugee, we want to say, “We are here now. We want to leave the past.” But we can clash with Western society, we are different… they look down at you. You don’t understand things.

(older, Arabic speaking women group, Parramatta *East West 101*)

Some of the comments appeared to reflect what Hermes and Adolfsson (2007) refer to as the ‘pain of multiculturalism’ – experiences of social exclusion, racism, prejudice and dislocation.

It [*East West 101*] shows the real discrimination. It shows how people from other nationalities are treated…

(older, Arabic speaking women group, Parramatta *East West 101*)
Ang suggests identification through the ‘melodramatic imagination’ allows audiences to process the “ordinary pain of living of ordinary people” (Ang, 1985: 80). In this case, the identification appeared to be strongest with those who could relate to experiences of marginalisation in a multicultural society. This frustration can be read as emerging from social exclusion in multicultural societies in which the “fantasy of tolerance” masks ongoing social inequalities (Hage, 1998).

Several in the younger Arabic speaking groups expressed concern that the injustices represented would ‘increase the hatred’ in society as the storyline, in this reading, reaffirmed the aggrieved sense that authorities such as the police and Muslim Australians were inherently in conflict.

Well it’s good like... because it’s showing a lot of things that happened in Australia. Between Westerners and Muslims.... Our culture yeah. Sad because.... I mean it’s bad because [of] what’s been happening between two cultures, you know what I mean? ... And I find that very bad because I wasn’t expecting something like that to be shown on TV. To be honest with you it’s a bit... how should I say this (long pause, looks at the ceiling) I think that it will increase the hatred between the two [groups of] people... because people think: they are treating the police officer like this... because he’s an Arab, well what about us?.. so I think it will increase the racism between them.

(younger, mixed gender Arabic speaking group, Parramatta East West 101)

Concern about the impact of the content, particularly on others, was prevalent amongst many participants, particularly the Arabic-speaking groups. There was a high level of vigilance about the representation of the Arabic community in Australia and, although there was a sense of the importance of their presence on Australian screens, some participants expressed concerns about the manner of representation.

I saw this, I felt that this is too much...because this is a big community, and professional people go to work, they don’t wear a scarf or anything. [The media] don’t want to focus on them. They focus on the things that people want to see. This is the way I don’t like it.... I saw this one...They went with the stereotyping thing.

(older, Arabic speaking men group, Parramatta East West 101)

Another respondent in the same group explained the issue of representation of Sydney’s Arabic speaking community had been actively discussed within his network of contacts. There was a strong sense that positive stories about Arab communities were rare and that the communities were being unfairly targeted:

... the Italian community is the same. The Croatian community... There is a bright side, but media shows you the bad thing. After September 11, now terrorism... There is terrorism, there is Iraq, and with Arabs it’s more than anybody else.

(older, Arabic speaking men group, Parramatta East West 101)

One participant in the older male Arabic speaking group described the representation in East West 101, as ‘racist’ for failing to represent enough of the positive elements of the Arabic community he sought to see.

Not only me. All my friends said the same thing. “Oh, this is racist!” Because they try to expose, or try to air something, that is really narrowly describing a community in such a way. Rather, it’s a vast community.... I’m telling you. Every day for the past six months or a year, every week there’s something on TV against us. For reason or no reason. So, it’s just like it fits the criteria. It fits the theme exactly.

(older, Arabic speaking men group, Parramatta East West 101)

This man’s anger about the representation of ‘Arabs’ in Australian media is understandable in the context of contemporary moral panics about Islam. Media coverage and political discourse in Australia have criminalised ‘the Arab’ via a
“...series of cycles of moral panic which have centred around those of Arabic-speaking background and especially, but not exclusively, those of Muslim faith” (Poynting, Noble et al. 2004: 11). In constructing a ‘common sense’ of social reality via narrative accrual and the continual layering of discourses around violence, crime and terrorism, Arabic speaking Australians have been constructed as a ‘cultural threat’.

The frustration with the representation of the Arabic community has been compounded by extensive negative media portrayals which many felt had a serious impact on the perspectives of many Australians on their community.

I’m used to that kind of stuff now, that “Yeah, all Muslims are terrorists” kind of stuff. It’s not new. That’s how it’s perceived in the media and that’s what everyone thinks...I mean, I do watch Insight, but that like gets both sides of the story. It’s normally like in the news, and A Current Affair when ... they get people that can’t really speak properly about Islam, and they just get them on the news where they’re saying that stuff... It’s just, like, topics that they keep bringing up: every time it dies out, they bring something back into the media about Islam.

(younger, mixed gender CALD group, Coburg East West 101)

The kind of weariness expressed in the comment by the Muslim respondent above, of being ‘used to’ media panics about Islam, describes the power of relentless affirmation of dominant discourses, the ‘drip drip drip of ideology’ (Seiter, Borchers et al. 1989) layered through media representation. When questioned, some of the respondents expressed a sense of futility about the impact of counter-narratives to dominant discourses.

(TV should show) the good things about these people...like, there’s thousands of Arab people, they have PhDs, Masters, whatever...I know it’s not interesting. Nobody’s going to watch it. But at least...

(older, Arabic speaking men group, Parramatta East West 101)

We live with these people. We know these people... I know Iraqi people, Lebanese people, what they’re doing. Some people do bad. But there are doctors. If you go to Fairfield Hospital, seventy percent of the doctors there are Arab – there is a good thing. But if SBS are doing a special program about the doctors, nobody’s going to watch it. (laughs) This is TV! It’s about controversial issues –

(older, Arabic speaking men group, Parramatta East West 101)

Australia’s Indigenous communities have also been the subject of moral panics in Australian media, with the majority of representations focusing on the problems of alcoholism, violence and entrenched disadvantage in Indigenous communities (Bullimore 1999). The first series of The Circuit aired amidst intense media coverage of the Federal Government’s Intervention into remote communities in the Northern Territory, responding to the high levels of child abuse noted in the Little Children are Sacred report. These current events would have certainly influenced the responses of many Australian audiences to The Circuit, as well as general perceptions of remote Australian Indigenous communities.

Some respondents acknowledged that the discourses surrounding Indigenous Australia would render the program less appealing. The following comment suggests that aboriginality has become a cultural signifier of ‘hopelessness’:

Sometimes people will see Aboriginal people in it and they will turn off, some of the time, I will see it, and think ... I hope this isn't going to be a downer one, 'cause if I am

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5 The intervention involved intensified police presence, compulsory health checks, the suspension of the CDEP program and the removal of the permit system for visiting Aboriginal communities.
not in the mood, if I am feeling low already, I’m certainly not going to watch it. It would be good to see more positive portrayals and hope rather than hopelessness coming through…

(older mixed gender mixed background group, Griffith The Circuit)

For those who did engage, the programs in this study portrayed a range of characters, including those who are successful and professional from CALD or Indigenous backgrounds. *East West 101* casting director Christine King noted that the series contained 150 speaking parts for CALD Australians (King 2008). *The Circuit* similarly included characters from a range of cultural backgrounds reflecting the diversity of the town of Broome, the setting for much of the series. Both of the series in this study placed a central character in a position of authority or professional context which challenged common stereotypes about their cultural background – an Arabic Australian detective in *East West 101* and a successful Indigenous Australian city lawyer in *The Circuit*. These disruptions to the “bad, sad or other” common stereotypes about ethnicity (Phillips and Tapsall 2005) invited identification in uncommon ways and offered a new vantage from which to explore the personal and social experiences of the characters’ worlds.

The positioning of central Aboriginal character Drew Ellis as an ‘outsider’ attempting to understand complex social relationships and cultural contexts created a ‘point of entry’ into *The Circuit* from which to explore potentially unfamiliar issues or cultural norms.

If you are not from that community, and you go into that community… [It’s like Drew], he doesn’t know what they are all about, and he was talking to stick up for them, but he still didn’t know what was going on.

(older, Indigenous Australian men group, Griffith The Circuit)

However, as a legal drama – changing the usual courtroom to the context of the travelling circuit courts – it explored issues of law, crime and legal frameworks. Some Indigenous respondents expressed concerns (similar to those expressed in the Arabic speaking groups) about the impact of content which addressed serious problems on the perceptions of the broader community of Indigenous Australians.

Well, if somebody was watching *The Circuit* for the first time and they were small-minded, they could just think that all those people in the Kimberley were just criminals and just waiting around for every Monday, for the circuit to come around. That’s how them blackfellas live anyway! Look, they’re showing it on TV! So in some cases it’s good to get the story out there, but if it’s going to the wrong people that think the wrong things, it could have a negative effect as well.

(younger, mixed gender Indigenous Australian group Petersham The Circuit)

Non-Indigenous respondents also expressed a desire for more positive representations of Aboriginal Australia, particularly as this could begin to counter some of the automatic switch off responses of many Australians representations of Indigenous Australia.

It’s very important for me to know as much as I can. And for this particular program, I think that if they will show something more positive about Aboriginal people it will be much better. Not only negative aspects. Of course it’s good, but I think that it needs to be a little bit more positive.

(older, mixed gender, mixed background group Coburg, The Circuit)

This desire for ‘positivity’, expressed in many groups, can be complex and contradictory. It was often expressed by the same participants who praised the grittiness and realism of the programs. Forms of representation intersect with genre...
expectations and audience pleasures in varied and individual ways. As a result, what we say we wish for is rarely what we’ll watch:

You can’t have nice all the time it gets boring.
(younger, mixed gender, Arabic speaking group Parramatta East West 101)

Positive representation can also have unintended consequences, As Jhally and Lewis (1992) noted in their analysis of The Cosby Show, idealistic representations of marginalised communities can mask social inequalities. Some respondents commented that the program did not resolve with the kind of comfortable narrative resolution they had come to expect from television drama.

A lot of commercial channels, it’s kind of more of a “happy ending” sort of thing,. Everything’s resolved, they go to sleep at night and they’re happy, where this doesn’t have that.
(younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta The Circuit)

From what I saw of the show, there were no easy answers to the problems.
(older, mixed gender, mixed background group Coburg, The Circuit)

Because the programs did not offer simple resolutions to the problems they portrayed, they were more challenging for audiences used to neat narrative closure. As a result, many commented on how the programs ‘stayed with them’, in contrast to more formulaic or familiar television:

This sort of leaves an impression when you watch it, whereas CSI – I mean, when you take it from minute zero to minute sixty, pretty much each episode is the same. They find a crime and then they kind of follow, find the guy, they have a personal issue somewhere in between…it’s exactly the same format. This kind of left an impression, left me thinking, whereas when you finish watching CSI, you just switch it off.
(younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta The Circuit)

Any media representation of a marginalised community that has been either rendered invisible, essentialised or demonised by prevailing discourses carries with it the ‘burden of representation’ (Shohat and Stam, 1994) which is “at once religious, aesthetic, political and semiotic” (81). The dearth of media content which engages credibly with cultural diversity in Australia has resulted, according to Harvey May, in “hair trigger sensitivity” about on-screen cultural representation (May 2002). The programs in this study were each attempting more nuanced and complex representations of difficult issues that have generally been short-handed in Australian as cultural threats. As such, the responses to them were powerful and often contradictory. For example, respondents have simultaneously commended the programs for reflecting diversity, supported their ‘realism’ in tackling difficult subject matter and wished for more positive representations which, they have also noted ‘nobody would watch’.
Key Finding:

*Drama has the capacity to activate thinking and feeling in powerful ways, frequently expressed in terms of understanding and empathy. The emotional affect and familiarisation of difference through drama may help people connect with one another in important ways.*

**Emotion and Perception**

Drama has the capacity to activate emotional responses in viewers; this in part relies on the kind of ‘emotional realism’ described by Ang (1985). Audience comments in this study revealed individual and varying interpretations of characters’ motivations, flaws and triumphs, yet many described being moved or challenged in some way. This emotional engagement can disrupt assumptions or perceptions which become ‘common knowledge’ in the context of prevailing discourses.

One of the notable impacts of this kind of content, as described by the focus group participants, was awareness-raising about complex or unfamiliar social issues. Many of the participants who declared themselves to be removed from or unfamiliar with the social situations reflected in the content (remote Indigenous communities and parts of Western Sydney), described the programs as ‘eye-openers’ and said it had shifted their perceptions of the areas or communities involved:

- We don’t even know, face it, we live in the city we don’t see these Aboriginal communities. They’re remote areas. And when I watched it, I was shocked at the problems they had. I didn’t think they were that bad.
  (younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta *The Circuit*)

- I didn’t know about the conditions the Aboriginal people were under, and the living standards and the crime and the things that happen in Broome. It was an eye-opener for me.
  (younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta *The Circuit*)

Similar responses were expressed in Sydney’s North Shore groups: for many, the representations of western Sydney and experiences of migrant communities in *East West 101* gave an entirely new image of the ways people live in their own city.

- You wouldn’t know about that unless you come from that, and I know about it because it was just next-door to us when it was happening, but a lot of people don’t know…
  (older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray *East West 101*)

- I think it's enlightening, because not everyone knows what these different nationalities and people went through, and their circumstances. Particularly in Australia. A lot of Australians haven’t got a clue unless there’s some background that they’re involved with… so in a way I think it is confronting and it’s a difficult subject, but I think it needs to be out there for people to see, to understand what took place. I don’t see it entirely as entertainment. I see it more as partly educational and enlightening…
  (older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray *East West 101*)

This notion of revelation was mirrored in a group on *The Circuit* by a participant who had worked in the field of service delivery for Aboriginal communities. He claimed that exposure to the program challenged him about his own lack of knowledge about the issues these communities were facing:
I used to work for the Department of Housing at an executive level, and that’s predominantly their clientele, and I don’t think I understood what the clientele’s needs were, but after seeing this show – like, I didn’t have any clue at all. My understanding of what their needs are was totally wrong. After watching these two shows I think it’s given me a bit of an eye-opener, a really good insight into what their real issues are. I’m not Australian-born, so it’s a different thing for me to come and have a look (than for) general white Australians. Looking at Aboriginal issues and finding exactly what they are, embracing that. This was a bit of an eye-opener. I had pretty much zero knowledge.

(younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta The Circuit)

The term ‘eye-opener’ was used frequently throughout the group discussions and was frequently paired with descriptions of emotional responses such as shock, dismay, strong identification and empathy. Many suggested that the storylines had more in common with news and current affairs subject matter, although the drama techniques, interspersed with ‘hooks’ (such as romantic interests between characters) and compelling story arcs made these treatments more accessible:

This was one step short of a documentary.
Pretty much, documentaries I don’t watch, this I wouldn't miss.
(older, mixed gender, mixed background group, Griffith East West 101)

I want to see... if his wife comes back! That’s one. Two, because the Aboriginal chick’s got the hots for him! (crosstalk, laughter) Yeah, they’re going to get together! Just a few things. Like, what’s going to happen with that guy and his son? Are they going to get together and fix things? Is he going to go to jail or Perth?
(younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Parramatta The Circuit)

Several comments revealed a level of discomfort with the ‘difficult’ subjects portrayed, expressing a kind of frustration at being confronted with material that could cause them to respond emotionally:

When they panned across and they were out in the community and there was the old lady who looked like she had cataracts, I thought: “Did they have to put her on?” then later I thought, “well, maybe you wouldn't [normally] see a lady like this and it’s confronting.” … that's how it is, the ladies are still around the camp, a lot of them have the cataracts on their eyes, kids with sore eyes, because there are no health services, there no education, and look at the housing that they're living in... That's what I thought first, “I hate to see that” but then I thought, “well, when you give it some more thought, there’s the lack of Health systems, and the lack of more actually more culturally appropriate [services] for them to access”.
(older, mixed gender, mixed background group, Griffith The Circuit)

This comment revealed the level of disruption such uncommon or challenging portrayals present to the regular television experiences of many viewers ("did they have to put her on?" “I hate to see that”). The jarring images were tested for credibility against understandings of reality (“that's how it is”), provoking them to think more deeply about social issues. Many respondents described the content as similarly ‘confronting’ as they didn’t expect the issues to be covered the way they were, although this respondent struggled to describe the sensation of resolution they experienced through the narrative:

that was a confrontation for me. I thought that they wouldn't touch on some of these things, but they have anyway. But that wasn’t confronting, the fact that they touched on it, necessarily, because as each program developed it worked well, they got the message across. It was confronting, but it came to a reasonable conclusion.
(older, mixed gender CALD group, Cammeray East West 101)
A common theme of the discussion of the programs was that they had inspired a sense of empathy, or ‘walking in the shoes’ of the characters:

But didn’t you get a feeling that you were actually them, seeing? I was actually watching the show thinking I know what it feels like to be a Muslim now, they portrayed it really well from their eyes. I felt the injustice and the discrimination, like I had nearly walked in their shoes a little bit.

(older, mixed gender, mixed background group, Griffith *East West 101*)

My perspective on Aborigines changed after I watched this program. I thought … initially I thought they only drink and grow fat, and that’s all, but then I watched this program, it helps me to understand their culture, how their court system works, how their family … they value their family life.

(older, mixed gender, mixed background group Coburg *The Circuit*)

It is important not to take too literally enthusiastic comments like “I know what it feels like to be a Muslim now” or “it helps me to understand their culture”. However, such comments indicate that the sense of familiarity engendered through portrayals of family life, everyday practices and systems offer connection with ‘universal’ experiences which create opportunities for identification.

Some of the comments from the Indigenous and Arabic speaking groups expressed the belief that the programs could convey important elements of their own experiences for the benefit of others, a ‘needed’ resource for developing understanding in a diverse society:

I recommended one of my colleagues to watch *East West*. I was watching *East West* a lot… I thought “this is what we really need, you know? To share with all Western society where we’re coming from and how we are struggling”… We discussed it. She said, “Wow!” (*laughs*) I said, “Yes, that’s what I was waiting for!” She put herself in the issues. Before, she was scared to go to Lakemba and she was scared to talk to a Muslim. Even with me she was very, very careful.

(older, Arabic speaking women group Parramatta *East West 101*)

This concept of television providing resources for mutual understanding has been theorised by John Mepham (1990: 60) as ‘usable stories’ – stories which can assist us to “make imaginatively informed choices and responses to other people” and to “articulate our feelings and aspirations”. The emotional affect and familiarisation of difference through drama may help people connect with one another in important ways.

Of course, such ideal impacts are not universal as the generation of meaning through media is individual, unstable and varied. Others in our study were unsure as to whether dramas would ever be able to change some people’s minds:

It’s hard to say what would change a narrow-minded person… people who are pretty set in their ways, and not a little bit open-minded to… yeah, probably that really, really extreme point of view. Like, I don’t think anything would change the minds of the Pauline Hansons of the world. They’re pretty stuck in their way of thinking.

*Facilitator: What about for the average person who might have a tendency to maybe stereotype certain cultures? What impact would it have on those sorts of people?*

I think it would get them thinking, that’s for sure. It wouldn’t change their minds completely.

(younger mixed gender CALD group, Parramatta *The Circuit*)
This comfortable assurance that there was clear distinction between ‘narrow minded people’ and others may have been used as a device to express uncertainty about the social project being implicitly tested through these groups.

Drama has the capacity to leave space for ambiguity, complexity and ambivalent interpretations of characters’ motivations, flaws and triumphs. The imaginary world allows for emotional connection and for viewers to empathise, shift loyalties, accept character reversals and deal with complexity in developing individual ‘private’ interpretations of broader ‘public’ issues. The impacts of these connections and responses are not straightforward but the disruptions to convention and expectations in relations to mainstream ‘moral panics’ allow for greater opportunity to explore and debate complex problems.
**Key Finding:**

*Cultural diversity in drama can offer a catalyst for discussion and debate about important issues in multicultural Australia*

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**Discussion and debate**

Media constitute the contemporary public sphere in which issues or problems are raised and public debate is both generated and facilitated. Cunningham and Miller argued over fifteen years ago now that “public life, most of it, occurs both on television and as television. That is the site of political culture” (Cunningham and Miller 1994). Television is also an intimate medium, which allows for exploration of personal-political issues and concerns. The capacity of television drama to generate discussion and debate, and therefore greater social engagement with issues, is explored in this, final, section of this report.

Some of our participants described intense engagements with a close community of viewers around specific television content.

> I can say that, if I know that someone amongst friends will like the program, or will have something in common, before the program I usually call them, over the phone, and tell them, ‘Look, it’s started, we’ll discuss it later.’ Basically if it’s some sort of documentary, you can learn something from it. And after the program we call each other again and discuss what was the most interesting and what was not. And sometimes, when we have got people in our place, depending on the topics, we discuss it very openly.
>  
> (older, mixed gender, mixed background group Coburg *The Circuit*)

Sometimes viewers may see content as a way of permitting or facilitating discussion on issues that would otherwise be difficult to articulate or explain, and may recommend it to others as a way of facilitating understanding.

> It did change my thinking. I started to – before, I used to avoid communication about Muslims and Christians and all this, but now I start to open and talk more about it.
>  
> Facilitator: Because of the program?
>  
> Yes, because of the program. I work with Wesley Mission and my colleague, she’s very, very believing in her religion. I got the courage to talk, I recommended she watch *East West*.
>  
> (older, Arabic-speaking women group Parramatta *East West 101*)

> *The Circuit* would be a show. I swear, I would recommend that to anyone I spoke to.
>  
> (older, Indigenous Australian women group, Griffith *The Circuit*)

Others extended this notion of the program as a resource for conversations or deeper understanding by describing the programs as an education resource:

> I would probably like to see it in the curriculum at school.
>  
> I was thinking that, it's something that should really be watched.
>  
> (older, mixed gender, mixed background group, Griffith *The Circuit*)

Interestingly, our respondents described how even those television forms (such as tabloid style current affairs) which typically generate alarmist portrayals of cultural difference can also enable audiences to put forward their own perspectives and challenge misconceptions amongst immediate acquaintances:
Just explaining your point of view... Like, I’m a Muslim, and there’s been, *A Current Affair* recently, [about] a guy that was coming down and wanted to marry more than one wife, for example. People at work, straight away, they saw it. I didn’t watch it, but they came and they discussed it at work. And I had the chance to defend the situation, and say, “Alright, well, he wasn’t talking correctly, and this is how it is.” So they got a, you know, an understanding – a better understanding of this family and stuff, so … If I couldn’t discuss it, then they would have stayed with that wrong idea.

(younger, mixed gender, mixed background group, Coburg East West 101)

There are limitations to this though, and discussion about deeper emotional engagement may be limited to ‘safer’ or more intimate relationships.

Probably also at work – this isn’t necessarily the place to discuss things if something touches you emotionally… it may not be a subject you’ll be discussing with work colleagues, because that is a different sort of relationship. You may discuss it with a friend, or your family, wife or partner. I think that’s probably even more appropriate.

(older, mixed gender CALD group Cammeray East West 101)

Such comments suggest that television content which ‘touches you emotionally’ is part of personal experience which may leave you vulnerable in certain kinds of relationships. Many, however, described discussions they had about the series’ with colleagues, friends and family. The form of discussion which followed stimulating content was valued as a way of deepening understanding of others’ perspectives.

Yes, it’s good to talk about it, because we’ve got different ideas. If we watch a movie, after we finish, you’re going to have a specific idea, because it depends on your culture, background, how you were raised, how different we’re all thinking about this. You have to analyse that. So it’s good to discuss, because when we discuss, we exchange information…

(older, Arabic speaking men group Parramatta East West 101)

It’s just like, I think, making it in the prime TV time is good because it raises the issues, you know… it generates debate, within or without…

(older, Arabic speaking men group Parramatta East West 101)

This last comment valorises debate ‘within’ and ‘without’ or between communities, an advantage that was echoed in the sentiments of many of our participants. What programs such as these encourage is a kind of ‘multicultural sociability’ in which exchange of opinion, information-sharing and mutual acknowledgement can occur in the context of cultural diversity.
Conclusions

The programs used in this study tackle difficult, complex and ethically challenging subjects. The social and political act of ‘taking a position’ on these issues involves a level of public and civic engagement, which interacts with the private and domestic spheres of everyday media consumption. In Meijer and de Bruin’s analysis of Dutch TV talk, they claim “the dominant mode of speech about ethnicity was marked by the desire to express an opinion, thereby acknowledging the political nature of the issue” (Meijer and de Bruin, 2003: 696). The complex social issues represented in these programs – racial profiling; fear of Islam in the context of ‘War on Terror’; legacies of trauma from homelands; sexual abuse in Indigenous communities; the inefficacy of ‘white’ legal frameworks in many Indigenous communities – are political. For many Australians, responses to representation of these problems are also deeply personal and emotional.

Joke Hermes envisages popular culture as a shared source of references and knowledge (Hermes 2005). This study found that television drama can offer common points of reference from which viewers can discuss and debate issues related to cultural diversity. The kinds of discussions generated through programs like *East West 101* and *The Circuit* are important in a multicultural society as ‘interactive’ cultural diversity (Ang, Brand et al. 2006) requires common points of reference and mutual recognition in the ‘mediated’ national imagination.

The SBS Charter includes objectives to reflect Australia’s multicultural society, promote understanding and awareness of cultural diversity and contribute to the overall diversity of Australian television. The responses in this study indicate that programs such as *The Circuit* and *East West 101*, which explore issues of Australian cultural diversity in well crafted drama, offer important interventions in the Australian media landscape to meet these objectives. Responses to these programs tended to be passionate and, while they were not predictable or consistent, offered important starting points for conversations within and about Australia’s complex, culturally diverse society.
references


Multicultural Sociability, Imperfect Forums and Online Participation

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This article explores the conditions for multicultural sociability facilitated by online current affairs forums hosted by Australia’s multicultural public service broadcaster, SBS. Multicultural sociability is defined as exchange of opinion, information-sharing and mutual acknowledgement within a commonly understood framework for participation. The analysis suggests that conversations facilitated by multicultural online forums are an important resource in a culturally diverse society as they offer up important new forms of participation and opportunities for mutual recognition and the exchange of views.

Introduction: Participation and Multicultural Sociability

Participatory media have been heralded as a radically democratizing force, with the potential to transform the contemporary public sphere (see e.g., Gillmor, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Rosen, 2000). This claim is often based on the capacity of user-generated content and online networks to allow for a new diversity of voices and a participatory culture of audience-led engagement (Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). Online chat and opinion offer new forms of conversations, constituting important forms of political and civic participation (Ackerly, 2006; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008; Green & Jenkins, 2011). Online possibilities for the production of new forms of citizenship are of particular importance for public service broadcasters, charged with creating inclusive platforms for engagement with public life. The public goods of public service broadcasting include universality of services; the provision of a diversity of views; and the vision of a desired public culture involving genuine cultural pluralism (see Costera Meijer, 2005; Jakubowicz, 2007).

Traditional models of public service broadcasting are, however, constitutive of particular, limited forms of sociability (Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000; Scannell, 1989) and have struggled to engage with the complexity of increasingly culturally diverse societies (McCLean, 2008). Although increasing availability of information and content online has allowed engaged users to become more engaged (Norris, 2000), there is also potential for many to be left out of the national conversation. Opening these conversations has become more important and more urgent in the context of what Toby Miller (2007, p. 1) calls the "crisis of belonging" that liberal democracies are facing, in which “more and more people are seeking to belong and..."
more and more people are not counted as belonging.” Miller relates this crisis directly to media and to the forms of citizenship, self-representation and engagement they enable or discourage. Morley (2000, p. 118) has argued that, “an egalitarian multicultural society depends on the creation and maintenance of a plurality of public arenas in which a range of groups, with a diverse range of values and rhetoric, can effectively participate.” In this context, Australia’s national public broadcaster the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), required by legislation to provide multilingual and multicultural services, provides a useful case study. This paper explores whether conditions for multicultural sociability are facilitated by the online chat and comments that follow Insight, an SBS television current affairs forum. Conditions for multicultural sociability are likely to exist when exchange of opinion, information-sharing, and mutual acknowledgement take place within a commonly understood framework for participation. I contend that multicultural sociability is an important element of civic engagement and participation in multicultural societies, drawing on an assertion by Dahlgren (2005, p. 149) that “democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other.”

SBS has a public charter, enshrined in the Special Broadcasting Services Act, 1991 (legislated at the time of SBS’ incorporation, 15 years after it started trial broadcasts) that requires it to provide multilingual and multicultural media services that reflect Australia’s society. The history of SBS, since its inception in 1975 alongside the introduction of federal multicultural policies, has been indexed to the history of official Australian multiculturalism (Nolan & Radywyl, 2004). SBS has, in developing its services, reified certain notions of multicultural society that have been elsewhere criticized as exemplifying top-down policies that depoliticize differences (see, e.g. Stratton, 1998). It has also, however, expanded Australia’s understanding of itself by normalizing cultural differences and assuming that “what Australians have in common is diversity” (Ang, Hawkins, & Dabboussy, 2008: 3). SBS Radio’s multilingual programs provide news and information with an emphasis on local issues in 68 languages, including English. SBS Television produces a range of news, current affairs and sports programming; commissions Australian documentary, drama and entertainment programs; and screens subtitled, internationally sourced content. A significant part of SBS’s offerings are online, including extensions of television and radio content, online-exclusive content and platforms for user engagement. Online interaction with content is now an expected part of the media experience for many Australians.

According to Michael Schudson (2008, p. 21), one of the most important functions of journalism, the provision of opportunity for the exchange of views in a public forum, has been made much more possible by low barriers to entry into public conversation online:

The public forum function of journalism has cracked wide open with the creation of the World Wide Web; the Internet opens up this journalistic function in the most wide-ranging and profound way. Its virtue is not individual but social, the virtue of interaction, of conversation, of an easy and agreeable democratic sociability.

In this article I will focus on the potential for platforms like SBS’s Insight website to facilitate multicultural sociability. Sociability, defined by Simmel (1949) as association for its own sake, has been used to conceive of media as enhancers of communication and social ties between people. Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic (2011, pp. 414–415) define sociability as “a form of interaction which builds on
certain shared human competencies to relate to multiple other persons as well as the desire for human relationships that are not framed around specific utilitarian goals.”

This definition offers a useful framework for investigating online chat and comments, as it highlights the interactions, competencies, and relationships that are formed in less constructed forms of conversation. Glick Schiller et al. develop the notion of cosmopolitan sociability, which they describe as “consisting of forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world” (2011, p. 402). Here they draw on notions of cosmopolitanism developed by theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2007, p. 57), who suggests that “cosmopolitans assume that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation” an act of openness and receptivity to difference.

Glick-Schiller et al., (pp. 401–402) in their definition of cosmopolitan sociability, offer a criticism of multiculturalism as ultimately reinforcing of “naturalized and bounded difference.” Although such criticism is not uncommon, I argue that multiculturalism, as a policy platform, has a democratizing effect as it affords ethnic minorities some political agency via strategic identification within a community rights model, providing important access to services (Baumann, 1999; Morley, 2000). Multicultural policies incorporate cultural difference within an overarching framework of agreed terms for mutual recognition and coexistence, based on an understanding of the equal worth of all cultures (Taylor, 1994).

I suggest that the term multicultural sociability recognizes the contingency and contextuality of conversations within a multicultural society in which individuals may align themselves with (or distance themselves from) others through strategic processes of identification. This is particularly true in anonymous online environments where identity is not fixed (Dryzek, 1987; Poster, 1995). Multiculturally oriented media, such as SBS, offer an intervention in which the conditions for participation from a diversity of cultural groups and range of views are central to the broadcasting charter. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008, p. 485) claim that such an approach is crucial for participation, arguing that “representing a previously marginalized discourse may mean that a particular category of people gets constituted as agents within the discourse.”

S. Elizabeth Bird (2011, p. 491) describes how the “cultural significance of news emerges through everyday interaction” as audiences use news as resources about issues from “morality, to religion, to race.” Bird has a particular interest in what she calls trivial news. I suggest that this kind of talk also occurs in more serious-minded online news and current affairs sites that offer new opportunities for different forms of sociability. This study conceives of Web-based interactions as part of everyday life, reflective of everyday misconceptions and prejudices, as well as mutual curiosity. Janssen and Kies (2005, p. 321) note that online discussion sites on which no identification is required could have a “disinhibiting effect” on political conversation. Dahlgren (2005, p. 156) writes that “the Internet seems to offer opportunities to participate for many people who otherwise find that there are too many taboos and too much discomfiture in talking about politics in their own face-to-face environments.”

Online spaces can allow diversity of voices in a range of ways; however, as Bird (2011, p. 500) cautions: “... not all online news sites encourage collective, constructive interaction.” The online public
media space does not necessarily mean an ideal public sphere as conceived by Habermas (1989), in which public opinion is formed via rational public debate. For one thing, online debate is rarely rational—it is more frequently “fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion”—and there is difficulty in bringing together conflicting points of view (Papacharissi, 2002). As Ang and Pothen have noted, “contact does not necessarily equate to ‘dialogue,’ it may just as well involve conflict, passing association, or sheer indifference (2009, para. 55).” Dryzek (1987, p. 666) has expressed pessimism about online intercultural exchange, claiming that “people from different cultural backgrounds are unlikely to come to agreement, especially under real time constraints” as consensus requires “shared norms and socialization experiences on the part of participating individuals.” However, Appiah (2007, p. 85) notes that conversations across boundaries of identity do not require the development of consensus or agreement on common values. He asserts that conversations and encounters, properly conducted, are valuable as a form of engagement with the ideas of others, important to help people get used to one another, a key requirement for practical tolerance and coexistence in a culturally diverse society. The distinction here may be Appiah’s qualification that they be properly conducted, as encounters do not always represent a genuine form of engagement with others.

Some studies of online environments have pointed toward a kind of political narcissism in which participants seek out others who share their perspectives in a kind of echo chamber of self-affirming views (see Deuze, 2007). As Papacharissi (2002, pp. 14–15) notes, “these technologies carry the promise of bringing people together, but also bear the danger of spinning them in different directions.” Online forums, because of anonymity and unstable identity, may just as easily provide platforms free of personal accountability, frequently allowing for vilification and anonymous bullying (Curtis, 2007). Online discussions can tend to privilege opinion, subjectivity and the personal (Hartley, 2008), a kind of anonymous graffiti without requirements for personal accountability. It is important to explore the quality of online debate rather than equating interactivity per se with better democracy (see e.g., Bird, 2011; Macnamara, 2008).

**About Insight**

SBS’s online sites frame debates by setting agreed terms for participation. The sites (as part of multicultural public discourse) offer a common set of reference points that facilitate exchange within a mutually understood set of parameters. Forums, such as *Insight*, emphasize values of collective deliberation and norms of public debate strongly identified with national public service broadcasting (Barnett, 2003: 8). Such parameters encourage mutual acknowledgement in a culturally diverse society. This study explores the conditions for multicultural sociability and forms of audience participation, facilitated by online audience response to three *Insight* episodes broadcast between 2009 and 2010. I suggest that sociable talk and exchange among divergent positions and cultural perspectives represent important forms of participation in a multicultural society.

*Insight* is a televised current affairs forum program, extended in recent years into online audience conversations with guests from the program directly after each screening (Live Chat); an online comment section (Your Say); calls for audience participation and for new topics, participants and questions to be included in the television programs; a Facebook page; and a Twitter account. *Insight* is
self-described as the place to speak your mind. The program presents itself as a counter to the spin that some describe as a major source of the destabilization of contemporary democracy (see Dahlgren, 2005, p. 150) *Insight* says, on its site, that “there’s no hiding behind press releases and spin on *Insight*, it’s face to face debate.” Of course *Insight* does not occupy a space outside mainstream public discourse. Topics are generally triggered by political developments or major news events, and the debates can echo dominant discourses.

This study explores an in-between space that is neither entirely user-led nor fully editorialized: moderated Live Chat and Your Say user comments sections on the SBS *Insight* website. In the weekly television program, host Jenny Brockie guides the one-hour discussion with about 50 invited guests, including public representatives, experts and politicians as well as ordinary individuals (although the higher-profile participants are often given more time).

At the end of each televised program, Brockie invites viewers to continue discussion online and notes that some program guests will be available to answer questions on the SBS *Insight* website. This post-program discussion takes place in Live Chat, which runs for about an hour after the broadcast, moderated in real time by two or three SBS staff. Your Say is a comment section, with reply and agree/disagree functions, that stays active much longer online after the broadcast (with most comments accumulating in the week after the first-run broadcast). Topics with a high volume of participants tend to have a very slow pace of chat, significant limitations to the forum design. The SBS moderators activate each comment individually, rejecting comments, as required by legal requirements and SBS editorial standards. The online producer may intervene to draw attention to the moderation standards. An example:

*Hi everyone. We appreciate this is a hot topic of debate but remember ANY comments that are deemed to be racist in nature or racially vilifying will NOT be published. We reserve the right to edit your comments for brevity or if they are deemed to be offensive. Regards, The Insight team.*

Some participants resist the moderation of the forum. For example, one contributor responded to the above post thus:

*If you don’t [like] racial comments—then don’t start shows which are clearly related to race. Who gives you the right to say what is wrong and what is right? Aren’t you a public broadcaster? Where does the money come from to pay your salaries at SBS? Don’t tell us what we can write.*

This contributor expresses the view that participants should be allowed to set their own terms for debate. Others called for greater moderation. An example is this contributor, addressing the producer after a series of inflammatory statements about Islam posted by user MG:

*Insight Producer, is this being moderated? How are MG’s comments getting through?*
The forums included a level of community regulation, with participants either ignoring or censuring inflammatory comments. Many applied their own norms to the forum:

*Micko if you're rigid enough to look at a problem and solve it by blaming it on the victims then maybe you shouldn't be on this chat.*

Several users asserted that racist contributors shouldn’t watch or chat on *Insight*, believing that this forum was not for them. This may reveal a valuing of the forums as a space for tolerant or open exchange. Disruption of these norms elicited responses, mainly angry, from participants who felt comfortable acting within the shared terms of the multicultural environment of SBS sites. Moderators also contribute to the flow of discussion by not posting a number of repeated questions, irrelevant comments or repeated responses. This role is described by Janssen and Kries (2005, p. 231) as a “promoter of deliberation” who allows for a level of structure and continuity in debate and some system of synthesis. This, it must be noted, had limited success in the case of Live Chat in particular, and the chat threads were frequently confusing and disjointed, in part because of the time lag between comments.

In order to participate, contributors to the *Insight* online forums simply have to list a contact email, their name or moniker as a user name, and their location. Despite the lack of any explicit design feature of the forum to enable or encourage it, many self-identified in both the Live Chat and the Your Say by adding categories such as Somali, Indian-Australian, Muslim, Anglo Aussie, or a migrant. These forms of self-identification provide examples of the adoption or rejection of positions in a debate, explored later, which create a context for comments and questions to be read by other users.

**Methods and Approach**

Contributions and comments made through *Insight* Live Chat and Your Say are available online in the public realm, along with vodcasts (online video on demand) of the TV programs, in the program archive. NVivo 8 coding software was used to create a instead of relying on an impressionistic reading. NVivo allows the researcher to create customized frameworks of analysis via open categories of classification. In this study, the customized NVivo frameworks were used to analyze the online comments for the kinds of contributions they represented rather than for the distribution of opinion. I was interested in what the participants were using the forums for and how they related to other users, rather than in contributors’ opinions of the issues covered. Coding of the comments was an iterative process, as befitted the diversity of the data.

Janssen and Kries (2005), in their analysis of methodologies employed in the analysis of online discursive spaces, outline the problem of imposing frameworks or rigid models on fluid conversations:

*Content analysis is an established method of the social sciences and carries with it implications of controllability and representativeness. The nature of the research question (how to get a true idea of the deliberative quality of an online conversation) however, begs for a more qualitative approach that enables the researcher to reveal*
discourse patterns in a more inductive manner, instead of a top-down application of some content analysis template. (p. 332)

In attempting such an approach, I was required to continually reshape project categories according to trends that emerged through my analysis and track these back against earlier material. I was less concerned with the numbers of coded comments than with the ways classifying comments allowed themes to emerge in the data. The NVivo categories developed through this process classified several uses of the forums: as platforms for personal venting on the issue; as opportunities to connect and converse with others; as resources for information; or as sites for critiquing or analyzing the experience of watching the TV program. These classifications, grouped for my analysis into the meta-categories below, helped me to explore interactions between forum contributors. The meta-categories:

- **Expression of views**: This grouping comprised comments that asserted the participants’ positions on the issue or related personal experiences without direct reference to other comments in the forum.¹
- **Dialogue and debate**: These comments directly responded to other comments (agreeing or disagreeing) or continued conversations in the forums, including by asking or answering questions.
- **Exchange of information**: These comments sought or provided information, links, references or advice relevant to the topic in discussion.
- **Understanding**: These comments contained assertions that the televised forum and/or online discussion had deepened their understanding of an issue or the perspectives of others.
- **Comment on forum**: These involved commentary about the quality, limitations or problems of the forum in general.
- **Representation**: These are comments about the representativeness of guests or spokespeople on an issue, expressing disquiet with the official multicultural parameters of the debate.

The analysis used three case study programs from the 2009–2010 *Insight* seasons:

- Somali Australians (broadcast September 8, 2009) a forum with representatives of the Somali community on the threat of radicalization after the arrest of three men in Melbourne accused of planning an attack on an army base.
- At Risk (broadcast July 21, 2009) on violent attacks on Indian students and the issues related to international students in Australia, particularly those in vocational colleges offering diplomas in skills prioritized in permanent residency applications.
- Family (broadcast March 16, 2010) about children in unconventional families, featuring children from a range of non-traditional family arrangements, including those with gay parents, surrogacy and inter-country adoption as well as children raised in intentional communities.

¹ Bird (2011) likens these kinds of comments to the debate structures used by political candidates, stating positions and not engaging with one another.
The first two topics are very obviously multicultural in that they draw on issues overtly tied to race and ethnicity within a culturally diverse society. The Family program engages with several kinds of diversity that provide useful case studies through which to explore sociability and the quality of online exchange. Specific examples or issues from each program are summarized in the case studies related to the key findings.

Findings

1. Online Dialogue and Debate

Using the NVivo meta-categories described above, this analysis sought to establish whether participants were indeed reading others’ contributions and engaging with one another or simply using the online space as an opportunity to vent after watching the program. About a quarter of the comments directly referenced or responded to others’ comments in some way. There were also significant levels of interaction, in which participants corrected, challenged, endorsed or situated others’ contributions. There were, for example, several instances in which individuals speaking from their own experiences were able to respond to critical comments in the same online space. There were many examples of reactive and polemic posts (which can characterize online participation), but there were also genuine questions and more considered or discursive contributions.

Many contributors expressed complex and at times contradictory views, in which they agreed or disagreed with others. These subtleties of position are far less represented in more heavily editorialized contexts such as televised current affairs, which have a requirement to represent a balance of views (see, eg. SBS, 2006). The online environment also created platforms for a more complex set of self-identifications in which certain cultural, political and regional identities were adopted or rejected in expressing views on an issue in which ethnicity played a major part. These kinds of identifications may have been examples of “enabling modes of objectification” in which “collectivities describe, redescribe and argue over who they are” (Werbner, 1996, in Morley, 2000, p. 236).

Case Studies:

(i) Somali Australians: Speaking Back

The Somali Australians program was broadcast after the arrest of several Somali men from Melbourne on terrorism charges related to a planned attack on an Australian army base. These arrests had prompted familiar panic about home-grown terrorism and extremism and radical Islam related to Australian Muslim communities (see Poynting, Noble, & Tabar, 2004). The Your Say platform for this program enabled Somali participants to respond to intolerant or critical postings (of which there were many, alongside roughly equal numbers of comments supportive of the Somali community). Several participants, identifying themselves as Somali, took the opportunity to make their case to the broader community by speaking for their own experiences. Several expressed a belief in the power of dialogue to
transcend difference of views. For example, Mariam Issa, a participant in the televised forum and an official guest online, wrote:

> When we all come together with good intentions and sincerity and use dialogue activities we then have a better vision of living together (Somali Australians Live Chat).

For Issa, as evidenced by this and other comments, the forum itself created a better society, in which dialogue enabled a better future.

(ii) At Risk: Identifications and Complexity

The At Risk televised program covered then-recent violence against Indian students in Melbourne and comments by senior police that the victims had been soft targets. Much of the debate focused on whether the violence against Indians had been racist or opportunistic. The program also explored, early in the public debate, a series of concerns about the conditions for international students in Australia. The unofficial links between fee-paying education and preferred status for immigration had been lucrative for Australia (as international student fees were a major source of income), but the poor regulation of the international education sector, particularly in privately run vocational colleges, had led to the exploitation of many international students seeking permanent resident status. Guests on the televised program included of a number of Indian students, including those who had been victims of violence: senior police, student representatives, community leaders, and vocational college representatives.

The Your Say comments for At Risk contained by far the most that disagreed with other posts (around a third of comments) of the three forums in this study. Most of these were about whether racism was a major problem in Australia. The Your Say forum provided a platform for the articulation of positions that resisted the easy polarization of assumed Anglo-Australian racism and migrant Indian agitation.

> If you want to say that Australians are racist then it should also be acknowledged that Australians are diverse, and there are many Australians who also identify with another culture such as Indian. . . . So by calling Australia racist you implicate many identities like Aussie Indians. (Suzu4381, Laverton, At Risk Your Say Racism and Australian Identity)

Others reaffirmed the diversity of opinion within the Indian community and rejected others attempting to speak for them.

> Not all Indians have the same opinion; we would be a stupid, robotic race if we all believed the same thing. You do not represent the Indian voice. . . . (Vijay Sinha, Strathfield, At Risk Your Say).

Many self-identified Indian-Australians distanced themselves from the representation of Indians by the students’ spokespeople. For example, in a comment titled “Not all Indians are like this,” Arjun Pande of Sydney distanced himself from “uncouth” Punjabis, and Seema Singh of Melbourne described
“uneducated, misinformed and selfish” Indians “tarnishing our reputation.” This kind of distancing represents a form of strategic non-identification, creating new subject positions in a debate in which race and ethnicity are politicized.

(iii) Family: Mutual Affirmation and Sociability

Family was very different in feel from the other study programs. Rather than exploring recent political conflict in a multicultural context, it set out to question what makes a family in relation to recent changes to surrogacy laws in Queensland. The program guests were all young people who had been raised in unconventional family circumstances: children of gay parents; children conceived via surrogacy or donor sperm; inter-country adoptees; young people raised in communes or intentional communities in which parenting was collectively shared. Despite the disparate range of issues and experiences described in the program, the emphasis in the online debate was on mutual affirmation and consensus on values. The chat and comments after the program involved high levels of collective identification and endorsement of the program and its participants. Family’s Live Chat and Your Say included a small number of highly engaged participants who tended to make multiple contributions. There was, among these comments and chat, the sense of being inside a community. There was a strong sense of easy and agreeable sociability among participants (including pleasantry such as “thank you” and “you’re welcome” and “Goodnight, thanks for all the input”). Only four comments challenged the mutual support and agreement that permeated Live Chat and Your Say. One was from Ali, a self-identified Muslim, from Perth who suggested DNA tests before allowing people to become parents, sparking outraged responses from several participants. One urged him to watch the program again, as though that would change his mind, and another suggested he “read the rest of the comments if you disagree - your narrow view is not really supported.” These contributions suggest a belief in deliberative consensus described by Ackerly (2006) in which participants are able to learn from other comments and come around to the prevailing view.

2. Online Resources and Information Exchange

There was evidence in these forums of an exchange of information and advice as well as cross-cultural engagement with others’ opinions (by, for example, seeking clarification of a viewpoint, asking questions or responding to other comments). Many appeared to treat the access to forum participants from other cultures as an opportunity to further their understanding of cultural difference, thus strengthening connections between groups, a kind of bridging social capital (see Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008: 105). Such exchanges represent mutual acknowledgement and a willingness to share information or views within an agreed framework in the context of cultural difference. These expressions of curiosity or self-identification, often answered with suggestions for offline connections, generate important resources for practical tolerance (for use of this term, see Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006, p. 37).

Case Studies:

(i) Somali Australians: Understanding Cultural Others

Both Live Chat and Your Say following the Somali Australians program included many questions posed to
other participants in the forum, especially about Islam. Several participants appeared to view the forum as an opportunity to seek greater connection or as a resource for understanding. For example, one Live Chat participant, Melissa, says: “I was wondering if there is a Sydney-based Somali community where it may be possible to visit and become acquainted with Somali culture.” Another suggests an open day for community contact:

Sheikh Isse Abdo Musse, I thought you spoke wonderfully tonight. Could you please tell me if your mosque has an open day to allow people from the wider community to see what happens inside? People have a general fear [of] the unknown and it may dispel some of the unfounded rumors relating to the religion of Islam. (Sarah, Somali Australians Live Chat)

Several self-identified Somali participants volunteered information or connections, attempting to find points of exchange, including for those who have no clue about Somali culture:

Most of Somalis arrive after 90s we are a tiny dot in a wider community. we are Australians as well, we are tax payers, we work in education, welfare, child services, employment services, broadcasting, hospitals, age care, [as] taxi drivers etc., most of the Australian communities are very gentle and nice people but we are willing that the others who have no clue about Somali culture and religion please let us do your research or contact us so we can chat me and you we are Australian. (Khadija, Somali Australian Live Chat)

(ii) At Risk: Advice and Offline Action

More than in the other forums, participants in the At Risk online discussions expressed the hope that the comments would somehow reach government. Many demanded that action be taken by either the Australian or Indian governments on the issue. These kinds of comments suggest that many participants saw this as an active actual engagement in political or policy processes, in a sense classic civic engagement. The online forums included a significant number of calls to action and arguments that people have to do something about the problems of private colleges. The comments urged others to contact representative bodies, complain, get legal advice, etc., exhorting students to work from within to improve the system.

The online forums following At Risk contained lots of personal stories, advice, information, and advocacy contacts supplied as part of the discussion. Some comments on Live Chat sought advice on the safety of specific locations in Australia, presumably from overseas participants canvassing the possibility of studying in Australia. These connections, suggestions and exchanges of information could be seen as direct results of the forum, whatever the broader impact on government or policy may be.

(iii) Family: An Online Support Community
The online discussions generally framed the young guests of the show as experts based on their own experiences and despite some resistance from them. One in 10 endorsed program guests in glowing terms. The participants formed an online support group, many seeking advice and providing links, information and reassurance. Live Chat contained many specific questions and advice. For example, participants asked detailed questions about intentional communities; lesbian mothers asked for advice on supportive schools; parents asked how old their kids should be before they can be told they were conceived by donor sperm; others asked about adoption experiences. Ann, the adoptive mother of a 15-year-old girl adopted from overseas, who had been asking Mauritian-born televised program guest Christina for advice, wrote:

Thanks you so much, Christina, for your reassurance. I wish I could have a hotline to you at any time to seek advice as I need it! (Ann, Families Live Chat).

Ann, like many others in the forum, appeared to consider this access to the forum guests as a resource for their own decision-making. Much of the online commentary took the form of descriptions or revelations of personal experiences. The forums, protected by anonymity, created a kind of online confessional. Forty percent of online Your Say comments and 30% of Live Chat comments described personal experiences either in response to questions or simply as contributions.

3. Frameworks of Analysis and Terms of Debate

The frameworks assertion category was used to group comments that overtly asserted a new or individual way of understanding an issue. Expressions such as "the real problem is . . ." or "this is actually a problem of . . ." or "why aren't we talking about the real issues? We need to look at . . ." were common. The data revealed that the online environments were conducive to these kinds of assertions, more so when there was considerable controversy (such as the Somali Australians and At Risk programs) than in more mutually endorsing environments (such as the Family program). Assertions of individual frames of analysis also limited the possibilities for multicultural sociability, however, as they tended to disrupt the threads of conversation, making them incoherent and disjointed. In all of the case studies, there was a sense of multiple parallel attempts at conversations and a range of questions, many of which were lost through the slow pace of the chat.

In the Live Chat, the producer regularly interjected to remind participants this was an opportunity to ask questions of the guests and that participants could express their own views on the Your Say comments page. Despite these attempts to encourage reciprocity and exchange, there remained a significant volume of comments expressing individuals’ own views. Some genuine questions—those that appeared sincere—were left unanswered in the noise and lag of the chat, and it was often difficult to tell which responses related to which questions. Frustration was evident in some comments, and some participants actively tried to shut down conversations they thought were irrelevant. The Live Chat, in particular, was confusing and difficult to follow. According to Papacharissi (p. 17), "When individuals address random topics, in a random order, without a commonly shared understanding of the social importance of a particular issue, then conversation becomes more fragmented and its impact is mitigated.”
Case Studies:

(I) Somali Australians: Anonymity and Self-Expression

The Somali Australians online forums exemplified some challenging constraints to exchange and multicultural sociability. Because of Australian laws related to contempt of court, the specifics of the case at the center of debates to which the program was responding could not be discussed. The discussion was instead framed around concerns in the community about radicalization, a highly contested term (see Gillespie, Gow, Hoskins, O'Loughlin, & Zverzhanovski, 2010). A number of comments in the Live Chat and Your Say responses directly criticized the line of questioning in the televised forum that was set up with the opening comment to the Somali participants: “We want to talk to you about your community and about the concerns that you may have about potential radicalisation in that community, particularly of young men” (Insight, 2009). Several participants expressed the view that the line of questioning undermined the possibilities of the debate:

It was totally focused on what the media always focus on . . . . do you think the presenter was pressured into asking those types of questions? (farz, Somali Australians Live Chat).

Several of the participants appeared to expect that an SBS forum, particularly one with mostly Somali participants, ought to be different from other forms of Australian media. However, comments like the one above suggest that the televised forum was seen as limiting by many of the online participants, as it reproduced dominant discourses on Islam and radicalization. Several online comments followed on the curtailed discussion in the television program about the Al-Shabab movement in Somalia, a discussion that caused apparent discomfort among some TV participants, most denying there is support among Somali Australians for the movement. At the time of filming and broadcast, Al-Shabab had been classified by the Australian government as a terrorist organization, and expression of support for it could constitute an offence under Australian terrorism legislation. Despite this limitation to public discourse, some online participants criticized the guests on the program for not speaking as true Somalis:

Somalis never agree on anything, but throughout the show it seemed everyone was shitting on their pants when it comes [to] the issues of Alshabab. For god sake, say what you believe in like when we are at the coffee shops, don't play chicken. (Ismalure, Somali Australians Live Chat)

LiveChat offered a forum for some less publicly endorsed views, for example this one from Hameed: “I just wanted to make a comment about the support for Al-Shabab. . . . I think we are kidding ourselves by saying there is no support.” These kinds of comments were possible because of the anonymity of the online forum, given the legal constraints on discussions about issues or groups like Al-Shabab. The online platforms, by virtue of their anonymity, may free discussion from the more guarded, self-censored positions generally represented in traditional media spaces. The online space allowed for complex positions and differing accounts of community sentiments from participants. By creating
opportunity for diversity of perspectives, online forums may overcome the problems of media use by individuals as representatives to speak for a heterogeneous community.

(ii) At Risk: Terms of Debate

The At Risk program on attacks on Indian students in Australia provided an example of the difficulty in reaching agreement on the definition of a problem or the framework within which to discuss it, which are preconditions for multicultural sociability. The program was broadcast soon after the attacks, in the early stages of the debate on this issue in Australian media; news of the attacks had, however, ignited huge coverage and outrage in Indian media (Ang & Pothen, 2011). Many of the Indian Australians participating in the debate were likely to have been drawing on knowledge of the coverage in Indian media, which contained none of the public messages from police and community leaders being aired in local Australian media (Visibility, 2010).

About a fifth of the At Risk Live Chat comments (69) and a quarter of the At Risk Your Say comments (252) involved participants asserting their own framework or analysis of the issue. These assertions often claimed to reveal the real problem or underlying issue. The level of detail about a range of concerns and the diversity of perspectives were certainly greater online than they were in the televised forum. The online chat and comments after At Risk reflected frustration among some participants with the move away from what they saw as the main area of concern.

What is the objective of this insight session? It started as a "poor boy, you were hit" and it has gone to "bad boy, why did you come here in the first place, to get PR [permanent residency immigration status]." (Gurbachan Singh, Melbourne, At Risk Your Say Insight objective?)

It was unfortunate to see the debate drift into the motives of Indian students in studying here and criticism of agencies that promote PR courses. It is a digression from the much larger issue of possible racism in Australia. . . . (Vidyasager, At Risk Live Chat).

The volatility of the terms of the debate may have been evidence of the previously underreported frustration and concern about these issues, which were becoming a major policy and strategic problem for the Australian government. Indian-Australian relations were tested, and Australia’s international education sector was scrutinized, revealing a series of significant problems. The issue of racism was consistently downplayed by Australian authorities despite the expression of local and international concern about the issue (Ang & Pothen, 2011).

(iii) Family: Co-constructing a Narrative

The sense of common identification with different families appeared to transcend issues of cultural difference in the Family program, an interesting example of contextual identification (see Baumann, 1999; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Many participants in this study claimed that Family provided
support by creating a program that was about them. Beyond the role of normalizing difference, some claimed as transformational the experience of speaking up, hearing new perspectives or getting new information. These kinds of comments involved a level of reflexivity on the part of the participants in which the conversation was valued as a resource in itself. Many expressed the belief that they, or others, would develop better understanding through viewing the program:

I thought the family episode was a real eye opener and a great collection of young people. It was a very well handled forum and illuminated just how non-conventional lives can be and indeed are, making the nuclear family often with all its dysfunction not so idyllic. I do hope minds and hearts were broadened. (Dave Sydney, Family Your Say, Alternative families)

Insight’s Family program explored diverse topics, but many attempts were made in the online forums to find common themes. The sense of community that emerged out of a diverse group of issues involved references to universal experiences, many of which verged on the platitudinous. Comments such as “all you need is love,” “home is where the heart is,” “what matters is parental love” were attempts to sum up personal experiences canvassed by the program and forums, which many of the other participants endorsed or extended. The participants in the Family program, as well as those who took part in the online platforms that followed it, overwhelmingly tended to express the view that the program would have some kind of transformative effect because of the differences and understandings of family it reflected.

Conclusion: Multicultural Sociability and the Imperfect Forum

The kinds of public conversations and interactions facilitated online are quite different from those in other public forums, such as editorially controlled television forum programs. Web contributions are not time-constrained, actively facilitated or required to achieve the same editorial balance as public television content. They are also freed by conditions of anonymity in which no participant is expected to speak for a particular position or view. As a result, a greater range of perspectives, forms of self-expression and types of interaction tend to take place online, in an often chaotic cacophony. The key value of the SBS online sites may be that they bring differing perspectives into one public space. Within the chat and comments sections of Insight online, divergent views definitely came together. But how much was clash and how much was conversation?

Within Insight’s online forums, sociability was both enabled and contained by SBS’s moderation and the common reference points established by the preceding television programs. Multicultural sociability, as I define it, is governed by frameworks that encourage participation by individuals from a wide range of perspectives but curb certain kinds of exclusionary expression. In the context of virulent debates about race-related problems, the parameters and safeguards set by SBS ruled out racial vilification or defamation, for example, which could have curtailed participation for many. The moderation did not regulate the kinds of “fragmented, nonsensical and enraged” discussion described by Papacharissi (2002, p. 10) but it did limit the kinds of anonymous bullying that can deter online involvement. In establishing such a framework, SBS may have facilitated a more inclusive or comfortable forum for participants from a wide range of backgrounds. In doing so under the umbrella of a national public
broadcaster, the forums promote the exchange and "engagement across differences with the ideas of others" that Appiah (2007, p. 55) describes as essential to the practical success of culturally diverse societies. This model can also counter the tendency of online debate to segregate positions into the politically polarized echo chambers described by Deuze (2007). The Family Live Chat was closer to an echo chamber than the other case studies, with the adoption of mutually affirming positions by most participants. It did, however, importantly "constitute as agents in the discourse" (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 485) individuals whose perspectives or experiences tend to be marginalized in discourses of family in Australia. Live Chat for the Somali Australians and At Risk programs represented more challenging conditions for sociability, comprising conflicting perspectives in the context of politically charged public debate about cultural difference. Participants in the Live Chat and Your Say for these programs were constituted as agents in discourses around Australia's cultural diversity. They tended to employ a range of self-identifications to support their arguments, adopting unique subject positions in relation to the debates. The online forums provided some interesting examples of strategic identification with complex forms of ethnicity and identity, generating new subject positions within debates that are frequently over-simplified in mainstream media.

The *Insight* online engagements allowed for a complexity of views, a framework within which exchanges and mutual recognition between diverse subject positions can take place. These are keys to sociability as they "build on certain shared human competencies to relate to multiple other persons" (Glick Schiller et al., 2011, pp. 414–415). Many of the contributors articulated their opinions within their own framework of understanding; they tended, however, to address a broad imagined audience. Views may have been polarized and fragmented, but they were not ghettoized; the notion of exchange was a fundamental part of the experience of participation. This suggests that the public sphere, rather than being diminished by online fragmentation, is granted new life and new possibilities in online spaces. As Jensen and Helles (2011, p. 531) note, peer-to-peer/interactive audience-led technologies complement traditional broadcasting in modern forms of political democracy and cultural engagement, although they claim "the jury—history—is still out reflecting on what kind of public sphere and cultural forum the internet may become." Despite their limitations, the platforms for multicultural sociability created by these forums are an important resource in a culturally diverse society. They generate opportunities for forms of civic and political participation negotiated within the framework of a public media space of mutual engagement.

Dahlgren's (2005) assertion that talk is essentially democratic leads us to a new valuing of opportunities for public conversation in liberal democracies. Yale University Professor Seyla Benhabib warns, however, that we need to "establish a distinction between virtual conversation and concrete commitments of living together and life forms, which is what democracy is all about" and claims that "there is a danger in talking about Internet democracy . . . It confuses information and exchange of views with action commitments that need to be made over a long period of time" (in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008, p. 965). Perhaps the best we can hope for in online environments are conditions for mutual recognition and resources that form important preconditions to democratic action rather than any radically new form of it.

This study found evidence of significant recognition and exchange between divergent positions and perspectives. These exchanges were encouraged by the conditions of each forum, contextualized within a commonly understood editorial framework and afforded a degree of legitimacy (and an audience)
through their association with a national public broadcaster with a multicultural charter. The conversations did not necessarily reach any consensus but, as Appiah (2007, p. 78) has noted, understanding doesn’t have to lead to agreement: it just helps us to get used to one another. Many participants in the Insight forums described how reading others’ comments had changed their thoughts or opinions, and a significant number claimed that the forums had led them to a better understanding of issues. These kinds of comments suggest the influence of the forum as a part of everyday life, and offering a resource for intercultural understanding and what Ang and Pothen have called “living together-in-difference” (2009, para. 11).

In an era when many public institutions are struggling to deal with the increasing cultural diversity of contemporary societies (McClean, 2008), the conditions for multicultural sociability described in this paper provide a useful framework for other contexts for participation. Mutual recognition in the context of democratic participation may go some way to addressing the “crisis of belonging” described by Miller (2007, p. 35), which intersects with moral panics and dominant discourses in disengaging citizens from one another across lines of cultural difference. Inclusive conversations contained by broadly understood terms of debate encourage new forms of sociability in which we can finally, as Appiah (2007) suggests, begin to get used to one another.

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Online Insights:
SBS Current Affairs Online Participation Report

Report produced for the Special Broadcasting Service, September 2010

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About this Report

In 2010, I conducted a study into the kinds of interaction facilitated by SBS current affairs site *Insight* online. The purpose of this study was to examine what audiences were using the SBS website for and how this relatively new area of audience engagement related to the SBS Charter.

The SBS Charter encourages SBS to promote awareness and understanding of Australian cultural diversity. It also requires SBS to present many points of view and use innovative forms of expression. SBS, under its Corporate Plan, seeks to be a catalyst for the nation’s conversations about cultural diversity and social inclusion.

This report describes some of the key findings of the study, drawing on some scholarly work in the field of online participation.

These findings have already been presented in summary form to:
- SBS Strategy and Communications;
- The *Insight* editorial team;
- Audio and Language Content management team; and
- The SBS Community Advisory Committee.

A paper was presented on this study at the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association Conference at Old Parliament House, ACT July 2010.

Findings summary

- Online comments were ‘freer’ than televised (editorially managed) forum content and online comments went beyond ‘publicly endorsed’ positions
- A greater complexity of positions were expressed online – these were complex and potentially incompatible with a traditional balance-of-views framework
- More individual associations and frameworks of analysis were asserted online, including a wider range of arguments and conclusions. This also led to difficulty agreeing on the nature of the issue under discussion.
- Many genuine questions were asked of others. The forums were used by many as a resource for advice, information or opinion, including about other cultural groups
- Many claimed a better understanding of issues for themselves or others after the forums
- Divergent views definitely ‘came together’: there were examples of exchange of opposing views – including personal responses to critical or ethnically stereotyping comments
- There was evidence of exchange of information, advice and engagement with others’ opinions (seeking clarification, asking questions, responding)
- Individuals’ own opinions tended to address a broad imagined audience – views may have been polarised but were not ‘ghettoised’
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Context
There is potential, in a multicultural society with uneven levels of public participation, for many to be left out of the national conversation. Online audience engagements with ideas represent new platforms for participation, made accessible by lowered barriers to entry and new availability of content and information online.

The promise of web-based interactivity parallels an important ethos of public broadcasting – the notion that all citizens have a stake in public debate. SBS has an obligation to ensure a level of universality of access. This universality is seen as one of the ‘public goods’ of public service broadcasting alongside the provision of a diversity of views and the vision of a desired public culture involving genuine cultural pluralism (see Jakubowicz, 2007: 115). Forums, such as those discussed in this paper, privilege values of collective deliberation and norms of public debate strongly identified with national public service broadcasting (Barnett, 2003: 8).

Online forums can provide new platforms for a diversity of views and previously unheard perspectives in a new ‘participatory culture’ as heralded by online theorist Henry Jenkins. Jenkins et al. describe this culture as reliant not just on technological access, but on opportunities for participation and “cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement” (2006: 2).

Participation does not guarantee positive outcomes for contributors, however. Online debates, because they generally occur between anonymous participants, can lend themselves to vilification or ‘uncivil’ debate. International studies have shown that online environments can create an ‘echo chamber’ of self affirming views around issues as users seek out environments where they feel comfortable or affirmed (see Deuze, 2007). As Papacharissi notes, “these technologies carry the promise of bringing people together, but also bear the danger of spinning them in different directions” (Papacharissi, 2002: 14-15).

When holders of different positions do come together, some argue they are unlikely to develop mutual understanding. Online forums, because of their agreed terms of anonymity and unstable identity, may just as easily provide platforms free of personal accountability, frequently allowing for vilification and anonymous bullying (Curtis, 2007). Online discussions can tend to privilege opinion, subjectivity and the personal (Hartley, 2008) – a kind of anonymous graffiti without requirements for personal accountability.

Public broadcasting sites like SBS can bring together conflicting points of view and offer a more ‘neutral’ environment within a commonly understood editorial framework. This report argues that this kind of exchange between views on topical issues of importance is crucial within a complex multicultural society. The study summarized in this report explored how effectively SBS’s current affairs forum Insight involves exchange of views and sharing of ideas in its online sites.
Background

*Insight* now offers a range of opportunities for audiences to engage online. These include:

- A Facebook site
- Via Twitter
- Via the *Insight* website in a Live Chat forum
- Via the *Insight* website in a Your Say comments section

*Insight* now invites its audiences to become involved in dialogue around public issues. From invitations to suggest program topics, to calls for forum participants, to the ability to recount personal experiences and ask questions, the current affairs format has been ‘opened up’ online. These elements are coupled with, and contained by, a strong professional editorial position and a team of researchers and producers involved in crafting each program.

Live Chat and Your Say

At the end of each program host Jenny Brockie invites the program audience to ‘continue the conversation online’ via Live Chat with several guests from the televised forum. Online, audience members are encouraged to ask questions of the guests to facilitate conversation rather than simply state their own views – it is noted that the forum for this is the Your Say comments page. While Live Chat runs for the hour following the broadcast, Your Say comments tend to accumulate over a week, mostly on the day of broadcast or the following day. Based on user names and comments, these appeared to include a limited number of the same participants. While the reply function enables some referencing of others’ views, Your Say is more focused towards the expression of individual views. Your Say comments read more like individuals taking their turn on the ‘soap box’, stating their own positions, sometimes critiquing the positions taken by others in the forum, sometimes emphatically ‘correcting’ other’s comments.
The Your Say comments section of the website, which includes a reply function and ‘agree/disagree’ ratings. There were, on a broad scale, greater levels of ‘exchange of information’ and ‘dialogue and debate’ (see Fig.1) in the real-time Live Chat forums than there were in the Your Say comments (which tended to feature more heavily the ‘expression of own views’ type of comments). This tendency may have reflected a natural response to the highly politicized topics. Your Say was also more impersonal, in that contributors tended to address themselves to the program audience more generally rather than to other individuals they imagined themselves to be in (real-time) contact with.

SBS User Generated Content and Moderation
SBS offers a kind of ‘in-between’ space, neither fully editorialised nor fully user-controlled. Participants simply have to list a contact email; their name (or moniker) as a username; and, in the case of Your Say comments, their location, in order to be able to contribute. Moderation takes place real-time, usually managed by two or three SBS staff. The Insight producer moderators act as gatekeepers to postings on the site, activating each comment individually. They contribute to the ‘flow’ of discussion by whittling down (by not posting) a number of repeated questions, irrelevant comments or repeated responses through the threads. The moderator will generally attempt to email participants to explain this, if the question they submit has already been asked, for example.

While many of the more pointed comments are allowed to go up and are self-regulated by the forum, the moderation rejects comments that include any defamation, contempt of court or blatant racial vilification – a kind of censoring role required by SBS editorial standards under the SBS Codes of Practice (SBS, 2006) and legal considerations. This is made known to participants.

At one stage in the Live Chat for the ‘At Risk’ program (covering violence against Indian students in Australia), for example, the online producer intervened to comment:

RACIST COMMENTS WILL NOT BE PUBLISHED
Hi everyone We appreciate this is a hot topic of debate but remember ANY comments that are deemed to be racist in nature or racially vilifying will NOT be
Some participants were affronted and resisted the moderation of the forum. One responded:

If you don't [like] racial comments - then don't start shows which are clearly related to a race. Why the Indians can call Australians - racists? Why don't you let us defend ourselves??? Who gives you the right to say what is wrong and what is right? Aren't you a public broadcaster? Where the money comes to pay your salaries at SBS? Certainly not from the moon... So - don't tell us what we can write.

Is SBS staff hypocritical? Terry ACT

This reference to SBS public funding may represent a sense of ‘ownership’ of the platform, implying that, as taxpayers, participants should be allowed to set their own terms for debate. Others, however, called for greater moderation and intervention to restrict flaming (posting inflammatory comments) to create a more ‘comfortable’ forum space – such as this direct address to the producer, following a series of inflammatory statements about Islam posted by user ‘MG’:

9:25 [Comment From Ben:] Insight Producer, is this even being moderated? How are MG's comments getting through?
Tuesday September 8, 2009 9

There was a level of community-regulation in the forum, with participants either ignoring or censuring ‘flamers’. Many applied their own norms to the forum:

Micko if you're rigid enough to look at a problem and solve it by blaming it on the victims then maybe you shouldn't be on this chat

Several comments asserted that contributors they considered to be racist shouldn’t watch *Insight*, believing that this forum was not ‘for them’. This ‘norming’ may reveal a further sense of ownership of the forums and, by implication, a valuing of them as a space for ‘intelligent thought’ in a shared imagined community of like-minded others. They are also, of course, more evidence of the name-calling and ‘enraged discussion’ described by online exchange theorist Zizi Papacharissi (2002) which limits the rational exchange required for an ideal public sphere.

The diverse views expressed on the *Insight* platforms are more broadly contextualised within a commonly understood editorial framework for the participants, and are provided with a degree of legitimacy (and a national audience) through their association with a national public broadcaster. All of these interactions are generated from an engagement with the framework established by the program drawing on common points of reference, creating a set of norms for the debate. There were some examples of resistance to these norms, which will be elaborated on later; however, the starting point for discussion went some way towards creating a common vocabulary to be used in discussion.

The kinds of discussion and interaction in Live Chat are, however, quite different from those in the editorially controlled television program. Web contributions are not time constrained, actively controlled by a facilitator or host or required to achieve the same editorial balance as public television content. As a result, a different range of perspectives, form of self-expression and type of interaction tends to take place online.
Program case studies
This study was based on three case study programs from the 2009-2010 Insight seasons:

- ‘Somali Australians’ (broadcast 8 September 2009) filmed in Melbourne, a forum with representatives of the Somali community on the threat of ‘radicalisation’ in the community;
- 'At Risk' (broadcast 21 July 2009) on violent attacks on Indian students and the issues related to international students, many in vocational colleges; and
- 'Family' (broadcast 16 March 2010) about unconventional families, featuring children from a range of non-nuclear family arrangements – including gay parents, donor inception, surrogacy and inter-country adoption as well as children raised in ‘intentional communities’ or communes.

The first two topics are very obviously ‘multicultural’ in that they draw on issues overtly tied to ethnicity within a cultural diverse society. The ‘Family’ program engages with several different kinds of diversity. They each raise interesting issues about representativeness, sociability and the quality of online exchange.
Program details – Somali Australians

The ‘Somali Australians’ program exemplified some challenging problems related to multicultural exchange in media. The program was broadcast following the arrest of several young Somali men from Melbourne on terrorism charges – for allegedly planning an attack on an Australian army base. These arrests had prompted media panics about ‘home-grown terror’ and radical Islam within Australian Muslim communities. Due to Australian contempt-of-court laws, the specifics of the case could not be discussed in the forum. The discussion was instead framed around concerns about ‘radicalisation’.

Radicalisation is of course, always a problematic concept and is a highly contested term. Many of the televised forum participants, Somali Australians of differing generations and positions (such as ‘spiritual leader’ Sheikh Isse Musse), expressed concern about precisely what or whom they were expected to represent, and the line of questioning was resisted by many of the forum participants. A young Somali participant in the studio, for example, said: “I don’t think the community is here to explain why violent acts occur” and later claimed that surveillance of the Somali community now meant Somalis are “not allowed to voice political concerns.”

There was also resistance among online participants to the televised current affairs forum approach. Thirty-one comments in the Live Chat and Your Say responses to the program criticized host Jennie Brockie’s line of questioning. Several participants expressed the view that the line of questioning undermined the possibilities of the debate:

It was totally focussed on what the media always focus on… do you think the presenter was pressured into asking those types of questions? (‘farz’, Live Chat)

This frustration with the focus of the media on certain issues, and the search for some motivating conspiracy, may reveal a deeper frustration with recent Australian media moral panics about Somali Australians. Several of the participants appeared to expect that the SBS forum ought to be different from other forms of Australian media. Comments like the above suggest that the televised forum was seen as limiting by many of the online participants. Some online participants criticized the guests on the program for not speaking as ‘true Somalis’:

Somalis never agree on anything, but throughout the show it seemed everyone was shitting on their pants when it comes [to] the issues of Alshabab. For god sake say what you believe in like when we are at the coffee shops don’t play chicken. (‘Ismalure’, Live Chat)

In the political context, however, this limitation may have been inevitable. The Somalia based movement Al-Shabab had been classified by the Australian Government as a terrorist organization.\(^1\) There was visible discomfort when the program host attempted to draw out whether there was any support for the movement amongst Australian Somali communities. LiveChat included less publicly endorsed views, for example:

I just wanted to make a comment about the support for Al-Shabab… I think we are kidding ourselves by saying there is no support. (‘Hameed’, Live Chat)

These kinds of comments were made possible by the anonymity of the online forum. The different platform opened up opportunities for different accounts of community sentiments from participants.

\(^1\) The expression of support for organisations on the official list of terrorist-classified organisations can constitute an offence under the Australian Anti-Terrorism Act (2005) see http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2005A00127
Program details – At Risk
The ‘At Risk’ program on attacks on Indian students in Australia and issues facing international students provided an example of the difficulty in reaching agreement on the definition of a problem or the framework within which to discuss it – preconditions for effective exchange of views.

The televised program guests consisted of Indian students, including those who had been victims of recent violence in Melbourne, Indian student representatives and ‘community leaders’, other international students, recruiters for international vocational colleges and senior police. The program started with a description of the violence against Indian students following by debate about the recording of the ethnicity of the victims of crimes, and recent comments by senior police that the victims had been ‘soft targets’. Much of the debate focused on whether the violence against Indians had been racist or opportunistic. The program also explored a series of concerns related to the conditions of international students in Australia, including those undertaking vocational courses in private colleges in order to apply for permanent residency.

The program was broadcast soon after the attacks took place, in the early stages of the debate on this issue in Australian media; however, news of the attacks had ignited huge coverage and outrage in Indian media (some examples of which were profiled on the SBS website). Many of the Indian Australians participating in the debate were likely to have been drawing on Indian media coverage, a different framework from the public messages from police and community leaders being covered in local Australian media (Visibility, 2010). Many attempts were made by the contributors in the televised forum and participants online to frame or understand the problem in their own terms.

The online chat and comments after ‘At Risk’ reflected frustration amongst some participants with the move away from what they saw as the main area of concern.

What is the objective of this insight session? It started as a “poor boy, you were hit” and it has gone to “bad boy, why did you come here in the first place, to get PR”.

(Insight Objective? Gurbachan Singh’, Your Say)

It was unfortunate to see the debate drift into the motives of Indian students in studying here and criticism of agencies that promote ‘PR courses’. It is a digression from the much larger issue of possible racism in Australia…

(‘Vidyasagar’, Live Chat)

About a fifth of the At Risk Live Chat comments (69) and a quarter of the At Risk Your Say comments (252) involved participants asserting their own framework or analysis of the issue. These assertions often claimed to reveal the ‘real’ problem. The online comments contained many claims to the ‘truth’ and a lot of assertion of the ‘real’ or underlying issue. The level of detail about a range of concerns and the diversity of perspectives were certainly greater online than they were in the televised forum. This tendency may have been evidence of the previously untapped well of frustration and concern about these issues that were to become the focus of major news and policy debates in the coming months.
Program details – Family
The program titled ‘Family’ was very different in feel from the other two case studies. Rather than exploring recent political conflict in a multicultural context, it set out to question ‘what makes a family?’ in the context of recent legislative changes in state surrogacy laws (lifting a ban on surrogacy for single people and same sex couples) in Queensland. The program guests were all young people (between 15 and 25) who had been raised in ‘unconventional’ family circumstances – children of gay parents; children conceived via surrogacy or donor sperm; inter country adoptees; young people raised in communes or ‘intentional communities’ where parenting was collectively shared. Despite the disparate range of issues and experiences described in the program, the emphasis was on mutual affirmation and consensus on values. The chat and comments that followed on from this program involved high levels of collective identification and endorsement of the program. Many participants appeared to seek a coherent meaning from the diverse experiences reflected in the forum.

The sense of common identification with different families transcended cultural difference. Several featured guests on the program were from non-Anglo backgrounds as children of inter-country adoption but experiences of identity and senses of belonging were commonly described, regardless of individual ethnicities. There was some discussion of experiences of cultural dislocation, although this was not the main focus of the program or these participants’ contributions.

Live Chat and Your Say included a small number of highly engaged participants who tended to make multiple contributions. There was, amongst these comments and chat, the sense of being ‘inside’ a community. There was greater dialogue between participants (including pleasantries such as “thank you” and “you’re welcome”, “Goodnight Coz, thanks for all the input”) rather than abstract modes of address that tended to pervade the other forums.

Only a few comments (4) challenged the mutual support and agreement that permeated Live Chat and Your Say. One was from a self-identified Muslim, ‘Ali’, from Perth who suggested DNA tests before being allowed to parent, sparking outraged responses from several participants. One urged him to watch the program again, as through that would change his mind, and another suggested he “read the rest of the [online] comments if you disagree - your narrow view is not really supported”. These responses appear to reflect a belief in a kind of deliberative consensus in which contributors like Ali could learn from other contributors and come around to (what they saw as) the prevailing view.
Methods
NVivo 8 coding software, which allows the user to create customized frameworks of analysis via open categories of classification, was used to analyse the contributions of participants for the ‘kinds’ of comments they represented rather than the distribution of opinion. I was interested in what the participants were using the forums for and how they related to other users, rather than their positions on the issues covered. NVivo was used to create a structured reading of the large volume of comments, rather than simply relying on an impressionistic reading. Coding of the comments was an iterative process, as befitted the diversity of the data. I was less concerned with the numbers of comments coded in particular ways than I was in the ways grouping comments allowed for themes to emerge, that could then be read collectively through NVivo.

For a summary of categories, see Figure 1 (below)

| Expression of views: own views, personal experiences, clarification of own opinion, assertion of own analysis of issue |
| Dialogue and debate: response to previous comment, disagreement, agreement, asking questions, asking opinions |
| Exchange of information: asking for information, sharing information or links, seeking or providing advice |
| Understanding: claiming better understanding for self or others after program or forum, expressing support or empathy |
| Comment on forum: endorsement or critique of forum, endorsement/critique of line of questioning |
| Representation: endorsement of guests, ‘speaking for’ a group, self identification |
| Ambivalence about representation: claiming guests are ‘unrepresentative’, refusing to represent a certain group |

The categories were defined in the following ways:

- **Expression of views**: this grouping comprised comments that asserted the participants’ position on the issue or related personal experiences without direct reference to other comments in the forum.
- **Dialogue and debate**: these comments all directly responded to other comments (agreeing or disagreeing) or continued conversations in the forums, including by asking or answering questions.
- **Exchange of information**: these comments sought or provided information, links, references or advice relevant to the topic in discussion.
- **Understanding**: these comments involved assertions that the televised forum and/or online discussion had deepened their understanding of an issue or the perspectives of others on the issue in question.
- **Comment on forum**: these involved commentary about the quality, limitations or problems of the forum itself.
- **Representation**: these made comment about the ‘representativeness’ of guests or spokespeople on an issue.
- **Ambivalence about representation**: these comments expressed disquiet or frustration with the choice of guests and their ability to ‘speak for’ an issue – they also included comments by televised forum guests themselves which expressed hesitation about ‘speaking for’ any community or set of experiences.
Figure 2 below sets out the proportionality of the meta-categories of comments evidenced in Your Say and Live Chat for all of the programs in this study.

Janssen and Kies assert that real-time discussion spaces (such as Live Chat) are “spaces of encounter that attract ‘small talk’ and jokes” while the asynchronous (a non-time limited space like Your Say) tends to be a more “favourable place for the appearance of some form of rational-critical debate” (Janssen & Kies, 2005: 231). Their findings were not borne out in this study, as evidenced in Figure 2 above. There were, on a broad scale, greater levels of ‘exchange of information’ and ‘dialogue and debate’ (see Fig. 2) in the real-time Live Chat forums than there were in the Your Say comments (which tended to feature more heavily the ‘expression of own views’ type of comments). This tendency may have reflected a natural response to the nature of the highly politicized topics – which were not conducive to ‘small talk’. Your Say was also more impersonal, in that contributors tended to address themselves to the program audience more generally rather than to other individuals they imagined themselves to be in (real-time) contact with.
Data Summaries

1. There was evidence of a significant level of exchange between participants

The meta-category for this analysis grouped agreement and disagreement, endorsement and critique of views and seeking more information or clarification of viewpoints from others. This sought to establish whether participants were indeed reading others’ contributions and engaging with each other or simply using the online space as an opportunity to ‘vent’ after watching the program.

As Figure 3 (above) shows, between 18% and 30% of all comments directly referenced or responded to others’ comments in some way. This indicates that a substantial portion of comments were involved in dialogue or exchange with other forum contributors. The notion of exchange was a fundamental part of the experience of participation.

Analysis of the online comments revealed interesting examples of back and forth between views, in which participants corrected, challenged, endorsed or situated others’ contributions. There were many examples of reactive and polemic posts which can characterize online participation, but there were also genuine questions and more considered or discursive contributions. There were, for example, several instances in which individuals speaking from their own experiences were able to respond to critical comments in the same online space.
2. The forums were also used by a significant percentage of users as an opportunity to share and access information

There was also significant evidence of an exchange of information and advice, as well as engagement with others’ opinions (by, for example, seeking clarification of a viewpoint, asking questions or responding to other comments). Many appeared to treat the access to forum participants from other cultures as an opportunity to further their own understanding of cultural difference, thus strengthening connections between groups.

The ability to provide a platform for this type of resource for understanding, personal connection and information is a crucial role for a broadcaster like SBS. Such representations are evidence of **multicultural sociability** – mutual acknowledgement and a willingness to share information or views in the context of cultural difference. Through these expressions of curiosity or self-revelation, often answered with suggestions for offline connections, the forum offered opportunities for a kind of ‘bridging social capital’ to create better mutual understanding between groups in multicultural society (see Flew, 2008: 105).

This idea of the forum-as-resource is useful for thinking about the ways SBS can use web technologies to further our Charter obligations to “inform, educate and entertain” using the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of our audiences.
The anonymity of the online environment created, in some instances, a culture of confession and exposé in which people’s descriptions of their personal experiences functioned as a kind of ‘vent’, or as evidence for an argument. It is unclear whether these contributors would have found other platforms for these views had *Insight* not provided them with a space; however, the sense of investment in the issues tended to transcend challenges to trust which can emerge from the unstable identities of online participants (Poster, 1995: 209). The SBS forums offered a space where these views could ‘come together’ under the umbrella of a public service broadcasting framework.

Janssen and Kies note online discussion spaces where no identification is required could have a “disinhibiting effect” (Janssen & Kies, 2005). Dahlgren further suggests “the Internet seems to offer opportunities to participate for many people who otherwise find that there are too many taboos and too much discomfort in talking about certain topics, including politics, in face-to-face environments” (Dahlgren, 2005: 156). This new kind of discourse, by virtue of its anonymity, may enhance multicultural sociability by freeing up discussion from guarded positions represented in more traditional media and overcoming some of the challenges of requiring individuals to ‘speak for’ their community as representatives in a constructed forum.
3. The online forums allowed for a wide range of themes and hugely varying interpretations of issues

This category of analysis was used to group comments which overtly asserted a new or individual way of understanding the issue under discussion. Expressions such as “the real problem is...” or “this is actually a problem of...” or “why aren’t we talking about the real issues? We need to look at...” were common. Although all comments tend to draw on certain frameworks of understanding, this category of analysis sought to explore instances in which contributors were resisting common interpretations or actively asserting a new way of understanding a problem.

The data revealed that the online environments were conducive to these kinds of assertions, more so where there was considerable controversy (such as on issues related to the ‘Somali Australians’ and ‘At Risk’ programs) than in more mutually endorsing environments (such as around the ‘Family’ program). Understandably, these kinds of assertions were more common in Your Say comments sections than in conversations with others on the Live Chat platforms. This range of interpretations of issues meant that the online environment included a very wide range of views, more than would be made available in traditional media forms and the usual ‘balance of views’ editorial frameworks.
Conclusions

This study found that online discussions allowed for a range of views that would be unlikely to be aired in more traditional media forums. Participants were able to take a range of complex positions in relation to the multiple topics of discussion, which had the consequence of making it difficult for participants to agree on the terms of debate.

Many competing frameworks for understanding the problem at hand led to parallel conversations and what Papacharissi (2002) has called ‘enraged discussion’. As a result, the threads of conversation in the forums were not coherent and the Live Chat, in particular, was confusing and difficult to follow. As in all of the case studies, there was a sense of multiple parallel attempts at conversations, many of which were lost through the slow pace of the chat.

The diverse views expressed on the Insight platforms are more broadly contextualised within a commonly understood editorial framework for the participants, and are provided with a degree of legitimacy (and a national audience) through their association with a national public broadcaster. All of these interactions are generated from an engagement with the framework established by the program drawing on common points of reference, creating a set of norms for the debate. There were some examples of a resistance to these norms; however, the starting point for discussion created a common vocabulary to be used in discussion.

More than traditional media forums, the Insight online engagements allowed for a complexity of views, broader frameworks for analysis and exchange between diverse subject positions – keys to emergent multicultural sociability. Many of the contributors expressed their opinions within their own defined framework of understanding, but they tended to address a broad imagined audience. Views may have been polarized but they were not ghettoized: the notion of exchange was a fundamental part of the experience of participation.

Many contributors seemed to imagine themselves as engaging with a broader sphere of influence by making calls to action or by directly addressing government or other authorities in their comments, imagining a direct engagement with policy or regulatory outcomes. The question of impact of the online debate, whether it offers false empowerment or actual significance for public life, however, relies on an understanding of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ spheres as separate. Many participants in the Insight forums described how reading others’ comments had made them think or feel. Many participants claimed that the forum had led them to a better understanding of issues. These kinds of comments suggest an influence for the forum within itself, as a part of everyday life, and offering a resource for living together-in-difference (Ang & Pothen, 2009).

The study found that participants were able to use the forums as a resource to develop better understandings of cultural difference and differing views in multicultural Australia.
Recommendations

This study leads to a series of recommendations to assist SBS to improve its relationship to user-generated content. These recommendations are:

- increase online moderation resources to speed ‘live’ chat and improve user experience;
- develop capacity to pursue simultaneous conversations (along various lines of argument) on issues related to the topic under discussion;
- draw out some of the unique perspectives and ideas expressed in UGC online for further exploration in different content sites;
- ‘report back’ on online discussions on other platforms and develop programming responsive to high levels of online activity; and
- actively support the use of online forums as resources for intercultural understanding with background information and briefing sheets, links to other content and recommendations for sources of information (including SBS content partners).

These commitments would maximize the potential of online comment and chat platforms to deliver on SBS Charter objectives by extending SBS audience engagement with content and themes of discussion. They would also ensure that audience comments are not simply ‘speaking into the void’.

As investments, they would assist SBS to ‘be the catalyst for the nation’s discussion about multiculturalism and social inclusion’, the first objective in SBS’s current Corporate Plan (2010-2015).
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SBS’s multilingual dilemma: global media, “community languages” and cultural citizenship

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Abstract

The increasing complexity of the multilingual environment, in large part resulting from globalising media trends, is creating new challenges for multilingual media. This article explores forms of citizenship, issues of ‘community’ and transnational media use through the case study of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Australia’s multilingual and multicultural national public broadcaster. SBS was developed as an element of Australian multicultural policy in a response to political pressures of a diverse society. It now needs to engage with contemporary forms of identity and increasingly sophisticated media use trends to maintain its relevance.

Introduction: Multilingual media as a resource for cultural citizenship

Media, particularly public media, are constitutive of contemporary forms of citizenship. As Sonia Livingstone (1998: 197) observes, “people's status as media audiences is a crucial way they participate as citizens.” International broadcasting has in recent years undergone major shifts in both technological and social uses and applications. Audiences and taste cultures have become increasingly atomised, dissolving “mass audiences” and triggering alarm about the eroding impact of the fragmentation of the public sphere on contemporary citizenship (see, for example, Habermas, 1989; Tomlinson, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008). Concurrently, national demographies have become more complex and diversified through globalisation-related trends such as migration, newly generated identities and affiliations and transnational ties which have thrown “traditional views of naturalised citizenship … into confusion” (Miller, 2007: 54).

Increasingly complex cultural diversity has generated a series of political and policy challenges aligned with uneven levels of civic and social participation. Miller describes this as a:

... crisis of belonging...a population crisis of who, what, when and where. More and more people are seeking to belong and more and more people are not counted as belonging (2007: 1).

Central to cultural citizenship is the notion of belonging, a force that “joins people together and informs their actions” (Calhoun, 2007: 286). Cultural citizenship is concerned with “inclusion and exclusion, bringing together culture (production of meaning) and citizenship (belonging, membership, rights and responsibilities)” (Stevenson, 2003: 4). One way in which these processes of inclusion and exclusion have been managed in culturally heterogeneous liberal democracies is via multicultural policy and the recognition of linguistic pluralism.

Multiculturalism was first introduced as official state policy in Canada in 1971 and later adopted in many other liberal democracies, where it took various forms as a practice for the “state management of minorities” which sought to be stable and “morally defensible” (Kymlicka, 1995: 26). As Kymlicka has also noted,

... the term ‘multicultural’ covers many different forms of cultural pluralism, each of which raises its own challenges ... Generalisations about the goals or consequences of multiculturalism can therefore be very misleading (1995: 18).

Some of these differences can be attributed to differing contexts of diversity and immigration. In Canada, multiculturalism sits alongside bi-nationalism – in which an “uneasy tolerance between the French and the English” provides an existing source of cultural pluralism (Kymlicka, 1995: 14). In the USA, large racially/ethnically constituted groups (such as African Americans and Latinos), represent significant divisions within society, and racial politics often focus on differing levels of socio-economic advantage. In many European contexts – such as the UK, France and the Netherlands – cultural diversity is linked to a legacy of imperialism with large migrant communities from former colonies. In Germany, some groups have been conditionally afforded residence as ‘guest workers’, extending to generations of Turkish residents, for example, who experience precarious...
Australian immigration has largely constituted a form of ‘social engineering’, building a larger, permanent, population and a skilled, or at least able-bodied, workforce (see Jupp, 2002). The "more British than Britain" aspirations of the White Australia Policy were therefore, continually compromised in the post World War II quest for more workers and residents. Australia was quickly becoming one of the most diverse national populations in the world (Jupp, 2002), with an Indigenous heritage augmented by successive waves of immigration. By the mid-1970s, following the official end of the White Australia Policy, it had become evident to policy makers that immediate integration into Australian cultural life was not an inevitable, or easy, step for most migrants. Australian multicultural policies were implemented in 1975 to redress the socio-economic disadvantage associated with non-English speaking backgrounds and to recognise officially the continuing diversity of the Australian population – an acknowledgement that prior policies of assimilation were unsustainable. Australian multiculturalism today retains an emphasis on citizenship and participation in its civil society.

Christian Joppke (2004) has tracked a retreat from multiculturalism in various contexts, including among the previous ‘standard bearers’ of multiculturalism in Europe (such as the Netherlands and the UK). This development Joppke notes, is due to multiculturalism's perceived failure to change the socio-economic status of migrants, lack of popular support, and to perceptions that it enabled certain groups (namely Islamic religious communities) to reject the liberal standards of contemporary democracies. Australia however, has been less inclined to follow suit according to Joppke, although the policy was dismissed as "mushy and misguided" (Gordon & Topsfield, 2006: 2) under the conservative Howard Government while it was in power (1996-2007). In 2010 and early 2011, several major nation-sates (Germany, France and the UK) dismissed multiculturalism as having 'failed'. In contrast, the Gillard Labor Government (elected in 2007) recommitted to a federal multicultural policy during its second term in early 2011, citing the 'genius' of Australian multiculturalism in facilitating a socially cohesive society (Bowen, 2011) in the context of Australia's existing cultural diversity and an economy tied to continuing immigration.

The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Australia's second public broadcaster, has been one of the most visible, and obviously multilingual, products of Australia's multicultural policies. SBS commenced operations as a small-scale radio experiment in 1975, extended to television services in 1980 and online in 1991. As a national public broadcaster operating under a public charter, SBS has a role in Australian nation building. As a multicultural media service, it has a role in pluralising the public sphere, offering a vision of Australia in which diversity is a 'naturalised' part of the national self-image. In this article I will focus on the programs in languages other than English on SBS Radio, as these services offer a useful case study to explore the new challenges and contexts for multicultural and multilingual policy in a globalised environment.

In the context of increasingly diverse societies, a crucial part of the practices and structures of inclusion or exclusion relates to language. Stevenson notes that cultural citizenship is linked to "whose language is given public acceptance" (2003: 23-4). The ‘public’ element of this proposition is crucial, ensuring that cultural and linguistic difference is not relegated to the home but promoted in the public sphere. Michael Clyne described the history in Australia of English speaking “monolinguals using other people's languages as an instrument of exclusion”, whereas he saw the possibilities for "Inclusion – legitimating and valuing Australia's multilingualism" (2005: x: emphasis in original) and signaling that it is acceptable in the public domain (Clyne, 2005: 97). SBS Radio provides a case study of some of the challenges facing these practices of inclusion (and containment) in multilingual policy and services.

According to Ang, Hawkins and Dabbousy, "language is one of the most intimate assets of cultural identity and social communication ..." (2008: 57), and as such plays a vitally important role in the enhancement, or curtailment, of social belonging and participation in multicultural society. Data on measures of social wellbeing from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) General Social Survey evidence that, "factors of language and culture can limit social participation in life in Australia" (ABS, 2008b). Statistics from the last Australian population census, conducted in 2006, reveal that more than 160 other languages (besides English and Indigenous languages) were spoken in Australian households (ABS, 2008a). More languages with fewer speakers are now in use in Australia than ever before. In 2006, according to the ABS Census, more than 16 per cent of Australians spoke a language other than English in the home (ABS, 2008c).

Toby Miller describes the counting of citizens via a census as a process of recognition of these citizens as part of the social sphere, which marks them as "deserving of aid and inclusion" following which, "their well-being [is] incorporated into collective subjectivity as a right, a problem, a statistic, and a law ..." (Miller, 2007: 42). This process forms a "technology of government" (Flew, 1997: 50) through which the inscription of citizens constructs them as subjects of evaluation, calculation or intervention and framed as a social policy ‘problem’. The concurrent recognition and categorisation of citizens are central to the processes of determining individual and collective rights within liberal-democratic nation-states.

Access to relevant media resources is, increasingly, understood as a crucial cultural ‘right’ of citizenship (Murdock, 1999); appropriately, media policy, particularly as it relates to public service media, is tied to concerns of democratic participation and citizenship. However, traditional models of public institutions, including public broadcasters, have been criticised as failing to address demographic complexities and uneven levels of access to these cultural rights (Jakubowicz, 2007; McClean, 2008). As Liza Hopkins notes, "because participation depends on capacity, which is distributed unevenly in heterogeneous societies, passively expanding citizenship to all does not necessarily lead to inclusion for all citizens or to full citizen participation” (Hopkins, 2009: 21). Citizenship rights must be supplemented by ‘minority’ or group-differentiated rights in a framework of social justice and equity in culturally diverse societies (Kymlicka, 1995: 6), a key principle underpinning multicultural policies. Kymlicka (2001) argues that minority rights must not be seen as a deviation from ethnocultural neutrality but as a response to majority nation building. Public broadcasting has been strongly associated with the modernist project of nation building, regarding audiences as citizens for whom participation requires access to knowledge, rather than as consumers placing "market value" on informational needs (Livingstone, 1999).
Theorists have emphasised the role of public broadcasting in developing the "common knowledge" of shared cultural significations – public information, political developments and major events – in constructing national citizenship (see, for example, Scannell, 1989). Traditional public broadcasters have however, been criticised for only facilitating exclusive forms of sociability which rely on culturally dominant social capital (see Born, 2004; Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000).

The public broadcasting 'goods' – quality programs, good information and the inclusion of people in democratic society (Costera Meijer, 2005) – provide crucial foundations for cultural citizenship, defined by Miller as aligned with "the right to know and to speak" (2007: 35). Contemporary citizenship has an intrinsic relationship to media use, as the processes of "bonding and community building" fostered by media (Hermes, 2005: 10) are key to practices of belonging, participation and representation. When the resources for these forms of bonding are limited or exclusive, the result can be alienation and disengagement (Madianou, 2011).

The notion of media as a resource which audiences can relate or respond to in multiple ways recognises audience agency. As Barnett notes:

Thinking about media requires a networked conception of socio-spatial power, one that works less through realising predictable effects of prescription, and more by providing resources for action whose appropriation is liable to considerable variation in effects (Barnett, 2003: 100; emphasis added).

Understanding media as resources for action, highlights the importance of multilingual media. The resources framework foregrounds issues of access and empowerment through media transmission of information and "common knowledge" (Murdock, 1999), without assuming a set of knowable responses from audiences. Audience theory tells us that audiences use and make sense of media in individual and creative ways (see, for example, Bird, 2011; Hall, 1997; Madianou, 2011; Ruddock, 2001). We cannot assume that the intention of programmers is carried through to the everyday media consumption practices adopted by audiences. Audiences can critique, reject, parody, recommend, celebrate or re-purpose media content according to their own needs and preferences. Studies of cultural difference in media reception indicate that cultural diversity adds layers of complexity to the meaning generated through media texts (see, for example, Gillespie, 1995; Liebes & Katz, 1993). It is important however, not to confuse this agency in interpretation and consumption (held by audiences) with power over the construction and presentation of media sources (held by media institutions and policy makers – Morley, 1992).

SBS represents a formal and institutional recognition of the internal linguistic diversity of the Australian nation. Its multilingual services provide opportunities for Australians to access linguistic diversity amidst an otherwise monolingual 'mindset' in the national context (Clayne, 1991; 2005). SBS is held up as an example internationally of an "impressive achievement" in multilingual media (Edwards, 2004: 185). However, fracturing audiences and increasing complexity of language and media use are posing new challenges to the SBS model. A discussion of these issues and some of the dilemmas surrounding SBS Radio's programming schedule (under review in 2011) evidences many of the complexities associated with providing services for multilingual populations in contemporary multicultural societies. Before I enter into this discussion however, I will describe the problem of group representation in heterogeneous societies, as well as challenges to citizenship in the context of transnational affiliations.

"Communities' and complexity in multiculturalism

Charles Taylor described multicultural policies as part of a "politics of recognition" whereby the equal worth of all cultures is recognised in diverse societies (1994:36). This is symbolically important, however it does not operate outside material structures. As Iris Young noted:

... claims for cultural recognition are rarely asserted for their own sake. They are part of demands for social inclusion and equal economic opportunity, where the claimants deny that such equality should entail shedding or privatising their cultural difference (2002: 106).

While recognizing the elements of "fairness, equal opportunity and political inclusion" inherent in this kind of identity politics (Young, 2002: 107), it is important to keep in mind that political alignment with a cultural or linguistic grouping does not generate (or emerge from) identical or equivalent perspectives or experiences on the part of social activists or those they (claim to) represent. This is a key challenge in the use of concepts of culture and multiculturalism, described by Madianou as a paradox, in which "the irony of stressing difference as a means of refuting primordialist perspectives is that one reproduces the same ideology one purports to question" (2011: 447).

The creation of multilingual radio services in Australia foregrounded community rights, based on shared ethnic or linguistic identity, as central to the realisation of inclusive multicultural citizenship. This kind of approach privileges a bounded notion of 'communities', whereby representation and identification are assumed to be relatively straightforward – a process in which "it is assumed the community exists and merely needs to be empowered" (Little, 2002: 3). According to Gerd Bauman, it turns migrants into "pseudo corporate 'communities'" and sets up competition between groups for resources (1999: 123-124).

Bauman describes this contradiction in practice in his analysis of the dual discursive competencies required for living in a complex multicultural society. He describes how in Southall, London, minority groups are complicit in reifying their own 'communities' for the purposes of competitive services allocation, while concurrently engaging with contextual (and processual) identifications which challenge those reified constructs (Baumann, 1999; see also Madianou, 2011). In this formulation,
identities are understood as strategic and contextual ‘identifications’ or self-understandings (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). This is not to say that identity means nothing; it is simply to say that it means different things in differing contexts and is relationally constructed and applied. Self-identification and categorisation by others (particularly institutions) are not, however, one and the same thing (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 15), and may not easily align with one another. Further, self-identifications are not necessarily consciously chosen, as Calhoun notes:

... we cannot understand group membership as always simply, consciously chosen, and if it is produced in part by larger webs of social relations and distributions of opportunities, it is enabling as much as constraining (2007: 299).

This notion of concurrent empowerment and containment runs through much critical analysis of multicultural policies and services. State-based policies for “managing minorities” and developing forms of pluralist citizenship and participation are aligned to traditional models of citizenship, governing the relationship between individuals and the nation-state. Transnational ties, influences and allegiances are currently challenging these understandings as the world becomes more globalised. These trends, intimately related to multilingual media use, are explored briefly in the following section.

Transnationalism and national citizenship

Transnationalism, it is often claimed, is undermining conceptions of nation-states and, with them, national audiences (Fraser, 2007; Madianou, 2011; Vertovec, 2009). Turner and Tay assert that traditional understandings of broadcasting which conceive of media as “addressing a national society and culture, and fundamentally connected to the governance of the nation-state” are “increasingly anachronistic” (2008: 72). As broadcasting becomes “disaggregated from the activities of the state” it is increasingly market driven, which “presents a number of challenges for those who believe that aspects of this former role were fundamentally useful to democratic politics” (Turner & Tay, 2008: 74). Christina Slade and Irene Volkmer have explored such concerns in their analysis of uses of transnational media by contemporary audiences, claiming that the public sphere has been fragmented into a set of linguistically differentiated “sub-national publics in self-referential spheres” (2007: 73). Their work focuses particularly on trends in Europe, but similar concerns about the impact of transnationalism have gained currency in Australian public discourse (see, for example, AAP, 2011). UK-based research evidences how warnings about the fragmentation of civic life through transnational media carry, in the context of the “war on terror” and security cultures, the additional signification of “home-grown terrorism” via ‘radicalising’ influences (Gillespie, Gow, Hoskins, O’Loughlin, & Zverzhansovski, 2010).

We cannot assume however, that transnational media is any less cosmopolitan or any more alarming than its local counterparts. Aksoy and Robins note that panics about retreat from local cultures or assertion of ‘uncivil’ cultures around transnational media cast audiences as passive and susceptible to the influence of their ‘national’ media system” (2000: 344). They challenge this assumption, arguing that the negotiation between differing national media products encourages “thinking around issues of belonging, identity and culture” which opens up more reflexive possibilities for self-understanding (2000: 356). Madianou adds that access to transnational media can “accelerate processes of cultural change”, encouraging audiences to become more cosmopolitan (2011: 449).

However, Nancy Fraser (2007) has noted that there is a problem in the increasingly popular idea of a “transnational public sphere”. She asserts that “the concept of the public sphere was developed not just to understand communications flows but to contribute to a critical political theory of democracy” in which public opinion as a political force holds authorities to account and ensures that the “actions of the state express the will of the citizenry” (Fraser, 2007: 45). Thus, Fraser claims, “a public sphere should correlate with a sovereign power” to have political efficacy (2007: 45). The public sphere must be grounded in citizenship and an accountable political environment to ensure political influence for its participants. This is still primarily how we make change in our daily lives. It is through the pressure of public opinion that changes are made to legislation or regulations affecting, for example, requirements for skilled migration, or housing conditions for international students – issues recently debated in Australian media, holding leaders responsible for the conditions experienced by many transnationally-linked residents in that country.

Transnational media cannot always be assumed to limit its users’ participation in local media or local civic engagement. Steven Vertovec (2009: 82) claims that the unprecedented levels of transnational ties among immigrants (variable within and between groups) are not necessarily a challenge to national integration. Vertovec cites recent research by Jayaweera and Choudhury (2008) indicating that engagement in political spheres internationally can tend to create greater confidence for local engagement. Hopkins, in her analysis of media use by Australian Alevi Turkish speakers, further notes that it is not “necessarily the case that engagement with transnational media comes at the expense of local content” (2009: 21). The contemporary reality of media use is that this is not a zero-sum game. Adrian Athique notes, “what most characterises the contemporary media as a discursive force in our society is its multiple sources and its intertextuality” (2008: 38). Media discourses intersect with one another in complex ways as audiences become increasing sophisticated in their use of a range of locally-and globally-sourced information and entertainment. There is still, however, an important role for national public media in linking the “working through” of identities and self-understandings facilitated by transnational media (Aksoy & Robins, 2000: 345) with the political efficacy and agency of media aligned with national citizenship (see Fraser, 2007).

Madianou asserts that, “when transnational audiences choose media from within their country of residence, this is often a statement about their citizenship and desire for participation in public life” (2011: 450). However, she describes a “closing off” that can occur when local media fail to represent cultural difference in inclusive ways. She says of her studies of national and transnational media users in Greece, “although my informants expressed openness and reflexivity in their narratives about identity, when they were confronted with ‘closure’ in the media, they adopted an essentialist ‘closed’ discourse themselves” (Madianou, 2011: 451). The reflexivity described in transnational media uses by Aksoy and Robins (2000), then, has a
relationship to the forms of sociability facilitated by local media. Openness in self-understandings is facilitated by inclusive media in countries of residence and citizenship that allow for more agency in practices of belonging and identification. I will now explore how the limitations of community representation, the problematic categorisation of community languages and new challenges posed by transnationalism, relate to my case study: the shaping of, and political justifications for, the SBS Radio schedule.

The SBS Radio schedule

SBS commenced operations in 1975, in the form of experimental radio stations that provided government information in the languages of Australia’s largest migrant communities (eight languages in Melbourne and five in Sydney). It was founded in response to a powerful “ethnic political lobby”, and developed over time in ways that were “indexed to” official state multiculturalism (Nolan & Radywyl, 2004: 54). SBS’s public Charter mandates an orientation to diversity and multilingualism as central principles of its services. SBS Radio has steadily increased its services from the early multilingual public broadcasting experiment, as representatives of more language groups sought to have their language included in the schedule to the current 68 language programs. With this figure, SBS lays claim to being the most multilingual broadcaster in the world (SBS, 2011).

The SBS Radio schedule is broadcast over two locally transmitted analogue frequencies (in Melbourne and Sydney/Canberra /Wollongong) and a national analogue frequency for more geographically dispersed audiences – with 63 per cent population reach across Australia (SBS, 2009-2010: 42). All of these services are now replicated on digital platforms and via audio streaming and podcasts online. SBS radio services start broadcasting at 6am daily with an hour-long English-language news and current affairs program (also from 5pm), and then broadcasts “in-language” news and information programs, changing language hour-on-hour, until 11pm when music and overnight programming takes over.

The language programs are separately tailored to each “community language” audience. The programs draw from a common editorial framework and an approximate division of each hour of airtime to major local and international news. However, they also cover major stories from relevant ‘homelands’ – additional coverage of the Middle East in the Arabic and Hebrew programs, for example (McClean & Cullum, 2003). The programs also cover stories of special interest to speakers of particular languages in Australia. Three programs highlight this approach: first, in April 2011, the Turkish and German programs collaborated on a radio documentary exploring differing experiences of Turkish immigrants to Germany and Australia (questioning why multiculturalism has been proclaimed a ‘failure’ in Germany but a success in Australia). Second, the Hebrew and Arabic programs that covered Marrickville local area council’s aborted bid to adopt the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel (the subject of a political row about a position adopted by the Greens Party in local and federal politics). The third was the Cantonese program that ran talk-back about Amy Chua’s controversial bestseller Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, questioning whether the style of strict Chinese parenting that she advocates has a place in multicultural Australia.

SBS Radio’s “in-language” programs have, over time, provided a significant resource for their audiences, creating links to services in settlement, employment, health and education. In addition to these practical settlement-and-services building blocks for citizenship, SBS multilingual broadcasting facilitates more participatory models of engagement via talk-back and community engagement activities which offer a national ‘hearing’ for otherwise marginalised perspectives. As Ang et al. (2008) point out:

Language specific programs are used not only for practical community support and ethnic cultural maintenance; their role is to educate listeners to become more cosmopolitan, multicultural citizens by increasing their ability to function as informed participants in a plural, liberal democratic society (2008: 68).

This role provides crucial support for belonging and participation in multicultural society. SBS Radio’s language program schedule has, however, failed to keep pace with changes in language use. Far more languages are now spoken in Australia than at the time of SBS’s inception (Brown, 2011b). Ex-Managing Director Shaun Brown publicly noted in 2011 that SBS “significantly under-serve[s] major or growing language communities ... [and] ... at the same we do little or nothing for new, high-need language groups” (quoted in Bourke, 2011: n.p.). The SBS Radio schedule is a balancing act, in which the five language groups with the most speakers in Australia (Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Arabic) have two hours of programming per day and smaller groups are allocated less airtime, down to the smallest (such as Lithuanian and Bulgarian), which have just one hour of programming per week. SBS also broadcasts, in two hours per week, an ‘Aboriginal’ program in English which includes small amounts of Indigenous languages, of which there are over 180 in Australia (see ABS, 2008).

The “high-need” groups referred to by Brown include speakers of languages rapidly growing in use in Australia due to new patterns of humanitarian settlement, such as Dinka (from Sudan), Khmer (from Burma), Oromo (from Ethiopia) and Tigrinya (from Eritrea – Clyne, 2005: 7). Newer language groups could not be accommodated in SBS’s current services without curtailing or removing programs for other language speakers – changes that are resisted by representatives of language groups currently on the schedule. Consultations concerning SBS Radio programs conducted in 2008 revealed a “stand-off” between advocates of the inclusion of newer language groups emerging through humanitarian settlement and those who emphasised the issues associated with ageing, including isolation and “reversion to language” trends (De Bot & Makoni, 2005) amongst smaller groups of European language speakers, such as Yiddish, who have been in Australia, and on the SBS Radio schedule, far longer. In 2011 SBS conducted a review of the radio schedule (the results of which are not available at time of writing – June 2012). The allocation of airtime in such a review is described in the SBS Codes of Practice in the following terms:

1.4.2 Allocation of Airtime for Community Languages – Radio

SBS Radio is a multilingual and multicultural broadcaster with a direct role in serving Australia’s language
SBS’s services were developed in the context of “ethnic lobby” groups organising collectively to demand the importance ethnic community organisations place on having their language included in the SBS schedule, the power not only to represent but also to validate community languages and their associated ethnic cultural needs and factors. Recent arrivals to Australia, such as the Karen speakers who have fled violence in Burma, may have little or no local media available in their language, while longer-standing groups, such as Khmer speakers from Cambodia, still rely on SBS for their only in-language media access to local information. Language speakers who are ageing along with the profile of speakers of that language, such as Estonians (who as a group have experienced high levels of “language transfer” to English use and, therefore, have lower rates of language maintenance in younger generations) use “their” SBS program to counter social isolation (Census Applications, 2008). Material circumstances continue to generate the need for in-language information and services, even if their uses and contexts are highly variable.

Just as the notion of ‘communities’ can be problematic, as we have seen, ‘community languages’ has long been a vexed descriptor (Kalantzis, Cope, & Slade, 1989). In a sense it could be argued that SBS Radio has created “language groups” by the nature of its service and classification. Its Arabic language program, for example, addresses an Australian national Arabic-speaking audience (with links to around 22 countries of origin) through its fourteen hours a week. The Arabic program is intended to cater for a national, geographically dispersed Australian Arabic-speaking audience which brings together, among many others, long-settled Lebanese Australians in Sydney’s Lakemba and newly arrived Iraqi refugees in Shepparton in regional Victoria. In constructing a set of language-based services, SBS Radio has formalised certain groupings as audiences for its language programs which include individuals with different identifications, backgrounds and media preferences.

Individuals who are not native language speakers may also use the language programs and, in fact, may not speak the language “in the home”. For example, Danielle Kemp, former Executive Producer of the French program, felt that her program should not be understood in terms of a community language as she counted among her audience the many students of French, Francophiles and intermarried families – generally not conceived of as part of “language communities” – who tuned in (McClean & Cullum, 2003). Notions of contextuality and relational identity required by a more nuanced concept of contemporary self-understandings (as advocated by theorists such as Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) are however, difficult to translate into inclusive or accountable ‘universal’ public media services and generate some difficult policy challenges for an organisation like SBS. Given the complex and competing ‘needs’ within the language environment, how can SBS act, making changes and delivering useful services, while maintaining an understanding of the complexity of ‘communities’? And how can a ‘communities’ framework maintain relevance in the face of the fragmentation of contemporary audiences?

Consultation and the ethnic lobby

In multilingual Australia, SBS has significant administrative power in ‘naming’ and affirming community languages as worthy elements of the national broadcasting project through their inclusion in the radio schedule. Of course, the allocation of airtime to languages in the SBS Radio schedule has never been a matter of simple recognition, but as a highly politicised process. According to Ang et al. (2008), ethnic communities place importance on being represented on the SBS Radio schedule as SBS is seen as the “cornerstone of Australian multiculturalism”:

SBS plays a central role as conduit for the symbolic recognition of multilingual Australia. As a national public broadcaster it has the power not only to represent but also to validate community languages and their associated ethnic communities – hence the importance ethnic community organisations place on having their language included in the SBS schedule, especially SBS Radio (2008: 61).

SBS’s services were developed in the context of “ethnic lobby” groups organising collectively to demand inclusion in public life, and whose demands were then subject to:

... the vicissitudes of a policy process, in which unequal power relations serve to determine the variable resources available to groups competing to exert influence over institutional arrangements and practices (Nolan & Radywyl, 2004: 43).
The legacy of SBS's relationship with ethno-politics has had significant implications for SBS's radio services. Consultations with community groups on proposed changes to SBS Radio's schedule tend to be political and highly fraught. In “speaking for” a language or cultural group, community representatives often align themselves with the conservativism of the “ethnic group model” (Nolan & Radywyl, 2004). The representatives have an investment in reflecting “their community” as unified behind a single position – in this case, usually a determination to maximise the airtime allocated to their language in the radio schedule.

If the process of consultation requires satisfying existing “community stakeholders” through relatively unchanged service delivery, however, in the context of media and social transformation the radio services do risk losing relevance for changing multilingual audiences. The existing model does not allow for generational change, new forms of professional or transient migration, or increasingly complex media use trends on a range of platforms – including satellite and online – which are breaking down categories of “community audiences”, if indeed they ever existed (see Madianou, 2011). Many speakers of languages other than English currently residing in Australia do not align themselves (particularly in their media use) with self-understandings tied to particular ethnic groups or ‘migrant’ experiences (Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006). It is now time to rethink the SBS multilingual model to take account of new forms of audience.

**Fragmenting audiences and the role of SBS**

A crucial factor in SBS’s dilemma is defining its public value in the face of diversifying competition. There is now a range of media services in languages other than English accessible in Australia – including community radio and television, satellite television and web-based content, as well as multiple forms of print media. SBS is not by any means the only source of news and information in preferred languages for many communities. In the context of more available alternatives and diversification of platforms, the SBS Radio schedule looks increasingly like a dated patchwork based on old-style “appointment listening” when compared with new 24-hour language services and satellite-sourced television news. Some have claimed that in the new transnational media environment of increased access to multilingual services and information, there is no longer a need for national in-language services (Sheehan, 2007). Others have critiqued SBS as “out of touch” in comparison with localised services such as community radio (Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2008). SBS’s response to these criticisms has been to emphasise its public broadcasting credentials (quality, accessibility and universality) and the importance of national/local Australian perspectives in multilingual content (SBS, 2009). The latter highlights the promotion of civic participation, aligning SBS with official Australian multiculturalism based in unifying citizenship. SBS Radio’s language programs are based on a “nationalist perspective, focused on Australia, rather than a diasporic one, focused on the homeland” (Ang, et al., 2008: 68), providing resources (such as linguistically appropriate information, services and reportage of the local political context) for participation in Australian public life. This orientation is a key distinction between SBS Radio and ‘transnational’ in-language media or some community radio services that involve substantial rebroadcasting of “homeland” content.

The distinction between local and transnational media has become a key argument for continued funding for SBS, which warned of the creation of ‘digital ghettos’ through the National Broadband Network’s facilitation of access to online content if Australian multilingual and multicultural content is not sufficiently supported (AAP, 2011). SBS has emphasised its role in making local news and information, the “common knowledge” of shared references and crucial links into civic participation, available in languages other than English. The principle that SBS asserts is that all Australians, regardless of their capacity in English, have a stake in Australia’s public life and its future (SBS, 2007). These assertions privilege the universal and unifying models of national citizenship that, as we have seen, many theorists are now calling into question. I argue that there is still an important role for multilingual media in developing a pluralist vision of the “imagined national community” and more inclusive models of citizenship generated in the public sphere. These engagements with a national public sphere remain important for political agency tied to local or legislative outcomes. However, these ideals offer little if audiences are not engaging with the resources provided to and for them.

**New understandings of multilingual audiences**

In order to develop relevant media services it is important to recognise that audiences are not naturally formed around content or services in preferred languages. Audiences may be as likely to form around interests or subcultural or generational groupings as they are around languages in their media uses. Audiences are however, as little reducible to a set of consumption practices (as grouped by marketing categories) as they are to ‘communities’ with knowable attributes. An engagement with new understandings of audiences would require SBS to think differently about its programming and the need to understand the “sophistication of some of these post-national audiences, which are at once globalised and highly specialised” (Hopkins, 2009: 24). Language is one medium by which to reach audiences – albeit an important one which carries its own signification and modes of identification – but it is not in itself the whole ‘message’. The message of inclusion and recognition carried by a multilingual broadcaster in a culturally heterogeneous society is important and symbolically powerful, but this takes us only a small part of the way to exploring the value of multilingual services. They must contribute meaningfully to the intersecting resources offered by media across linguistic as well as local and national lines.

Bearing in mind the new opportunities for (most) audiences to access multiple sources of information and linguistically diverse content, I would argue that the cornerstone for SBS multilingual programming can no longer be that SBS creates or broadcasts content in multiple languages, it must be what SBS and its audiences do in and with this content. This kind of new approach is evidenced in SBS’s pilot “virtual community centres”, the first of which is in Mandarin, aggregating a weekly Australian current affairs program, Mandarin News Australia, and content from a range of sources in Mandarin on an online social media platform. This platform enables comment, interaction and recommendations between participants, with an emphasis on issues relevant to younger, web-literate Chinese Australians. The distinction between the programming tied to access-and-equity frameworks and a more contemporary understanding of how the platform may be useful to audiences, highlights the difference between a service-based culture and a clearer understanding of media-literate audiences with access to “local, national, geolinguistic, regional and global media” (Tay & Turner, 2008: 80). The former privileges social policy frameworks which imagine knowable responses to policy problems (Miller, 2007), while the latter engages with ‘ungovernable’ publics via content and forms that
are understood to have “variations in effects” (Barnett, 2003: 100). They also carry different forms of measurement, the first oriented towards reporting, community representation and compliance, and the second towards research and more contemporary understandings of audience engagement.

Conclusion

While multilingual and multicultural policies act as an agent of top-down authority in the construction of particular categories of citizens, they simultaneously offer a source of individual and collective empowerment and new forms of citizenship. Participatory citizenship remains an important source of political agency, even in the context of increasing transnational ties. Despite the limitations of traditional ‘community’ frameworks in recognising heterogeneity and contemporary identifications with language, Australian multilingual public broadcasting resources remain important. According to Little (2002), protection of communities (however flawed the concept) is important in the context of pervasive market discourses in modern life. A purely market-based approach to language audiences would almost inevitably lead to market failure in addressing the needs of multilingual communities as, “not every niche is a marketable niche” (Costera Meijer, 2005: 30). Multilingual media are crucial cultural resources required to render “citizenship rights substantial rather than nominal” (Murdock, 1999: 8-9). In the case of SBS Radio, the resources include symbolic recognition, access to information and services, and opportunities for new forms of social and civic participation. However, in the context of a fragmented digital media environment and fluid contemporary identifications, the audience framework on which these resources are based is losing relevance. The community rights model has provided an important intervention in Australian media policy to fund and support multilingual services. There is now, however, a need to rethink the ways that multilingual services address their audiences and find new approaches to program for them as sophisticated media users.

The pressures surrounding SBS Radio reflect many of the tensions around broadcasting, audiences and civic participation internationally. Formal structures of inclusion go some way towards addressing the ‘crises’ facing public institutions and citizenship in increasingly pluralised liberal democracies. Despite their limitations, culturally and linguistically specific resources for participation, whatever platform they utilise, can create new opportunities to “know and to speak” (Miller, 2007) – crucial foundations for cultural citizenship. Strategic engagement with the frameworks of ‘communities’ (aligned with representation, advocacy, and access and equity) and ‘audiences’ (aligned with changing media habits, preferences, generational shifts and subcultural groupings), while recognising the problems inherent in each of these concepts, can create new possibilities for responding to cultural diversity in policy and programming. The challenges facing public institutions in meeting the needs of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse society require ongoing critical reflection – work which has become more important than ever as national contexts become more diverse and globally networked.

References


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Communicating Complexity: 
SBS Multilingual Services Report

Report produced for the Special Broadcasting Service, March 2011

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About this Report

This report forms part of a work-based doctorate on the practices of engaging with cultural diversity at SBS.

It is intended to record some of the current thinking and challenges around multilingual services for SBS. It also engages with some more theoretical approaches to language, audiences and cultural diversity. The intention is to summarise some of the perspectives offered by these theories to benefit SBS decision-making.

There is a particular focus in this report on the radio schedule review, as this is one of the major challenges currently facing SBS in addressing its multilingual remit. This issue should not be considered alone, however, and current SBS multilingual services, as well as new and emergent possibilities, are outlined to provide context to options for servicing culturally and linguistically diverse audiences.

The report concludes with some options for extending the impact and relevance of language services as well as a set of recommendations to consider in future decision making.
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SBS Charter

The SBS Charter, provided in Section 6 of the Special Broadcasting Services Act 1991 (SBS Act), sets out the principal functions of SBS and a number of duties it has to fulfil. The Charter states:

(1) The principal function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society.

(2) SBS, in performing its principal function, must:

(a) contribute to meeting the communications needs of Australia's multicultural society, including ethnic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and

(b) increase awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of Australian society; and

(c) promote understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people; and

(d) contribute to the retention and continuing development of language and other cultural skills; and

(e) as far as practicable, inform, educate and entertain Australians in their preferred languages; and

(f) make use of Australia's diverse creative resources; and

(g) contribute to the overall diversity of Australian television and radio services, particularly taking into account the contribution of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the community broadcasting sector; and

(h) contribute to extending the range of Australian television and radio services, and reflect the changing nature of Australian society, by presenting many points of view and using innovative forms of expression.

SBS Charter multilingual responsibilities:

• contribute to meeting the ‘communications needs’ of Australia’s diverse society;
• contribute to language retention and development;
• provide services in audiences’ preferred languages;
• present diverse points of view using innovative forms of expression
• promote understanding and acceptance of linguistic diversity; and
• contribute to the diversity of Australian television and radio services
Goal 1: To deepen Australians’ engagement with content that reflects our Charter

SBS’s objectives are:
1.1 To be a catalyst for the nation’s conversation about multiculturalism and social inclusion
1.2 To create more multicultural and multilingual Australian content
1.3 To increase the range and quality of multilingual services across all platforms.

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Goal 2: To grow audiences

SBS’s objectives are:
2.1 For more Australians to use SBS services
2.2 For Australians to engage more with SBS services
2.3 For more Australians of CALD backgrounds to use and value SBS language services

Commitment to Audience Making a difference Curiosity and creativity Collaboration and openness Professionalism and responsiveness Honesty, respect and fairness
1. Multilingualism and SBS

1.1 Introduction: Relevance and new possibilities

The principal function of SBS as stated in its Charter includes, as the first reference, the provision of multilingual services. Subsidiary functions set out in the Charter require SBS to contribute to meeting the communications needs of Australia’s multicultural society, assist with language maintenance and ‘as far as practicable, inform, educate and entertain Australians in their preferred languages’. Multilingualism has always been a central element of SBS’s services. The 2010-2013 SBS Corporate Plan places renewed emphasis on language, including objectives to ‘create more multicultural and multilingual content’ and ‘increase the range and quality of multilingual services across all platforms’ as well as a core strategy to ‘elevate the place of languages across all platforms’ (referred to as the SBS Language Strategy).

SBS services represent a formal and institutional recognition of the internal linguistic diversity of the Australian nation. According to the ABS Census, 24% of Australians were born overseas, and more than 16% speak a language other than English in the home (ABS, 2008b). The ABS General Social Survey notes that factors of language and culture can limit social participation in life in Australia (ABS, 2008a).

According to Ang, Hawkins and Dabbousy in *The SBS Story*, “language is one of the most intimate assets of cultural identity and social communication…” (2008: 57) and SBS’s multilingual media have enabled a powerful symbolic and actual inclusion of diversity into Australia’s public sphere.

SBS Radio’s services in particular have long provided a significant resource for Australian ‘language communities’ – a term that is problematised later in this report – creating links to services in settlement, employment, health and education. SBS Radio’s in-language program producers bring culturally specific expertise to the task of broadcasting in the Australian environment. Their programs are based on a “nationalist perspective, focused on Australia, rather than a diasporic one, focused on the homeland” (Ang, et al., 2008: 68). This is a key distinction between SBS Radio and ‘transnational’ in-language media – satellite services from overseas – or community radio services involving substantial rebroadcasting of ‘homeland’ content.

The development of common reference points for participation in Australian public life – public information, political developments and community events for Australia’s linguistically diverse communities – is central to SBS Radio’s broadcasting objectives. The underlying philosophy is that all Australians, regardless of their capacity in English, have a stake in Australia’s public life and its future. In making a common, inclusive framework accessible in multiple languages, SBS operates as a powerful force for integration.
The SBS Radio model can evolve to facilitate further interaction between diverse points of view and unique perspectives within Australia’s multicultural society, and extend SBS’s reach and influence. A greater focus on translation and re-purposing content from in-language programming into English as a lingua franca could further understandings of issues specific to certain communities for a broader audience. An increased emphasis on common language programming, drawing on in-language program content and contacts, would expose listeners to a range of opinion and concerns rarely heard in Australian media. Bringing together a range of under-represented perspectives in common discussion would also provide for unique diversity of views on any given issue.

New intra-community forums would bring, to a national audience, perspectives on issues of importance to all Australians – the diverse citizens they may rub shoulders with on public transport, work with or count as intimates in their daily lives. Rather than limiting multilingual audiences to a set of ‘niche’ communities with specialised service needs, this kind of exchange addresses audiences as cosmopolitans, engaged with difference and ‘open to the world’ (Hawkins, 1996). According to The SBS Story:

Language specific programs are used not only for practical community support and ethnic cultural maintenance; their role is to educate listeners to become more cosmopolitan, multicultural citizens by increasing their ability to function as informed participants in a plural, liberal democratic society. (Ang, et al., 2008: 68)

In addition to language specific programs on radio or unsubtitled news services (explained further in section 1.1 of this report) on television, which target specific language speakers, SBS provides a range of in-language content on television (film, food shows, drama, documentary), made accessible via subtitling, which expose audiences outside that language group to distinctive content – and other languages. This is a unique opportunity for Australians to access linguistic diversity in an otherwise formally monolingual local media environment (Clyne, 1991). While audiences now have access to a range of community, local, national and transnational media – and often use these in conjunction with one another (Hopkins, 2009) – the importance of multilingual services which ensure that diverse audiences are informed, addressed and included through Australian media remains undiminished.

Exchanges between groups from differing cultural backgrounds within a common framework provides platforms for new forms of ‘multicultural sociability’ – a concept based on exchange of opinion, information-sharing and mutual acknowledgement in the context of cultural diversity – which is crucial for belonging and participation within a complex culturally diverse society.
1.1 SBS Multilingual services

NB these are trial pilot services, publicly launched in February 2011. SBS intends to roll out similar multi-platform language specific services in a range of major languages pending funding through Government appropriations.

SBS ONE
SBS, in its Codes of Practice, has a commitment to a balance of LOTE and English language content in television services. This balance is currently maintained on the main channel SBS ONE. LOTE content is selected for its quality and relevance to SBS broadcasting priorities, including key strengths of SBS programming (termed ‘verticals’): film, documentary, food, news and current affairs, and football.

There have been criticisms that SBS ONE now broadcasts less LOTE content in prime-time than previously, in part due to the extended news hour launched in 2006 and shifting of films to later start times.
WorldWatch
All LOTE content on SBS ONE is subtitled into English, with the exception of direct sourced international news services programmed as part of the WorldWatch schedule. WorldWatch currently rebroadcasts throughout the morning and early afternoon on SBS ONE (and SBS TWO), news services in 25 languages from 26 countries provided to SBS direct via satellite, cable and FTP transfer. They are not currently subtitled due to prohibitive cost and the delays that would be involved (which would render a news service irrelevant). WorldWatch services, unlike the other programs on television, are scheduled according to the language size of communities in Australia and where services of suitable quality are available.

SBS TWO
SBS TWO, launched on 1 June 2009, has a higher level of LOTE content, including in prime time, than SBS ONE, with a focus on Asian and Indian subcontinent languages. This was intended to redress a tendency to rely on European markets for SBS Television acquisitions. This decision was described as bringing television LOTE scheduling into line with the new demographic mix of Australian society, reflecting an increase in Asian and Indian language speakers in Australia.

This may be seen to reflect a shift in the approach to programming for television, taking into account the linguistic demography of Australian audiences as part of the scheduling process, as in the early days of SBS television (see Ang, et al., 2008). This content is subtitled for a broader audience, however, and the audience for this content is still considered to be ‘all Australians’ rather than only those language speakers.

SBS TWO also broadcasts WorldWatch services (see above).

SBS Radio
SBS Radio currently broadcasts 68 language programs, including English, on five analogue networks – AM/FM in Sydney (and Canberra/Wollongong) and Melbourne; and a national service available in the remaining state/territory capitals and regional locations. Languages are distributed across the networks in one hour slots, requiring high levels of audience awareness of the schedule and ‘appointment listening’ practices.

SBS Radio is defined as a ‘news and information’ service. Programs are roughly divided into news (first fifteen minutes of the hour) – including local, international and homeland news priorities – and other information or current affairs coverage. Larger programs with a greater number of hours per week have greater capacity to extend into, for example, talk-back, arts programming, local community information and in-depth coverage of issues.

[See Appendix 1 for current program guide for all SBS Radio programs].

SBS Digital Radio
SBS Digital Radio rebroadcasts SBS’s AM and FM services (simulcast). Digital services are accessible through digital radio receivers and digital television. (Digital radio is currently only available in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, and is being trialled in Canberra and Darwin.) SBS also broadcasts two music channels – SBS Chill and SBS PopAsia – and a separate channel broadcasts the BBC World Service or special event radio (e.g. Eurovision).
SBS Pop Asia and SBS Chill
SBS PopAsia and Chill are aimed at providing a multicultural music service accessible to all Australians. The objective is to get Australians to engage with music and culture that is outside their predominant culture, helping them appreciate some of the benefits of multicultural Australia.

PopAsia builds on the enormous success of Canto-pop, Mando-pop, J-pop (Japanese) and the current K-pop (Korean) phenomenon that is sweeping Asia.

Chill is an easy-listening music service with similar aims to PopAsia with a focus on world music. The music is relaxed and comfortable, providing an initial ‘touchpoint’ for some Australian listeners who may not have considered SBS Radio in the past.

SBS Online
SBS streams all of SBS Radio’s language programs online and podcasts selected program highlights, as well as in-language Radio news items.

Multilingual content and resources are available around selected SBS content initiatives – eg Parent Rescue, a program about child rearing produced for SBS TV, was subtitled and supported with FAQs and resources in six languages on the SBS website.

SBS Virtual Community Centres
The Virtual Community Centre (VCC) is a social networking and news website featuring text, audio and video content. The first of these, launched in February 2011, is in Mandarin and Cantonese. It aggregates SBS’s current Mandarin and Cantonese content with new services and user-generated content capabilities. It also hosts a news service which is also broadcast on SBS TWO, Mandarin News Australia, a locally-produced professional news service in Mandarin with an Australian perspective on current events. The intention is to grow the SBS Australian Chinese audience, and provide deeper engagement with a richer, integrated and interactive content experience.
1.2 Approach – key principles

In order to ‘create more multicultural and multilingual content’ and ‘increase the range and quality of multilingual services across all platforms’ as required by Goal 1 of the Corporate Plan, as well as ‘for more Australians of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to use and value SBS language services’ as required by Goal 2, SBS’s decision making should follow these key principles:

- **Audience focused**
  driven by an understanding of available knowledge about diverse audiences (background and profile; media use; needs and attributes)

- **Evidence-based**
  use of research on media use trends and demographic information to drive decision-making

- **Creative**
  imagining content and service delivery beyond current practices and platforms

- **Grounded**
  based in the SBS Charter and the distinctiveness of the SBS proposition for audiences
1.3 ‘In-Language’ Audiences

In order to develop relevant media services it is important to recognize that audiences are not naturally formed around content or services in preferred languages – ‘in-language’ doesn’t always equal engaging. Audiences may be as likely to form around interests or sub-cultural or generational groupings as they are around languages. CALD audiences now engage with multiple forms of media in English as well as languages other than English (LOTE), from Australia and overseas. There are a range of options and services in languages other than English now accessible in Australia – satellite services, web-based content and community radio and television.

The significant message and cornerstone for SBS multilingual programming can no longer be that we create or broadcast content in multiple languages, it must be what we do in and with these broadcasts.

Audiences who use SBS in-language services do not necessarily experience SBS content as platform specific. We can no longer talk about ‘SBS Radio audience’ or ‘TV audience’ as discrete entities. Research tells us there is substantial cross-engagement between platforms for CALD audiences (Top 6 report 2008). In thinking about CALD audiences for LOTE content, SBS must consider a range of important questions:

- Which languages are priorities for SBS? These may differ for different platforms: SBS Radio analogue and digital, WorldWatch, film, online, SBS ONE, SBS TWO, (etc) and ‘high needs’ targeted services.

- Whom, within language groups, are we targeting with each platform and program? Younger people, the aged, new arrivals, educated professionals, ‘cultural information seekers’, low income or high needs groups?

- How do we target these audiences? What content do we offer in which languages? On which platforms?

- How can we maximise engagement with LOTE content across all platforms?

- How can we extend other content we offer by including in-language components? How can our language resources and capabilities be used to support and define SBS’s distinctive offerings?

- What is SBS’s unique proposition in relation to in-language content?

Audience theory tells us that audiences use and make sense of media in individual and creative ways (see, eg. Bird, 2011; Hall, 1997; Hartley, 1992; Livingstone, 1990; Ruddock, 2001). We cannot assume that the intention of programmers is carried through to the everyday media consumption practices adopted by audiences. Audiences critique, celebrate, reject, parody, recommend or repurpose media content according to their own needs and preferences.

Studies of cultural difference in media reception indicate that cultural diversity adds layers of complexity to the meaning generated through media texts (see, eg. Gillespie, 1995; Liebes & Katz, 1993). It is important, however, not to confuse this agency in interpretation and consumption (held by audiences) with power over the construction and presentation of the media sources (held by media institutions) (Morley, 1992).
Audiences for in-language content have a finite set of resources with which to develop their responses or interpretations. SBS is still the only public service broadcaster producing national media for Australian CALD audiences. The implications of this for audiences, and the pressure this places on SBS are explored in the following sections of this report.

**Recommendations:**

- *Tailor services to different audiences (a move away from ‘standardisation’ of services)*

- *Target specific audiences within language speaking groups (eg young people, ‘cultural information seekers’ etc) on different platforms.*
1.4 SBS and ‘Community Languages’

The languages represented on the network have steadily increased from the early 1975 SBS ‘experiment’: at first only eight languages were broadcast on the 3EA station (in Melbourne) and five languages on 2EA (in Sydney). The number of languages on the radio schedule has remained relatively static since 1996 at 68 language programs.

However, recent migration trends to Australia have increased the number of languages spoken in the community. More languages, with fewer speakers, are now in use in Australia. The range of different experiences, needs, affiliations and relative agency within any given group of language speakers add to the complexity of Australian diversity, making relevant service delivery a major challenge.

How can SBS, a model of the multilingual broadcasting ideal which has evolved over 35 years, accommodate the increasing diversification of the Australian language environment?

The SBS Charter states that ‘the principal function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians, and, in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society.’ In order to meet these obligations, SBS must respond to the ways Australian society is changing. Australian cultural and linguistic diversity is becoming more complex. Interrelationships exist between age, generations of residence in Australia, religion, family structures, intermarriage, professional lives, social and political engagement and language ability that make the experience of Australian cultural diversity individual and varied.

These trends reflect what UK anthropologist Steven Vertovec has called ‘superdiversity’. This term has been used to encapsulate a whole ‘interplay of factors’ in people’s lives that have created new challenges for service delivery and policy frameworks. These include:

- differential immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses… (Vertovec, 2007: 1025)

Vertovec warns against describing cultural diversity simply in terms of ethnicity, as such classification misses a complex range of factors which may have a significant impact on identity, participation and policy outcomes.

SBS services, including the SBS Radio schedule, are divided into language group units which classify audiences in particular ways. The SBS French Radio program, for example, groups a range of different nationalities and cultural origins, from France to Mauritius and Guinea, as a ‘French-speaking audience’. Danielle Kemp, former Executive Producer of the French program also counted among her audience the many students of French, Francophiles and intermarried families who tune in to her program, and felt that program audiences should not be understood in terms of a ‘community language’ (2003 Content Analysis Report).

‘Community languages’ has long been a vexed descriptor. More than twenty years ago, Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope and Diana Slade questioned the term even as it relates to a ‘single homeland’ language in their introduction to Minority Languages and Dominant Culture (1989):
One has to question what this term ‘community’ means and how useful a descriptor it is. For example, are those post-1960s migrants of Greek background who live in the outer western suburbs of Sydney and work in factories and shops, of the same community as those pre-war migrants of Greek background who live in the eastern suburbs and work as professionals? Are they of the same community as those who were born in Australia and live in the southern suburbs and work as public servants? Are they of the same community as the aged group who migrated from the Greek island of Lesbos and are now institutionalised in an old people’s home? Are their language needs similar? In what sense can we talk about a Greek ‘community language’ linked to a Greek ‘community’?

In a sense it could be argued that SBS Radio has created ‘language groups’ by the nature of its service and classification process. It groups all of the above mentioned locations, professional spheres and socio-economic groups as the audience for the Greek language program. It has also constructed, for example, an Australian national Arabic-speaking audience (comprising around 22 nationalities) through its fourteen hours a week of the Arabic language program. The Arabic program addresses an assumed national audience which brings together, among many others, long settled Lebanese Australians in Lakemba and newly arrived Iraqi refugees in Shepparton.

Languages and their usage in Australia can defy obvious generalisation – the last ABS Census, for example, reported 4,591 Cantonese speakers who cited their ancestry as English; 4,230 Italian speakers who cited their ancestry as Irish and 2,092 Italian speakers who claimed Greek heritage (ABS, 2008b). Intermarriage, complex family relationships, access to education and policies of integration can all impact upon languages spoken in the home.

Indeed, the complexity of language use and linguistic diversity in Australia today requires new ways of thinking about the Charter obligation to ‘as far as practicable, inform, educate and entertain Australians in their preferred languages’.

1.5 Complexity and strategic simplification

The notion of ‘superdiversity’ and complexity itself pose concrete challenges for an organisation like SBS. ‘Complexity’ is very hard to service. SBS must find ways of providing meaningful media for Australian audiences that somehow engage with the contemporary nature of diversity.

The aversion to essentialisation or classification of groups or communities among many cultural researchers and commentators on contemporary diversity makes working with policy frameworks difficult. Policy ‘solutions’ are expressed in terms of categories, stakeholder groups and guidelines for action. To be workable they must give concrete guidance rather than be conditional or entirely context specific. According to Vertovec, “many anthropologists are still broadly reluctant to engage with the policy world whether to do with migration and multiculturalism or not” partly because they “harbour anxieties over being labelled as ‘essentialist’ if they dare describe almost any characteristic of a group or category” (Vertovec, 2007: 974).

Real needs, however, persist amongst CALD Australians. Certain common factors related to the need for in-language information, services and the opportunity to participate in public life are experienced by many CALD Australians, even if their impact and context are unique and individual.
Can too much concern about complexity or ‘essentialising’ communities or simplifying complexity lead to paralysis? How should SBS engage with this complexity?

Ien Ang (Ang, 2011, in press) proposes the use of ‘strategic simplification’ to address complexity with flexible solutions. Complexity must be recognised but policy solutions have to find ways to work through it. Ang suggests that complex problems call for cultural intelligence to address them, employing creativity and risk-taking rather than deterministic or formulaic solutions. The result of applying cultural intelligence would be flexible processes and responses which allow for contingency and variability.

**Recommendation:**

- *Build flexibility into the SBS Radio schedule to become responsive to emerging communities, changing needs and immigration trends.*
2. Multilingual Radio

2.1 Radio Schedule Review

SBS Radio regularly undertakes a reschedule of the language programs on the analogue networks. The SBS Codes of Practice states:

1.4.2 Allocation of airtime for community languages - Radio
SBS Radio is a multilingual and multicultural broadcaster with a direct role in serving Australia's diverse language communities. In recognition of this role, the allocation of airtime to particular languages on SBS Radio is based on factors such as the size of the community speaking a particular language and other criteria which are reviewed from time-to-time in consultation with communities.

The consultation on program schedule changes tends to be a political and highly fraught process with impassioned representations from community organisations and a determination from community representatives not to 'lose hours'.

The pressures and debates surrounding SBS Radio services reflect many of the tensions around service provision for a multicultural society. It reflects the limitations of community representation, the entrenchment of positions, the difficulty of negotiating between different needs and the highly individual experiences of CALD Australians.

It may seem strange to still have such pressure on a single platform in a digital media environment. New technologies and convergent platforms offer a set of new possibilities for engagement with audiences, as explored later in this paper. However, the core audiences of many SBS in-language programs, older CALD Australians, tend to be slow adopters of new media. The ‘main game’ remains the analogue radio schedule.

There is another, legacy, reason for community lobbying around SBS Radio. According to Ang, the importance communities place on being represented on the SBS Radio schedule is, in part, symbolic, as SBS is seen as the ‘cornerstone of Australian multiculturalism’:

SBS plays a central role as conduit for the symbolic recognition of multilingual Australia. As a national public broadcaster it has the power not only to represent but also to validate community languages and their associated ethnic communities – hence the importance ethnic community organisations place on having their language included in the SBS schedule, especially SBS Radio. (Ang et al, 2008: 61)

Is this form of the ‘politics of recognition’ still relevant?

SBS is not by any means the only source of news and information in-language for many communities. In their research into community radio audiences Forde et al set out a critique of SBS as ‘out of touch’ (Forde et al 2008). Others have explored the importance of transnational media for contemporary CALD audiences (Slade & Volkmer, 2007). Indeed some have claimed that in the new media environment of access to satellite services, there is no longer a need for national in-language services (Sheehan 2007 ‘SBS an indulgence we don’t need’ 27 August 2007, SMH).

Is there still an important role for ‘national media’ between the local (community broadcasting) and the international?
SBS – as a professional, trusted multilingual broadcaster – offers a different kind of service, complementary to the community radio sector and transnational media. Market research shows that SBS remains the most trusted source for news and information for Australia’s major language communities (Top 6 report, 2008). Relevant, credible, in-language media is a central resource for multicultural citizenship. SBS offers opportunities for participation in public life that engages with a national media space. SBS is focused on issues of importance for Australia, providing common points of reference for language-speaking communities with other Australians through national politics, policy and debate. As everyday work, SBS Radio services are focused on fostering citizenship and engagement with news and information – key elements of belonging and participation.

2.2 The ABS Census and Language Use data

Decision making for the SBS Radio schedule has long been based on a range of factors – including a complicated weighting of data sets around: community size, English-language proficiency, ageing, socio-economic profile and recency of arrival. This is primarily based on the Census figures, collected every five years, tempered with an awareness of the limitations of the data (see Kipp and Needs report).

Toby Miller describes the counting of citizens via a census as a process of recognition of all citizens as part of the social sphere, following which: “their well-being [is] incorporated into collective subjectivity as a right, a problem, a statistic, and a law…” (Miller, 2007: 42). Since 1976 the ABS Census has included questions of all Australian households about language use in the home. Since 2001, a question on self-identified ancestry has been included. The recognition and construction of subsets of the Australian populace into groupings of language speakers or cultural background have, in a sense, made a policy issue of the needs and well-being of these groups.

Concerns about what the Census tells us about multilingual Australia, often cited in SBS community consultations, tend to be based on a range of issues with the framing of questions and the limitations of data collection. These include:

- the questions asked in the Census survey (including changes in these over time)
- the skewing of data through inaccurate self-reporting on questions such as English proficiency (possibly due to a sense of pride)
- the inability of generic quantitative instruments to reflect complexity or engage with lived experience.

Community-specific causes of under-counting include:

- low response rates from communities mistrustful of Government ‘surveillance’ – often from ex-Eastern bloc countries or refugee backgrounds;
- post-Census trends such as the recent waves of migration of Karen speakers (after 2006), many of whom would be recorded as being born in Burma.
- Recent historical changes in political geographies; for example, because of Russian and Polish rule over different parts of the Ukraine, birth places for Ukrainians can often be recorded as Russia or Poland, reducing the actual Ukraine population count.
- behavioural legacies from homelands related to information sought by Governments; for example Dinka speakers tend not to provide accurate information about family size as in the former Sudan tax levels are
determined by the number of children in a family (Cultural Partners Report 2009).

Perhaps most importantly, language related information in the Census is all based on questions about ‘languages spoken in the home’ which excludes many language speakers who may not live in households where their first or preferred language is spoken due to factors such as intermarriage (Clyne, 1991).

Despite these concerns, the ABS Census is still the most comprehensive source of data we have about changing Australian society (see Kipp, 2007). Trends in language usage reported in the Census are mostly direct products of immigration, humanitarian settlement and the ageing (and attrition) of some long-established communities, as well as a loss of language use in the home through generational change.

In Australia the general trends observable in the Census languages-spoken-in-the-home data reveal:

- an increase in the diversity of Indian and Asian languages;
- an increase in numbers of speakers of Indian and Asian languages, including a continued increase in the number of Vietnamese, Hindi, Mandarin and Korean speakers;
- rapid increase in smaller groups such as Hmong and Telugu;
- a decline in the numbers amongst speakers of European languages (with the exception of Polish and Serbian);
- significant ageing of populations of European language speakers - indicative of language attrition amongst the second and third generation;
- better cross generational language retention amongst languages with higher geographical concentration, such as Greek, although this is not always the case – as for Maltese speakers (see Kipp, 2007).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006 Census Total Speakers</th>
<th>English Speaking Proficiency: Not well and Not at all</th>
<th>Low English Proficiency %</th>
<th>Hrs on SBS</th>
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### 2.3 Language ‘Needs’

The first subsidiary function of the SBS Charter is to ‘contribute to meeting the communications needs of Australia’s multicultural society’. The ‘communications needs’ of communities are changing. Providing for community need has always been a significant part of the social and policy role of SBS and it must continue to find means of delivering communications services that are relevant to the contemporary needs of Australia’s diverse population. As Ang set out in *The SBS Story*:

> Although English is Australia’s lingua franca, certain groups would be disempowered without public outlet for exchange of ideas and information in the language they are most comfortable in. Their inclusion and well-being within Australian society depends on media services in these languages. (Ang, et al., 2008: 66)

‘Need’ in this context is not necessarily aligned to ‘need’ in the general sense of the word. A particular language or cultural group may be underserved and marginalised by most Australian media but have strong socio-economic advantage, or a higher than average education level, for example.

The Charter responsibility of meeting the communications needs of Australia’s multicultural society raises a series of difficult questions for SBS. For example:

- How are ‘communications needs’ defined?
- Are all language groups equally ‘deserving’ of services?
- Should groups with better English skills (eg Dutch or German) drop off the schedule?
- Is the notion of communications needs necessarily tied to implied social disadvantage?
- Are new and emerging groups with immediate settlement needs a greater priority than ageing language speakers?
- Where the size of the language speaking community changes over time, should new languages take the place of others on the schedule; for example, should Hmong simply take the place of Yiddish based on numbers alone?

Determining ‘communications needs’ as required by the SBS Charter is difficult in this context as they vary significantly between and within groups.
A core content strategy set out in the current SBS Corporate Plan is to “elevate the place of languages across all platforms with an emphasis on large language groups and high needs groups”. Large language groups can be defined by most recent census data, with recognition of the limitations of the data as set out in section 2.2 of this report. Determining what constitutes high needs is far more complex and involves the assessment of a range of factors, including those set out below.

2.3.1 English language proficiency

English language proficiency is a major factor in assessing the communications needs of audiences. Obviously those groups and individuals with lower levels of English language proficiency have a higher need for services in their own language to facilitate their access to services and information as well as their participation in public life in Australia. Levels of English language proficiency as recorded in the 2006 Census are set out in figure 1 (above). Consultations with community representatives and service providers have revealed concern that the levels of low English proficiency are often under-reported due to shame at acknowledging the issue, particularly for long-standing Australian residents and citizens.

2.3.2 Recency of arrival

Communications needs may differ greatly in relation to recency of arrival. Service providers interviewed in recent SBS-commissioned qualitative needs research identified, for example, the need for very basic in-language settlement information for the most recently arrived Dinka and Karen speakers, even to the degree of how to catch public transport (SBS audience needs research, Cultural Partners, 2009).

Stakeholders and service providers interviewed for the SBS audience needs research identified a range of programming types that would benefit emerging communities. These included more than 30 suggestions for content ranging from information on ‘government benefits and how to obtain them’ to ‘family and relationships programs’ to entertainment programs in-language. To cater for all of these diverse forms and topics of programming would require more than the program schedule can accommodate, particularly for smaller communities. Based on the current model these high needs groups, if they were provided with a designated program, would only be allocated one hour per week. But, on one reading of ‘needs’, these communities should be given higher levels of airtime, irrespective of the size of the community.

2.3.3 Language maintenance and established communities

We know that issues such as low English language proficiency and low disposable income compound reliance on freely available media in-language, but do they override the rights to in-language media of larger groups who may be more fluently bilingual with a higher disposable income. The Charter references language maintenance and ‘preferred languages’ as priorities, ensuring that established language groups are maintained in the schedule, even where they may have English language skills and fewer immediate settlement needs. Large, established language groups such as Dutch and German fit into this category.

According to Kalantzis et al, the notion of language maintenance must also be continually revised, as languages do not remain static and need to reflect the contemporary needs of ordinary people in the community:

The issue of [language] maintenance in Australia should be primarily about what is going on in Australia; communication in the home, communication between different groups, communication with the rest of the world, self-expression, success and optimising social opportunities…Communication at home for some families that have
migrated to Australia is in many instances fraught with conflicting, and far from familial, values and aspirations. (Kalantzis, Cope, & Slade, 1989: 3)

To become fluent in a second language, particularly when immediate priorities of work or local interaction require only low levels of competency, is extremely difficult. As a result, many first generation migrants to English speaking countries often experience a half-understood and frustrating relationship to media in English (see Gillespie, 1995).

2.3.4 Ageing

Longer established communities, furthermore, tend to have a rapidly ageing language speaking population, which brings with it a new set of concerns. The SBS audience needs research (2009) focused on four language groups with significant ageing populations: Italian, German, Lithuanian and Ukrainian. Major issues these ageing communities faced included:

- increasing reliance on others for mobility and quality of life;
- reversion to first language, requiring language-specific services;
- lack of awareness of government services available to them.

Many of these factors contribute to an increasing reliance on in-language radio services. The immediacy, intimacy and accessibility of radio make it an ideal medium for ageing populations, and many report heavy reliance on radio services. To remove services from these language speakers would adversely affect their quality of life and may compound a sense of isolation for some vulnerable older CALD Australians. The tendency towards reversion to first language (see De Bot & Makoni, 2005) noted in first generation migrants who had previously become relatively fluent in English renews and alters the needs for these groups.

2.4 Technology solutions and new platforms

New platforms for the distribution of in-language content may provide some solutions to the competing pressures for services experienced in analogue radio.

There are significant gaps in research, however, about media use on various platforms among diverse communities of language speakers. We know proficiencies, access and preferences vary within and between ‘language communities’; however, census data indicates that the level of computer and Internet usage by LOTE speakers is comparable to the levels of usage of the population as a whole.\(^1\)

2.4.1 Digital Radio

For many years the potential of digital radio to create more hours via multichannelling has been heralded as creating opportunity for more access, more diversity and more content. Digital radio launched in five state capital cities in Australia on 1 July 2009. Take-up is currently limited with only 400,000 sets currently in the market, and digital radio comprising only 5.6% of radio listening in Australia (Commercial Radio Australia Media Release, 21 March 2011). There is no available data for CALD radio users, although anecdotally many larger established groups of SBS Radio users are slow adopters of new, more expensive technologies.

\(^1\) Languages in Transition Report. CASL working group on electronic multicultural library services July 2004
2.4.2 Online streaming/ podcasting

There has been some suggestion that online streaming and podcasting could be used to reach communities on an as-needs basis. However, this has the potential to create significant delays from the moment of production to when they are accessed, which is not conducive to a relevant news service. These kinds of services all come at a cost, of course, and Government appropriations to SBS have, in the past, not reflected any serious commitment to use the online platform to resolve these competing pressures.

2.4.3 Virtual community centre

The SBS Virtual Community Centre (VCC) is a social networking and news website featuring text, audio and video content. The first of these, launched in February 2011, is in Mandarin and Cantonese. There are currently 19,000 unique users to the site. SBS plans to launch future VCCs, which may follow a different model from the service developed for Mandarin-speaking audiences, depending on audience and media trends research to be conducted with the relevant language community.

2.4.4 Platforms – key questions

The consideration of different platforms for different language groups raises a set of interesting questions. Do all language groups need the same types of services on the same medium? Many Hindi speakers, for example, are generally considered to be early adaptors to ‘new’ technologies. Should they therefore be moved over to digital-only or online services? Would new services reach all of the members of this target audience or might it exclude Hindi speakers with other, compounding, ‘factors of need’? Should English language programming be used to reach younger CALD second or third generation Australians? What is the notion of an audience in this context? If they are not ‘radio audiences’ or necessarily addressed as ‘Hindi speakers’, what defines, or justifies, the service?

2.5 Priorities and processes

To prioritise these very real and immediate needs with a finite set of resources involves a difficult set of decisions. SBS has received no additional funding for content on new platforms, and has therefore not been able to realise much of their potential.

An effective and responsive realisation of the SBS Language Strategy will require flexibility in the SBS Radio schedule and the use of other platforms to respond to trends in migration and humanitarian settlement. In order to manage effective engagement with a range of language speakers in Australia, SBS services will have to target audiences within language communities with different services and platforms. The service model will have to be adaptable to the differing communications needs of specific audiences within language groups.

Recommendation:

- Define the unique value of each SBS in-language service in the context of the current media environment.
3. A multilingual forum

Universality of access is seen as one of the ‘public goods’ of public service broadcasting alongside the provision of a diversity of views and the vision of a desired public culture involving genuine cultural pluralism (see Costera Meijer, 2005; Jakubowicz, 2007: 115).

3.1 Exchange and diversity of views

SBS is the only national service that has the capacity to mediate between ‘mainstream’ English language content and ‘community’ LOTE content and participation (via radio talk-back, online chat or user-generated content). SBS services can be used as a crucial set of resources for increasing the diversity of perspective in public discourse about issues of relevance to multicultural Australia.

This would involve capitalising on the in-language contacts and engagements we have with diverse audiences and communities of interest – unique access in the national media space – to inform our broader English language programming and bring distinctive perspectives into the public arena. The kinds of discussions and views represented in, for example, Arabic talk-back in the SBS Arabic program are very different to the ‘official community representative’ positions often reflected in mainstream coverage of issues affecting Arabic-speaking Australians.

SBS can leverage its language literacy and engagement with communities in a two-way exchange with content offerings to maximise distinctiveness and generate stronger engagement with audiences.

SBS can, for example, lead the way with unique perspectives on major stories via immediate sourcing of a range of community perspectives on topical issues. When a major story emerges, such as the attacks on Indian students in 2010, SBS can generate discussions through its range of Indian languages programs to add to the diversity of views on the issue and can ‘break’ these stories in our television news flagship program World News Australia. This would increase the distinctiveness of the SBS offerings in English. It would also have a broader influence on the range of perspectives available in freely accessible English language media, establishing SBS as a resource for unique content for audiences, opinion leaders and other media.

3.2 Forum tools and resources

Forums privilege values of collective deliberation and norms of public debate strongly identified with national public service broadcasting (Barnett, 2003: 8). Providing a forum for exchange of views and intercultural interaction in multicultural Australia is central to SBS’s public remit and its objectives in promoting social cohesion.
SBS has a unique set of tools at its disposal, through existing activity, which it can bring to a ‘forum’ model of intercultural exchange.

These include:

- **Community engagement**: with Australians from a range of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences;
- **In depth local and international news and current affairs**: from unique perspectives and with credible, valued coverage of issues;
- **Access to in-language international media and comment**: accessed and used as part of in-language news services;
- **Access to ‘experts’ and talent from non-English speaking backgrounds**: a range a unique levels of expertise;
- **Radio talk-back and community consultations**: providing unique views and new information from audiences;
- **User-generated content in-language**: via Facebook, Twitter and the SBS Radio websites.

All of these operate within a common framework of the SBS remit and ethos and public service broadcasting editorial standards. This creates a common set of reference points within which to commence discussion of potentially controversial and challenging issues.

The exchange of content and ideas via translation into and out of languages in each of these realms offers opportunity for new kinds of engagement with diverse audiences, compelling new content offerings and new ways to contribute to the diversity of voices in the Australian media landscape. Due to the costs associated with translation, these resources may be used selectively and produced in creative ways, for example through summaries and ‘wrap-ups’ from SBS’s bilingual radio producers in an English language forum. This could offer an extension of the existing World News Australia (previously Worldview) English language services on SBS.

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Radio, currently produced twice daily. The new forum model would encourage greater interactions, content and contacts sharing and editorial exchange between SBS language programs and English language content.

The SBS Corporate Plan 2010–2013 sets out an objective for SBS to ‘be a catalyst for the nation’s conversations about multiculturalism and social inclusion’. Fully utilising SBS’s language capacities and access to range of perspectives for innovative news content and forums will contribute to more dynamic public debate about Australia’s diversity.

Recommendations:

- **Increase translation and re-purposing of in-language content for use in other SBS content (including news and current affairs) and new platforms.**

- **Establish SBS as a ‘resource’ for comment on issues of relevance via unique content, perspectives and contacts with CALD communities.**
4. Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations, to be considered in decision-making around SBS multilingual services:

- Maintain linguistic diversity in SBS services as far as possible.
- Tailor services to different audiences (a move away from ‘standardisation’ of services)
- Target specific audiences within language speaking groups (eg young people, ‘cultural information seekers’ etc) on new platforms
- Build flexibility into the SBS Radio schedule to increase agility in response to emerging communities, changing needs and immigration trends.
- Define the unique value of each SBS in-language service in the context of the current media environment.
- Increase translation and re-purposing of in-language content for use in other SBS content (including NACA) and new platforms.
- Establish SBS as a ‘resource’ and public agenda-setter on Australian multiculturalism via unique content, perspectives and contacts with CALD communities.
Conclusions

National multilingual services on SBS are expected to provide for many levels of engagement with Australian public life – from basic settlement information such as how to access Centrelink services, to opportunities to debate Australian political issues and engage in mediated and ‘positive’ intercultural dialogue. These all assist to build cultural citizenship and forms of belonging in and to Australia. SBS, from its origins, has navigated a policy framework that intersects between media use and a range of other social, cultural and civic needs. A single set of services cannot, of course, solve all problems.

According to Miller, “traditional views of naturalised citizenship have been thrown into confusion by late twentieth-century immigration and multiculturalism... This is a matter of cultural belonging and material inequality” (Miller, 2007: 54). Material inequalities have real and immediate impacts upon the ways media services reach audiences, and the kinds of services they need. SBS cannot assume an audience of equally active, engaged and accessible individuals in addressing a multilingual, multicultural society. At the same time, the development of any service cannot assume that a constructed linguistic or ethnic categorisation carries knowable attributes or homogenous experiences.

SBS must address research and data warily and maintain an understanding of the problematics of any of the categories of definition. Decisions still have to be taken, however. The challenges posed by ‘superdiversity’ require a new level of responsiveness to a rapidly changing society.

SBS, through its ‘professional’ standards, public broadcasting standards, news expertise and public service remit, creates a framework for addressing its audiences inclusive of the linguistic subcategories of an assumed overall audience. The overarching umbrella of SBS’s Codes of Practice and centralised editorial standards encourage SBS program producers to address a broadly plural public amongst the speakers of any language. This ‘professional’ news and information service is intended to create base-level tools for citizenship and civic participation amongst all its in-language listeners. This does not mean, however, that all speakers of any given language should be expected to access the same services.

The participation with cultural life that is required for cultural citizenship can be facilitated by relevant, engaging and accessible in-language media. To enable Australians who may not be as articulate, competent or comfortable in English to step into the public sphere is an important intervention required for a cohesive and effective multicultural society. The building blocks of settlement information, access to services and rights-based empowerment create a platform for owning opinions on issues in Australia, participating in debate and contributing to the public life in a way that truly pluralises the public sphere. SBS must address audiences at various stages along this trajectory – from basic settlement information to more sophisticated opportunities to contribute to Australian public life – through relevant and engaging services.

The challenges of meeting the communications needs of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse society require ongoing work – work which has become more important than ever as Australia becomes more diverse and globally networked.
references


Attachment 2

SBS Radio services

Digital

Five channels are available in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney.

- SBS Radio 1 – SBS’s AM services
- SBS Radio 2 – SBS’s FM services
- SBS Chill
- SBS PopAsia
- SBS Radio 6 – BBC World Service and special event radio.

1. Sydney AM services are available in Sydney and Brisbane. Melbourne AM services are available in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.
2. Sydney FM services are available in Sydney and Brisbane. Melbourne FM services are available in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

Analogue

National Radio Network

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Notes

Overnight: Mainly BBC programming.
WNA: World News Australia.
## SBS Radio 1
**Sydney 1107 AM - Canberra 1440 AM – Wollongong 1485 AM & 1035 AM**

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