
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/4360

It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.
Reporting Diversity: The Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Australia’s Television Current Affairs

Abstract

A recent study of ethnic diversity in Australia’s television news showed that diversity of race, culture and religion is largely absent from the news services, unless people from ethnic minorities are posing a social problem of some kind. A parallel study of Australia’s nightly current affairs programs has yielded similar results: like news, they represent Australia as an ‘Anglo’ nation. When ethnic minorities are featured, they tend to occupy peripheral roles, and where they are allowed a central role, it is usually to be shown as threatening and menacing to the Anglo mainstream. The industry codes of practice explicitly state the standards that should apply in reporting on race, culture and religion, yet only the public broadcaster, the ABC, follows the guidelines in the representation of diversity. The reporting practices on the commercial stations deliberately or unwittingly encourage a sense of racial hierarchy in which the Anglo dominates.

Since 2005 a series of studies has been undertaken in Australia monitoring the treatment of ethnic minorities in the media. The aim was to provide a current-day snapshot of ethnic representation, especially given the global ethnic tensions in a post-9/11 world. The research included two studies in 2005 and 2007 on the nightly television news bulletins (see Phillips and Tapsall 2007a, 2007b; Phillips 2009a). In 2008 a third study focused on television current affairs, the half-hour news feature programs which follow the news bulletins on commercial channels Seven and Nine, and the public broadcasting station ABC1. The aim was to apply the same methodology used for the television news studies to examine the amount of content featuring people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the way in which they were presented and represented in stories. The analysis brought out not just the differences between the news and current affairs genres but also the extent to which current affairs reporting, especially on the commercial channels, falls short of the standards embedded in the industry’s own codes of practice in relation to the representation of race.

The Current Affairs Genre

As Graeme Turner notes in his discussion of television current affairs in Australia this genre emerged as a complement to the news services, aiming to provide more background, analysis and context than news was able to deliver in its abbreviated formats (2001: 52. See Holland 2001 for how the genre evolved in the UK). However, even in
2001, Turner noted that this brief had fallen by the wayside in the chase for ratings which in commercial current affairs meant an increasing focus on entertainment-based stories. By 2005 Turner was able to state categorically that ‘[i]n my view it is now undeniable that news and current affairs content is as much the product of public relations and publicity as of journalism.’ (2005:10) Meanwhile at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the public broadcaster, cost-cutting at that time also impacted on current affairs programming, with increasing reliance on cheaper talking heads formats rather than filmed stories (Turner 2001:52). Cross-media deployment of reporters meant that time they could spend investigating stories had to be devoted to filing for radio and television. Revisiting the field for this study it is clear that the further leaching away of audiences and money and the increasing pressures of delivery to multiple media formats, including online, have only made things more difficult for both the commercial and public sector broadcasters. What Turner called the ‘sprint down market’ (2001: 56) has gathered pace in the commercial arena while studio-based interviews continue to be the mainstay of the ABC’s programs. As we shall see, these features which define current affairs reporting in commercial and public sector environments have implications for the way in which Australia’s ethnic diversity is portrayed.

Television has always been seen as having a particularly important role to play because, as Cottle observes, whatever the economic or commercial imperatives of the media business model,

Through its presentational formats, TV news literally mediates the surrounding play of social and cultural power and, potentially, plays a vital role in serving to enact, and thereby enhance and deepen, cultural citizenship. (2001:75)

This is particularly relevant to the genre of current affairs, which traditionally has focused on in-depth reporting that has highlighted the authority of the journalist. In this genre what Holland refers to as the “access” challenge’ (2001: 85) of representing society in all its diversity is particularly acute. According to Holland ‘the authority of a journalist becomes particularly suspect when they address those who are different from
themselves.’ The journalist’s authoritative right to speak ‘[a]lthough apparently knowledgeable …may be based on a form of ignorance – ignorance of experience and of the lived reality of the situations reported on.’ (ibid)

The conventions, routines and practices of the television medium, which as we saw in the analyses of television news impact so heavily on what the public gets to see (Phillips and Tapsall 2007a, 2007b; Phillips 2009) impact on current affairs reporting as well.

The Television Codes of Practice
All the broadcast media include protocols for ethnic representation in their codes of practice requiring that they avoid representing people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds in disparaging or discriminatory ways (Free TV Australia 2010: 22; ABC Editorial Policies, ABC 2008a:15,40, ABC Code of Practice, ABC 2008b:4).

There are reasons for these codes. They exist because as far as Australian society is concerned the assumption is that the media will abide by certain standards in line with the broader public interest. The ABC’s commitment to multiculturalism is embedded in the ABC Act 1983 (Section 2(a)(iv) and compliance with the Code of Practice which ‘sets out the major principles which apply to ABC content’ (ABC 2008b: 1) is therefore part of its legal remit. In the commercial sector there is a regime of voluntary compliance under the broad oversight of the Australian Communications and Media Authority. Nevertheless industry support for the codes appears strong, if public utterances are to be believed. In 2009 in launching Free TV Australia’s review of the commercial television codes Chief Executive Officer Julie Flynn declared:

Commercial television stations take their responsibilities under the Code very seriously and are committed to the public review process by which we ensure the Code reflects community standards (Free TV Australia 2009)
Around the same time as this review was announced ACMA released the results of its study of ‘community attitudes to the presentation of factual material and viewpoints in commercial current affairs programs.’ (ACMA 2009) This quantitative and qualitative research study revealed that the public expects current affairs programs to give ‘true’ representations of the world. Viewers were most unforgiving of conscious omissions and distortions and were very critical of sensationalist reporting harmful to the individual. The following analysis is particularly revealing of the extent to which commercial current affairs programs respond to these community sensitivities.

Methodology
The study looked at the evening weekday current affairs programs on channels Seven (Today Tonight, 1830-1900), Nine (A Current Affair, 1830-1900) and the ABC (730 Report and Stateline, 1930-2000) during a randomly selected two-week period, 16 -27 June 2008. Today Tonight has two versions, one for Western Australia and another for the rest of the country and both versions were included in the content analysis. The 730 Report is nationally networked Monday to Thursday with local Stateline programs on Fridays. The study captured data from the national program and then from the state programs from the same states which featured in the television news study: Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.  

This study adopts Dunn et al’s terminology of ‘ethnic minorities’ (EM) to distinguish the diverse range of ethnic groups from the ‘dominant (Anglo-Celtic) “host” society’ that defines mainstream Australia. (2004: 411) People from different ethnic backgrounds were identified on the basis of what could be deduced by an average viewer from features such as appearance, dress, accent, name or title. In this way it was possible to compare reporting styles for stories featuring ‘Anglo’ talent with those featuring talent drawn from ethnic minority groups. 

The quantitative study focused on the proportions of total content and specific story types featuring Anglo and ethnic talent. The qualitative analysis focused on how stories were
told in terms of talent selection, the role the talent played, and the way the talent was presented. For reasons of space just a brief summary of the main quantitative data relevant to ethnic representation will be offered (for the complete data and analysis see Phillips 2009b).

The current affairs programs contain fewer but longer stories than the news bulletins (average length 5:00 minutes compared to 1:03 minutes) and this means the quantitative data gathered over a two-week period is based on a much smaller data base: 209 stories compared to 2928 news stories in 2007. 4

The current affairs programs have a less intense agenda than news, leavened by softer social issues and entertainment stories. The differences between EM and Anglo content are less stark and there is in fact more ethnic content overall (31 per cent of total content compared to 12 per cent in News). Crime is the main content category where EM content is found, but there is less of a disparity between EM and Anglo in the levels of negative stories, the gap being much smaller than in news (40 and 35 per cent respectively in current affairs compared to 57 and 30 per cent in news). However it is significant that the negative EM stories are concentrated in the nightly commercial programs, in particular Seven’s Today Tonight which featured around 27 per cent negative EM content compared to 15 per cent for Nine’s A Current Affair and 0 per cent for all the ABC programs.

What concerns us in this paper beyond how frequently EM talents appear is where and when they appear, and how they are represented when they do.

Story Analysis
The previous content analyses of Australia’s television news in 2005 and 2007 confirmed the extent to which story selection and storytelling techniques were a product of the business model, formats and conventions of the medium. These constraints exacerbated a tendency for EM talent to be ignored unless stories were dramatic or tragic enough to
make them worthy of public attention (Phillips and Tapsall 2007a, 2007b; Phillips 2009a). As with television news the default position in current affairs reporting is that the talent will be predominantly Anglo – reflecting the main pool of talent for stories concerning politics, business, and public affairs in general. Of the 209 stories in the current affairs sample, 139 stories have no EM faces at all, even incidentally in the background, and on a couple of occasions EM talent is absent from an entire program. That said, as has already been noted, overall EM content levels are higher as a proportion of total content than for news and, especially on the local Stateline programs on the ABC, diversity appears more normalized: we see EM faces in classrooms; in shops; at sporting events.

In stories where EM talent is used people appear in a variety of roles:

1. *Silent assistant* (six stories). Here EM talent is peripheral to the story, and is just a silent presence in the background.

2. ‘Victim’. Commercial current affairs programs in particular feature many stories where people have fallen victim to the system in some way (see for example McIver 2009) and in this category we find both Anglo and EM talent. Out of a total of 14 ‘victim’ stories, nine feature Anglo victims and five stories feature EM victims.

3. ‘Deviant.’ There are eight stories in this category (compared to two featuring deviant Anglos). In some respects this category follows on from the previous one as it relates to victim stories where EM talent is represented as ‘bad’, usually in relation to Anglo victims.

4. ‘Good’ EM. There is just one story in the sample that presents EM talent centre stage in a positive light. The ABC Stateline WA program of 27 June features a story about a young African refugee from the Congo who is building a career as a soccer star.

5. ‘Normal’ EM. In television current affairs, as in news, it is the Anglo who is represented as the ‘generic Aussie’, in this case featuring in 30 stories – the largest of the sub-categories identified here. However there is also a category
which can be called ‘Aussie EM’ where the talent may have a name or the
remnants of an accent which may indicate EM heritage to the close observer, but
where this identity is totally unproblematic and the person is presented as very
comfortably located within the Australian mainstream. This applies mostly to
people from the more established migrant communities who speak with
Australian accents, for example an Italian-Australian winemaker who wins a
French award (ABC: 730, 17 June); a Middle Eastern Australian who organizes
‘swap and save’ parties (ACA, 19 June). There are five stories in this category.

We have already noted that television current affairs reporting is different from television
news. It has a less intense agenda and the distinction between EM and Anglo is less stark.
While the content is still predominantly Anglo, the more formulaic nature of the genre,
especially on the commercial programs, means that the type of story matters more than
the actor, and all talent tends to be treated in the same way – as heroes or villains,
shysters or victims, no matter what their ethnic origin. Although EM deviants outnumber
the Anglo eight to two, there is less of a sense that ethnic communities are targeted and
demonized to the extent that they appeared to be in television news (see Phillips and
Tapsall, 2007b and Phillips 2009a). However, the fact that Anglos are often seen as the
victims of EM criminals extends the ‘racial and ethnic typification of crime’ (Chiricos
and Eschholz 2002: 416) also noted in television news (Phillips, 2009a:73).

There were two particularly disturbing stories captured during the current affairs survey
which merit more detailed consideration. They are noteworthy because they were the
only ones on the commercial programs where ethnic minorities were the central focus of
the story rather than peripheral to it. The nature of the reportage raises questions about
how responsibly commercial current affairs deals with sensitive ethnic issues.

Legalizing Polygamy, Today Tonight, 25 June
This story, which leads the program, appears to have been prompted by the decision by
the UK to legalize polygamy. On the basis of that decision, the story investigates
whether legalization could or should happen in Australia. Two Muslim men, one a
current polygamist and one seeking a second wife, are used as talent, as are two male Islamic leaders and a female (Anglo) relationships expert. The focus of the story is on whether polygamy opens the door to rorting of the Australian welfare system as men claim benefits for multiple families.

The opening graphic carries the title ‘Multiple wives’ and features shots of the veiled heads of two women, one in a white chador with her eyes and forehead showing, the other in a burqa with just her eyes showing through a slit. However in both cases the eyes are carefully made up and the impression is one of veiled sexuality, a common stereotypical theme in the representation of Muslim women in the media (see Aly and Walker 2007).

According to the announcer’s link, the UK initiative has prompted Muslim men in Australia to ‘rally’ to have Australian laws changed. However we have no way of knowing whether the story was prompted by a local community initiative, or whether the responses from the Islamic community have been triggered by the reporters themselves as they have sought local comment on the issue. There is certainly no evidence given for a local initiative – a petition, a report given to government, a press release etc. From the opening words, where the announcer presents the story in the context of Muslim leaders pushing to have ‘our laws’ changed there is the setting up of an oppositional relationship between the Muslim ‘them’ and the Australian ‘us’.

The schism is confirmed with the rather shocking start to the story itself, which features an obviously enraged large and bearded man attacking the much smaller blonde female reporter and her camera crew as she attempts to interview him. The reporter’s introductory voiceover sets the violence in context: ‘It’s illegal, considered morally wrong, and unjust to women, but that hasn’t stopped some Muslim men in Australia snubbing the law’. The violent and cursing man is introduced as ‘Mad Mohammad Maba’ [last name unclear] who is accused of ‘taking two wives and every taxpayer’s cent he could’. He is in a polygamous relationship with two women, but all three have kept their relationship concealed from the authorities. The wives are captured at a distance,
paparazzi-style, in grainy and unsteady footage. While Mohammad lashes out and repeatedly protests that his personal life is ‘None of your business’, one wife, unveiled, who is with her husband at the time of the interview, attempts to present the case to the reporter, saying that under Muslim law men can have up to four wives. The story shifts to the second example where a man who is trying to find a second wife via a Muslim internet site is confronted by a male reporter on the street with the words ‘You’re attempting to break the law here…It is illegal in this country to have two wives. Can you tell me why you are trying to find a second wife?’ The man is described as being ‘on the prowl’ for a second wife while his first wife was in a park near his home – with the inference of unfaithfulness underscoring the blot against his character. The man refuses to face the camera or to answer the reporter’s questions so instead the story is illustrated with mug shots from his website and blurred shots via a hidden camera of his wife in the park.

Interspersed with the images of street chases and violence are calmer interviews with two Islamic community leaders: Sheikh Khalil Chami is interviewed in a book-lined library, and Keysar Trad, often used as community spokesperson, is in a studio setting. They are well dressed, well spoken, and controlled – in keeping with the established conventions already noticed in television news for the representation of authority (Phillips and Tapsall 2007b: 25-27). Both try to make the case that the issue is a social rather than a religious one, with men with multiple partners - be they sequential or, in the case of polygamy, simultaneous – a fact of life. However the story continues to underscore the theme of Muslims rorting taxpaying Australians while the relationships expert gives her opinion that polygamy is not fair to women and that they go along with it because they have no choice. She underscores the rorting theme asking rhetorically: ‘Is it fair for the Australian taxpayer to pay for twenty children from three different wives? I don’t think that’s really very fair.’

The reporter’s links are delivered over file shots of men in prayer at a mosque and women in the streets in robes, veils and burqas – images that tend, as the previous news studies have shown, to underscore the ‘otherness’ of Muslims in the Australian
community (Phillips and Tapsall 2007b; Phillips 2009a.) The story has a little kick in the tail with Mohammad’s final words in response to the reporter’s comment that Australian men don’t have two wives: ‘Maybe they don’t have the balls.’

This story therefore brings into play several uncomfortable themes while offering no context, nor any way of resolving the apparent impasse between Muslim practices and the assumed (Anglo) Australian way of life. The Muslim men are portrayed as exploiters of women and adulterers. The Muslim commentators are represented as condoners of behaviour that the journalists are presenting as beyond the pale, even though multiple partners and tax-rorting of family benefits are not exactly unknown in the wider community. The images of violence, both verbal and physical, and the impression of untrustworthiness and sneakiness are disturbing. Taken together with the images of men at prayer and veiled women in the streets they contribute to an overall impression of rather threatening otherness. Muslims are pitted against ‘Australians’ even while Mohammed forcefully declaims that he is an Australian and can do what he likes in his country. And the story ends with a slight on Australian manhood that would be bound to raise the hackles of at least some male viewers. This goading, along with the opening images of a large and physically violent Muslim man threatening an archetypal blonde Australian woman, suggest subthemes around masculinity, territoriality and male pride that create the climate for inter-racial discord. Thus an issue that is certainly newsworthy has been treated in a way that could exacerbate, and even encourage, community ill-feeling. There is no attempt to give a context, or to explain Muslim practices to us in ways that broaden our understanding. Nor is there any attempt to deal with the wider social welfare issues, of which in the end this is just one example amongst many others that could be cited involving non-Muslim Australians.

Cairns Mosque, A Current Affair, 27 June
This story, the third in the program line-up, revisits a story originally aired in 2007 concerning plans by the Islamic community in Cairns, Queensland to build a three-storey mosque in a suburban street. The proposal outraged the locals at the time and resulted in legal action which had now been resolved in favour of the construction of what is
described as the ‘mega mosque’.

The reporter’s introduction sets the story up as a clash between religions: ‘Humble home today. Mighty mosque tomorrow. Residents of this quiet Cairns street have fought a holy war and lost.’ The comments of the local Anglo residents suggest objections go much deeper than the appearance of the streetscape with one resident saying ‘We don’t want it in our city and we certainly don’t want it in our street!’ and later ‘The two are totally opposed – their way and our way.’ Another resident says he would rather have a brothel in the street than the mosque.

The clang of a gong provides a Middle Eastern-sounding segue to a computer representation of the planned building, superimposed on the modest fibro house currently occupying the block. The main building is one storey high, the same height as surrounding houses, with the minaret rising above it to the full three-storey height. The robed and bearded Imam is introduced to us at prayer in the current modest premises. Footage of the rest of the street and the reporter’s commentary emphasize the apparent incongruity of the appearance of the proposed building with its dome and minaret. The Imam comments that the residents ‘exercized their right [to protest] and they gave it their best shot and they lost’. Muslim community representative Keysar Trad is once again sought out for comment and he describes the residents’ reactions as ‘hysterical and to some extent based on ignorance’ showing ‘no understanding of Islam, and simply repeating some of the anti-Islamic rhetoric picked up from other places’.

The reporter then provides apparently alarming statistics: 1.4 million Muslims ‘call Australia home’, mosques are ‘mushrooming’ around the country. We see file shots of other protests against Islamic encroachment – with speakers at a rally against a proposed Muslim school in the Sydney suburb of Camden saying things like ‘Watch out, Australia’ ‘Don’t let them take Camden’ and ‘If they want to integrate then they should
go to our schools’. One Anglo man says ‘it means a way of life that will vanish quickly’ while an Anglo woman says ‘you tell me one country where these people have gone that [sic] there’s not unrest, they will not assimilate’. Another Anglo man comments: Well, they don’t come up and shake your hand …and say “g’day mate”’. The presenter’s back announcement sums up by saying that construction is due to start within a couple of months unless an appeal lodged.

The story pits ‘archetypal’ Australians living in their archetypal fibro houses against intruders who are shown through the language of the report to be alien, unAustralian, and unholy. It doesn’t attempt to hide the prejudice inherent in this portrayal and in fact features numerous examples of the blunt language of the Anglo talents who demonstrate the fear and loathing within the general public for Muslims and their religion. The tone of the story suggests our sympathy should lie with the Australians whose way of life is being encroached upon no less than their communities and streetscapes. The story is striking because of its frank representation of anti-Islam feeling in a context which implies that such feeling is part of being a true blue Australian. This certainly gives the story impact, with apparently little concern for any potential impact on community harmony.

Given there are only three stories in the entire sample which feature people from EM backgrounds as story subjects in their own right it is particularly significant that two of them, both on commercial stations, concern the Islamic community and represent them in such a way as to increase rather than decrease public fear and mistrust. The focus is less on responsible reporting than on making the most of the topic’s dramatic potential even if this requires appealing to the public’s basest prejudices. The stories appear at best to sympathize with and at worst to condone racist persecution of Islamic groups. They articulate explicitly and implicitly feelings that Muslims are different from ‘us’ and have no place in Australia unless they conform to Australian (Christian) behavioural norms. This is of concern given the role both news and current affairs play in reflecting society back to itself (see Phillips 2009, McIver 2009). We can grant, as Entman and Rojecki do
in relation to the media in the US, that the racial prototypes in the news ‘are less the product of conscious racial distinctions and more the indirect result of economics shaping journalistic practices’. (2001: xx). But we also cannot ignore the fact that ‘however purely commercial and nonracist the media executives may be, the images they produce embody and reinforce racial distance.’ (ibid). Jakubowicz et al’s observations in their study of race and the media in Australia in 1994 are as relevant today as they were 15 years ago: we still have ‘a news and current affairs output that speaks nearly always with the voice and from the perspective of…the ‘dominant race’’. (1994: 29-30)

Conclusion
This analysis of current affairs programming on Australian television shows that while Anglo content dominates, EM faces and voices are more in evidence than they were in news. However the qualitative analysis shows that as far as commercial current affairs is concerned similar reporting practices as observed in news subtly convey a sense of racial hierarchy in which the Anglo dominates. When they become players in the story EM talent, like Anglo talent, are the fodder for the classic commercial current affairs storylines about people who have become victims of the system in some way. On the three occasions where EM talent is the primary focus just one story - the ABC Stateline story of an up-and-coming African-Australian soccer star – is positive. The other two stories focus on the Muslim community in ways that underscore the sense of threat they appear to pose to the Anglo-Australian way of life.

In this small snapshot of television current affairs only the public broadcaster demonstrates in practice the sort of respect for difference that is at the heart of the broadcasting codes of practice that were referred to at the start of this paper. While the commercial channels may attend to the spirit of their code in eschewing outright racial vilification, nevertheless racial profiling and racial hierarchies emerge, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes quite overtly as alluded to in the examples cited above. We see clear evidence of what Dunn et al call the ‘new racisms of cultural intolerance’ (2004: 409), indicative not just of a lack of sensitivity to the broader community, but of the
failure of the media organisations to live up to the standards the community has set for them. Further, ACMA’s reliance on a complaint system rather than on regular monitoring means diversity as an issue is under the radar and stations are able to escape proper scrutiny in relation to their adherence to the values embedded in their codes of practice. For the sake of their viewers who represent the culturally diverse community that is modern Australia the television news media need to show through deed as well as word that they understand, accept and aspire to attain the standards their codes set out for them.

References


Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2008a, Editorial Policies, retrieved on 27 August 2010 from

Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2008b, ABC Code of Practice, retrieved on 27 August 2010 from

Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, retrieved on 27 August from

Australian Communications and Media Authority 2009, Community Attitudes to the Presentation of Factual Material and Viewpoints in Commercial Current Affairs


Free TV Australia 2010, *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice*, retrieved on 26 August 2010 from


1 This study was undertaken as part of the Australian Government’s Diverse Australia Program, administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. For more information, visit http://www.harmony.gov.au. The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Andrew Tapsall and Jo Morrison to this research.

2 In the 2005 television news study the sample encompassed three different audience catchments. Sydney, the capital city of New South Wales, was selected as an Eastern States metropolitan centre; Perth, capital city of Western Australia, was selected because it was a small metropolitan centre, and Shepparton in Victoria as a regional centre with a diverse population including new migrants. In 2007 a second regional centre, Townsville in Queensland, was added, also because of the diversity of its population mix.

3 This investigation does not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - while data was collected this constitutes an altogether different study and the data was analysed separately (see McCallum and Holland 2009).

4 The original study also captured data for two hour-long weekly programs (Dateline on the Special Broadcasting Service, the ethnic public broadcaster, and 60 Minutes on Channel Nine). Because only two programs were captured across the two weeks, and because SBS by its very nature contained 100 per cent EM content while 60 Minutes had no EM content, for reasons of space this paper will focus on the more readily comparable daily programs. Calculations have been done on this basis and therefore vary from the original study. Comparative data is based on weekday domestic content for both news and current affairs. The complete analysis and data tables are accessible at www.reportingdiversity.org.au.