



# Media Monocultural, Research Confirms

**Two recent research studies present a bleak picture of the performance of the Australian media in reflecting the society around it.**

They suggest that the electronic media, in particular, continue to present a distorted and unrealistic view of Australian society, and fail to acknowledge its cultural diversity.

The studies, commissioned by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, are: *Multicultural Australia in the Media*, in which Dr Philip Bell makes a detailed analysis of the way the Australian media (radio, television and print) represent multicultural and ethnic relations issues; and *Next Door Neighbours*, which reports on the views of over 60 groups drawn from ethnic communities who participated in a qualitative study of attitudes to the media, and analyses over 650 viewing diaries kept by participants.

The reports follow on from and complement earlier research by Goodall and others, and Dr Bell, published in 1990 and 1991.

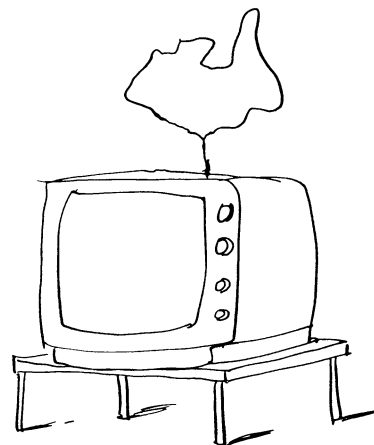
Another recent addition to the body of research in this area was the Australian Broadcasting Authority monograph *The People We See on TV* (see CU 87), a national study of community attitudes to the portrayal of cultural diversity, conducted in conjunction with a similar study in the UK by the Broadcasting Standards Council and enabling comparisons to be drawn between the prevailing attitudes in the two societies.

## 1. Multicultural Australia in the Media

Philip Bell, *Multicultural Australia in the Media*, a report to the Office of Multicultural Affairs, August 1992, AGPS Canberra 1993, 93pp plus references.

Dr Philip Bell monitored, over two two-week periods in 1991 and 1992: 64 editions of quality and popular English language newspapers; one commercial television and one ABC evening news; all early evening current affairs programs; episodes of *Neighbours*, *Home and Away* and *Country Practice*; and all major women's and men's magazines. In addition, one week of two commercial radio talk back shows was monitored.

The newspaper analysis showed the influential nature of headlines, the selection of which often involves ideological choices and reflects presuppositions or ingrained opinion about the issue concerned. Although the reports under negative headlines may not themselves be negative, 'the



general structure of reporting is reflected in the simplified condensations of headlines' the report says.

Both men's and women's magazines addressed their readers in ethnocentric terms, seeing 'otherness' as alien, threatening or exotic. Local norms were depicted as fair-skinned, idealised mothers and children, or models and mistresses 'symbolically available' to the Australian male.

The study found that the great majority of television advertising depicts idealised Anglo-Australian faces and figures engaged in leisure or social rituals. Ethnic differences, whether cultural or physical, were used as metaphors for products with relevant associations, like 'Italian pasta' or 'French yoghurt'. Out of 2771 advertisements, 127 were 'explicitly ethnicist or stereotyped'.

Talk-back radio was found on occasion to be 'implicitly ethnocentric'. This was particularly noticeable in the way the presenters failed to confront their listeners' ignorance and prejudices. The presenter often adopted a 'devil's advocate' position of popular ethnocentrism when interviewing experts.

## News and Current Affairs Practices

Television news and current affairs programs are extremely popular with audiences. As Bell points out, during the period monitored for his report, the ABC news in Sydney rated up to 15 points, *The 7.30 Report* up to 22, and Channel Nine news up to 33, while the most popular current affairs program, *A Current Affair*, scored up to 36 points. Between them, these program penetrated about half of all households in the Sydney region between 6pm and 8pm.

Given their popularity, these programs - both in their selection of items and in the emphasis they place on certain

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kinds of news - have considerable potential to influence people's ideas about their society and the rest of the world.

The study found that the subjects most easily incorporated into television news items were 'levels of immigration', black Australians and 'Asians'. While television was seldom overtly anti-ethnic, it tended to see ethnicity as a 'problem' which was newsworthy to the viewer, who was assumed to be Anglo-Australian.

Bell notes that the nature of television news inclines it to cover events rather than issues, mainly because of its dependence on visual resources. It is antithetical to abstract stories like Aboriginal land rights or the immigration debate, and while refugee stories are more frequent, they depend on the 'availability of visually dramatic material'.

Television mentioned ethnicity only in relation to otherwise newsworthy material such as crime, celebrities, law and order issues and politics. In addition, news has a limited agenda, centring on 'conflict' in areas like politics and industrial relations, and on social issues which may be given a particular angle in order to set parties in opposition and create conflict even where little exists.

Television's narrow news agenda, and its very small number of items (12-18 per half hour bulletin) and its competition for audiences via dramatic visual news, all render multiculturalism and related issues only occasionally newsworthy.

Bell concludes that the mass media in Australia 'are involved in.....the ideological reproduction of racism'.

*[A]ll the media exclude representations of active, powerful, positive aspects of cultural diversity and social heterogeneity. Only Aboriginal interests received significant non-prejudicial coverage in the information media. 'Chinese' ('Asian') and 'Italians' were the most stereotyped. 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' had dropped off the agenda only a few months after the excesses of the media coverage of the Gulf War and were rarely mentioned during the six weeks studied.*

Multiculturalism as such is not seen as newsworthy by the Anglophone media. The study found that OMA's initiatives during the period reviewed, and in fact all cultural and social justice arguments for a multicultural society, or for refugee and other migrant intakes, were 'swamped by an agenda which emphasised the numbers and dollar costs to the Australian economy of "high" or "higher" levels of immigration'.

For example, there was heavy criticism of business migration, which was often linked to 'rorts', failures or the (implied) costs of immigration generally.

The concept of multiculturalism as reflected in the media was changing into 'an empty label signifying cultural diversity of a superficial kind (national folk customs, cuisine etc)'. Other concepts which continued to circulate in the media, like 'migrant' and 'ethnic', were used to describe more significant social and political aspects of different communities.

The study found that overall, ethnic minority communities and individuals are rarely explicitly stereotyped; but the relative infrequency of stereotypes 'reflects the general exclusion of all non-Anglo-Australian interests from both the information and entertainment (eg television drama) media'.

In the Australian media, analysis and historical contextualisation of relevant issues are rare, Bell says. If the media are potentially educative, their multicultural curricula are narrow and shallow.

## 2. Nextdoor Neighbours

Bronwyn Coupe and Andrew Jacubowicz with Lois Randall, *Nextdoor Neighbours*, a report for the Office of Multicultural Affairs on Ethnic Group Discussions of the Media, November 1992, AGPS Canberra 1993, 86pp plus appendixes.

Structured group discussions conducted for this study, along with the viewing diaries, produced a detailed picture of media consumption among ethnic communities and of their attitudes to the media.

Ethnic audiences are heavy media consumers, especially of commercial television. The ethnic media are also widely used where they are available.

Ethnic audiences do not see the Australian media as presenting an accurate or wide-ranging reflection of Australian society. Instead, it is perceived as providing 'avenues for the communication of British and US cultural concerns'.

Many of the findings of this study confirm the conclusions of Bell's analysis of media content. For example, the study showed real concerns about the narrowness of Australian society as depicted in the media. A consistent theme across all groups was the limited range of physical types shown, of story lines, and of issues covered in programs. Comments were made about culturally specific notions of beauty and attractiveness serving to denigrate women who were not blonde and slim.

The groups expressed a consistent concern that media reported specific issues affecting ethnic communities in a patronising or biased way, presenting inaccurate and/or partial information. They perceived an overwhelming focus on 'bad news', especially in the treatment of Asian immigrants. They saw an unquestioned assumption that the audience's point of view was that of Anglo-Australians to the exclusion of all others.

The media representation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders was 'overwhelmingly negative' and was seen as one-sided, unfair or too harsh.

Participants wanted better information, more historical background, and more sympathetic and sustained representation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. □

*(This article is adapted from a background paper prepared for the OMA Conference by the Communications Law Centre).*