

The Representation of Cultural Diversity in Commercial Radio Broadcasting

By *Bradley Shrimpton*,
Ethnic Communities
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76 pages

This four chapter report on Australian commercial radio makes a welcome contribution to a somewhat neglected area of media research. Radio has in the past been the lesser researched cousin to television and the press in media studies, and aside from the recent John Laws saga, it is not often in the regulatory spotlight. Shrimpton's report attempts to place the representation of cultural diversity in commercial radio within the context of developments in post-Second World War immigration history and broadcasting regulation. The report adds to these historical frameworks by including a chapter of "contemporary perspectives". In the third chapter, 10 Victorian ethnic community leaders offer both criticisms of the medium and suggestions for how commercial radio can address what seems to be a poor record for the representation of a culturally diverse Australia (it should be noted, the study clearly articulates that cultural diversity in this research does not include representations of indigenous Australia).

While the report makes rather bleak reading, it does conclude with a number of strong recommendations which implicate regulators and academics particularly, to increase awareness of the situation through further research and monitoring. It is hoped that this combined with the efforts of community organisations, will make commercial radio "more aware, responsible and responsive to Australia's cultural diversity". This would ultimately be achieved by reviewing employment practices, amending programming and increasing consultation with communities.

The report makes much of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA) by way of unfolding broadcast regulation

before 1992 and then exploring the post self-regulatory landscape with respect to the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), radio codes of practice and the place cultural diversity holds in the BSA in general. The study notes that in the 1950s and 1960s there was an ethnic programme presence on commercial radio - be it a maximum of 2.5% of weekly transmission hours. The absurd regulation that such programming be accompanied by English translation would have made such programming an unpopular choice for radio broadcasters. Shrimpton notes that the above constraints combined with the advent of government funded "ethnic radio" in the 1970s, led to the complete disappearance of commercial multi-lingual broadcasting. Here we find similarities with commercial television - the creation of special broadcasting services for ethnic populations translates to the commercial sector being (and feeling) "relieved" of the perceived burden of multicultural programming. However, on more than one occasion, Shrimpton notes how television is more "regulated" than radio with its own fiercely contested Australian content standard and at the very least, advisory notes for the television industry, on the portrayal of cultural diversity.

After connecting the objectives of immigration policy with the appearance of ethnic radio broadcasting, the report goes on to review research undertaken in the 1990s which examined media, racism and ethnicity. This renowned research by Goodall, Jakubowicz and Bell among others has almost neared its use-by date for direct application to the media landscape in 1999. But it still provides a useful platform for reflecting on the research climate at the time of broadcast deregulation. From here, the report delves into how cultural diversity is treated by the ABA and what the implications of the BSA have been for the representation of a multi-cultural Australia.

This chapter is insightful, for it explains how regulation has been active in the creation of measures which attempt to address accuracy in reporting, racism and vilification in the media. Shrimpton notes that specific regulation for the portrayal of cultural diversity on the other hand is at best, "woolly sophistry", which lacks any explicit prescription. The Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters code of practice also leaves the author unimpressed. Like advocacy groups who have lobbied for firmer regulation and guidelines regarding cultural diversity on television, Shrimpton looks to the ABC and SBS codes of practice as examples of more specific and meaningful instruments of change.

The final section of the report communicates the feelings and ideas that ethnic community leaders have on the issue. And it is here that the issue is clearly articulated into two realms. The portrayal of cultural diversity on commercial radio hinges on who we hear on the radio and what we hear. Ethnic leaders would be correct I'd imagine when they say they never hear a commercial announcer with a foreign accent. And while this research does not contain a content analysis of programming, ethnic leaders continue to express disappointment over what is broadcast, when it comes to cultural diversity. What the report sorely lacks after this section is comment from the commercial radio industry itself. While the author notes the absence of this perspective, it is nevertheless an aspect that would have been very welcome in the report. However, as Shrimpton hopes, the research should provide interested parties with another resource to bring both regulatory bodies and the commercial sector to task on the representation of cultural diversity in commercial radio.

Harvey May is carrying out research into cultural diversity in Australian commercial television, at Queensland University of Technology