

Communications Update

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Media Slow to Reflect the Real OZ

Australia's media - particularly the commercial electronic media - have a long way to go when it comes to accepting the realities of Australian society in the 1990s.

This message emerged loud and clear from a one-day round-table conference held under the auspices of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in Sydney at the end of May. Attitudes displayed by media decision makers are reflected in the end product, according to two new research studies which looked at the media representation of cultural diversity. Immigration Minister Nick Bolkus launched these at the conference (see pp6-7).

The conference's theme was the portrayal of cultural diversity in the media in the context of self-regulation. There was general agreement that the emphasis should be on education and attitude change rather than on compelling the media to 'do the right thing' by tougher regulation or threats of sanctions. 'Teach rather than intimidate, censure rather than censor' was the way Phillip Adams put it.

The conference, organised for OMA by the Communications Law Centre, invited a wide range of decision-makers and regulators from radio, television, print media and advertising. Some leading players in the media revealed an outdated or blinkered view of the realities of Australian society and in some cases, an entrenched resistance to change.

The Minister believed that the ABC and even the SBS still show room for improvement. The SBS, for example, could 'sharpen its focus in covering local issues of concern to the 43 per cent which is ethnic communities, in its news and in its programming'. (This statistic, which apparently represents the total of people born outside Australia and people with one or both parents born outside Australia, was queried by some conference participants as too high.) The ABC was taking a long time to appreciate that its radio services were not just 'community radio for Glebe and Fitzroy', the Minister said.

We live in a culturally diverse society, so our potential audience is just that - culturally diverse. And our potential field of participants in the industry, as program makers, journalists, managers, producers, technicians is just that - culturally diverse.

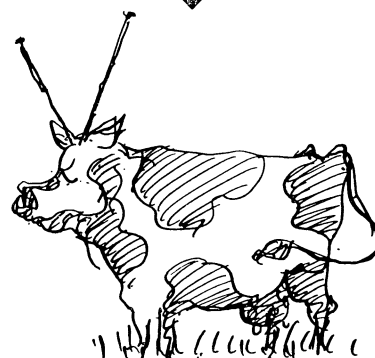
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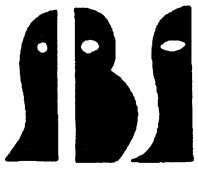
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Special Issue

Media Reflections of Australian Society: Will they ever get it right?

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So why is reflecting diversity such a problem?

Are we saying that the talent isn't there? Are we saying that 40 per cent or so of our audience can be disregarded; and are we saying that there are 'media success' genes and these are to be found primarily in white, Anglo males?

'Freedom of Speech' vs Vilification Legislation

Various forms of regulation which might help redress the balance were highlighted in a session of the conference.

The CLC's Michelle McAuslan spoke of the inherent tensions, and the difficulty of striking a balance, between competing demands such as keeping control of programs, allowing freedom of speech, maintaining creative integrity and meeting commercial imperatives.

Only two existing industry codes cover positive portrayal of cultural diversity, she said. Prohibitive rules do not encourage positive portrayal. The law can suggest what behaviour is unacceptable but it is not appropriate for setting down matters best achieved by co-operation.

Adequate representation of multiculturalism will not be achieved until there is a genuine commitment to change on the part of all parties involved, McAuslan said.

Human Rights Commissioner Irene Moss said that freedom of speech was not an absolute: we are not free to publish defamatory statements, or to be in contempt of the courts or the Parliament, for example. Freedom of speech is important, but freedom from fear is perhaps more important.

Speaking in favour of racial vilification legislation, Moss said that community education and self-regulation are not enough. Talkback radio, for example, remains a problem area.

She showed a patently racist cartoon from the Cairns Post and said

that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has no power to compel mediation between the paper's editor and the Aboriginal community, and at the moment the only recourse was to the Australian Press Council. Action could be taken against such a cartoon however under racial vilification legislation.

Moss said that acquiescence with proposed racial vilification legislation will be by persuasion rather than compulsion, and that criminal sanctions should be a resort only in extreme cases of racial violence. She noted that after four years of racial vilification legislation in NSW, there had been no observable diminution in freedom of speech.

Codes of Practice Inadequate

At a time when industry codes of practice for programs are in the process of being ratified, there is considerable concern about the failure of these codes, by and large, to come to grips effectively with the issue of the media's

view of multicultural Australia.

Speaking about the Broadcasting Services Act, ABA deputy chair Peter Webb said that it was important not to lose sight of the objects of the Act. Broadcasters should focus on how they can achieve the objects rather than concentrating on compliance with 'the rules'.

The objects of the Act, which are supposed to underpin the codes, and all aspects of the Act, include:

- to promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity; and
- to encourage the providers of commercial and community broadcasting services to be responsive to the need for a fair and accurate coverage of matters of public interest and for and appropriate coverage of matters of local significance.

It is significant that these objects are expressed in positive terms, using words like 'encourage' and 'promote'. By contrast, the codes which have so far emerged from commercial radio

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Minority Languages Fight Back

In Europe, the growth of minority language broadcasting highlights a move towards increasing regionalisation and ethnic differentiation, thus fragmenting traditional centralised broadcasting services.

The 1980s saw the birth of television stations broadcasting in Welsh, Basque and Catalan. In Scotland, a major increase in Gaelic broadcasting is under way. Gaelic television began with a small amount of cultural programming, then moved into current affairs and educational programs, and is now extending into light entertainment.

It is not just these smaller language groups but the major European languages which may increasingly find themselves threatened by transnational broadcasts in English. One commentator has described the situation in Sweden as the younger generation turn to such programs and raises the possibility that the Swedes, one hundred years from now, may be 'engulfed by the "English Empire" and keep Swedish in the family chest, a quaint relic to be dusted off, polished up and displayed on festive occasions'. (*European Journal of Communication*, Vol.8#1, March 1993, p.101, 115-116). □



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and television tend to take a negative, prohibitive approach. Typical of this is the FACTS draft code stating that a licensee **may not broadcast** (our emphasis) a program which is likely in all the circumstances to:

- seriously offend the cultural sensitivities of Aborigines or of ethnic groups or racial groups in the Australian community
- stir up hatred, serious contempt or severe ridicule against a person on the grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin (*inter alia*).

Similarly, FARB's code specifies what shall not be broadcast but contains no stimulus to the broadcasting of a more rounded view of Australian society (though FARB has produced an extremely positive set of guidelines on portrayal of indigenous Australians - see story, p10).

It is interesting to contrast this approach with the SBS's codes of practice, which place the emphasis on what the broadcaster **should** do rather than what it should not, viz the following excerpts (our emphasis). The SBS, for example:

- seeks through its programming to counter attitudes of prejudice against any person or group;
- seeks to correct distorted pictures of ethnic communities and issues of race generally;
- aims to ensure that programs either counter or do not support individual and group stereotyping;
- aims to promote a greater awareness of the actual and potential contributions of women; and
- recognises the social and cultural integrity and pluralism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, and aims to facilitate an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and values among all Australians.

The Casting Issue

The issue of casting in television drama is central to this debate, and this

emerged at the conference as an area of confusion and misunderstanding. On one side are producers and writers, who often seem to think that it is enough to feature 'issues' concerning these groups, or to have one or two token characters drawn from them, or to include them among extras. On the other side are the communities themselves and the media unions, who argue that the scope and emphasis of drama must change to reflect the reality of Australian society, and that 'ethnic' and indigenous actors should not be cast only in roles which call for an actor from these groups.

Anne Britton of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance said that only two per cent of the available roles in mainstream drama went to indigenous or NESB actors. To illustrate the desirability of different approaches to casting, she showed a video made by the American stage actors union in which well known plays were recast using non-traditional actors - for example, two black women performing the roles in *Night, Mother* which are usually filled by whites.

The basis of non-traditional casting in the US is that ethnicity and gender should be ignored unless they are integral to the role - and only a minority of roles fall into that category, Britton said. Broadcasters are expected to collect casting data regularly and pass it to the union. If bias is observed, the parties have to sit down and discuss remedial strategies.

In the ten years 1981-91, non-traditional casting has increased from 11 per cent of roles to 23 per cent.

The ABC has admitted to casting problems and has undertaken a special study in co-operation with the Alliance. Britton said that advocates of non-traditional casting practices are not urging rigid political correctness, nor is it a backdoor way of introducing quotas. In Australia there tend to be cries of 'artistic freedom' whenever casting practices are mentioned, but producers cannot afford to be complacent about the current situation, which excludes people on the grounds of their race and ignores their talent.

James Davern of JNP Films, executive producer of *A Country Prac-*

tice, produced a long list of examples to illustrate that his company was enlightened on this issue. Unfortunately, the effect was often the opposite of what he intended, and many of his examples backfired. For example, he showed a scene (intended to highlight the generation gap in migrant families) between two 'Polish' characters - but they were played by Anglo actors Ben Gabriel and Danny Adcock.

He took issue with the research finding by Philip Bell that Anglo-Australian was the norm in soaps and to support this listed 'ethnic' characters in ACP (though some were ethnic only in name and were played by Anglos), and obtained a list of 'ethnic' actors from Grundys (defined by the fact that they had ethnic-sounding names).

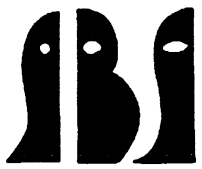
Davern said that producers had to be careful in showing Aboriginal issues, for example, that the audience at home was not alienated.

A more salient example was the difficulty the producers had encountered in finding Iranian actors for an episode about Iranian refugees, because local Iranian actors feared reprisals against relatives still in Iran. Davern said this problem was 'typical' when trying to cast ethnic minorities.

The ABC's Michael Shrimpton mentioned that the policy of not re-using actors in the TV series *GP* made for casting difficulties when there was a small pool to draw on in the first place. He said however that when the ABC had made demands on its casting directors and writers, it had uncovered some great new talent. A major problem for NESB actors was a tendency to be over-awed and over-prepared, an overwhelming concern to 'do the right thing'. As a result the ABC was experimenting by mounting special training courses for groups of likely contenders, to help overcome these difficulties.

The ABC is planning a number of drama series on multicultural themes, including a China-Australia historical productions spanning several decades, *The Wives of Quong*; *Bordertown*, set in a migrant camp; and *Burnt Bridge*, a series about Aborigines with an Aboriginal producer.

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Advertising

Rob Belgiovane, an Australian of Italian background who runs his own successful advertising agency, deplored the tendency of his own industry to stereotype Italians (and by association, other ethnic groups). The 'Mamma Mia' type of ad reflected a view of an Italy which had probably never existed, and ignored the great culture of that country. He totally disagreed with the conventional wisdom that only a small minority of people might reject a product advertised in this way.

SBS managing director Malcolm Long said that the SBS could have been proscriptive and not shown about '90 per cent' of ads shown elsewhere (because they might offend someone). Instead, there was a decision to take a positive approach and draw the attention of advertisers to SBS's codes. Advertisers had reacted well, Long said, and SBS hopes that this might spill over into the wider market and change advertising intended for that market.

The Industry Speaks

Predictably, commercial broadcasting interests played down evidence in the OMA research reports which showed their performance in a negative light. FACTS General Manager Tony Branigan said he was 'not greatly impressed' with the research because it 'started with a clear idea of where it was heading'. The facts were not indisputable, Branigan said: for example, it is not easy to gauge from the screen what an actor's ethnic background is.

FACTS 'totally resists' any idea of industry quotas but there is plenty of scope for listening and talking about the issues, Branigan said. The picture was less black and white than the research suggested. The main factors that will effect change are discussion, education and 'the effluxion of time'.

He admitted room for improvement in complaints handling by stations, saying that the approach tended to be 'haphazard' and while some were sys-

tematic about it, many saw complaints simply as a form of feedback from viewers.

Jeff Rushton (FARB) said that the punitive aspects of the BSA should not be forgotten; by ignoring the codes broadcasters would incur heavy penalties. He asked where racial vilification legislation fitted with codes of practice.

Paddy Conroy, ABC Director of Television, said that from 'virtually a nil start' in 1987, the ABC's on-screen reflection of cultural diversity had 'improved markedly'. He speculated as to whether there was a connection between this and the ABC's improved ratings. The Corporation saw it as not just socially desirable but 'a matter of survival'. Program decision-making has to be based on an accurate assessment of the audience, as reflected in studies of contemporary Australia.

There was a need for recognition and action at executive level. The ABC had set quotas for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees and there would be 41 by the end of 1993.

On this point, SBS managing director Malcolm Long said that positive employment policies would fail if employees found the workplace intimidating. The environment must be culturally aware, sensitive, appropriate.

The ABC was in a mood to beat its breast. ABC-TV's head of news and current affairs Peter Manning said the Corporation had started from a low base and was 'well behind' in reflecting Australian culture. The ABC has over the past two years been holding seminars all around Australia for journalists, camera people, editors and producers at every level. These have been 'pretty controversial' and 'a lot of

heavy stuff has come out' Manning said. It has not been easy to strike a balance between traditional news values and the reporting of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, as an issue it is now at the top of the news and current affairs agenda, and the ABC is attempting to change the staff structure with assistance from OMA.

Summing Up

In a final panel session, Christina Sammers from the Australia Council echoed the views of many present when she said that the industry were great buck passers, with everyone blaming everyone else. If the industry can't set the agenda for reflecting Australian society adequately, the Federal Government should do it, she said.

Sema Varova of OMA said that some defensiveness had been apparent but it was not necessary. There was no suggestion of censorship, social engineering, 'political correctness' in the case that OMA was making. She supported the idea of smaller, targeted, craft-based seminars as part of the educative process, and said that OMA was prepared to put resources into a number of the proposals which had been put forward.

These included:

- Education of writers, producers and directors, and involvement of the AFTRS in this process.
- A casting project similar to the US one.
- Another round-table conference in three months.
- Using existing industry conferences (SPAA, ASDA etc) to spread the message. □

