

# The diversification of ethnic media

*A recent CLC seminar highlighted the different functions performed by Australia's ethnic media: as a provider of information to aid migrant resettlement, a source of news from home and a conduit of local news and events*

**A** demonstration takes place in the morning outside Parliament House, Melbourne, concerning the conflict in Kosovo. A speaker, born in Macedonia near the Albanian border, now a long term resident of Australia via Canada, talks of the inhumanity of war, whenever, wherever. Interviewed and filmed by SBS, he expects to see the segment on the evening news bulletin and syndicated through the ABC.

But they are beaten to the airwaves by the Albanian language program on Belgian radio. This news is conveyed to the speaker by a friend who rings from Belgium at 3pm that afternoon catching our Macedonian-born speaker on his mobile phone and playing the broadcast directly into the mouthpiece. That night the speaker can connect to the Internet and see himself on an international news service. And all because a reporter had attended the demonstration, recorded the speeches and SBS interview on a video camera and distributed the footage internationally via the Internet.

The above anecdote was told at "The Ethnic Media in Australia" seminar in August 1998, the second in a series of seminars jointly auspiced by the Victorian University of Technology and the Communications Law Centre (CLC). It could have not set the scene more aptly for the diverse range of issues raised both explicitly, and implicitly, by a consideration of ethnic media, ethnic communities and community media.

In his welcoming remarks, Professor Rob Pascoe noted the appropriateness of the St. Albans campus for such a discussion, its being located in the heart of Melbourne's Maltese community. In her introduction Vic Marles, from the CLC, set out some of the key issues facing the ethnic media including the impact of electronic and digital broadcasting, the need to maintain audiences and the perennial problems of funding. The list expanded considerably as speakers raised a number of fascinating themes both for discussion among those attending and for future debate.

A particular perspective on ethnic media was provided by Wolfgang Mueller, a Melbourne news bureau journalist at SBS, the world's only multicultural radio and television network. SBS is currently exploring the potential that its exclusive access to four-channel programming through digital technology will provide - a degree of diversity beyond that available to commercial broadcasters, and potential which Mueller considers SBS is in a unique position to exploit with its radio and television capacity. He could see the possibility of digital broadcasting leading to a convergence of these two mediums with radio providing an opportunity for low budget television production.

The difficulty of balancing its response to the diverse expectations and demands that the community has of SBS at the same time as

meeting its overriding commitment to provide a world news service was highlighted by Mueller's contribution. Subsequent speakers expanded on this issue and provided an insight into the various circumstances that can influence an individual or community expectation of the media in general, and SBS in particular, in its coverage of local and international events.

Research being undertaken by Professor John Sinclair from VUT required many of those in attendance to rethink and expand their concepts of ethnic media and its functions. Professor Sinclair spoke of the role that the ethnic media plays in the lives of more recent migration groups to Australia, in his case the Chinese community in Melbourne. Other partners in his research project are looking at Vietnamese, Indian and Thai community expectations of the media.

Rather than seeing the migration experience as absolute, a once and for all shift to a new country, an increasing number of migrants maintain a dual existence, as part of a diaspora of wealthy migrants. The relationship of this group to their country of origin is not merely nostalgic but is ongoing; meaning a need for current affairs and news on an almost daily basis, giving rise to what Professor Sinclair describes as "global narrowcasting". This audience will also have a more demanding view and expectation of a world news service which is partly why SBS news does not focus on local stories, according to Mueller. This debate heightened the awareness of those present of the extremely wide range of expectations that are put upon ethnic media.

George Zangalis, broadcaster to the

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## Ethnic media

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Australian-Greek community for more than 20 years and currently president of the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, was able to provide an inter-generational perspective on these issues. He identified the tension between the information needs of migrants at different stages of their migration and settlement experience. Initially, there were high demands for news of home, particularly where migrants had left a tense political situation, one in which they maintained an active and continuing involvement. But after some time their interest may shift to more local matters both relating to their ethnic community and also their interests and activities in local Australian politics.

Danh Duc Tran presented an equally complex picture of Vietnamese media in Australia. His research provided an indication of the competing demands that members of the Vietnamese community had of their magazines and newspapers. These included a diverse coverage of all news, the need to maintain a Vietnamese culture and identity, a desire to receive news both locally and from the homeland and to receive news in their own language.

The perception of Vietnamese readers of the Australian media depended on the position that they had taken in the war in Vietnam and their attitude to the present government. Danh Duc Tran had identified a perception of an inadequate coverage of human rights abuses in Vietnam, a situation attributed to its potential impact on trade between the two countries. In addition, it was expected that the ethnic media would provide information that would assist in integration and establishment in the new country and would also contribute to the building of strong communities in Australia.

His research indicated three stages in the development of editorial

content in magazines and newspapers produced in Australia for the Vietnamese community. Initially, these contained substantial information for new arrivals to settle in Australia. Then there was significant coverage of political news from Vietnam which focused on the resistance to the Communist government. The third, and present stage of content, relates to the need to find a peaceful solution to political unrest in Vietnam.

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The most compelling feature of Danh Duc Tran's research was the continuing engagement in the politics of his homeland. His research has also identified a significant decline in the readership of young people who may get their information through other sources such as the Internet. Access to online news services, able to provide information direct from Vietnam, poses a direct challenge to locally produced newspapers

and magazines.

Discussion among participants focused on the issues of imported content as opposed to local ethnic production and the difference between diversity of ownership and diversity of content. George Zangalis noted that while there is no shortage of avenues for broadcasting, with digital capabilities ensuring even more on the way, there is a dearth of local product in any areas other than community broadcasting. The importing of cultural product displaces local production by Australian Greeks and also denies that group the opportunity to contribute to the diaspora - again emphasising the fact that migrants are not passive recipients of the culture of their homeland but are continually shaping that culture and developing their own Greek culture in Australia.

When the term "community" is used in relation to media this often suggests a form of operating and ownership which is far from the reality and an inappropriate characterisation of the ethnic media. Whereas there may have been strong community ownership of ethnic newspapers in the past, as ethnic communities grow their media tend to exhibit the same features as other sectors of the media, i.e. concentration of ownership in private hands. The number of newspapers in the Greek community, for example, has shrunk from 17 to just three with much stronger emphasis on commercial realities rather than serving the diverse needs of a community. In other words, ethnic media have the same characteristics as so called "mainstream" publications. They are, in fact, just one more component of the mainstream media.

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