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The Media, Cultural Diversity and Identity

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How can we ensure that our mass media speaks in a way that is meaningful to all Australians and gives everyone a ‘fair go’ when it comes to sharing their ideas?

Researchers, media workers, community leaders and ordinary citizens have for decades been pointing out problems in the way in which Australia’s mass media represent, misrepresent or completely fail to represent the identity and experiences of people from Indigenous and many other ethnic or religious groups. Sometimes journalists and other media workers use blunt, obvious stereotypes or racist language. However, the problem usually occurs in a subtle, almost undetectable way. It appears not just in the language that journalists and other media workers use, but in the way that they select which people will be represented in their stories, how they frame the topics they talk about, and the range of ideas and opinions that are discussed.

Community broadcasters have shown considerable innovation in presenting voices, presentation styles and program content that represent a diverse variety of communities. Many people who work with community broadcasting stations later take jobs in the mainstream media, so we might hope that they will introduce incremental improvements to all of Australia’s media.

However, although community broadcasters have great potential to present fresh voices and culturally inclusive content, in reality much of what they put to air closely mimics the style, structure and content of the mainstream media. Although many people move from work with the community media to jobs in the mainstream media, once they do so, they tend to adopt the professional cultures and patterns of their new employers and drop the styles and formats that they previously used in community broadcasting.

So what can be done? I would like to discuss some of the factors that lead to minority communities being under-represented or misrepresented in news and current affairs, even by well intentioned and well trained journalists and media workers. Although I mainly discuss journalism, the issues are relevant to other forms of fiction and non-fiction media.

A Raw Deal for Minorities in the News Media

Studies of Australian journalism have long pointed to the tendency for reporters to collect their news in particular ways that allow them to be as time efficient as possible. The drive for journalists to save time, and therefore money, for their employers affects the way in which people from minority communities are represented in the media.

Much research shows that although journalists can and do access a wide variety of sources, reporters generally spend most of their time collecting news from the centres of political and economic power. This includes the parliaments, police headquarters, courts, stock exchanges and offices of major businesses, where journalists can quickly and easily gather a lot of information about events and issues that fit the journalists' understanding of what is 'newsworthy'. The leaders and spokespeople in these institutions are skilled in suggesting story ideas and articulating their points succinctly, so that journalists can obtain and process the information as quickly as possible before their ever-pressing deadlines.

Problems do arise because Australian journalists generally over-use these types of sources. This creates imbalances in the amount and type of news that journalists produce about Indigenous and ethnic communities, religious minorities, women, people from rural and remote areas, people with disabilities, senior citizens, and young people. This inequality occurs because the bosses and official spokespeople of the big headquarters of politics and business are mainly white, middle-aged men from mainstream social demographics. When journalists over-rely on sources from these political and business institutions, they are unlikely to encounter many if any sources from minority groups or culturally diverse backgrounds.

In short, journalists who use these institutions as their operational base may inadvertently exclude non-white, non-mainstream voices, agendas and perspectives. This may occur despite the journalists' best efforts to be 'objective' in the way that they identify topics of public importance, determine what the facts are, and listen to different sides of the story.

Ironically, these factors also mean that people from minority groups are least likely to be excluded from news about crime. The police headquarters in major cities and towns usually provide journalists with summaries of all the crimes that have occurred in their area, regardless of the gender, ethnic or social background of the victims and those accused of committing the crimes. As a result, some minority groups mainly appear in the news when extremely negative events such as crime, corruption or chaos requires a response from police, who in turn bring the issues and actors to journalists' attention.

Increasing the Social and Cultural Diversity in Media Representations

Australians are increasingly obtaining their information from the Internet and alternative or community media, which operate with different agendas, routines and budgets to the commercial media. This may lead to some improvements in the situation.

Some media organisations are also experimenting with what the Americans have dubbed 'public journalism' or 'civic journalism'. Public journalism is aimed at ensuring that journalists act as mediators who help ordinary members of the community to take part in public debate and community decision-making processes. Some experiments in public journalism have involved big, expensive projects with public forums and similar activities that have attempted to engage ordinary people in exploring major social issues.

Sometimes public journalism has involved very simple community-based activities, such as the media organisation setting up stalls at public events to encourage members of the public to approach journalists to talk about issues affecting their lives. Public journalists may also conduct 'civic mapping'. 'Civic mapping' occurs when journalists identify places where different community groups naturally congregate, such as shopping malls, church and bingo halls, clubs and pubs, and spend time there to gather ordinary people's perspectives on what is important in society.

In *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*, Bruce Itule and Douglas Anderson suggest easy, low-cost strategies for improving journalists' connections with multicultural communities. They advise reporters to:

- do more than just report about annual multicultural festivals. They should also provide consistent, daily coverage about community issues. This involves reporters leaving the city centre, stock exchange, parliament and police headquarters, and going into suburbia to talk with ordinary people.
- acquaint themselves with the people they cover through personal exchanges, links and friendships and not just formal interviews.
- engage in 'mainstreaming', where they use ethnic sources not just for so-called 'ethnic issues' but also for 'mainstream issues' such as economics, business and politics.
- recognise that there is diversity within cultures.
- bring perspectives from their own communities to the newsroom.
- expand their coverage beyond the 'problem people' perspective of minorities.

The concept of 'mainstreaming' sources is particularly important. Are 'ethnic' people only quoted in stories about 'ethnic' issues, or do they appear in a range of stories that explore the community's health, lifestyle, leisure pursuits, economic development, and safety? Both journalists and other media workers alike could easily audit their own stories or programs to count how often they have used minority-group sources and how well they have represented the full social mix of people in their communities.

Mainstreaming should occur in both news and fictional/creative media products. News and current affairs purport to present an objective, factual account of our society, so they obviously help to shape Australians' understandings of our identity. However, Australians may be more influenced by the issues, stories and characters that they see and hear in talkback, music, soap opera, detective, life-style, 'reality', game and other programs that they use for pleasure than for information. For example, do Australian soap operas hire Indigenous actors, ladies in headscarves, or gentlemen with Sikh headdress to portray taxi drivers, school teachers, shopkeepers or other 'mainstream' characters? Or do people from these diverse backgrounds only appear when the soap opera's storyline specifically calls for an 'ethnic' character? The path to ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds are represented in everyday settings and doing everyday things – just like "us", although with their own particular quirks or styles – remains an ongoing challenge.

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