

Communications Policy and Research Forum

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Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes of Multicultural Australia

The *Connecting Diversity* study, commissioned by the Special Broadcasting Service in 2005, was developed to fit the special needs of SBS as Australia's national multicultural broadcaster, contribute to contemporary thinking about cultural diversity and fill an identified gap in existing research. By examining the experiences and views of first-, second- and third-generation Australians aged from 16 to 40, the study uncovered a series of paradoxes in Australia's thinking about itself as a nation. Appreciating these assists SBS to fulfill its Charter, the principal function of which is to "provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians, and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society."

For a broadcaster dedicated to reflecting multicultural society, research which informs its thinking about contemporary Australian diversity helps it stay relevant and responsive to Australian audiences and society. The SBS 2004-2006 Corporate Plan, encouraged SBS to commit resources in order to "Increase our understanding of Australia's cultural diversity, our audiences and the role of SBS". Relevant research is a key component of this objective.

The first research study of this type to be commissioned by SBS was *Living Diversity: Australia's Multicultural Future*, which was published in 2002. Based on a national telephone survey of 3,400 respondents, this study gathered data about attitudes to multiculturalism, Australian life and sought out common experiences and differences within and between a range of cultural groups (Somali, Vietnamese, Filipino, Greek and Indigenous Australians) and a national sample. The unique methodology and approach, based on collaboration between SBS and independent researchers, developed a report which has been used internally to inform programming and has had significant external impact, including incorporation into public policy at the Commonwealth level.

Some of the key findings and concepts to emerge from the first study '*Living Diversity: Australia's Multicultural Future*' included:

- The idea that multiculturalism is 'unfinished business' in Australia;

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- The significant changes to 'mainstream' Australia in which most people identify with difference and the lived experience of 'everyday cosmopolitanism';
- The generally positive attitudes to diversity, including support for reconciliation, support for immigration and 'qualified support' of multiculturalism;
- The similarities in attitudes on these issues between rural and urban respondents;
- The internal diversity of 'cultural communities' in Australia, especially the differences created by generational change;
- The complex relationships of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians to identity and self-identification, including an experience of diversity within diversity and 'hybrid lives'.

SBS identified that there was significant potential to further investigate some of these key findings. The second study was to be qualitative to give richer contextual information to these findings and explore why the trends identified in *Living Diversity* have developed in Australia. In general, internal discussions indicated that the study should:

- Sit between a study of cultural practices and media use;
- Include groups 'missed out' in conventional research;
- Be usefully applicable to SBS practices.

A strong theme which came out of initial discussions was an interest in knowing more about younger audiences and the way they engage with media and other cultural influences in a changing media environment. The study was not intended to be inward-looking or brand focused. Rather, it was developed to improve SBS's understanding of the changing nature of cultural diversity and media use in Australia and to track trends in Australia's multicultural society.

The Research Team contracted for the Project comprised:

- Professor Ien Ang and Dr Greg Noble of the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney;
- Associate Professor Jeffrey Brand of the Centre for New Media Research and Education at Bond University; and
- Dr Jason Sternberg of the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology.

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The research team determined to use focus group methodology with a very tight recruitment design in locations it determined would avoid stigmatised communities, but reflect locales featuring complex cultural mixing. Market research companies were approached for the delivery of the focus groups recruited to the very tight recruitment brief in various selected locations in Sydney, Brisbane and regional Western Australia.

Findings

Connecting Diversity revealed that many younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds are comfortable with Australia's diversity yet still experience racism, and may express prejudices themselves.

Overall, the participants in this study described an 'interactive' cultural diversity in which friendships, working relationships and connections with those from other cultural backgrounds promote better understanding. Younger generations of Australians appear to be much more comfortable with cultural difference and complexity than previous generations.

The study, however, finds a series of paradoxes concerning their views about multiculturalism and the media:

- There is support for multiculturalism, but there is also concern about a perceived failure by some 'groups', often located 'elsewhere', to adapt or adjust to the Australian way of life;
- Many have experienced racism, but some admit to holding racist views themselves;
- Younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds feel Australian and part of mainstream society, but many complain that others don't recognise them as fellow Australians;
- Many are intolerant of migrant communities speaking their language in public, even when they themselves speak a language other than English in their homes;
- They are highly critical of media's representations of cultural groups as 'problems' and 'threats', but often use similar stereotypes when discussing 'other' cultural groups;

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- They view most media highly critically, yet have a ‘dysfunctional dependence’ on it for information about the world; and
- Their cynicism about news media springs, not from apathy, but from the failure of mainstream news and current affairs’ to live up to journalistic values.

In addition, the study drew out the following themes:

Multiculturalism defines Australia

Multiculturalism is seen as a defining characteristic of Australian society and most feel a strong affinity towards it. There's a feeling that it's maturing, and despite instances of intercultural and inter-racial tension, the focus groups agreed that Australia is more accepting of cultural diversity than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Diversity is seen as both ‘good’ and ‘bad’

One of the most striking paradoxes is that diversity is seen as both good and bad, and that there are clear limits to what people believe are acceptable levels of difference. Difference that leads to separateness and disconnection with society is generally not tolerated, and there is little sympathy for groups that are seen to keep themselves apart. Many participants valued multiculturalism for what it teaches Australians about each other; greater interaction produces understanding of other cultures and better opportunities to form connections.

Most Australians live with ‘practical tolerance’

Participants told stories of discrimination, prejudice and intolerance; from mild forms of name-calling to severe forms of bigotry. However, this intolerance was not confined to ‘white’ or ‘Anglo’ Australians but crossed other cultures as well. Overall, the study found that younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds manage the complexities of multicultural Australia through ‘practical tolerance’, a pragmatic approach to everyday experiences that enables them to negotiate prejudices and enjoy the benefits of diversity.

Criticism of media stereotyping

Younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds are seeking ‘connection’ through personal relationships and media. Although the majority are highly critical of mainstream media, particularly the stereotyping, negativity and exploitation of

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prejudices, they remained convinced of the importance of news and current affairs and sought 'connection' through new media.

Younger people are looking for media they can use

Respondents in this study expressed deep frustration with 'depressing', one-way traditional media that reflected set agendas or commercial interests in the presentation of information and coverage of events. Many younger Australians viewed media critically, occasionally with outright hostility, yet still relied on it for information and as a means to identify issues of importance. The younger the respondents, the more likely they were to engage with newer interactive technologies, and there was a strong sense of loyalty to these platforms.

Younger Australians are hungry for citizenship

Far from being apathetic, they are hungry for citizenship and are eager to participate in public life and to engage with democracy. However, they report that media fail to empower them to make change on important issues. In this way, although they feel more capable of filtering information than previous generations, they don't feel more empowered. New media become their alternative tool not only as a feedback loop, but as a place for creation of new content. Yet they recognise the extant power of mainstream media and the infancy of newer media. Younger Australians report a desire for the media to serve a more educative, "how-to" function to facilitate audience engagement and citizenship.

Central to all these considerations is the idea of 'citizen audiences'. Participants in this study were not only passive consumers of media, but in fact active critics of media and sometimes creators of content they had published online. Good information, transparent analysis, interpersonal connection and open debate are all empowering and are the foundations of cultural democracy. Many younger Australians are frustrated, and subsequently cynical, because media are perceived as failing to deliver these resources. Where they have the social, cultural and educational means, participants in this research sought alternative media experiences and connections.

The citizen audience construct begs clarification. It would be an over-generalisation of the findings to conclude that Australian audiences are politically and socially active either in, or in response to, the media they consume. However, the younger group in

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this study were using more media overall and the additional media they used (compared with the older group) tended to be newer, multichannel and two-way communication tools. Herbert Blumer's (1946) conceptualisation of collective groupings entertained the distinction between crowds, publics and masses. The fundamental difference between the public and the mass is that the public is both motivated by an issue that confronts it and engages in discussion about the issue whereas the mass is neither identifiable in its response to an issue nor in any way engaged in any communicative activity about the issue.

Citizens are members of the state who have rights and privileges (whether or not they are exercised through active participation, construction, use, or response). The rights are assumed and the privileges sought. In this way, citizens are as likely to act selfishly as altruistically. Most citizens are media consumers or "audiences" but not all audience members are citizens. The distinction is important. An audience member who is inclined to participate in feedback loops or, indeed, content creation even if rarely, is likely a more motivated member of the audience. To the extent that more young audiences are inclined to a) attend to an issue and b) act in response to that issue by blogging or sending an SMS to a group of family, friends or colleagues, we can argue they are progressively more representative of the "citizen audience." Associated concepts include citizen journalism, citizen media, cybercitizens, the empowered audience, the citizen critic, and the user-community.

The implication of this conceptualisation and the finding that culturally diverse younger Australians show a capacity to participate, and to seek content that both engages them and provides opportunities for connection is that broadcasters must operate in more complex ways.

Limitations of this Research

Qualitative research of this nature cannot be generalised with ease. The sample was drawn according to deliberately constructed parameters to deliver diversity in groups. The findings were not generated on the basis of standardised measures or response options and therefore cannot be said to be true for all Australians who are between the ages of 16 and 40 from those communities in which the data were drawn. Moreover, and most importantly, not every nuance that might have been a "finding" in this research was observed, recorded or reported.

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Strengths of this Research

Despite these limitations, this project features a number of remarkable strengths. Among them, it presents rich qualitative data from a diverse collection of younger Australians from diverse locations in Australia. The research distills complex and often contradictory experiences with multiculturalism into a unified set of paradoxes that are manifestly clear in terms of both meanings and solutions. It expands research in this area, including the more generalisable quantitative research that preceded this project, *Living Diversity* (2002). The research compels broadcasters and policy officials to connect with audiences in a way that allows them to engage with contemporary issues. And in all these ways this research is rich for public policy deliberations.

Summary

Connecting Diversity reveals that younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds are comfortable with Australia's diversity. Nevertheless, they continue to experience racism and may express prejudices themselves. Their media are a critical source not only of meaning creation, but also of active engagement in their complex experiences as Australians. The research extends the picture of Australian multiculturalism and adds substance to the existing research AND the opportunity to practice pluralistic multicultural ideals for Australian media organisations.

Challenges and Opportunities

Connecting Diversity has told SBS some new and challenging things about the way multiculturalism is shifting in Australia. We have moved on from the origins of multicultural policy in 1970s Australia and today's younger Australians face new tensions but greater contact, improved cultural competence but more cynicism than in previous generations. Some of these shifts were known, anecdotally and through experience, by the program makers at SBS, however the research has provided us with new rich data about these trends and has set up some challenges and opportunities in developing relevant content and services.

The research highlights some important opportunities for the developing role of public broadcasters in the changing media environment in relation to public value, audience

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engagement and nation-building. In amidst the cynicism, there is the emerging citizen audience. Quite prepared to seek alternative views, new forums for individual expression and connection or to simply disconnect from certain forms of media, the emergent audience is seeking new ways to engage through media. As *Connecting Diversity* notes, they are seeking connection through media and through personal relationships and are searching for better, more trustworthy tools with which to influence the world around them.

Greater media literacy allows for more targeted criticism of media which are seen as irrelevant and biased, or guided by assumed 'hidden' agendas. New media platforms are providing significant forms of engagement for younger audiences and media organizations are attempting to find new ways to talk *with* audiences, rather than *to* them.

The findings of this study challenge us to think more deeply about the connections and divisions in Australian society and raise the following calls to action:

- Discussion about Australian diversity needs to move beyond attacking or defending multiculturalism.
- Work still needs to be done to advance the 'unfinished business' of multiculturalism.
- Media and national debates need to reflect the intercultural exchange which underlies 'everyday cosmopolitanism'.

The challenges for media organizations set out in the report are to find ways to:

- Tell stories in a way that embraces cultural complexity and allows audiences to learn more about one another;
- Offer a greater diversity of sources, including voices of 'real people', in public discussions;
- Encourage connections through media that are individual and interpersonal;
- Emphasise a commitment to objective, accurate and impartial information delivery.

SBS has communicated these ideas in various ways to ensure the new thinking becomes part of its knowledge base and framework for understanding the challenges facing a contemporary multicultural public broadcaster. These have included: a televised forum and debate on the issues; distribution of the report to stakeholders;

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presentations at national and international conferences and forums; and staff training and information sessions. SBS's commissioning arm SBSi is using the report to describe to independent producers the kinds of complexities SBS is seeking in representations of cultural diversity.

SBS, with part of the research team, recently ran a *Connecting Diversity* workshop for commissioning editors, programmers, radio program managers and digital content developers to test out possible programming applications of the new thinking. Thirty participants spent two hours together in which they were presented with the methodology and major findings of the *Connecting Diversity* project and then asked to create new hypothetical program ideas based on the research. The sketched multiplatform program options included programs aimed to:

- Deepen understanding of diversity, particularly to reveal complexities that are often glossed over in popular media.
- Demonstrate the realities of cultural diversity as lived experiences to change the public perception of artificiality.
- Encapsulate the paradoxes of contemporary society with an appreciation of the audience's cultural competence and ability to appreciate these apparent contradictions.
- Use satire and parody of existing formats to find new ways of engaging with audiences.
- Create ways of engaging with political processes that are credible, immediate and accessible.

As the report notes, more work needs to be done to deliver credible and relevant media for the culturally complex society Australia has become. Effective cultural democracy requires genuine opportunities for participation. It also requires rethinking simplistic assumptions about cultural difference in Australia.

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