

Lack of Equal Representation in the Australian Television Media

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An increasing number of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have made their mark in the Australian print media. But not on television. This article explores this absence in greater detail.

The Diversity Challenge

When I was studying a Diploma of Journalism at a Sydney college almost 20 years ago, my television lecturer who was also a producer with one of the commercial television networks said to me: "You will make an excellent TV reporter – when you return to your home country." This unsolicited remark aptly captures the attitudes towards people of diverse backgrounds of both people in the television media industry and the mainstream audience. He did not see a future for me in the industry. Sadly, little has changed in the intervening two decades.

'Whitewash on the Box'

People from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds continue to be grossly under-represented in the Australian media, particularly television, even though in 2020 [almost 30 per cent of the Australian population were born overseas](#). This includes more than 720,000 people of Indian descent, 650,000 of Chinese descent, and hundreds of thousands of others from a range of countries including the Philippines, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

An increasing number of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have made their mark in the print media. Radio networks have worked around the issue by giving daily or weekly slots to ethnic broadcasters in different languages. The lack of diversity is most clearly evident in the television media which, by its very nature, is more visible to audiences than any of the other mediums.

Most television audiences would be hard pressed to name five CALD presenters or regular show hosts. With a few exceptions – Waleed Aly of Network Ten's *The Project* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) David Chau and Jeremy Fernandez – there are no CALD people who would be considered as household names. Only the SBS has a fair representation of CALD presenters and reporters, but the ABC and the

three commercial networks only have a tokenistic presence of CALD people. The result is that Australian television does not even remotely reflect the composition of our multicultural and diverse society.

A 2020 Deakin University report titled 'Who gets to tell Australian stories' by journalism senior lecturer Dr Usha M Rodrigues found more than 75 per cent of presenters, commentators and reporters on television programs monitored over a two-week period were of Anglo-Celtic background, while there were 9.3 per cent of non-European and 2.1 per cent of Indigenous background. The report found despite Australians of non-European and Indigenous backgrounds making up 24 per cent of the Australian population, they appeared on television news screens for only 6 per cent of the time.

The lack of diversity was also reflected in the coverage of television programs monitored for the report over a two-week period in June 2019. Less than 4 per cent of all news and current affairs stories broadcast by 81 programs were about multicultural Australia.

Barriers to Equal CALD Representation

So what are the barriers to equal racial representation in the Australian television media? The answer lies partly in the broader Australian attitudes to race. While the majority of Australians are welcoming and inclusive, a significant minority harbours racist attitudes. According to [a 2014 report by the Australian Human Rights Commission](#) (AHRC), titled *Face the Facts: Cultural Diversity*, around 10 per cent of Australians (1.5 million of the country's adult population) believe that some races are superior to others.

18 per cent of Australians surveyed by the AHRC said they had experienced discrimination because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. Of the 500 complaints lodged under the Racial Discrimination Act in 2012-2013, 192 related to incidents of racial hatred. The coronavirus pandemic and its likely origin in China has only made matters worse. A [2020 study by the Australian National University](#) found 84.5 per cent of Asian Australians reported at least one instance of discrimination between January and October last year. The Australian Government has also faced [accusations of racism](#) over its recent decision to ban flights from India due to the spiralling coronavirus crisis there. Commentators noted that the government did not take similar action against the US, UK or European countries when COVID-19 case numbers there were skyrocketing.

Another barrier that CALD people face, particularly new and first-generation migrants, is mastering the Australian accent. Even the few CALD people who are part of the television media sound 'Australian'. Anecdotally, the thinking among television bosses is that native Australians would find it difficult to understand foreign accents and would prefer to hear their news and current affairs in a familiar accent. Comedians on television often mimic and mock other accents, for example Indian (as an aside: there are many different Indian accents). It can therefore be argued that who gets to tell Australia's stories reflects broader mainstream attitudes to race.

What Needs to Change

In an [article in The Conversation](#), the Deakin University report's author, Dr Rodrigues, recommends systematic collection of diversity data, establishing cultural diversity targets, and prioritising diversity in the recruitment and promotion of newsroom staff. She also discusses the commercial incentive for networks to better connect with and reflect their increasingly diverse audience. In this regard, it must be said that advertising on the commercial television networks and pay television channels has at last started to reflect Australia's diversity. CALD people are increasingly being featured in many product advertisements. This may be because it makes commercial sense that to entice CALD people to buy goods and services, people like them should be plugging them.

Dr Rodrigues also asserts there must be greater diversity among Australian television networks' decision-makers like senior executives and the boards, which currently are completely lacking in diversity representation.

The lack of diversity in our television media leaves our society poorer for excluding the rich cultures and experiences of CALD people. To draw parallels with the changes in Australian culinary habits over the past half century or so, Asian and sub-continental cuisines have spiced up our kitchens and our palettes. A similar transformation in CALD television representation would similarly enhance our lives. Let's hope it doesn't take half a century!

The author has worked as a journalist in Australia, Papua New Guinea and India.