

Evaluating Impact

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As we all well know by now, there are many ways to approach “Making a Difference in the Multi-Platform World”. I will be telling the story of how public service broadcasters like the Special Broadcasting Service, Australia’s multilingual and multicultural broadcaster, have made, and may continue to make a difference in terms of cultural impact and a broader social role. This is, of course, one of the hardest things to evaluate, but I will be talking about some tangible and obvious impacts in relation to cultural diversity and audiences. In a multi-platform world, more choice does not necessarily translate as a genuine plurality of voices. Democracy is a word we have heard a lot over the last few days – appropriate in the context of India, the world’s largest democracy. This short paper will explore ideas about **cultural democracy** in relation to citizenship and audiences for public service broadcasting.

Many of the ideas outlined in this paper are being explored in much greater detail for a collaborative research project between SBS and two Australian universities, University of New South Wales and University of Western Sydney, entitled: *The Special Broadcasting Service and Australian Cultural Democracy: Evolution, Uses and Innovation*. to be published in 2007. I am indebted to the authors of this work, Professors Gay Hawkins and Ien Ang, for many of the ideas I will only have time to touch on in this paper.

This conference has shown us the tremendous diversity of nations within the Commonwealth. I’m going to focus on a model explicitly aimed at reflecting the internal

diversity of one nation. First I will give a brief overview of the SBS model for those who are not familiar with us.

SBS was set up as Australia's second public broadcaster (the first is the ABC) in 1975; it was the product of a transformative political moment in Australia. It started with modest multilingual radio services and grew, five years later, to incorporate a national television network and, later still, online services and digital channels. It is often described as the most tangible product of Australian multicultural policy.

That said, SBS operates independently of Government and is accountable to the public and the Parliament rather than any Government or Minister. SBS has enjoyed bi-partisan support since its inception and has developed a mixed funding model – part Government, part commercial funding – to extend our services further since incorporation in 1991. We are a relatively small broadcaster but we are one of the best loved brands in Australia.

The creation of SBS was based on the recognition that the development of an inclusive society cannot be a passive project. The principal function of SBS' Charter 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'*. This Charter is particularly remarkable when considered in light of the history of Australia in relation to cultural difference. One of the first Acts of Australian federation in 1901 was the White Australia Policy, which sought to control immigration to Australia on explicitly racial terms, and indeed, the campaigns to promote British immigration in the 1930s and 1940s described Australia as "more British than Britain".

This practice gave way to large waves of post-war non-British European migration. The

new migrants in this period were expected to 'assimilate' into Australian cultural life by leaving behind their language, cultural connection and histories in starting a new life in Australia.

The multicultural policies which emerged in the 1970s were based on the understanding that assimilation and integration policies were unworkable because the cultural identification, communities and language groups of 'New Australians', inevitably, did not vanish with time. With the important exception of the Indigenous first nations, Australia is a nation of migrants from all parts of the world. The new multiculturalism aimed at recognising, encompassing and celebrating cultural difference. Hence the need for 'Special' broadcasting services to promote this vision.

SBS' role was to provide platforms for voices that would otherwise remain unheard in Australian media, recognising that a truly democratic media landscape could not assume equal access amongst its contributors or audiences. It is important to note that from the outset the SBS audience was conceived as being *all Australians*. SBS understood the definition of this audience and their interests very differently from the way they had been traditionally perceived. SBS Radio's 68 different language programs make SBS the most multilingual broadcaster in the world. SBS also broadcasts via Television to a national audience that is conceived as far more cosmopolitan and open to the world than previously imagined.

SBS created access to a whole range of international content that was previously not known to Australian audiences. It brought content that may have been familiar to particular communities within the rapidly diversifying Australia – such as *telenovellas* from Latin

America, Iranian film, *The World Game* football and the Eurovision song contest – and made them accessible, not just to those communities, but to the broader public.

SBS TV broadcasts around 52% of its content in languages other than English. The language or cultural content is not tied to the population of any particular community. SBS TV programmers understand that Hong Kong cinema, Japanese *anime* and French documentaries have broader appeal than just to those language speakers. Multilingual TV content is mostly made accessible by subtitling into English, a form of linguistic and cultural translation that maintains the integrity and linguistic authenticity of the program's original form and makes it accessible for a broader audience.

Subtitling was chosen over dubbing at SBS for pragmatic as well as idealistic reasons: it's much cheaper and our resources have always been limited. However, it has had a significant impact on Australian audiences. The SBS commissioned *Living Diversity: Australia's Multicultural Future* report, published in 2002, found that 64% of Australians watched subtitled films, and most of them watched these on SBS. SBS' creative, cross-cultural programming has had impact on Australian audiences in many tangible ways, often creating cult followings and new audiences where none had previously existed. SBS Radio serves the interests of the many language communities in Australia with international and local news and relevant cultural content.

We now, of course, have competition from other in-language community Radio and Pay TV, online international news and World movies channels in the fragmenting media landscape. However, the identification with credibility and quality and the sense of ownership audiences have of SBS as a public broadcaster continue to provide a positive brand identification that set us apart.

For culturally and linguistically diverse Australians accessing culturally relevant services on a national public broadcaster, there is a 'politics of recognition' that assists and encourages participation in public life. To have access to national TV and radio services that broadcast in your first language – be it Amharic, Vietnamese, Italian or Persian Farsi – is affirming of your place in the nation. It also creates new points of entry into Australian public life to groups that may otherwise be isolated due to language barriers.

It is this contribution to cultural democracy that is one of the greatest impacts of SBS. It helps us conceive of and describe our national identity in new ways. Our vision statement is '*Communicating Australia's Living Diversity*'. Finding new ways of doing this with Australian content within budgetary restrictions is central to SBS' current strategies.

With a commitment to increasing the amount of local content it produces and broadcasts, SBS TV screens documentary, drama and entertainment content created in Australia through co-production models which have become essential to the Australian film and television industry. Difficult though it is to measure and quantify, our research tells us that audiences engage more with SBS content than with programming on other networks.

When asked to recall the names, content and story narratives of particular programs, audiences are more readily able to list these for SBS programming than for other types of content. While other networks may rate higher, SBS audiences have a different kind of connection in their media use. It is this qualitative engagement that helps us to deliver on our Charter in meaningful ways.

We have seen the impact of SBS on Australian national self definition through its work in addressing Australian citizen audiences differently, but we cannot afford to be complacent

about this. Recent tensions in Australian society, including the 'riots' in Sydney last December, have challenged many platitudes about social harmony in contemporary multiculturalism.

A recent study commissioned by SBS turned up a series of surprising findings. The research, soon to be published in a report entitled *Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes in Multicultural Australia*[\[c1\]](#) , tells us that younger generations of Australians are practicing an 'interactive' cultural diversity that is much more comfortable with cultural difference and complexity than previous generations. One of the paradoxes found in the study was that, while prejudices and stereotypes still exist in Australian society, they exist alongside support for multiculturalism, and are managed with 'practical tolerance'.

Younger people are now highly critical about media content, and news and current affairs in particular, yet they are seeking more connection through media. While they are used to filtering information and using a range of different media platforms, there is often disillusionment with the commercial interests and agendas that they see as undermining the quality of information in many sources. Frustration with one-way delivery of information has led to a 'switch off' from traditional media. Younger audiences, far from being apathetic, are hungry for citizenship.

This is where public broadcasters can continue to have an impact. We must find ways of translating credible content produced in the public interest into new media forms which facilitate engagement. We need to find new ways of communicating with audiences that enhance their sense of democratic engagement and which provide platforms for the plurality of voices required for effective contemporary cultural democracy.

[\[c1\]](#)len, in her latest comments on the draft report.