

# Transnational News and Multicultural Australia



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## **Transnational News and Multicultural Australia Project: Cultural Diversity and News in Australia**

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# Transnational News and Multicultural Australia

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# Acknowledgments

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The project team would like to express their appreciation and sincere thanks to hundreds of participants in the audience survey and the conference for their time and energy they lent to this important project on the significant role the media has in social cohesion in society.

We extend our gratitude to the media practitioners, keynote speakers, panellists, scholars, policy makers from the state government and various Victorian councils for their generous contributions in terms of articulating issues and suggesting strategies to further a dialogue in this critical shift in the public sphere in Australia.

Dr Usha M. Rodrigues

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## 1. Executive Summary

The impact of media and public discourse, including on new media platforms, is one of the priority themes of the *Victorian Social Cohesion and Community Resilience Ministerial Taskforce*. The proposed project aligned with the Taskforce's research priority on "community polarisation and marginalisation", wherein the project examined the media's role (both traditional news media and non-traditional/new media such as social media platforms/apps) in disseminating news and information about transnational events and multicultural issues in Victoria. For example, following the November 2015 Paris attacks, the media's coverage of the news event and the Australian community's reaction to the event – irrespective of its positive or negative nature – caused unease among Australian migrants, particularly those following the Muslim faith, as they felt they were put under the spotlight by the media.

The primary aim of this project was to investigate the nature, and consumption, of news, information, and audience reaction to news available on various media platforms/sources, with a focus on cultural diversity in Australia. We also sought to ascertain the reasons for audience preference for specific media sources for news by undertaking a content analysis of news and information available in the mainstream media and on new/social media platforms. In the process, we facilitated a dialogue between the media, the policy makers, representatives of various communities and scholars by holding an inaugural conference on "Cultural Diversity and News in Australia". The outcomes of these three broad activities, which formed part of the project, are summarised below.

### **The Audience Study<sup>1</sup>:**

Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds are more likely to rely on social media and other internet sources, rather than traditional media, for their news and information. Our audience research shows that Australians born overseas have a keen interest in local, national and international news, similar to those born in Australia. However, they turn to non-traditional media more often to consume news of interest. Our comparative audience study sheds light on the differences between the news consumption habits of Australians born in Australia, and those born overseas but living in Australia.

In the study, we distributed an online survey to 216 Australians in September 2015, with 68.5% identifying themselves as born in Australia. In the second phase, we distributed the same survey to 221 Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds in June 2016, 73% of whom noted they were born overseas. The age distribution of participants in both surveys was similar, with a slightly higher proportion of younger people in both groups.

Our study concurred with international research that news consumers in more developed nations have "distributed" or diversified sources of news for a variety of reasons, including access to new media. Our comparative audiences study shows that Australians born overseas were more active online when consuming news than those born here, and as a result had further "enhanced distributed" sources of news than respondents in the first survey, who were predominantly born in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> The audience study findings have been published as an academic journal article and as news articles. See, Rodrigues, Usha M. and Paradies, Yin (2017) 'News Consumption Habits of Culturally Diverse Australians in the Digital Era: Implications for Intercultural Relations', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2017.1411289>. Also, Rodrigues, Usha (2017) 'Australians born overseas prefer the online world for their news', *The Conversation*, November 8. <https://theconversation.com/australians-born-overseas-prefer-the-online-world-for-their-news-84355>.

Respondents in the second survey relied less on television (29% versus 42%) as their “main source of news”. Higher numbers of Australians born overseas considered social media networking sites (18% versus 12%) and radio (16% versus 8%) as their “main sources of news”. Similarly, respondents born overseas visited an online news site more often (65% versus 48%); and searched through a news aggregator such as Google News more often (34% versus 23%). They also searched for a specific news topic via a search engine more often (72% versus 47%); and they were referred to a news story more often by a social media contact (53% versus 35%).

This is significant considering that the 2016 census showed that more than one in four of Australians was born overseas (ABS.gov.au 2017a). The census also pointed out that an increasing number of Australian citizens were born in Asian countries and other parts of the world, whereas in the past most migrants came from Europe. The changing demography of Australia means that a typical recent migrant in Victoria was born in India, while a typical migrant in New South Wales was born in China (ABS.gov.au 2017b). Considering this demographic shift, our research raises questions about the kinds of news stories covered by the mainstream media in Australia.

For example, our study shows that nearly twice as many respondents in the second survey (40% versus 21%) used social media to gain news about international events. Similarly, a significant number of Australians born overseas sought international news on Australian online sites (80%), compared with those in the first survey (50%).

The study has implications for traditional Australian news media (print, radio and television) in the digital era, where the industry’s outlook remains one of “struggle and constraint” from declining revenue and competition from global online media and subscription video-on-demand services. Our study shows that audiences are aware that news available on social networking sites can be of lower quality. However, Australians born overseas trust social media slightly more than those in the first survey, which predominately included Australians born in Australia. However, about a fifth (19%) of 437 participants in the combined surveys results did not trust any media source.

The reliance on social media is alarming because news and information distributed via social networking sites may not be filtered by experienced and skilled journalists, potentially leading to the sharing and consumption of unverified information. Meanwhile, research (Schemer 2014; Saleem et al 2015; Shaver et al 2017) has shown that skewed coverage of transnational news events and issues creates stereotypes and causes anxiety amongst communities. The distributed sources of news isolates various sections of the Australian community into silos. This in turn results in fragmentation of news audiences and decentralisation of news production by a variety of producers, both of which have an impact on a community’s common understanding of shared events. We argue that by catering to the needs of the increasingly multicultural audiences in Australia and providing more depth to their coverage of transnational news, events and issues, the mainstream media may be able to increase their relevance as a source of news to a broader range of Australians.

### **The Media Content Analyses:**

Our preliminary findings from the content analysis of news coverage in the mainstream media show that some controversial news stories, such as Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and a discussion of Islam as a religion, receive extensive coverage in particular media outlets. Australian audiences from culturally diverse backgrounds may well see the coverage of these issues to be “negative” for a lack of a variety of sources quoted in these stories.



Although our sample of 1366 stories on selected controversial topics such as 18C, Islamophobia, the U.S. President Trump's refugee ban, youth crime, the London terror attack in March and the Bourke street attack, included 80% of news stories reporting events and issues of the day, only about 28% of them included information from non-government or independent or expert sources, relying mostly on the reporter's own observations and government sources. We engaged two research assistants – one born in Australia and one born overseas from a culturally diverse background – and asked them to read the news stories and nominate their emotions when reading the information provided in these news stories. Surprisingly, the news stories when read from a journalist's point of view were predominantly neutral, only 13.5% could be considered negative in tenor. However, when read from the point of view of someone from a culturally diverse background, over 35% of the stories seem to evoke negative emotions because of a lack of balance in the information included in the stories and sources quoted in the story.

Similarly, the ambience created by the conversations on social media platforms when certain hashtags such as #refugees and #humanrights started to trend on Twitter – following a series of articles on 18C and Pauline Hanson wearing a burqa in the Federal parliament – may also cause anxiety among some Australians. It is a matter of perception how audiences may see a news story covered by a media outlet, but in the absence of positive news stories covered by the mainstream media and overall tenor of the conversations on social media being 'negative' in relation to the linking of Islam and terrorism, audience perception that the media in general is negative towards certain multicultural groups seems justified.



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### **Interviews and Beginning of a Dialogue between Stakeholders:**

The project included in-depth interviews with audiences and some of the stakeholders including community and media leaders. Despite repeated calls for participation, interviewees from Anglo-Australian backgrounds were difficult to recruit. The in-depth interviews concurred with the research outcomes of the audience survey and the content analysis, where audiences used multiple sources of news for their needs. They also shun the mainstream commercial media outlets because of their "bias" in covering news events and issues of contemporary Australia, instead relying on new online sources such as global media, blogs or their own social networks to get their in-depth news. These interviewees continued to have trust in the Australian public service broadcasters.

As promised in the research grant application, we organised a symposium/conference where various stakeholders include the mainstream media, community representatives, scholars and government officials were invited to deliberate on the issue of “Cultural Diversity and News in Australia” on September 13, 2017, at Deakin Downtown.

More than 100 participants attended the inaugural conference, including keynote speakers Emeritus Professor Gillian Triggs, former President of the Australian Human Right Commission, and Tracey Spicer, journalist and co-founder of Women in Media. Also present were the heads of news at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Special Broadcasting Service, *The New York Times* Australian Bureau and BuzzFeed; current and former editors of newspapers owned by Fairfax and News Ltd; scholars from Monash, Swinburne, RMIT, Deakin, Sydney and South Australian universities; community leaders from ECCV, Australian Intercultural Society and Victoria Police; and state government and Victorian council representatives.



Photograph by Simon Fox Deakin University

The enthusiasm among participants and the success of the conference is a testimony to the heightened awareness among Australian communities and the media, of a need to change how the media represents Australia. The participating community, media, and academic leaders outlined their concerns and raised matters with the way media covers (and at times ignores) news events and issues pertaining to the culturally diverse population in Australia. A lack of diversity in the newsroom among journalists covering news in Australia was also highlighted by the newly formed Media Diversity Australia founders and other journalists. Some of these observations are outlined in the report. The project team will endeavour to continue to facilitate a dialogue between all the stakeholders to enhance the media’s role in reflecting cultural diversity in contemporary Australia by convening a biennial conference on “Cultural Diversity and News in Australia”.

## Future Considerations and Strategies

### **Future Considerations & Strategies**

If part of the media's role is to reflect the society in which it functions, then it should reflect the cultural diversity of Australia in 2017. In this context, acknowledging several initiatives already underway at the government and community levels and in the media industry to improve representation of cultural diversity, we outline some of our recommendations in terms of an agenda for the future based on our findings and conversations with stakeholders.

- The government to take a leadership role in demonstrating their commitment to cultural diversity, by working with the Australian media to formulate and implement **regulatory guidelines** such as codes of practice to ensure cultural diversity in all media content – news, advertising and entertainment programs.
- Resource allocation for research to map and measure diversity in the media industry's workforce and management in all sectors – public, private and community media. It may be noted that some of the global media companies already have an in-house quota system to improve cultural diversity in their newsrooms.
- Increased resource allocation to facilitate and improve cultural diversity in the media industry by **funding scholarships and internships for journalism students from culturally diverse backgrounds**. We note, that the public service broadcasters continue to lead in this space, but more needs to be done, particularly in the commercial media organisations.
- Resource allocation to ethnic communities to participate in **media training programs**, with special emphasis on women from culturally diverse background to be co-opted in telling their own stories – both negative and positive.
- Facilitating **interactive workshops between ethnic communities and journalists** to learn about each other's needs: (i) increasing awareness among journalists about traditions and norms of various cultures, so that relevant news stories can be highlights and covered by the media; and (ii) increasing awareness among ethnic communities about news production processes.
- As we have noted in our research, social media platforms have become a significant part of contemporary media ecology. On the one hand, social media provides opportunities for audiences to share news stories of interest and express their views about current events and issues. On the other hand, social media gives an opportunity to some social players to troll others with opposite views; and it has given rise to the circulation of "fake news". We propose that the government fund and/or partner with ethnic groups such as ECCV and AIS; education providers (TAFE, universities and other organisations with social enterprise agenda); and organisations such as Our Watch and Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, to convene **media training programs for ethnic communities, particularly women and the older generation, on how to navigate social media**.
- Last but not the least, we recommend training workshops on cultural diversity for journalists working in the newsrooms at present, and for future journalists, by incorporating teaching curriculum on cultural diversity in university courses.

[Appendix:](#)

**The Cultural Diversity and News in Australia conference program**

9am–	<b>Inauguration:</b> Professor Brenda Cherednichenko, Executive Dean Arts & Education, Deakin University
9.15am–	<b>Keynote 1:</b> Professor Gillian Triggs
10am–	<b>Discussion Panel: <i>Setting the Scene</i></b> Chair: Prof Karen Farquharson, Swinburne University of Technology  Panellists: Gaven Morris, Director of News, ABC; Jim Carroll, Director – News & Current Affairs, SBS; Damien Cave, Australian Bureau Chief, The New York Times; Ahmet Keskin, Executive Director, Australian Intercultural Society; Prof Andrew Markus, Pratt Foundation Research Professor of Jewish Civilisation, Monash University; Charles Allen, Superintendent, Priority Communities Div., Victoria Police; Anna Parle, Director, Community Resilience and Social Inclusion, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria State Government.
11.45am–	<b>Research Panel: <i>Women, Media and Culture</i></b> Chair: Antoinette Lattouf, Co-Founder, Media Diversity Australia, and Senior Reporter, ABC Keynote: Tracey Spicer, Journalist and Co-founder of Women in Media Papers: Mary Barry, Chief Executive Officer, Our Watch Adele Murdolo, Executive Director, Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health:  <b>Closing Remarks:</b> Professor Jane den Hollander, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University

2pm–	<p><b>Discussion Panels: <i>Research and Strategies</i></b></p> <p><i>Representations of multicultural issues in the media</i>  Chairs: Eddie Micallef (ECCV) &amp; John Trevorrow (Former Editor-in-chief  Leader Community News)  Papers: Tanya Muscat &amp; Penny O’Donnell</p> <p><i>Representations of Australia(n) in the media</i>  Chairs: Andrew Holden (Cricket Australia) &amp; Nicola Harvey (BuzzFeed)  Paper: Nasya Bahfen</p> <p><i>Online media and alternative news sources</i>  Chairs: Alan Sunderland (ABC)  Paper: Catherine Gomes &amp; Shanton Chang</p> <p><i>Ethnic media</i>  Chair: Russell Anderson (NEMBC)  Papers: Russell Anderson and Charitha Dissanayake</p> <p><i>News audiences and social media</i>  Chairs: Santilla Chingaiepe (journalist &amp; filmmaker) &amp; Damien Cave (The New  York Times)  Paper: Usha M. Rodrigues, Yin Paradies &amp; Michael Niemann</p> <p><i>Employment in the Media Industry</i>  Chairs: Clare O’Neil (SBS) &amp; Antoinette Lattouf (Media Diversity Australia)  Paper: Heather Anderson, Susan Luckman, Ruchi Sinha &amp; Ruth Rentschler</p> <p><i>Practice and Policy</i>  Chairs: Michael Short (The Age)  Paper: Florencia Melgar</p>
4pm – 5pm	<p>Bringing It Together  Chair: Andrew Holden (Cricket Australia)</p>





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### **Note:**

Further project details available on request.

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