Media narratives and the impacts on culturally and linguistically diverse communities

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What is the problem?

The media, including television and film, plays a critical role in shaping public opinion. The Multicultural Queensland Advisory Council has identified concerns that media reporting and a lack of diversity within the media is negatively impacting on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Two recent events in Queensland have highlighted this issue.

1. Two young women from African backgrounds travelled from Melbourne to Queensland, breaching COVID-19 restrictions. The media's response was to blame and publicly shame the women by publishing their names and photographs. The Courier Mail described them as "enemies of the state".

    This is despite other people breaching restrictions not being publicly identified. In a statement, the Queensland Human Rights Commissioner described the negative impacts this reporting had on the women and broader African communities including abusive text messages, social media harassment, and children being harassed on their way to school.[1]

2. In September 2020, a violent event in Zillmere resulted in the tragic death of a young man and several more injured. The media has a duty to report on issues of public safety, but what resulted was a narrative focusing on race and cultural background and linking race and culture with crime. Examples of articles about the incident that linked the cultural background with gang violence include:
    -   https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/police-fear-revenge-may-follow-fatal-brisbane-brawl-hospital-attacks-20200914-p55ve1.html
    -   https://www.news.com.au/national/queensland/crime/bats-knives-brought-out-in-zillmere-park-brawl-that-left-one-dead/news-story/252d0d9e90235d3791d674b5e02739b8
    -   https://www.9news.com.au/national/brisbane-gang-brawl-one-man-dead-10-injured-during-fight-at-zillmere-police-news/7d004a9b-e5d8-408c-b9e2-3cf199350281

Literature review

There is a wealth of research available exploring media narratives and the general shift towards more negative reporting and specific narratives in relation to migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum. The following outlines some of the key research, reports and media articles available on the topic.

Negative media narratives on cultural diversity

The role of the media in shaping public opinion was recognised by the Senate Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism. The Committee recommended that:

> "…the Australian Press Council develop a broadcast media Code of Conduct, requiring commercial broadcasters to report in such a way that raises awareness of Australia's diversity and prohibits misrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse communities."[2]

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[1] McDougall, S. (30 July 2020) *Commission urges focus on safety, not scapegoating,* https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/27434/2020.07.30-Media-statement-re-new-Queensland-COVID-cases.pdf

[2] Senate Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism (2017), *Ways of protecting and strengthening Australia's multiculturalism and social inclusion,*

The Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland provided a submission to the Committee stating that the mainstream media appear 'disinterested in positive stories of social cohesion' and are unconcerned about presenting accurate representations of ethnic and migrant groups.

It can also have a profound negative impact on those communities amid media attention. Twenty-one per cent of participants in forums held by the Victorian Multicultural Commission noted negative representations by the media as adding to 'stereotyping' or 'racial profiling' incidents which they encountered, and which in most instances they perceived as unprovoked and unwarranted.[3]

A study into media representation in Canada found that "(t)he 'traditional' journalistic focus on balance, objectivity, and impartiality does not mean that everyone receives equal treatment in media representations. Minority groups are regularly excluded and marginalized, and the dominant culture is reinforced as the norm."[4]

There is also strong evidence for correlation between media coverage and attitudes towards migrants, such as the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe.[5]

Over the 12 months to April 2019, All Together Now monitored mainstream Australian media for racialized reporting. Out of 281 media pieces, 57 per cent were negative when discussing race. Muslim women were most often targeted by negative social commentary and the perpetrators were primarily mainstream newspapers. When talking about race, 70 per cent of pieces used covert techniques such as dog-whistling, irony and de-contextualisation. Given the media industry's codes of conduct consider overt forms of racism only, media regulators cannot prosecute media agencies that perpetrate covert forms of racism, leaving targeted Australians without an 'independent' avenue for complaint.[6]

Out of the 281 media pieces reviewed, more than one third were inclusive about race. These pieces were written and produced by journalists from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The more inclusive media pieces were from the Sydney Morning Herald/The Age (37 per cent) and Network 10 The Project (21 per cent). In contrast, of the 57 per cent of media pieces reviewed that were negative, 96 per cent were written or produced by media commentators with an Anglo-Celtic or European cultural background. The report suggests that by increasing the cultural diversity of media commentators to reflect the cultural diversity of the community, social commentary will become more inclusive. There were more race-related media pieces in newspapers (218) and less on television (63). Most newspaper pieces were negative (66 per cent), while most television pieces were inclusive (56 per cent).[7]

A study conducted in 2007 found that despite the media being a primary source of information for Queenslanders, only a minority (14 per cent) were affected by the negative nature of media coverage of Islam and Muslims, with most finding the representation biased,

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Strengthening_Multiculturalism/Multiculturalism/Final_report

[3] Victorian Multicultural Commission, (2015), *Engaging our youth: our future*, https://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/2016/EngagingOurYouthOurFuture.pdf

[4] Mahtani, M. (2001) Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities, Canadian Ethnic Studies, Vol. 33, Issue 3

[5] Danilova, V, (2014) *Media and their role in shaping public attitudes towards migrants*, United National University, Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility, https://gcm.unu.edu/publications/articles/media-and-their-role-in-shaping-public-attitudes-towards-migrants.html

[6] All Together Now (2019), *Social commentary and racism in 2019*

[7] Ibid.

sensationalist and unfair. Over two-thirds of those surveyed stated they had some interaction with Muslims at work, school or university, or as friends or relatives.[8] This may be why the negative media did not have such an effect on this group as their interactions with Queensland Muslims provided a better understanding than through the media.

In 2016, an Essential Report found that 49 per cent of Australians supported a ban on Muslim immigration to Australia. Another poll by the Australian National University found that 71 per cent of Australians were concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism locally. In the same year however, researchers at Griffith University found that 70 per cent of Australians believed they knew "little to nothing about the religion and its adherents" (O'Donnell 2017), despite the disproportionate coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media shown above.[9]

Throughout 2017, the OnePath Network tracked how five Australian newspapers reported on Islam (the Australian, Daily Telegraph, Herald Sun, Courier Mail and the Advertiser). In the 12-month period these newspapers printed almost 3000 articles that referred to Islam or Muslims alongside words like violence, extremism, terrorism or radical. For figures like Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtsen, on average 31 per cent of their opinion pieces were devoted to Islam, with the overwhelming majority of them being negative and divisive in nature. For Jennifer Oriel, that number was 54 per cent. Even though they are stated to be "opinion" pieces, they are often written as fact. [10]

Unbalanced media reporting contributes to negative community perceptions about people from CALD backgrounds, particularly migrants and refugees and Muslim-Queenslanders. The narrative around counterterrorism and security incidents domestically and overseas, also impacts on social cohesion.

General trend towards negative reporting

There is evidence to suggest that the media in general is slanted towards the negative. A study by Kalev Leetaru found that news reporting in the New York Times and other outlets around the world has become progressively more negative since the 1970s, which has a marked impact on community perceptions e.g. increased crime despite crime statistics providing evidence of the contrary.[11]

Negativity in the media may not simply be the fault of journalists and media organisations. A study published in 2019 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) found that Americans are not the only people who respond strongly to negative news content. People in many other countries are similarly drawn to media stories with a negative tone.[12] This negativity bias, established by experiments conducted at McGill University in Canada, may be something we have learnt to respond to in order to avoid danger and why despite saying we want to see more positive stories in the media we respond more readily to negative stories.[13]

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[8] Abdalla, M. Dr & Rane, H. (2007), *The Impact of Media Representations on the Understanding of Islam and Attitudes toward Muslims in Queensland*, Queensland Government.

[9] OnePath, (18 February 2018), *Islam in the Media 2017*, https://onepathnetwork.com/islam-in-the-media-2017/

[10] OnePath, (18 February 2018), *Islam in the Media 2017*, https://onepathnetwork.com/islam-in-the-media-2017/

[11] ibid

[12] Perry, S. (9 May 2019), *Worldwide humans are more responsive to negative news, study suggests*, MINNPOST, https://www.minnpost.com/second-opinion/2019/09/worldwide-humans-are-more-responsive-to-negative-news-study-suggests/

[13] Stafford, T. (29 July 2014), *Psychology: Why bad news dominates the headlines*, BBC, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140728-why-is-all-the-news-bad

Impact on communities

The nature of news is likely to distort people's view of the world because of what psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman called the Availability Heuristic: people estimate the probability of an event or the frequency of a kind of thing by the ease with which instances come to mind. Whenever a memory comes to mind for reasons other than frequency, because it is recent, vivid, gory, distinctive, or upsetting, people will overestimate how likely it is in the world.[14]

One role the media plays in normalising behaviour, and consequently racism perpetrated by media agencies has harmful ramifications, including mental health problems, degrading belonging and creating a sense of exclusion.[15]

All Together Now and Victoria University found that far-right extremist groups in Victoria used media narratives as recruitment tools. All Together Now reviewed the comments section accompanying negative racialized articles published on mainstream newspaper websites and found the negative opinion pieces solidified and reinforced the views of readers who already had negative opinions of particular groups. [16]

There is a link between negative media on communities and vilification of individuals from these communities. In 2017, the Islamophobia Register Australia published the report *Islamophobia in Australia: 2014-2016*, which found "an observable coincidence between spikes of vilification reported to the Islamophobia Register and terror attacks, anti-terror legislation and negative media coverage of high profile Muslim leaders" (Iner 2017), such as the case of the Grand Mufti.[17]

Ethical reporting

One article highlighted the limited research available to help journalists better understand how to ethically report on stories. It reported there is little information or research on how to report on migration fatalities, which hinders journalists' professional awareness.[18]

In a study of reporting on migration in the Mediterranean, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development identified that the media in the region were under-resourced and unable to provide the time, money and level of expertise needed to report the stories in context. It also noted the influence of local politics and the fear of not adequately reflecting community concerns on the media.[19]

While this study focused on the Mediterranean experience, parallels can be drawn to the reporting in Australia on people seeking asylum, in particular 'boat people'. The study noted two predominate narratives – firstly a focus on migrants as victims and secondly a focus on

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[14] Pinker, S. (17 February 2018), *The media exaggerates negative news. This distortion has consequences.*, The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/17/steven-pinker-media-negative-news

[15] All Together Now (2019), *Social commentary and racism in 2019*

[16] All Together Now (2019), *Social commentary and racism in 2019*

[17] OnePath, (18 February 2018), *Islam in the Media 2017*, https://onepathnetwork.com/islam-in-the-media-2017/

[18] White, A. and Singleton, A. (2017, 'Mixed messages: Media coverage of migration and fatalities', Fatal Journeys – Volume 3 – PART 1 – Improving Data on Missing Migrants.

[19] *How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration? A study by journalists, for journalists and policy-makers*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/migration-dialogues/euromed-migration-iv/migration-narrative-study/

migrants as a threat to security, welfare and cultural standing of host communities.[20]

In response to the increase in migration to Europe in 2015, the Ethical Journalism Network developed Migration Reporting Guidelines.[21] This five-point guide covers reporting on facts not bias, knowing the law, showing humanity, speak for all and challenge hate. The Network also offers training workshops for journalists within the European Union.

The Western Australian Office of Multicultural Interests has published a Media Guide for Multicultural Western Australia as a tool for the media to enhance understanding of Western Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse population and covers issues such as stereotypes, accuracy when representing a group and not linking crime and ethnicity.[22]

Counter-acting the negative narrative

Another article talks about how some communities are using social media to counteract the perceptions that negative media reporting generates about particular groups of people and places. "Embracing the accessibility of modern technology, African social media bloggers and commentators are using Facebook, YouTube and other platforms to undermine longstanding "Afro-pessimistic" stereotypes – the backward continent characterised by strife and poverty."[23]

Research undertaken by Mairead Mackinnon indicates that refugee communities in regional areas of Queensland have a more positive experience with the media as regional journalists are seen to be more connected with their local communities, including through attendance at community events. As a result, regional media coverage was found to be more positive than national news.[24]

An interview with Ms Mackinnon and Dr Aparna Hebbani indicated a lack of understanding amongst journalists about the difference in meaning of the terms refugee and asylum seeker and these are often used interchangeably.[25] While some journalists may not intend to be negative, the term asylum seeker does have negative connotations and when used to inaccurately describe other groups, creates confusion and negativity towards those groups amongst the broader community. During Ms Mackinnon's research only the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) were found to provide diversity training to its journalists.

Increasing the representation or voices of refugees within media stories may assist in counter-acting negative narratives. Ms Mackinnon identified that 90 per cent of interviews in the media are with politicians, government or settlement workers rather than people with any lived experience of being a refugee. Journalists interviewed said refugees were hard to access despite the refugees interviewed being willing to engage with the media. Journalists found it was easier to call up someone they already knew for an interview.[26]

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[20] *How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration? A study by journalists, for journalists and policy-makers*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/migration-dialogues/euromed-migration-iv/migration-narrative-study/

[21] http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/what-we-do/media-and-migration

[22] https://www.omi.wa.gov.au/About/Documents/Media/media_guide_2011.pdf

[23] Mkono, M. (24 May 2018), *Changing the African narrative through social media platforms*, The Conversation, http://theconversation.com/changing-the-african-narrative-through-social-media-platforms-97097

[24] Mackinnon, M. and Hebbani, D., 2020. Media Narratives and Diversity.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

More equitable representation on our film and television screens

The Senate Select Committee also noted the under-representation of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in mainstream film and television and recommended the introduction of cadetships for people from CALD backgrounds amongst all public broadcasters and that all media broadcasters seek to improve pathways for CALD individuals and communities to participate in broadcast media.

Stories that represent the experiences of people from CALD backgrounds, as well as stories of interest to these Australians, are less common in mainstream media (excluding the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)).[27]

The PWC Australia's report, *Entertainment and Media Outlook 2016-2020: Growth through diversity: talent, geography and business models*, noted a lack of diversity in Australia's media and entertainment workforce, in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and thinking, is dragging on the industry's growth. The report found that 82.7 per cent of the national entertainment and media workforce are monolingual, speaking only English at home, and the average age is 27.[28]

The Screen Australia's, *Seeing ourselves: Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama,* analysed 199 dramas that aired between 2011 and 2015, finding only 18 per cent of main characters in the period were from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, compared to 32 per cent of the population. Television is a large part of contemporary daily life and reflects our sense of who we are as a society, and who we might be.[29]

Underrepresentation of cultural diversity in the media further entrenches the invisibility of culturally diverse communities, as well as increasing feelings of exclusion and devaluing their role in society.[30]

Greater participation in the mainstream media by people from CALD backgrounds would support more culturally capable film and television industries, as well as contributing to more positive community perceptions of migrants and refugees as images of diversity become the norm.

A study noted in the evaluation of the Theatre Diversity Initiative in 2015, identified several barriers for culturally diverse theatre, including:
- Monoculture of traditions, relating to Australia's close cultural ties to England and English theatre traditions
- Values and norms in Australian theatre
- Lack of will to "develop or encourage theatre which 'acknowledges, reflects and responds to Australia's cultural diversity' or a sense that they had a responsibility to do so" (Bertone et al. 2000, x), due to perceptions that culturally diverse work was not relevant to their audience
- Discriminatory processes
- Conservatism of theatre-going audiences
- Size of the market, despite the growing recognition of the cultural and economic potential of accessing new culturally diverse audiences (Bertone et al. 2000, x)

[27] All Together Now (2019), *Social commentary and racism in 2019*

[28] PWC Australia, Growth through diversity: talent, geography and business models, The Australian Entertainment and Media Outlook 2016-2020, https://outlook2016.ezimerchant.com/

[29] Screen Australia, *Seeing ourselves: Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama*, https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/157b05b4-255a-47b4-bd8b-9f715555fb44/TV-Drama-Diversity.pdf

[30] Mahtani, M. (2001) Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities, Canadian Ethnic Studies, Vol. 33, Issue 3

- Lack of risk-taking – "cultural diversity in theatre is financially risky" (Bertone et al. 2000, x)
- Preference to work with people that one knows (Lee in Ribeiro 2012)
- Lack of funding to be able to take greater risks and to take responsibility for improving representation of cultural diversity
- Lack of appropriate plays and roles; and
- Language (Bertone et al. 2000, xiii). [31]

The Theatre Diversity Initiative worked with three theatre organisations, The Queensland Theatre Company, La Boite Theatre Company, and Metro Arts to increase engagement with CALD artists across Queensland stages. The evaluation of this initiative identified the following learnings:

- Greater understanding of the current state of their engagement with CALD artists and their work;
- Greater awareness of the needs and challenges in their engagement with CALD artists and their work, including their willingness and readiness to address the challenges, make adjustments to business processes, organisational structure and corporate culture, as necessary, to accommodate change, and establish and develop management and measurement systems for capturing existing and future engagement with cultural diversity;
- Awareness of the issues and challenges faced by CALD theatre artists and their role in assisting artists to address these;
- Willingness and ability to develop strategies to address these issues, and provide opportunities, conditions and platforms for CALD artists and their work;
- Awareness of good practice strategies to engage with cultural diversity; and
- Understanding and experiencing the benefits of embracing cultural diversity.

Diversity and inclusion policies within Australian mainstream media outlets

Of the mainstream media outlets in Australia, excluding the SBS, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is the only organisation with dedicated targets for increasing diversity within the organisation and one of only two that have a diversity plan. The ABC also provides diversity training for journalists.[32]

Media outlet	Diversity and inclusion response
Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)	*ABC Diversity & Inclusion Plan 2019-22* Diversity targets - by August 2022: - 15 per cent of content maker roles and 15 per cent of executive roles filled by CALD employees; - 3.4 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander/Indigenous employees; - 8 per cent employees with disability; - 20 per cent of technologist roles and 50 per cent of all executive roles to be filled by women.
Network 10	No mention of diversity or inclusion on website. Parent company is Ten Network Holdings which is owned by ViacomCBS Networks UK & Australia.
Nine Network	No mention of diversity or inclusion on parent company website

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[31] Kwok, JY. (2015), *Report: A case study evaluation of the Theatre Diversity Initiative (2012-2015)*

[32] Mackinnon, M. and Hebbani, D., 2020. Media Narratives and Diversity.

Media outlet	Diversity and inclusion response
	– Nine for Brands. This includes The Sydney Morning Herald, The Sun Herald, The Age, Brisbane Times, The Australian Financial Review, and radio – 4BC amongst others.
Seven Network	Parent company, Seven West Media, has a Diversity Policy, which recognises the benefits of an inclusive and respectful workplace culture that draws on the experiences and perspectives of all employees, contractors and Directors. Diversity at SWM focuses on gender, age and cultural background. However, the Policy only has measurable objectives in relation to gender diversity. Seven West Media includes The West Australian, Pacific magazines and Racing.com.
News Corporation (e.g. Courier Mail)	No diversity or inclusion policy on website.

Role of multicultural policy

While government multicultural policies can help improve representations within the media, the Canadian example warns of a potential unintended consequence resulting in stereotyping of culturally diverse groups. "Multicultural policy affects media representations of minorities in Canada because, by law, Canadian media organizations are expected to reflect "the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada" (1991 Broadcasting Act). However, it has been suggested that this law is regularly disregarded in Canadian press, radio, and television accounts (EQUALITY NOW! 1984; see also DuCharme 1986:11; Dunn and Mahtani 2001) and can result in more subtle forms of stereotyping and prejudice appearing in the media alongside blatant forms of discrimination."[33]

Further action

As identified above, there is a wealth of research available exploring media narratives and the impacts on migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum. Further research into this topic is unlikely to add any additional value and is therefore not identified in the following actions. The 6 media release, at opportune times during the year e.g. refugee week.

1. **Register of people for journalists to contact / database by issue** (e.g. refugee, employment etc): MQAC can support Media Diversity Australia in developing their register of spokespeople project by promoting the self-nomination process through their community networks. MQAC's involvement in this project is subject to Media Diversity Australia identifying an appropriate funding source for the project. Media Diversity Australia is best placed to promote the tool to news organisations. The database will make it easier for journalists to find people available for comment when there are related stories e.g. new visa changes – interview refugees for comment on the impacts etc. As part of this project, the database could promote the calendar of events on the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs website as another way for journalists to connect with community groups.

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[33] Mahtani, M. (2001) Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities, Canadian Ethnic Studies, Vol. 33, Issue 3

2. **Increase diversity within journalism classes at universities:** Work with universities, through the Multicultural Queensland Ambassador Program, to explore inclusion of diverse perspectives within journalism courses. This may include identifying how course content can be expanded to incorporate hearing from diverse voices. The proposed project by Media Diversity Australia, Mentoring Workshops, may assist with addressing barriers to inclusion by linking current journalists from CALD backgrounds with students. Access to these workshops for students may assist in encouraging diverse students to continue in this field of study.

3. **Forums:** Two forums hosted by MQAC in a similar way that the former Council met with the Chairs and secretariats of the Parliamentary Committees.

   a) Meet with the heads of media organisations to discuss how journalists can engage with migrants and refugees when reporting the news. This meeting could be conducted in conjunction with Media Diversity Australia and link into the creation of a register as outlined in proposal two.

   b) Meet with Queensland heads of television, theatre, Screen Queensland and media organisations to discuss how these organisations can be more representative of and engaging for diverse audiences.

4. **Media training for community spokespeople and experts.** MQAC can support Media Diversity Australia in promoting training opportunities to CALD stakeholders through members' networks.