

Nextdoor Neighbours

Coupe, Bronwyn and Jakubowicz, Andrew, with Randall, Lois Nextdoor Neighbours - A Report for the Office of Multicultural Affairs on Ethnic Group Discussions of the Australian Media, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992, pp 1-5, 29-37, 77-82.

**by Bronwyn Coupe and
Andrew Jakubowicz
with Lois Randall**

Contents

- 1 INTRODUCTION
 - 1.1 Audiences and the media
 - 1.2 Race, culture and social difference
 - 1.3 The role of the media
 - 1.3.1 The media as mirror to reality
 - 1.3.2 The media as leader of public opinion
2. METHODOLOGY
 - 2.1 The group discussions
 - 2.2 The media diaries
 - 2.3 Scope of the report
 - Figure 1
 - Figure 2
- 3 MEDIA CONSUMPTION
 - 3.1 Memorable programs
 - 3.2 Programs liked
 - 3.3 Programs/stories disliked
 - 3.4 Youth
 - Figure 3
- 4 HOW THE MEDIA SHOWS AUSTRALIA/NS
 - 4.1 Australian Values
 - 4.2 Identifying as Australian
 - Figure 4
 - Figure 5
- 5 THE PICTURE OF AUSTRALIA/NS IN THE MEDIA
 - 5.1 Blonde and blue eyed
 - 5.1.1 Family structure and relationships
 - 5.1.2 Attitudes to sex and sexual relationships
 - 5.1.3 Acceptability of violence
 - 5.1.4 Attitude to work and education
 - 5.1.5 Importance of Religion
 - 5.2 Beer drinking
 - 5.3 Sport loving
 - 5.4 Friendly and easy going
 - 5.5 Tolerant or fair
 - 5.6 Intolerant, unfriendly or racist
 - 5.7 The Lucky Country
 - 5.8 Always at leisure
 - 5.9 Wealthy and materialistic
 - Figure 6
- 6 AUSTRALIAN SOAP OPERAS
 - 6.1 Casting Practices - Only Anglos
 - 6.1.2 Stereotypical representations of ethnics
 - 6.1.3 The 'wrong NESB'
 - 6.2 Australian Families in Soaps
 - 6.2.1 Family structure
 - 6.2.2 Nuclear families
 - 6.2.3 Children in families
 - 6.3 Sex in soaps
 - 6.4 Representation of women in soaps
 - 6.5 Good, clean soap
- 7 ADVERTISEMENTS
 - 7.1 Representation of Australians and Casting Practices
 - 7.2 Representations of non-Anglos
 - 7.3 Women in Advertisements
 - 7.4 Realism and Selling - Should Ads Be Representative?
 - 7.5 Amount of advertising & reduction of viewer enjoyment

- 8 NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS
 - 8.1 Interest in News and Current Affairs
Figure 7
 - 8.2 International News: The Distorted Globe
 - 8.2.1 Amount of news
 - 8.2.2 The nature of news - or Our News is Bad News
Figure 8
 - 8.3 Representation of non-Anglo migrants in Australia
 - 8.3.1 News, current affairs and the immigration debate
 - 8.3.2 Boat people and the representation of 'Asians'
 - 8.4 Bad Company - Negative associations and stereotypes
 - 8.5 When an Australian is not an Australian
- 9. REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINES
 - 9.1 Negative representations
Figure 9
 - 9.2 Amount of Representation
 - 9.3 Aboriginal art and culture
 - 9.4 When an Aborigine is not Aboriginal
- 10 REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN
 - 10.1 Stereotypes
 - 10.1.1 Glamour - Sexy vs. Sexual exploitation
 - 10.1.2 Traditional Roles - Home Vs. the Workplace
 - 10.1.3 Professional and independent
 - 10.2 Appearances
 - 10.3 Ethnic stereotypes and notions of beauty
 - 10.3.1 Southern European women
 - 10.3.2 Asian women
- 11 TELEVISION STATIONS
 - 11.1 SBS
 - 11.2 ABC
 - 11.3 Commercial TV
 - 11.4 Youth
- 12 RADIO
 - 12.1 ABC
 - 12.2 SBS
 - 12.3 Commercial Radio
- 13 ETHNIC MEDIA
 - 13.1 Radio
 - 13.2 Press
 - 13.3 Youth
Figure 10
- 14 CHANGE AND ASPIRATION
 - 14.1 Changes noticed
 - 14.2 If I owned the media
Figure 11
Figure 12
- 15 CONCLUSIONS
 - 15.1 Options for Reform
- 16 RECOMMENDATIONS

Excerpts

1 Introduction

1.1 Audiences and the media

The mass media have become the avenue for social communication, providing access to information and entertainment, while offering the space for public rituals, the "cement" of social relations. The mass media are deeply and centrally implicated in the social and political interactions of contemporary societies, acting both as "carriers" of the views of social groups and interests, and at the same time selecting and interpreting those values and interests. Much of the debate about the media has focussed on the intentions of the key players - powerful social groups and those who control and distribute the flow of cultural communication. Yet the large mass of the population play crucial if often unrecognised roles in these communication flows. These people are constituted by the mass media as audiences - indeed in democratic free market societies, it has been argued that a major role of the media is the creation of audiences

and their transformation into consumers for "sale" to advertisers.

Yet the ways in which these created audiences "use" the media reflect complex social, cultural and socio-psychological processes. This complexity reflects both the diversity of the social experience and locations of the audiences, and the ambiguity and "open-ended" nature of communication - often despite the intentions of communicators to limit and "close" the opportunities for audiences to interpret the meaning of what they are consuming. Audiences work on the media to extract meanings which are relevant to their lives. Yet the range of material on which they work clearly limits the possibilities they have to explore.

In this report we address the experiences of ethnic Australians and their attitudes to their exploration of the mass media with which they have contact. The research shows that what audiences do with the media they consume is affected by their social location and background (factors of ethnicity, language, class, gender, age, are important here), and the material to which they have access.

The development of a media strategy for the Office of Multicultural Affairs must thus address both the "social reality" of immigrant settlement, and the political realities of media control. We begin then with a contextual statement about that social reality.

1.2 Race, culture and social difference

All colonial and post-colonial societies, and Australia is no exception, reflect in their social structure the hierarchies of power generated by the historical experience of settlement and societal formation. The residues of this history are evident in the patterns of domination, and in the nature of resistance, in the social institutions which have emerged, and in the cultural practices which manage, explain or contest this history.

Australian cultural practices and social institutions are involved in an often ambiguous

way in creating, transmitting, challenging and transforming our ways of understanding ideas of race and ethnicity. 'Race' has changed in public discourse from a quasi-scientific concept which brought together biological similarities, cultural behaviour and social hierarchies (as in the idea of the superiority of the white races which underlay the White Australia policy of the century from 1865 or so), to a term which today is generally used as merely a descriptive differentiator of physically distinguished social groups or has been discarded as an anachronistic or dangerous form of explanation of behaviour. 'Ethnicity' has been developed as an alternative concept based on an egalitarian and non-judgmental interpretation of culture as a social process (as distinct from biologically caused).

Apart from these definitional questions, in complex societies it is clear that culturally homogeneous groups, which have often formed (or re-formed) following immigration, seek to establish social institutions to reinforce and facilitate the survival of cultural practices which they value. These ethnic groups (however diverse and contradictory their values may be internally, and however complicated their homogeneity may be in reality as a consequence of gender, class and age divisions and conflicts) experience various structural and cultural barriers to their persistence; indeed they sometimes form in opposition to these barriers, particularly those based on racist responses to their presence.

Racism describes those situations where the ascribed membership of an ethnic group (be it based on physical features or cultural practices) reduces the opportunities of individuals to act freely in pursuit of their values and beliefs, and limits their access to wider social opportunities. Thus racism can exist where the way in which social institutions traditionally behave reduces opportunities and limits access. In particular, it exists where a social hierarchy, expressed in the power to control 'social reality' and cultural practices, systematically excludes or limits the opportunities of members of ethnic groups (whether or not they consciously identify with those groups or seek to publicly advance the

group interests).

For ethnic communities as audiences, the media as social institutions play a powerful role in structuring opportunities in many social dimensions. But these audiences are neither monolithic nor powerless: their power is limited, they are diverse, but they are active subjects in the use of the media. In this report we explore how their power is constrained, and how they use what they have to gain some control of the media communication processes in which they are involved.

1.3 The role of the media

There is a long history of debate on what should be the role of the media. While there is no doubt that the media is largely consumed for its entertainment value, Australian audiences rely on the media, in particular TV, as their most important source of information about what is happening in their local community, state, nation and the world. Economic factors aside, there are community expectations of what constitutes responsible practice.

1.3.1 *The media as mirror to reality*

Many people talk of the media in terms of a "reality" which can be distorted or, through good practice, be truthfully mirrored and communicated. Many people expect that the media will in fact mirror this reality, and become critical of it when they feel it fails to do so. They see the media distorting what is really going on. Many media workers say, particularly in relation to news and current affairs, that they report or broadcast merely that which is out there - the problem is with reality, they would say, there is no need to adjust your set.

This debate over what the media actually does - and in particular what perspectives on society key information and cultural programs and articles are conveying on television, radio and in the press - are major questions, not only for academic analysts but also for policy makers and the general public. For the debate rapidly moves from arguments over fact - a hard enough

situation to address - to arguments over values, from what **is** the case, to what **should be** the case. For instance many of those who claim that the media should reflect reality or report it accurately, but say that this does not happen, argue for a more specific link between the occurrence of phenomena in society, and their coverage or appearance in the media. As an example, if twenty per cent of the population are of non-English speaking background, then that same proportion should apply to the stories in the media about them, to participation in television soaps and advertisements, and to the availability of broadcasting in languages other than English.

Their opponents take a different view - if there is little representation of 'ethnic' Australians, if issues affecting them are not featured, or if they do not appear in soaps and ads, this is a reflection of the reality of power in society. This reality may not be palatable, but it exists, it is claimed, even if we do not like it. Key elements in this reality are that 'ethnics' do not usually make interesting news stories because news values identify conflict between powerful people as central, and 'ethnics' are de facto not very powerful. In addition, audiences, it is claimed, prefer highly valued characters in soaps, characters who most resemble archetypal role models - 'ethnics' are hardly this, in a society of blue eyes, blond hair, affluence, and monoglot Ockerism. These audiences may also include 'ethnic' Australians, who may themselves prefer idealised Anglo-Australian visions of the good life, than a reflection of their own which may be hard, depressing, and unglamorous.

1.3.2 *The media as leader of public opinion*

If the media relation to reality is so controversial, and so difficult to pin down, perhaps an alternative perspective will allow progress. If all media is a selection from a range of possible interpretations, and if this selectivity occurs in most circumstances as a simple and unself-conscious support for the status quo, or at least the majority version of it with all its exclusion of minorities and intolerance of

difference, then surely the way forward is to have the media become more self-aware of what it does. With self-awareness, it might be argued, would come responsibility for the social effects of the media. This responsibility would recognise the real impact the media can have on values, and thus ensure that positions taken are well thought through. Specifically, where social values of egalitarianism, opposition to inequalities based on gender or ethnicity or religious belief, are firmly entrenched in government policy and public discourse, then there the media should be using its persuasive powers to advocate for egalitarianism in its work - multiculturalism, equal employment opportunity, anti-discrimination, human rights to name a few of the arenas.

Advocating a "social engineering" role for the media faces strong opposition from media owners and defenders. Even though there is evidence of significant bias and news management in much of the media (though not in all of it all of the time), the importance of a free press and media has been reiterated as the basis of a democratic society. Once government regulation is imposed, or the media are forced to respond to diktats from bureaucrats or politicians, or specific pressure groups, then the citizenry lose their major weapon against tyrannical government. The idea of the public sphere in which free debate can take place requires a media prepared to act without fear or favour, even where this might in practice reinforce the inequality in society.

Yet willingness to support a free media does not require withdrawal from the field by those concerned with social justice. It does require well researched and carefully argued cases for changes in practice by media organisations where they can be shown not to live up to their own claims to access and moral legitimacy. It is within this context that the research for this report was undertaken.

Earlier research for OMA by Goodall et al. (1990) and Bell (1992) has demonstrated the way in the which the content of the media significantly under-represents and distorts the

experience of ethnic Australians and all Australians' experience of the multicultural reality of society. Both those studies demonstrated that the "media exclude representations of active, powerful, positive aspects of cultural diversity and social heterogeneity" (Bell 1992:v). For Bell, the meaning of multiculturalism in the media was moving towards "an empty label", while for the Goodall group, the media had demonstrated a systematic incapacity to cope with the real diversity of Australian society, revealing a lack of competence and confidence in this regard.

Other researchers have described these problems with the media in terms of the ownership and control, with the elite groups of society using the media to reinforce and reproduce their world views, and in so doing bolster and extend their power and protect their interests - the media reproduce racism because it is in the interests of an elite which profits from the current social hierarchy (Van Dijk 1991) .

Given the sustained evidence about media content, and the overseas evidence about the impact on and the use by audiences of the media in reproducing racism, an exploration of how Australian ethnic audiences perceive the media offers an important insight to strategies that OMA will need to undertake.

6 Australian Soap Operas

The participants were asked how Australian soap operas showed Australian society, in particular Australian families, what soaps they thought were good and bad in the way they represented Australia and why. In relating their opinions the groups also drew on examples from other Australian domestic dramas, such as situation comedies, and American programs.

6.1 Casting Practices - Only Anglos

There was considerable criticism regarding the casting practices of Australian soaps which show a white, Anglo-Australia and exclude 'ethnics', 'Asians', Aborigines and 'blacks'.

Neighbours was the subject of a few particularly bitter attacks in relation to its exclusively Anglo cast, especially given its premise that it is an average Australian Street. Where would you find such a street in Australia one group asked. 'Unbelievably, even the school apparently has no ethnic students enrolled.' It was also criticised as unrepresentative of Australian society where people rarely know or have close relationships with their neighbours.

GP and *A Country Practice* were the only Australian soaps mentioned as featuring positive non-Anglo characters, while one group said that *Kingswood Country* was not very good but has at least portrayed a mixed Anglo/non-Anglo marriage.

American soaps were also referred to with the *Cosby Show* praised:

Programmes like these raise the self-esteem of ethnic communities. These portrayed the African Americans as professionals, wealthy and disciplined. These types of programmes should be encouraged.

6.1.2 Stereotypical representations of ethnics

Acropolis Now, which was discussed as a soap by a number of groups, was sometimes thought to show negative stereotypes of migrants in general and of the Greek community in particular.

Even in 'Acropolis Now', which is meant to be a show about migrants, Jim and Effie are dumb, but the Australian girl on the show is tall, blond, educated and intelligent. She's well spoken and they can't speak good English.

However other groups thought this humorous look at Greek Australian culture was a positive contribution to broader representations of Australians on TV. This division in attitude to this program has been previously noted.

The recently introduced Italian character in *Neighbours* 'Marco Alessi' was also seen as confirming stereotypes.

...Marco Alessi in 'Neighbours' who is supposedly of

Italian decent. Only after appearing for no more than two or three episodes, the respondents were confronted with a common Italian stereotype. Another character, upon meeting Marco, was quick to make the following blatant assumption: 'something shifty about him, Mafia connections, I bet he comes from Sicily, I'd like to see his passport.'

Where non-Anglo-Australian actors were used they generally were typecast. One group member commented on the programme 'All Together Now', where the only Italian part was cast as a "sleazy sneaky lazy comical" Italian, and said there should be an Italian part to counterbalance this role.

6.1.3 The 'wrong NESB'

A number of cases of the "wrong NESB" were also described. That is a non-English speaking background character of one nationality or ethnicity being played by another.

A participant commented that in 'A Country Practice', a Filipina actress featured as a Vietnamese doctor.

Or in another case:

...where Mediterranean looking characters were cast, it was more than likely that these characters were given Anglo names... Recently 'E Street' introduced actress Chantel Contouri, who is of Greek descent, and who was cast in the prestigious role of a doctor. The respondents acknowledged that this is a positive progressive step, however, Anglo domination became apparent once again when, instead of adopting an ethnic name for her character, she was labelled 'Dr Preston'.

The group felt that migrant people were very unrepresented in TV dramas with non-English speaking people and accents rarely featuring in programmes. In some cases English speaking people were used to play people with accents and the result was annoying to those with the particular NESB accent as well as being a questionable practice not to employ a migrant.

6.2 Australian Families in Soaps

Over half the groups thought Australian families were always depicted as Anglo-Australians. However, it was the structure and behaviour of families in soaps that generated the most heated discussions with nearly two thirds of the groups not relating to and often disapproving of these families.

6.2.1 Family structure

The Anglo families on TV were mainly seen as being variously dysfunctional and lacking in care, respect and love. (Anglo) Australian culture either did not value family life or was unable to resist dissolution. Families that were plagued with conflict and unable to resolve problems were commonly perceived to be characteristic of soaps. While some groups acknowledged that the amount of family conflict was probably exaggerated in the interests of drama, others thought or suspected that:

the scenes depicted in 'E-Street' and 'Chances' were probably what happened in any Australian homes and Australian society with marriage breakdown and other domestic and social problems being depicted as 'normal'.

Other groups echoed this sentiment and the regular portrayal of de facto partners, divorce, unmarried mothers, runaway and adopted children causes a great deal of anxiety, especially in regard to the likelihood of these events occurring in their families. Further, soaps were often blamed for contributing to family disintegration, marital breakdown and intergenerational conflict:

Australian soaps... do not support good values of family life. Instead they show lack of bond between parents and children, constant conflicts within family and lack of respect of children towards their parents. They portray almost total lack of parental control over teenage (and younger) children. They show divorce as a common 'adjustment' in a family life and in some cases even show the financial benefits of it.

A respondent from Vietnam, who was a widow-mother gave the following account which illustrated how the two different sets of family values had brought about intergenerational conflict among the Chinese. The respondent explained that being a single parent, she was rather strict in bringing up her children. She would not allow her teenage daughter to go partying with her schoolmates. One evening while watching one of the soaps, she was accused by her teenage daughter as an unreasonable and cruel mother, since in the soap, the Australian mother did not only encourage the daughter to go out socialising but the mother actually helped the daughter dress up for the party.

Whether soaps were seen as being representative of Anglo family values or not, many groups found the depiction of disrespectful or uncaring family relationships distressing:

One of the participants mentioned that he does not watch soaps on television, however, the closest show to family relations he has watched is a comedy show 'Mother and Son'. This programme, he feels, in the way it shows the family relation is really bad. He thinks using the family relationship or the relation between a mother and son in this case as a subject for a ridiculous comedy show is bad taste. The sacred relationship between members of a family should be respected not ridiculed.

Most disturbing were the number of groups who specifically watched soaps to learn what went on in Australian families, and what was considered normal behaviour.

All the participants enjoyed watching TV Soaps for relaxation, also mini-series. These are regarded as an important indicator of what Australians accept as normal behaviour.

They could not make out or understand the beginnings and ends of many of these soaps shows. However, the young members of the group responded that they want to know how young Australians behave in the society and learn good role models.

6.2.2 Nuclear families

Another area of concern for eight of the groups was the dominance of nuclear families. The extended family was considered to be the norm for many migrant groups, particularly those from Asian countries. Not having any representation of extended families on 'family' programs led to a feeling of being 'odd' and sometimes to embarrassment.

The concept of extended family is very strong in the group and having uncles, aunties, grandparents around at home or nearby and with almost daily contacts with them, was normal. This is not shown in any of the soaps.

A proportion of the group still live in an extended family environment, and as a consequence of acceptable and unacceptable norms, these members claim that, amongst their Anglo-Australian peers, they are embarrassed by concepts of "living with in-laws" or "being escorted to school by grandmother". These respondents claim that relative to the progress that is being made in the acceptance of cultural diversity, the concept of the extended family remains alien to many Anglo-Australians.

However not all groups were disturbed by the portrayal of unfamiliar family structures. Even less traditional presentations of families were considered to be good by some:

'Hey Dad!' and 'All Together Now' portray both fathers as single parents trying to handle teenage children. The shows are presented lightly and towards the end the relevant moral lesson or value is shown.

6.2.3 Children in families

The behaviour of children on soap operas upset and alienated many of the participants (20 or a third), including young people born in Australia. Children were seen to be disrespectful to their parents and other elders, to talk back and disobey parents, to be engaged in sexual activities at an unseemly early age, to rarely socialise within the family, to behave like 'little adults' and to be 'hanging out for the day they can leave home'

In some cases it was considered to be 'unbelievable' behaviour and that children would not get away with the antics portrayed in reality. Such extraordinary acts were thought to be a ploy of the producers to keep their mainly teen audience 'hooked'. Other groups saw this as a sad reflection of declining values in Anglo-Australia.

Either way there was considerable concern that their own children might mimic what they saw on the screens:

...the major portion of TV "soaps" acted as poor role models for their children and conveyed conflicting cultural ideals that opposed the traditional Macedonian methods of child rearing and parental respect. Some examples that the group shared were: teenagers running away from home, youngsters bringing boyfriends to the family home and teenage pregnancy. These issues that "soaps" represented illustrate some of the differing values that parents and children of non-Anglo background have to cope with.

They worry when their children see daughters answering back to parents, swearing or acting against parents' advice, or worse not caring about them. Now the participants fear they may die alone in Australia because their children are adopting the cultural values of the TV.

Some of the young people surveyed admitted to sometimes feeling confused or that adopting the Australian attitudes seen would put them in conflict with their parents. They usually came down on the side of their traditional values. This is not to say that their views of Australian society were necessarily the same as their parents.

On a family level, it is way out of Samoan family and culture. We have principles, standards, values and all that. The way some of the actors and actresses reflect their home life, their reaction to their parents, some of us start to question our values. But somehow, we prefer to stick with our disciplinary measures at home.

Another program which was spoken negatively of was 'Degrassi Junior High' on ABC at 5.30 pm, which was also described as "rubbish", showing

sexual liberty and drugs as a normal part of school life. During the discussion, one of the group member's teenage children who was perhaps 14 years of age, said that this was really what happened at school.

Strangely, the two groups of young girls who were identified as avid soap watchers were happy to accept them as unrealistic but enjoyable fantasy. This perhaps reflects the familiarity these young women have with the tradition of romantic melodrama also found in women's novels and magazines.

Another interesting point is that while parents were mainly concerned about the effect of Australian soaps on their children, their viewing was actually dominated by American programs.

6.3 Sex in soaps

Disapproval of the sexual mores enacted in soaps was a dominant theme in the discussions with nearly half of groups finding them unacceptable in some way. The program *Chances* was almost always mentioned as an example of a program that contained too much or too explicit depictions of sex, with many participants referring to it as 'pornographic'.

The participants think the real bad soap is 'Chances', because there is nothing but sex and sex acts which is pornographic. They feel angry because this soap is shown during prime time.

The men from the Finnish group were alone in saying that they found the sex portrayed attractive (although none of them recorded watching it in the week surveyed). For a program so generally abhorred, the majority of participants seemed to be familiar with its contents, although this could be due to the promotional trailers which some young Filipino women suggested should be banned from prime time airing.

A high proportion of the groups obviously thought that the program was a media fantasy. Nonetheless it was considered to be a potentially dangerous influence on community, especially

young morals. In addition it was thought to exploit and degrade women.

They firmly believe that the portrayal of women especially in 'Chances' is disgraceful and insulting to all women. In their opinion, therefore, 'Chances' is the worst show in the way it shows Australian society.

Other soaps were also considered to oppose traditional values and relationships. Once again it was the effect on minors that most worried groups:

Also, sexual desire and sexual love were repeatedly shown in soaps TV in vivid details while parents-children love plays only a minor role which could lead young viewers to believe that leaving school, leaving home, having a girl/boy friend, are better than staying home with parents and studying for a better future.

The soapies portrayed teenagers as poor role models for their own children who should be studying conscientiously to pass exams. The TV stars would be preoccupied with sexual relationships and other out of family pursuits not encouraged by the ethnic groups represented.

6.4 Representation of women in soaps

The representation of women in the media will be dealt with later in this report. It should be noted that this was a topic that was brought up spontaneously by a large number of groups spontaneously in the discussion of soaps. The comments can be broken down into a number of categories:

- sexual exploitation - generally brought up in relation to *Chances*
- Anglo and ethnic women especially regarding notions of beauty
- portrayal of traditional roles
- other roles and equality
- representation of women vs the reality,

especially with regard to equality and employment

6.5 Good, clean soap

On a more positive note, soaps were sometimes considered to be promulgating useful messages, even if there were reservations about their casting practices and how representative they were of Australian families. *GP*, *The Flying Doctors* and *A Country Practice* were often singled out as promoting positive values.

'Country Practice's story is just round and round the circle. But participants enjoy it because it has a 'mission' to tell the society about the caring of others among the communities in the country and it shows about how to solve the conflict in society in a friendly way.

'A Country Practice' (channel 7) and 'GP' (channel 2) are by far the favourite programs, because they deal with real life problems, like leukaemia and suicide, and provide useful information and a contact number afterwards.

They were generally quite pleased with the theme of 'Flying Doctors' and 'Country Practice', but these again lacked in portraying the multicultural nature of the Australian society.

15 Conclusions

The issues of social context and group experiences which we indicated would frame the way in which ethnic groups perceive and use the media are borne out by the results of the study. There are a few general statements that can be made about ethnic audiences. The caveat remains that we are not in a position to compare them with Anglo-Australian or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences.

Ethnic audiences are heavy consumers of the media, particularly commercial electronic media. They do not appear, on the whole, to use English language print media regularly, except to follow issues directly relevant to their particular concerns. Therefore, while the print media are important for some news stories, and

have been criticised for bias etc., the emphasis is on the electronic media.

Within the electronic media SBS is used extensively where it is available, especially for news and sport. The use of the ABC also tends to be concentrated on news and current affairs programs, which are perceived as more reliable and accurate than those of the commercial channels and stations. The commercial media have the widest audiences, reflecting general patterns in Australian society.

The Australian media were not seen to be presenting an accurate or wide-ranging reflection of Australian society. Rather they were interpreted as avenues for the communication of American or British cultural concerns, with the quality of Australian material somewhat less effective in stimulating audience involvement and response. There were real concerns at the narrowness of Australian society as it appeared in the media. The limitations of physical type, story line, and issues found in programs was a consistent theme across groups.

There was also a consistent concern that where the media reported specific issues affecting ethnic communities, this was done in either a patronising or biased way, with inaccurate or partial information typifying the presentation. The "bad news" focus was overwhelming, leading to a view of ethnic Australians which portrayed them as conflictual, violent and uncivilised. There was widespread unhappiness with the way the media treated Asian immigrants, for example, and there was frustration with the lack of balance in reporting. It seemed to be assumed that the point of view of the audience was that of Anglo-Australians to the exclusion of any other people. Ethnicity was presented continually as problematic, rarely as a positive quality of a multicultural society.

Media representation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders caused some distress to the audiences. The overwhelmingly negative portrayal was seen as one-sided, unfair or too harsh. Audiences expressed the need for better information, more historical background, and a

more sustained and sympathetic representation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders communities.

Gender roles generated a range of responses - three main perspectives were offered. The media were criticised for presenting women only as domestic drudges or sex objects; the media were commended for valuing the role of women as mothers and as professional workers; the media were encouraged to break free of stereotypes and show women in a range of roles, and ethnic women as other than simply working class cooks and cleaners. Significant comments were made about culturally specific notions of beauty and attractiveness serving to denigrate women who were not blonde and slim.

The ethnic media were widely used where available, and provided a useful service where English language skills were limited. In this regard ethnic radio services were sometimes criticised for being old fashioned, or limited in their coverage and accessibility, though important for cultural and linguistic maintenance.

15.1 Options for Reform

This report has produced some evidence for the dissatisfaction of a wide range of the Australian ethnic population with the Australian media. Television is the medium most well attended and important as an information source. It is failing to address the range of issues and events of interest to this population and to represent adequately their communities, both in terms of amount and diversity of representations. Commercial television is the main target of these grievances. The perceptions and conclusions of this population are supported by objective analysis of the mass media, that is:

The mass media in Australia are involved in what some commentators have called the ideological reproduction of racism. The **media** are literally that - media rather than structurally significant causes of ethnicism and ethnocentrism: they **reproduce** and **maintain** the ways in which an ethnically diverse society makes sense of itself and the ways in which

the dominant groups define and re-define the less numerous and less powerful.

A number of ways of dealing with this have been suggested and recommended in the past. They include awareness and education campaigns for both the public and media workers, government regulation and industry agreements and enforcement. It is apt at this particular point in time, in the light of the current change in government and industry regulation governing the electronic media, to focus on the latter two approaches.

The transformation of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal into the Australian Broadcasting Authority in October 1992 following the passing of the Broadcasting Services Act, 1992 by Parliament in June 1992, has significant implications for future strategies. In the past The Broadcasting Act laid down Standards governing discriminatory broadcasts and fairness in current affairs reporting (Television Program Standard 2 (b) and 24 and Radio Program Standard 3 and 8), breaches of which were independently investigated and (in practice rarely) addressed through penalties. These Standards, ineffective as an ABT Inquiry recently found them to be, are to be maintained until October 1994 or until the relevant codes of practice have been registered. After this time such regulation will be replaced by an industry Code of Practice. The ABA has advised the industry to take a number of steps in the formulation and practice of these codes, importantly:

- liaison with community groups
- maintaining supervision of programs broadcast
- incorporating mechanisms for independent arbitration when complaints have been received or codes have been breached
- wording of relevant codes to address the ineffectiveness of the Standards mentioned above, specifically by including amendments suggested by submissions to the Inquiry.

To date the draft Code of Practice for the commercial television industry put out for public comment has not taken any of the above into account.

16. Recommendations

1. Given the importance of the media in the lives of ethnic Australians, given the ambivalence expressed about the capacity of the media to adequately reflect their experience of Australian society, OMA should request the Australian Broadcasting Authority to carry out an inquiry into the most effective guidelines necessary to ensure that ethnic Australians' needs to participate in public communication with other Australians is addressed by the electronic media.

2. The issue of the inadequate and biased representation of non-Anglo-Australians in the electronic media has been documented by many organisations. OMA should press the commercial broadcasting organisations, and the ABC and SBS, to adopt an affirmative action strategy in the recruitment of ethnic Australians into on camera/on air roles. Targets (not quotas) should be set to ensure that institutional and structural factors do not continue to exclude ethnic Australians.

3. OMA should meet with the advertising industry media bodies to develop a code of practice in the recruitment of non-Anglo-Australians, and the avoidance of the use of potentially derogatory stereotypes (as the only method of portrayal). This code should be trialed and monitored.

4. Given the perception of the limited number of roles and types of roles available for non-Anglo actors in Australian drama, OMA should encourage the Media Council of Australia, FACTS and Actors Equity to negotiate a code of practice to govern discrimination in casting.

5. OMA should seek corporate sponsorship of an annual award for the best reporting in the media of ethnic issues, or portrayal in the media

of issues affecting ethnic Australians, not limited to news and current affairs.

6. OMA should stress to the ABA that any industry guidelines developed for self regulation must include a code of practice on the representation of and reporting of ethnic Australian issues. These should at least include the criteria with similar goals as those developed by the UK Broadcasting Standards Council, as in the following Code of Practice which refers to 'Preserving Dignity: Television and Radio - (c) Questions of Race':

It is important that broadcasters should familiarise themselves with the law governing relations between the races in Britain. Apart from strict legal requirements within the country, sensitive treatment of the differences which exist between races and nations is called for. Such differences and the conflicts they cause, as well as the occasions when they are overcome, must be reflected in any accurate portrayal of both history and contemporary life. For example, there are times when racial or national stereotypes, whether physical or behavioural, may be used without offence in programmes, but their use should always be carefully considered in advance. Use of derogatory terms in speaking of men and women of other races and nations almost invariably gives offence and should be avoided where the context does not warrant it. Great distinctions exist between many people within single countries, let alone whole continents, and a broad community of interests cannot always be assumed. The presentation of minority groups as an undifferentiated mass, rather than a collection of individuals with limited interests in common, should be discouraged. (Broadcasting Standards Council 1989:45-6).

7. OMA should monitor the development of the commercial television Code of Practice being drafted by the broadcasters, and urge them to :

- actively consult with representative and community bodies during this process
- include appropriately worded requirements for the non-discriminatory depiction and reporting of persons and events (including

news and current affairs programming)

- include a mechanism allowing independent arbitration for complaints of and breaches of the codes.

8. In the event of an unsatisfactory Code of Practice being presented to the ABA at the end of the current transitional period of the Broadcasting Services Act (October 1994), OMA should request that the ABA not register the Code but impose a Standard governing the above, this Standard being worded to include amendments suggested by submissions to the ABT's Inquiry into Standards Relating to Discriminatory Broadcasts to make the Standards effective and ensure that breaches are swiftly and appropriately addressed.

9. OMA should establish a communication media strategy advisory group involving the press, electronic media, advertising and magazine publishing sectors, plus communication industry education groups, to develop and implement a detailed plan of action for the media.

10. OMA should regularly monitor the mass media, publicising and criticising poor practice, while commending good practice. Where appropriate OMA should refer matters to the state anti-discrimination authorities or the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Such a monitoring program could be contracted out to an independent media research body, with regular recommendations to OMA for action.

11. Given the perceptions by ethnic Australians of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, it is recommended that OMA seek urgent meetings with ATSIC and other ATSI organisations, to help them target ethnic communities in their public awareness and communication campaigns. In particular given the complaints that the media fail to adequately communicate the all-round experience, history and activities of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, special emphasis should be placed on getting information to the ethnic press, and to

community language radio programs.

12. OMA should liaise with the Office for the Status of Women to ensure that the Mediawatch project, the advertising project and other communication industry related programs (including Affirmative Action) integrate issues affecting ethnic women into the "mainstream" activities. OMA should insist that OSW expend at least 30% of its budget in this area over the next two years on issues affecting ethnic women, and jointly monitor the effectiveness of this strategy for changes in media representation.

13. Following agreement with the consultant on the final form of the report, the report should be published and made available to media industry organisations, government and regulatory bodies, ethnic, women's and Aboriginal organisations, and to the general public.