

A personal submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration in Australia from Darce Cassidy.

News for parrots – multiculturalism, community broadcasting and the public sphere.

Good evening. Here is the news for parrots. No parrots were involved in an accident on the M1 today, when a lorry carrying high-octane fuel was involved in a collision with a bollard That is a BOLLARD and not a PARROT. A spokesman for parrots said he was glad no parrots were involved.

Monty Python's Flying Circus – Episode 20.

This submission will focus on the Committee's first term of reference -the role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda.

As Australia's population grows more diverse there is a need for more diverse media to respond not only to language differences but also to broader cultural differences. At the same time there is also a need for diverse communities to engage with one another, and with the mainstream, lest we arrive at the absurdity of a news service of interest only to parrots.

British anthropologist Georgina Born has taken a special interest in the role public service broadcasters, like the BBC or the ABC, play in the operation of a universal public sphere. However she suggests that the public service broadcasters can't do it alone. In her important essay "Digitising Democracy" she argues that alongside the "universal orientation" and "impartial news functions" of the public service broadcasters there needs to be

... a rich array of communicative channels for the self-representation, participation and expressive narrativisation of minority and marginalised groups, addressed both to and among those groups and to the majority. In this way the architecture of public service communication will encompass both practices of toleration and the politics of presence, and will contribute to the formation of a more adequate communicative democracy than we have yet seen.ⁱ

To continue the Monty Python analogy it is not enough for the parrots to have a place to talk to themselves. They also need to be tolerated by, and engage with, other species. Born put it this way in an interview with ABC Radio National:

... we can be at risk of losing sight of the other crucial function which is unification, which is the need for let's call it a universal public. We need a universal public because it mirrors our political system, the Federal political

system. We need a space in which all those micro publics can talk to the majority, and the majority can be expected to listen. And only mass channels provide that kind of universal space, now that for example a newspaper market is more and more segmented as well.ⁱⁱ

Recent research by two Canadian scholars has shown how ethnic media, operating as “public sphericals” can provide a sense of belonging to citizens who might otherwise have been marginalised. Their research focused on Korean-Canadian participation in the 2008 Canadian federal election.

Ethnic media, as part of a multiple model of “public sphericals”, offers a sense of belonging to groups largely alienated from the dominant public sphere. They are, however, not alternatives to the mainstream public sphere, but work to bridge the gap between marginalised groups and mainstream society. The findings of this study are consistent with that of Karim’s (2002) study of South Asian press in Vancouver. Ethnic media are not isolated from public discourse. Issues that concern the rest of society also concern ethnic minorities.

One of the strengths of ethnic media is in its ability to reach audiences in their own cultural idioms, instead of the language used in the mainstream public sphere (Karim, 2002, p. 239). Aforementioned special feature columns on different ridings are good examples of this. The issues in each riding were discussed from Korean-Canadian perspectives. Another strength of ethnic media confirmed in this study is its ability to complement mainstream media by covering the type of news that specifically matters to the community. As discussed, some of the minority issues or visible minority candidates/voters discussed in Korean papers were nearly absent in English papers. Ethnic media, thus, should not aspire, nor be encouraged to operate on the margins. Instead, they should aspire to act as players in the larger public sphere where most politics and government affairs operate.ⁱⁱⁱ

While new technologies have enabled self-publishing by individuals to thrive there needs to be spaces where people can come out from behind the computer screen to talk among themselves, and also engage with the broader community.

Multicultural community broadcasting, by the way it is structured in Australia, encourages minorities not only to talk among themselves, but also to engage with other minorities through shared access to the airwaves.

While almost anyone can self-publish from a computer in their living room multicultural community broadcasting as it has developed in Australia requires groups to share premises, production resources and an organisational structure with other groups. It is social, rather than individual, in its mode of production. It can be an antidote to the atomisation of public debate.

The broadcasting schedule for 3ZZZ-FM in Melbourne shows that Jews and Arabs, Turks and Armenians, Croatians and Serbians, Sinhalese and Tamils all share the same studios and the same transmitter. The schedules of ethnic community stations in Perth, Adelaide, Sydney, Darwin, Canberra and Brisbane tell a similar story.

In stations like this volunteers do nearly all the work. They learn how to operate broadcasting equipment, research, compile and read news, and conduct interviews. They record and broadcast the music of their communities and maintain cultural links.

They also support the station financially. For example 3ZZZ in Melbourne has more than 5,000 individual financial members. In its annual radiothon appeal it normally raises more than \$150,000 from listeners, mostly in small donations of twenty or thirty dollars each.

Meanwhile 'shock jocks' on commercial radio continue to denigrate migrants, asylum seekers and Indigenous Australians. There are dangers in broadening and extending laws against racial vilification, but much to be said for helping the targets of racism to stand up for themselves.

The federal government already provides financial support for ethnic and Indigenous broadcasters through the Community Broadcasting Foundation. Last year that amounted to a little over \$3.7 million.

A decision to double that amount would have both symbolic and practical value.

However as Born, Yu and Ahadi have all concluded it is not enough for marginalised groups to talk among themselves. They also need to engage with the mainstream. It is critically important therefore that the ABC and the SBS be supported as forums for rational debate and as an alternative for the ravings of the shock jocks.

ⁱ Born, G, 'Digitising democracy', in (eds.) J. Lloyd and J. Seaton, *What Can Be Done? Making the Media and Politics Better*, pp. 102-23. Special book issue of *Political Quarterly*. Oxford: Blackwell. ISBN: 1 4051 3693 6. p.11

ⁱⁱ Interview with Gerald Tooth. Transcript at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2006/1703051.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Yu, S, & Ahadi, D. (2010) 'Promoting Civic Engagement Through Ethnic Media', Platform: *Journal of Media and Communications* 2(2) (September) ISSN:1836:5132