

3. 1950s vibe, 21st century audience

Australia's dearth of onscreen diversity

Commentary: The difference between how multicultural Australia is ‘in real life’ and ‘in broadcasting’ can be seen through data from the Census, and from Screen Australia’s most recent research into onscreen diversity. In 2016, these sources of data coincided with the Census, which takes place every five years. Conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, this presents a ‘snapshot’ of Australian life. From the newest Census figures in 2016, it appears that nearly half of the population in Australia (49 percent) had either been born overseas (identifying as first generation Australian) or had one or both parents born overseas (identifying as second generation Australian). Nearly a third, or 32 percent, of Australians identified as having come from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, and 2.8 percent of Australians identify as Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). Nearly a fifth, or 18 percent, of Australians identify as having a disability. Screen Australia is the government agency that oversees film and TV funding and research. Conducted in 2016, Screen Australia’s study looked at 199 television dramas (fiction, excluding animation) that aired between 2011 and 2015. The comparison between these two sources of data reveals that with one exception, there is a marked disparity between diversity as depicted in the lived experiences of Australians and recorded by the Census, and diversity as depicted on screen and recorded by the Screen Australia survey.

Keywords: Australia, census, diversity, Islam, media representations, New Zealand, Screen Australia

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MOST academic writing is unapologetically dry, but it seems wrong to launch blithely into this commentary on diversity and the media without mentioning the Christchurch mosque attacks. On the day I put this article together from a keynote presentation I made to the 2018 conference of the Journalism Educators Association of New Zealand (JEANZ), a terrorist opened fire at two Christchurch mosques during Friday prayers, killing 50 adults and children and wounding a further 39 people. He was a white Australian and well-armed with magazines strapped to his legs and a car stocked with



Figure 1: A young woman prays outside Ponsonby Masjid in Auckland in the wake of the Christchurch atrocity on 15 March 2019.

extra ammunition. He had written a manifesto of nearly 40 pages explicitly declaring the attack as terrorist in nature. He attacked when the places of worship were packed, with the intent to take out as many Muslim New Zealanders as possible, while the Bangladeshi cricket team nearly became collateral damage as the players fled for their lives.

As I watched with horror from across Te Tai-o-Rehua, it occurred to me that such an attack was entirely predictable and I was not the only one who thought that. Repeatedly, after the attacks, Muslim voices pointed out that what had happened in Christchurch was not a shock (Rose, 2019) while Australian and New Zealand media engaged in some rare introspection (and more than a few crocodile tears). In June 2016 in Perth, Australia, a mosque was firebombed at night during Ramadan, when the number of worshippers attending was likely to be higher. That attack in Perth (Weber & Roberts, 2016), a spate of fatal shootings in mosques across the United States (Coleman, 2017) and the Christchurch shootings tragically and horrifically underscore the points that I and other researchers who work in the ‘media and diversity space’ (for want of a better description) have been making for years (for example, see Fares, 2015). We have been arguing about the need for more attention to be paid to the threat posed by giving far right voices a platform, along with the importance of accurate media representation that does not narrowly define what it means to be American, Australian, New Zealander and so on (Figure 1).

In the Australian context, there is a demonstrable history in the media of the exclusion and dehumanising of specific religious and ethnic groups, and the portrayal of these groups as violent, invading enemies. The Christchurch attacks are an end-result of a history of problematic reporting on diverse or multicultural societies, where the erroneous portrayal of a seemingly homogenous country, devoid of any diversity except that which came from angry brown and black people, contributed to the atmosphere of Islamophobia. Such reporting motivated the terrorist to preserve his culture—the dominant, mainstream, normal culture portrayed in the media—which he believed to be under threat, as outlined in his incoherent manifesto. This media narrative was also evident in New Zealand (Rahman & Emadi, 2018).

In multi-ethnic countries, the portrayal of ethnic minorities in the media has constituted an emerging area of academic interest over the past few decades. Australia has had one of the most concentrated patterns of media ownership among developed countries (Jakubowicz, 2010), where a small number of commercial interests control the private media sector which exists alongside public broadcasting. The public broadcasting sector in Australia is spread over two organisations—the ABC which is similar to the BBC, Radio NZ, and other public service broadcasting models—and SBS which is specific to Australia, as it has a specific mandate to cover multicultural issues (Flew, 2011) sharing some similarities in its mission and vision with broadcasters such as Māori Television in New Zealand. The commercial sector encompasses the press (state and local) and broadcasting outlets of News Corporation and its effective monopoly cable service Foxtel, and the Fairfax media group including print/online outlets (at state and local) and radio. In 2018, Australian commercial broadcaster Nine announced a takeover of Fairfax, which was approved by Australia's federal court in November 2018 (Barker, 2018). A third, traditionally important sector in the Australian media landscape is that of community broadcasting. There are more than 360 community radio stations around Australia producing media content by and for their local communities (Hess & Waller, 2015). Programmes cater to a wide range of audience interests including shows targeting different ethnic groups, religious communities, young people, radio for the print handicapped, fans of different music genres, Indigenous audiences, etc. The sector is powered by the labour of 20,000 volunteers and held up as one of the world's most successful examples of community broadcasting (Anderson, 2017).

The related issues of representation and diversity in the Australian media have been the subject of research by Phillips (2009) which concluded that in the Australian media,

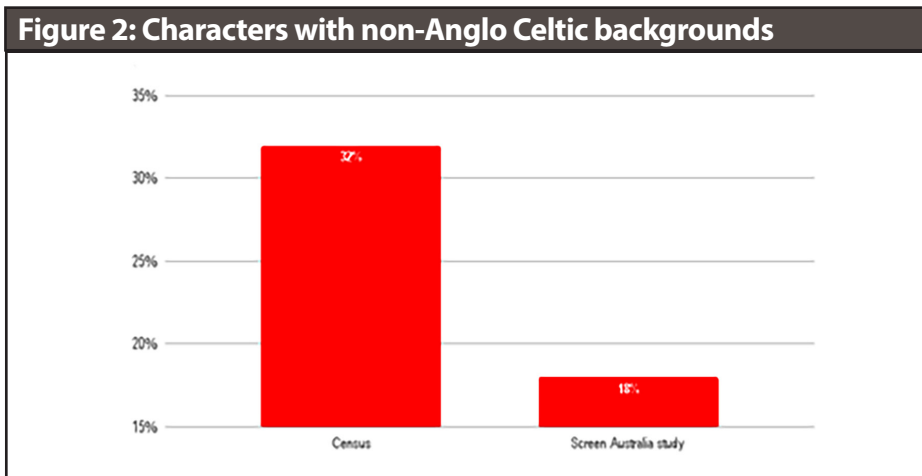
...instead of a range of peoples and cultures, we see mainly Anglo faces, projecting an archetypal image of a 'white Australia' that is more applicable to the 1950s than it is today.

Studies such as those by Ewart and Beard (2017) or Nunn (2010) find that the problematic media in which ethnic minorities are portrayed by the Australian media reflects the manner of representation found in other Western countries with multicultural populations—for example, in associating specific cultural, religious or ethnic groups with crime, and situating groups externally to the dominant culture. Lack of representation as ‘Australian’, and the media’s use of discourses of otherness, as outlined by Dunn, Klocker and Salabay (2007), reproduces racist and discriminatory sentiment against ethnic and religious minorities. In terms of the Australian media, the ‘...diversity of race, culture and religion is largely absent from the news services, unless people from ethnic minorities are posing a social problem of some kind’ (Phillips, 2011). An objective review of the relevant literature finds it hard to avoid the conclusion that mainstream Australian media contributes to, and constructs, a very narrow definition of ‘Australian’ that borders on reductivism. As I have previously argued (Bahfen, 2016), the commercial media in Australia on the one hand stresses the importance of national values and harmony, but on the other hand amplifies the voices of division and hate through portraying sections of Australian society as deviating from, and not belonging within, that framework of national values and harmony.

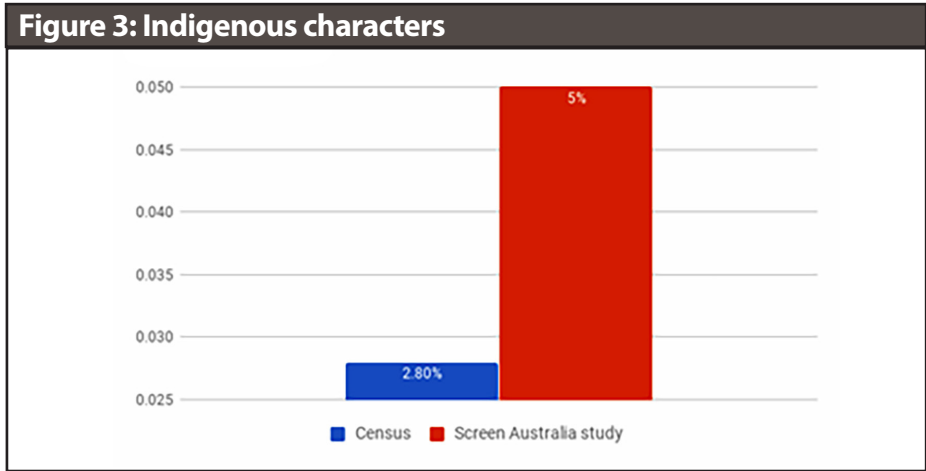
Within this context of a disparity between diversity in reality and as reported/portrayed in the media, one group as the focus of this tension is the Muslim community (Bahfen & Wake, 2011; Ho, 2007; Aly, 2007; Kabir, 2006). Much of the Western media typically portrays Muslim women as, paradoxically, either veiled victims in need of liberation, as threatening non-conformists whose clothing is seen as visual shorthand for ‘otherness’ or as sexualised, exotic beings (Posetti, 2017). Hess and Waller (2011) describe how ‘in Australia, the media’s relationship with Islam is arguably the most controversial dimension of reporting on cultural diversity at present’. While much of the research on diversity in the media in Australia has looked at the news media, some studies have found that specifically within the realms of film and television Australia’s diverse demographics are either un-represented or represented narrowly. In a content analysis of Australian drama Klocker (2014) found inter-ethnic relationships, on the rise in Australia and contributing to an ‘unprecedented level of ethnic diversity into our homes’, were portrayed on TV in physical terms without acknowledgement of committed, long-term partnerships between Australians of different ethnicities. On the issue of quotas (of the kind used with some success in the United States), Hammett-Jamart (2004) concluded that resistance to quota-based policy on the grounds of interference with the market belied the fact that ‘commercial forces alone will not enable diversity’ and called for a discourse of cultural diversity in any Australian pursuit of such a policy.

The difference between how multicultural Australia is ‘in real life’ and ‘in broadcasting’ can be seen through data from the Census, and from Screen

Australia's most recent research into on screen diversity. These sources of data coincided in 2016, with the Census taking place every five years. Conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, it presents a 'snapshot' of Australian life. From the newest Census figures in 2016, it appears that nearly half of the population in Australia (49 percent) had either been born overseas (identifying as first generation Australian) or had one or both parents born overseas (identifying as second generation Australian). Nearly a third or 32 percent of Australians identified as having come from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, and 2.8 percent of Australians identify as Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) (Figure 2). Nearly a fifth or 18 percent of Australians identify as having a disability. Screen Australia is the government agency that oversees film and TV funding and research. Conducted in 2016, Screen Australia's study looked at 199 television dramas (fiction, excluding animation) that aired between 2011 and 2015.

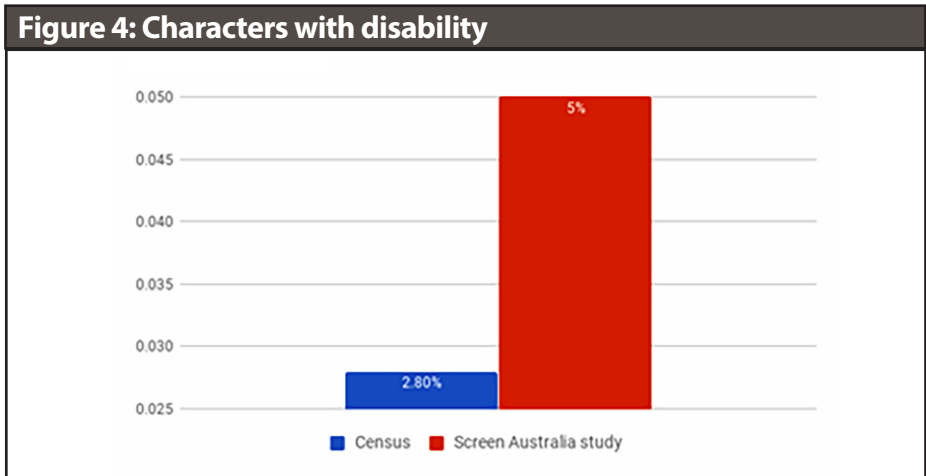


The comparison between these two sources of data reveals that with one exception, there is a marked disparity between diversity as depicted in the lived experiences of Australians and recorded by the Census, and diversity as depicted on screen and recorded by the Screen Australia survey. For example, when it came to characters of non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, 18 percent of characters on screen were depicted demonstrating this cultural diversity—but that is just over half the percentage of the Australian population who identify as coming from a non-Anglo Celtic background, according to the Census figures (Figure 1). While there are shows on television that depict, through the medium of television drama, households of people from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds (for example, SBS's *The Family Law*), these shows tend to be aired on public broadcasters, not commercial ones, especially the public broadcaster with a specific mandate to cater to and represent the country's diverse audiences.



In an overall depressing examination of the two sources of data, one result stood out when a comparison was undertaken of the Census figures versus those from the Screen Australia study. During the timeframe in which the Screen Australia study was undertaken, it was found that Indigenous (Aboriginal) characters are over-represented on screen (Figure 3). Such characters include those of the main roles in shows like *Cleverman* (an ABC production about an Indigenous superhero). This over-representation is a welcome change from previous studies in this area, which have found an under-representation of Indigenous life—for example, in the area of women’s leadership (Ryan, 2016).

In broadly defining diversity, I have included people with a disability, who—as other more comprehensive studies have found—have been under-represented in the media in Australia, where ‘representations of Australian identity are mostly based on the concept of a strong, masculine, fighting body’ (Ellis, 2019, p. 40).



A comparison of the figures from the 2016 Census with the study by Screen Australia in the same year serves to emphasise this disparity, with only four percent of characters onscreen shown with a disability despite 18 percent of people in Australia identifying as having a disability (Figure 4). *Please Like Me*, a television drama shown on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, was singled out for praise by Screen Australia for including main characters with a disability and positively depicting these characters.

There were other ‘positive signs’ in the Screen Australia survey, including the finding that out of the nearly 100 drama programmes that aired on Australian screens between 2011 and 2015, 64 percent included at least one character who was not Anglo-Celtic, and the general finding that children’s shows and comedies tended to be more diverse than other dramas (Screen Australia, 2016)

In discussing the differences that exist—some quite markedly—in the Census and Screen Australia’s study between the differing categories that can be grouped broadly under the rubric of ‘diversity’, economy of scale emerges as a factor that accounts for the disparity. Australian broadcasters feel producers in other nations, such as Canada, were at a competitive advantage because their local broadcasters helped them put together project financing deals (Aisbett, 2007). The ABC and SBS by comparison are limited in their abilities to fund programming and are likely to fund established content-makers, who in turn do not represent the diversity of their (theoretical and actual) audiences (Coles & MacNeill, 2017). From the perspective of those cast in the screen content, an actor of Asian descent felt that ‘Australia is about 20 years behind the US in terms of being more open [and] “colour-blind”’ (Screen Australia, 2016). I posit that because of a markedly smaller market in Australia compared to similar multicultural countries such as the United States or Canada, commercial broadcasters and producers in Australia are not likely to consciously improve on showing diversity in media because they worry that this type of product would not get audiences. A second factor worth considering when looking at the disparity between the lived experiences of diversity among Australians, compared to their mediated homogeneity as depicted on screen, is the influx of alternative content sources and programming. The monopoly of traditional commercial broadcasters is being eroded with iTunes, Netflix and Stan (a local Netflix-like company). This permits audiences to have a wider choice of broadcasting to listen to and watch, including overseas productions with more cultural diversity.

Obviously, there are limitations in straight comparisons of the data from the Census and the Screen Australia study. One of the first that comes to mind is that the Screen Australia study looked specifically at television drama—and beyond this genre, in other realms of the media, diversity is playing catch-up. For example, while the journalism industry remains overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic in commercial media, there are documented nascent efforts by journalism or

media educators to improve this situation. The Reporting Diversity project in 2007 (Hess & Waller, 2011) represented one such early effort and comprised a collaboration between what was then the Journalism Education Association (JEA) and the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (now JERAA and the Department of Home Affairs respectively). These types of projects stem from a recognition among journalism academics that ‘news media representations contribute to the social exclusion of Muslims’ and that ‘few researchers have explored these issues from the perspective of journalists, journalism educators, media trainers, and communication specialists’ (Ewart, Pearson, & Healy, 2016).

As one of the few journalism educators in Australia coming from a culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse background, in addition to researching the media’s lack of diversity and journalism educators’ attempts to overcome it, I am also attempting to address the gap in knowledge in this area through, for example, developing a specific subject for students enrolled at La Trobe University where I work, tentatively called ‘Journalism and Diversity’, to be taught on site at the Islamic Museum of Australia (a La Trobe partner). Quoting my frustration at the overwhelmingly homogenous nature of the industry I prepare my students for, Jakubowicz (2010) explained that as far back as 2009, I posited that there are three potential responses to the systemic bias in reporting—refuse to have anything to do with the Western media as they are ‘inherently evil’; seek to join the media as a mainstream journalist and change attitudes through interaction and have Muslim organisations engage with the media to enlarge their knowledge of Islam and Muslim communities. While media depictions of Islam and Muslims in places like Australia and New Zealand comprise just one of the most glaring examples of problematised media representation, efforts to overcome the lack of onscreen diversity, coupled with the normalisation of an exclusionary paradigm within which diversity is portrayed (one end result of which is the type of terror attack seen in Christchurch in March 2019), are signs of just how far the industry has to go.

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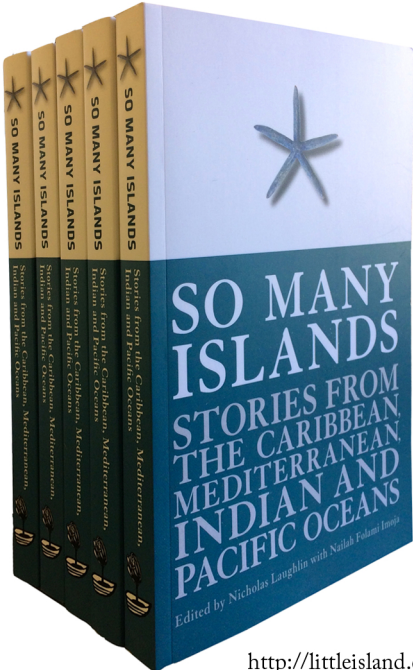
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