



SBS Managing Director Michael Ebeid - Business and Ethics Group, University of Sydney Business School Annual Dinner, Tuesday February 12, 2013

Introduction

Thank you to the Business and Professional Ethnicity Group for inviting me to speak tonight.

Can I also add my acknowledgment to the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

I've been the head of SBS for over 18 months and it has certainly been a period of rapid change at our network and across the media sector more broadly.

It is a privilege to have this opportunity to talk to you about SBS in today's Australia.

- About how we have evolved in our short 30 year history;
- About how new technology is changing the media landscape and how we engage and consume media differently today; and
- About the complexities faced by SBS, as Australia's most unique broadcaster, as we cover news and world events for audiences which are more multicultural than ever before.

You may be familiar with SBS's current tagline: 7 Billion Stories and Counting.

That's because at SBS, we tell the best stories humanity has to offer both about Australia and the world we live in.

Our content captures a broad range of truly global views and perspectives, as well as the stunning cultural diversity within our shores that reflect today's Australia.

We aim for our content, especially our Australian commissioned content, to provoke debate, push boundaries, surprise audiences and inspire change.

Whether that is in Drama like East West 101 or our new series Better Man which we will air later this year and is about a young Vietnamese Australian who was the last Australian to be hung in custody in Singapore or documentaries like our world-famous Go Back to Where You Came From or Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta. Or our food genre which is all about culture and discovery or indeed through our sport like football, the world's biggest game, and cycling and our news which I will talk more about later.

Our content has to be distinctive and we have to be different to every other network in Australia.

SBS history

To appreciate the Australia we live in today, I'd like to touch on the nation shaping role that SBS has played over its 30 year history.

The beginnings were somewhat modest.

SBS was established in 1975 to address a government concern that ethnic communities would require details of the new Medicare health scheme in their own languages.

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Two ethnic radio stations were established in Sydney and Melbourne to broadcast pre-recorded messages in several foreign languages about the new scheme.

SBS was founded a few years later in 1978 and grew to include television in 1980, progressively expanding its reach and accessibility to all Australians.

Back then, one of SBS's important roles was to assist migrants to maintain a connection with their country of origin and cultural heritage.

Today we do far more than that - we broadcast to the whole country and we are there for all Australians. We are certainly no longer thought of as the 'Ethnic Broadcaster.'

We believe what this does is contribute to participation and the overall success of Australia as a diverse migrant country, building on our reputation as being the most successful multicultural country in the world.

My History

I was born in Cairo and my parents came to Australia in 1968 when I was three.

They migrated to Australia for a better life; a story shared by so many millions of Australians.

As a child I have memories of my parents engaging with SBS – and it wasn't images flickering on a television screen, it was initially through radio.

For many migrants like my parents SBS was a trusted source of news and information in a language my parents could understand, a familiar voice speaking in a language they could understand, helping them participate better in the national conversation and integrate into Australian society.

The power of television should not be understated either, in that it can promote both feelings of inclusiveness or isolation in the viewer and I recall thinking as a child there was nobody who looked like me on mainstream television on shows like Neighbours, Home and Away, A Country Practice or the Sullivans.

I enjoyed growing up in a culturally diverse family, knowing another language and appreciating another culture.

SBS brought the world and its cultural diversity into our living rooms and allowed the many recent migrants to Australia:

- To stay connected to their country of origin and gave them an avenue to help them feel a part of the broader Australian community;
- And also to understand the other new cultures around them;
- And it gave all Australians the opportunity to experience new cultures.

These qualities still reflect what SBS is delivering for Australian communities today.

SBS Charter and purpose

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SBS occupies a special place in not only Australia, but indeed in the international broadcasting landscape.

Nowhere else in the world will you find a broadcaster with a Charter like ours.

We are truly unique and Australia is lucky to have two public broadcasters.

I define our Charter and purpose as being to inspire all Australians to explore and appreciate our diverse world, and by doing so contribute to an inclusive and cohesive society. It is a purpose which drives and motivates staff at SBS.

Today's Australia

As we are all well aware, Australia has experienced significant shifts in demography.

Today, there are over 270 languages spoken other than English in Australia as well as more than 200 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages.

One in four of us were born overseas and 43 per cent of us have at least one parent born overseas.

Four million Australians speak a language other than English at home, that's double the number of people speaking a second language than 30 years ago when SBS was first established.

So what does multiculturalism mean for SBS audiences?

Research shows that audiences believe the concept of multiculturalism has evolved over time, developing different focuses, though all facets still co-exist to an extent.

In the 1970's it had a focus on safeguarding culture and countering racism – multiculturalism was about nationality and it was about being anti-racist.

In the 1990's this had developed into a broader celebration of Australia's diversity with a focus on unity and confidence.

Audience research tells us that more recently, people feel that multiculturalism is about integration with the world's diversity. It's about being open-minded and feelings of connection to the world.

It shows that Australians live in quite a cosmopolitan society and we are comfortable with being part of multiple cultures.

Our own most recent research conducted with IPSOS Mackay confirms that younger audiences in particular interpret multiculturalism as interacting with the world's diversity beyond simply making it about ethnicity.

And I am a perfect example. I feel Australian in every sense, but I also value my Egyptian heritage because both have contributed to who I am.

And as the Prime Minister noted in her Australia Day speech the other week:

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“Our nation is not just a patchwork of identities and backgrounds....”

“...our multiculturalism is revealed not as an ornament but as an organising principle not as a decorative feature of our society, but as a decisive element in our success.”

Changes in the media landscape

Just as multiculturalism has evolved in our 30 year history, so have audience consumption habits.

Let's look at the media industry.

Just five years ago there were only five free-to-air television stations plus Foxtel in Australia.

Today there are 16 free-to-air stations, hundreds of pay television stations and several IPTV – internet protocol television providers.

On demand television delivered via the internet is a major growth area.

The average home has:

- Four internet enabled smart devices;
- 2.2 televisions; and
- 50 per cent of homes have a DVR; and
- 25 per cent of homes now have a connected television

Nearly 50 per cent of us use Facebook every month and increasingly we use Facebook and Twitter while we watch television.

Dual screens or 'concurrent watching and interacting' is emerging as a major trend and audiences have higher levels of engagement with that content.

Currently there are one billion smart phones in the world out of a six billion phones.

Google estimates that there will be six billion smartphones in just three years.

Australia leads the world with 50 per cent of our mobile phones being smart phones and we have a 200 per cent growth in mobile data usage in the last year alone.

Our own projections for our news and current affairs mobile app is that more people will access SBS news from their mobile phones on their way to or from work than from a desktop within the next 12 months.

Just about every network including SBS has a catch-up or on-demand viewing service and of course ours – SBS ON DEMAND - is the best and available on mobile devices, connected televisions, game consoles as well as the boring old desktop.

During our recent transmission of *Hunted* an eight-part television drama, 20 per cent of the total audience accessed the series through our catch-up service through devices at a time of their choosing.

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The real question is can you imagine what that figure will be in three years?

We know that video consumption will be a major driver of the rollout of a national broadband network.

We expect the appetite for on demand viewing to grow exponentially.

Speaking to people at Telstra they tell me their network traffic for video has been doubling every year for the past three years.

The fact is that the sheer number of channels and services available means that our audiences have fragmented and have much more choice.

For broadcasters, grabbing audience attention is harder than it ever has been.

For media organisations everywhere, it is creating significant challenges.

Increased competition for audience attention, increased competition for advertising dollars coupled with a difficult economic climate has slowed commercial growth.

We've seen the impact of this with some of the major players forced to restructure and lay-off staff from traditional media platforms.

Channel 9 and 10 have laid off hundreds of staff in the last two years and Fairfax and News Limited have laid off about 1500 staff collectively in that time.

All of this will have an impact on in-depth and investigative journalism and a lot of the serious news and current affairs is being left to the two public broadcasters.

But because of the fact that SBS is a niche player it means we've experienced less audience decline than Seven, Nine and 10's main channels.

Thanks to a Federal Government funding boost this financial year, SBS has been able to maintain our services and audiences – a hard thing to do in today's environment.

We have a value we can clearly demonstrate to Australians.

We have exciting innovations across our platforms and content because we've always had to be innovative.

We are able to deliver more with less given our modest resources.

We run SBS TV on about 20 per cent of the average budget of the other four networks.

SBS operates five television channels SBS ONE and TWO, National Indigenous Television (NITV), and two other channels on Foxtel - World Movies, which showcases films from more than 200 cultures, and Australia's only arts and entertainment channel STUDIO.

Our services in the digital age

But being a broadcaster in today's media landscape is not just about television and radio.

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We operate an extensive online site, full of rich content available on demand.

I believe we are in fact leading the industry on a number of fronts, particularly in the digital innovation space.

Well over 90 per cent of the content you see on television today and all of our radio content is also available online through our catch-up services.

We have over a dozen mobile apps for our key content and programs which helps to deepen the engagement for our audiences with our content.

Social media has of course become the centrepiece of our offering for key programs and content and is a cost effective promotional tool.

We also publish a monthly food magazine, Feast which sets itself apart by exploring culture and heritage through food.

And we have a publishing and distribution business for CDs, DVDs and books which supports our on air offering.

Connecting communities through technology

So with all of these technological advances the world is smaller and much more accessible.

Back when my parents arrived, it cost two years' wages for a flight back to the home country, phone calls were expensive and unreliable, letters took weeks to arrive, and there was no real access to electronic media.

What that meant was that migrants had no choice but to immerse themselves and participate in Australian society.

The reality today is that it is possible for new Australians to stay completely connected to their country of origin through satellite channels, social media and the internet. Phone calls are free thanks to Skype and international travel is a fraction of the cost.

So, in considering SBS's role in this climate, we need to consider whether this new media world will reduce a person's ability to participate in Australian society?

Because it's increasingly possible to rely on country of origin media for news, information and entertainment, SBS's role is changing to be more focused on ensuring migrants can access Australian news and information in a language they're familiar to help them participate in Australian society.

There is much research to say that as people get older and leave the workforce they revert back to their original language and can disengage from society.

Sadly, evidence from Europe and, to a small extent here, shows that if not actively supported and nurtured increased cultural diversity can actually lead to social tensions and divisions.

We've recently seen evidence of this in mainland Europe and the United Kingdom.

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Our German radio presenters recently completed an online documentary looking at the success of multiculturalism in Australia following on from the German Chancellor's recent declaration that multiculturalism had failed in Germany.

They examined the experiences of Turkish migrants in Australia and Germany and how the contrast in the treatment and freedoms of migrants between the two countries has impacted on the success of multicultural cohesiveness.

Post the Second World War, the German Government allowed limited migration and treated most as temporary 'guest workers' offering no policies or citizens' rights to support permanent migration and settlement.

In contrast in Australia successive Governments from both sides of politics have actively supported migration through a range of policies and settlement support.

But being multicultural in and of itself does not ensure a cohesive society.

If not nurtured and fostered, multiculturalism can become a source of tension, rather than being a strength.

That's why SBS's goal of reflecting the true diverse Australia and promoting the benefits of multiculturalism is making a significant contribution to our success as a migrant country.

SBS – Deeper and richer

SBS's contributes to that goal through our rich broadcasting on two radio stations in what will soon be 74 languages up from our 60 today.

We broadcast in over double the number of languages the BBC Worldwide does.

It's interesting to look at the top 10 languages other than English from over 15 years ago and then look at them today.

Mandarin has jumped from number seven to number one and Hindi wasn't even in the top 10 languages in 1996 and we've recently reviewed our schedule to reflect these changes.

The Asian Century White Paper recommends that all students should have access to at least one priority Asian language – Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Japanese and Indonesian.

It also projects that by 2025, four of the 10 largest economies in the world will be in our region - China (first), India (third), Japan (fourth) and Indonesia (tenth). Asia is likely to account for almost half of the world's economic output, with China accounting for about half of that.

SBS already today broadcasts in 23 Asian languages so we are more than ready to help equip Australia to be more active in Asia.

We know our younger audience s are seeking to re-engage with their culture and backgrounds and are doing so in a more contemporary way than their parents and grandparents.

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That's why we've recently launch a range of in-language digital music stations PopAsia, Pop Araby and Pop Desi.

Let me know turn to our country's first culture.

At the end of last year we launched National Indigenous Television on free-to-air television on SBS and in doing so, brought the stories about and produced by the First Australians to every Australian household for the first time.

Adding NITV to SBS makes us even more 'special.'

I believe this is a significant step forward not only for Indigenous broadcasting, by preserving Indigenous culture for future generations but also for reconciliation in this country by giving non-Indigenous Australians a chance to learn more and a real window into Indigenous culture for the first time.

One of SBS's important pillars is our news and current affairs.

SBS delivers Australia's only local news bulletin with a real focus on world events.

Our World News gives all Australians an in-depth insight into world events but through an Australian lens.

And we cover current affairs through our Insight program and Dateline which examines international current affairs.

Broadcasting for multiculturalism

A report contributed to by various universities and media organisations including SBS, highlighted that we are still seeing low levels of ethnic minority content on commercial television news, unless it's when they make news as 'villans' or 'victims'.

SBS promotes our nation's diversity positively unlike any other media outlet, as you would rightly expect.

At SBS for example, we use subtitles for interviewees speaking a language other than English in news and current affairs stories to preserve the language.

The common practice in Australia, and indeed with most global networks, is to drown the native language with an English voice over.

It is a subtle distinction, but we believe the full sound of an interviewee speaking in his or her own language further reinforces their cultural and ethnic identity and allows the inflections and emotions of that language to be heard.

Turn on a commercial networks' evening news and current affairs programs and what you often see is a representation of Australia's demography in the 1950s and 1960s.

The reporter base in the mainstream media in Australia still does not represent our true demography.



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SBS has rightly led the other broadcasters on this front.

SBS actively recruits people from all backgrounds.

Each year we take in graduates and we ensure they represent Australia's diversity.

As a result, reporters have had names like Yalda Hakim, Auskar Surbakti, Anton Enus, Lee Lin Chin and Ricardo Goncalves. When he was at Sky, Ricardo anglo-fied his name, calling himself Richard Gon-galves.

So how do we manage the complexities of being a broadcaster with a Charter which specifically sets out that we must reflect Australia's multiculturalism through our services?

At SBS, we also take our responsibility to ensure balance and neutrality in how we report issues involving ethnic minority groups seriously, ensuring a range of perspectives are brought to our viewers.

Let me give you an example.

In Melbourne a few years ago five men were charged with terror-related offences over an alleged plot to mount a suicide attack on a Sydney army base.

All were Australian citizens and three were Somali Australians.

The arrests sent the small Somali community into a rapid spin. All the classic stereotypes were heaped upon them.

The story needed context, for an in-depth examination of an isolated and vulnerable community.

SBS had the ideal forum for such examination - Insight.

The big challenge for our news management team was to convince a community which felt it was under siege to talk openly about their frustrations and fears.

The community feared a racist backlash. Younger members didn't want to talk for fear of being interrogated by ASIO.

This was also a clan-based culture, rivals often reluctant to appear in the same room together. Then there were elder and gender issues - young people reluctant to speak their minds in front of elders; women afraid to debate males on camera.

Despite all this, a producer with experience in dealing with ethnic communities gained the trust of this community.

What resulted was a strong example of how to properly portray an ethnic community which felt it was ostracised and threatened by prejudice and alienation.

Let me give you another example from that same year, also in Victoria.

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You might recall a few years ago the news reports of attacks on Indian students in Victoria with stories of particularly vicious assaults - one featuring a young Indian with graphic stomach wounds.

India has one of the competitive and crowded media markets in the world with over 600 television stations of which 100 are news-based.

As soon as that image was published in India, hysteria erupted with the majority elected to paint Indians as the victims of racists, in an inherently racist country.

Research SBS commissioned in 2010 on this issue, found Indian people in Australia were getting 80 per cent of their news via the often inflammatory coverage from India rather than getting their information from local news outlets which included coverage of initiatives by local authorities to address the situation.

There was no denying that Indian students were being attacked in Australia. But the police believed they were the victims of mainly opportunistic economic crimes. This view was later supported by a Senate inquiry.

There are more than 90,000 Indians studying in Australia, contributing an estimated 12 billion dollars into the local education sector so this was an important issue.

Our Insight team uncovered a story for a forum which looked at how international students, eager for a new life in Australia were vulnerable to exploitation by education agents overseas and vocational colleges in Australia.

A number of Indian students – some of them victims of violence – were keen to go on the show and recount their experiences in Australia.

I share this example because it epitomises what reporting diversity most strongly requires – context, something sadly often missing from the mainstream commercial media.

Proper context provides true understanding to issues where false assumptions are too easily made as a result of sensationalised headlines.

We recently launched an interactive online documentary *A Convenient Education* which explored the issue from all points of view.

Again, SBS sought to bring perspective to a complex issue where multiculturalism was at the centre of the debate.

On a day-to-day basis, SBS must take into account considerations of how we give voice to our diverse communities whilst being respectful and sensitive to cultural, ethnic and racial issues and sensitivities.

In covering the Middle East in particular, SBS has worked really hard to greatly improve the balanced and neutral reporting of conflicts from the region.

We are mindful of the diverse and conflicting views, beliefs and religion or faith, however this does not mean that we Kow-tow to extreme views from either side of the debate.



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It is fair to say that we do get regular complaints from those who would sit at the extremes on many of the world's hot issues.

What we also do is try to put the issues in the national debate into an international context. For example on carbon pricing, marriage equality, church paedophilia we explore what some other nations are doing on those issues to help put things into perspective for our audiences.

The dilemma for SBS is being consistent with how we balance these considerations and sensitivity with our commitment to delivering content that still provokes debate and inspires change.

Conclusion

Let me go back to where I began.

SBS is helping all Australians, no matter where they are from or when they arrived in this country, understand and value diversity.

We do this by telling the stories of our rich multicultural society, provoking debate about what it means to be Australian today and challenging Australians to really think about the world they live in.

SBS is an important part of national strategies to ensure the continued success of Australia as a migrant society, particularly in these more challenging economic times and as technology demands a new approach to audience engagement.

So hopefully you can see how SBS has evolved over the past 30 years to not just speak to migrants but to engage with all Australians to share in and understand the value of diversity.

We actively play a role in providing balance and context to break down the misunderstandings or prejudices that can cause social tensions as we've seen in Europe and in ensuring that Australia today is a cohesive society.

Given Australia is more diverse than it ever has been before, SBS's role is not only more complex but more important than it ever has been before.

ENDS