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Ethnic minority media and the public sphere: the case of African-Australian media producers

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Ethnic Minority Media and the Public Sphere: The Case of African-Australian Media Producers

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Abstract:	This paper analyses the work of ethnic minority media producers through a series of 13 in depth interviews with African-Australian broadcasters, writers and producers. Focusing on the aims and motivations of participants, the paper demonstrates a more expansive role for African-Australian media, one that brings niche media products into dialogue with mainstream Australian public life and challenges common understandings of ethnic media as appealing to a small, linguistically and culturally defined audience. Such a role also raises questions around wider conceptual understandings of the public sphere, particularly as it is employed to interrogate minority-majority relations. The paper concludes by engaging with previous literature focused on the changing contours of the public sphere ideal in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies.

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Ethnic Minority Media and the Public Sphere: The Case of African-Australian Media Producers

Introduction

Many ethnic minority media producers, writers, journalists and broadcasters work on a volunteer basis, finding time between employment, study and family, and enjoy little in the way of stable funding and resources. So why do they do it? Or, more specifically, what are the aims and motivations that drive the producers of ethnic media to continue their work, and what is the social role they envisage for their media? This paper engages with these questions by drawing on data from a series of 13 interviews with African-Australian media producers in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, and interrogating the way in which producers discuss the importance of their work and what they hope to achieve. Through this analysis, the paper will engage with contemporary theoretical questions around minority-majority relations in complex multi-ethnic countries such as Australia.

Ethnic minority media around the world provide an important service often not catered for by the large, yet mainly homogenous, national and global broadcast, digital, commercial and public service media environments (Cover 2012; Browne 2005; Forde et al. 2009; Author 2013). Ethnic media exist at the intersection of local, national and the global cultures, and are often tasked with articulating a continuously changing and hybridised sense of culture, history and collective identity for their listeners, viewers and readers. On the one hand, transnational and diasporic communications and cultural networks have helped shape ethnic media, including the practices of media producers, the resources, stories and images available to them, and the set of products to which they can compare and contrast themselves and from which they can take inspiration

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(Cover 2012). It is also true that the local social and media environment continues to significantly effect ethnic media in Australia and elsewhere, presenting as it does a series of unavoidable challenges and opportunities such as a lack of resources and employment, relationships with authorities, and mainstream media representations (Cover 2012; Forde et al. 2009).

Ethnic minority media are produced, disseminated and consumed in multiple networks and fields of power (Cover 2012). For example, literature suggests ethnic media producers are motivated by a need to counter a powerful 'mainstream' media environment that is often both national and transnational, is guided by a market rationale of appealing to the largest possible audience, and draws on sets of familiar tropes that overtly and implicitly articulate symbolic borders of inclusion and exclusion[i] (Browne 2005; Lay and Thomas 2012; Matsaganis et al. 2010; Gillespie 2006; Shields 2014). Additionally, the idea of a local community is often prevalent in the work of ethnic media producers. As Lay and Thomas (2012: 376) suggest, "ethnic media … facilitate a sense of community cohesion". They do this by providing a cohesive community voice and by covering local issues important to minority ethnic communities, issues often ignored in the mainstream media (Author 2015; Browne 2005). Indeed, this community cohesion has positive psychological and democratic potential for migrants, as "ethnic community broadcasting is contributing to the idea of active citizenry and enhancing the democratic process" (Forde et al. 2009: 18).

It is also important to acknowledge the multiple stances and gazes cast by migrants and ethnic minorities and to resist the temptation to see their media use and production as any less complex than that of non-migrants and non-ethnic minorities (Sreberny 2005; Deuze 2006). A focus on community empowerment does not mean that the 'gaze' is always cast inwards (Sreberny 2005).

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Rather, diasporic networks coalesce with local ties in ethnic media, as they provide a space for the articulation and management of difference based on age, migratory status, political and social affiliation (Cunnigham and Nguyen 1999; Deuze 2006). Indeed, the community focus of ethnic media can involve focusing on the specificities of particular communities embedded in a certain time and space, as well as an expansive gaze, based on a desire to stay connected to the homeland and diaspora (Cover 2012). Countering mainstream media portrayals can also involve multiple relationships with co-ethnics, those from the majority ethnic group, and other minorities.

Such multiple perspectives are reflected in the findings of this paper, which support the themes discussed above. However, this paper will also focus on aims, motivations and roles less commonly discussed in literature on ethnic media (Forde et al. 2009; Lay and Thomas 2012; Husband 1998, 2005). These are based on the desire to reach out to the broader Australian society and to communicate across communities (Husband 1998, 2005). They include actively targeting a non-African audience and attempting, directly or indirectly, to affect and change the representational practices of Australian media. These findings point to a need to broaden the range of possibilities when it comes to understanding the work of ethnic minority media producers, and to better relate the motivations of ethnic media workers to their surrounding social and media environments. The findings also raise important questions about theoretical understandings of the relationship between media, minority rights, public participation and social cohesion (Fraser 2011; Husband 2005; Sreberny 2005). As such, I will relate the most significant findings of this study to debates around the changing contours of the public sphere as a tool through which to analyse and understand the role of media in democratic participation.

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Why *Ethnic Minority Media*

The term ethnic minority media is used in this paper specifically as it allows for the analysis of media produced by and for (although not exclusively) a particular ethnic group and the role of these media "in the negotiation of minority-majority or minority-dominant group relations" (Matsaganis et al. 2010: 9). A focus on ethnic minority media, rather than a similar category such as immigrant media or minority language media, also allows for an analysis of media produced by and for second and third generation migrants, media produced in English and media produced in ways that facilitate both "cultural maintenance and adaptation" (Cunningham and Nguyen 1999: 125) as well as "belonging and distancing" (Deuze 2005: 273).

A focus on ethnic *minority* media also provides an opportunity to differentiate between diverse ethnic media systems around the world. For example, ethnic media in the United States include large-scale, commercially independent media organisations (Deuze 2005). These media cater to large audiences, and although they can still be considered as minority – not only numerically but also in terms of social and political power – their operational and economic structures differ significantly from the independent, small-scale community operations at the heart of this paper. Within the context of the former, there is evidence of distinct divisions in media use between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority in the US (Morley 2000; Deuze 2005). According to Deuze (2005), mainstream newspapers struggle to reach ethnic audiences in both the US and Holland. Ethnic minorities also use media for different purposes, preferring ethnic media for information on their own countries and communities, and mainstream media for news on American politics.

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Such differences raise questions about the role of ethnic media in social cohesion and representation (Sreberny 2005; Deuze 2005; Husband 2005; Couldry and Dreher 2007). Notwithstanding the important role that ethnic media play in cultural maintenance and adaptation, public concerns revolve around fears of cultural and ethnic segregation and ghettoization. Although in popular debates these concerns are often based on simplistic and unfounded fears of ethnic isolationism, there are more complex issues at play that relate to democratic representation and political participation for minority communities. Sreberny (2005) portrays the conundrum as one of balancing the need for marginalised communities to have spaces for self-controlled representation, whilst attempting to avoid ethnic reification in which communities are frozen in isolated positions vis-à-vis each other and the majority ethnic group. Similarly, drawing on the theory of the public sphere, Husband (1998, 2005) and Couldry and Dreher (2007) question the dominant discourses surrounding ethnic media as, in and of itself, an effective resource for minority empowerment. Rather, more attention should be paid to the potential of communication across and between communities in ways that allow for recognition of the fluidity of ethnic identities and the diversity of their voices. What is at stake is not so much a re-idealisation of a singular public sphere, but recognition of the need for marginalised and minority communities to not only speak, but be understood and acknowledged by the mainstream and by each other.

Sreberny's (2005) study of ethnic and multicultural media in England found that ethnic media producers and audiences sought a media system that better reflected the multiple identities, relationships and 'gazes' of minority Britons. Many spoke out against being categorised as 'ethnic' producers, while others accepted the label as a form of positive differentiation. Audience members complained of the lack of portrayals of mixed race characters on English television,

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suggesting such portrayals often constructed a homogeneous ethnic group with few inter-ethnic relationships (Sreberny 2005). What these findings, as well as those of Deuze (2005) and others, suggest is that when ethnic minorities engage with media, either as users, producers or both, they engage with a multiplicity of media, perform different identities and enact various gazes towards geographical, political and social spaces (Sreberny 2005).

Sample and Methods

The author conducted in depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 13 African-Australian media producers, presenters, broadcasters and journalists in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. The interview questions were prepared according to criteria established in previous literature on qualitative methodologies (Berg 2007; Silverman 2003). Although the sample is not intended to be generalizable, it nonetheless provides a significant range of respondents from a variety of media. Participants represent a variety of countries from the African continent, including the Congo, Ethiopia, Botswana, South Sudan and Sierra Leone. Respondents produce media through different technologies, including a website, community radio, community television, and magazines. All but three of the interviewees produce at least some of their content in English. The three exceptions are all Ethiopian community radio broadcasters, with two broadcasting in Amharic and one in Harari. The participants are all first generation migrants. All interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded and transcribed by the author. The use of in depth interviews is the best way to examine “the *how* and *why*”, of participants’ work, including their aims, motivations and the social role they see their media playing (Gustafson and Hickerson 2014: 6). Interview transcripts were analysed first in their totality, in line with aspects of grounded theory (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The next stage of the analysis consisted of identifying key themes as they relate to the central aims of the paper. Each transcript was read

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through carefully several times, with themes identified and highlighted (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The themes themselves were made more prevalent by the overall structure of the interview itself.

In discussing the data I begin with findings that replicate those most common in previous literature on ethnic media – their role in providing an alternative to mainstream media. At the same time, I will contextualise the situation amongst African-Australians within the broader media landscape of Australia, particularly the mainstream media discourses that have emerged around African migration and settlement. I will then move on to some of the more unique findings of this project and articulate the way in which they shed further light on the relationship between minority ethnic media and majority social institutions and media practices. Finally, I will relate these findings to debates involving the public sphere.

A Voice of our Own: Countering Negativity and Promoting Positivity

Participants are far from homogenous in their approaches to media work and production. Coming from different political, linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds, they display a diverse set of aims and motivations. Indeed, Cunningham (2001: 138) suggests diasporic media provide a "space for the staging of difference". The acknowledgement of such difference in terms of media production and reception is an important antidote to the all too easy essentialisation of migrants and ethnic minorities as consisting of homogeneous communities guided by uniform experiences of displacement and nostalgia. Several participants are motivated in their work by a personal desire to create media and, in some cases, to work their way into the mainstream media sector in Australia. At least one participant was motivated to produce a magazine by, in part, a love of creativity, writing and art. Still another participant sited as part of his motivation for community

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radio broadcast a desire to give back to the community after he had been exposed to kindness upon arriving in Australia.

There are several instances in the interviews, however, in which the personal and public intertwine and participants' discussions of their personal reasons for producing media are clearly part of a wider narrative concerning representation, power and access to wider social structures. This is particularly the case in discussions of Australian media, and their general failure to sufficiently acknowledge African-Australians as anything other than 'problems' to be dealt with. In Australia, both African migrants in general, as well as Sudanese and Somali youth more specifically, have been featured in mediated public debates over multiculturalism and migrant and refugee settlement (Due 2008; Marjoribanks et al. 2010; Windle 2008). Analysing media representations, Due (2008) and Marjoribanks et al. (2010) argue that the mainstream media in Australia construct a binary opposition between a white Australian 'we' and a black 'other'. Sudanese in Australia, for example, are constructed largely as a problem to be dealt with, even when they are reported as being victims of violence (Marjoribanks et al. 2010; Windle 2008). Such media coverage provides a platform for debates about their perceived inability to integrate (Marjoribanks et al. 2010). Arguably, these issues came to a head in Melbourne around 2007, when teenager Liep Gony was beaten to death by two white youths. After the attack, then immigration minister Kevin Andrews questioned the ability of African migrants to integrate into Australian society.

Whilst interviewing participants in 2013 - 2015 it became clear that, while some saw a slight improvement in media coverage, there were still major concerns with the mainstream media's treatment of African migrants and related issues. All 13 participants discussed Australian media in negative terms, while 6 also saw some positive attributes to the mainstream media sector. The

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major themes in these discussions revolved around a lack of balanced representation, little focus on the positive achievements of African-Australians, and a preoccupation with crime and gang activity amongst young Africans (Marjoribanks et al. 2010; Due 2008). It is within this context that participants discussed the importance of self-representation and the way in which they could counter the negative images of the mainstream media sector (Browne, 2005). Several participants directly relate the need for self-representation to mainstream media. One participant, a young, female community radio host and musician, discussed the importance of having control over media in the following way:

> I studied at NAIDA and my teacher told me that the only job I'll ever get is either SBS or community media…if you're trying to get in channel 7, channel 9, channel 10, the criteria within there is that if they don't look like us (white) don't bring them in the door…it's good that we focus on kind of creating our own outlets.

Other participants lamented the lack of African voices in debates about African communities and issues in Australia. As one male community radio host said:

> There isn't a platform at the moment for the African Australian community to speak. Every time there's an issue there's 'Bob Smith', who's a Professor at so and so talking about, you know why this issue is important…No matter how well meaning that person is they won't necessarily be going with the agenda or the interests of the African Australian community at heart.

When discussing the need to promote a positive image of African communities, participants pointed out that they do not want positivity at all costs, rather a more balanced portrayal that includes coverage of problems facing African-Australian communities, as well as the contributions these communities have made to Australian society. One young female participant

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who contributes to an English language website was careful to emphasise the journalistic ideal of objectivity in her work. When discussing the benefit of being able to provide a voice for African-Australians, she described her motivation as being “able to send out the right messages out there, even if it’s negative even if it’s positive, but we just need to be heard, that’s it”.

Indeed, at times it is simply a more realistic portrayal that is aimed for. A female host of a Sudanese community radio program spoke of the importance of her program as showing “we don’t only exist when there’s a mistake; we also exist when everything is just normal”. A young male participant who produced and hosted a community television program in 2012 spoke about the lack of normalcy when it comes to media portrayals of Africans and Africa. In particular, he lamented the construction of Africa as an exotic safari holiday destination, and Africans as successful entertainers or sports people:

> There is nothing normal, you know, it’s either we’re super holiday, or super dancing, or sports, you know, yeah we’re the best in sports, super body built African, and so people tend to think we’re just not normal, so I wanted to show Africans as being normal.

For some participants, their aims to promote a positive image of their community involve an inward gaze that is directed less at mainstream media and more toward language and cultural maintenance, social education and the embracing of future community leaders. The 3 Ethiopian participants who broadcast in Amharic or Harari focus extensively on community and youth issues, including involving young people in Ethiopian and Australian social life. As the section below explains, community maintenance and support was a central factor for several participants.

Local Issues, Community and Youth

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Supporting community culture, Language and traditions is a common goal amongst ethnic media producers around the world according to Browne (2005). Several participants in this study emphasised their aim of promoting and articulating a particular community, whether that be pan-African or a specific linguistic or cultural group. The importance of community maintenance was most evident from participants who's media was based on a particular linguistic group (the Ethiopian respondents who broadcast in Amharic or Harari, or the Sudanese participants who broadcast in Dinka and Arabic as well as English) and those who focused on a particular aspect of the African communities, such as social justice and African history.

Two participants from a community radio program in Sydney articulated an African history and identity when discussing the aims and motivations of their programs. Their approach is educational and one in which they aim to rediscover and pass on a particular African narrative to future generations. As one of the participants explained:

> We're [African communities in general] not talking about the real issue … you know who we are, cause we come here and automatically want to be Europeans, we want to forget about being Africans … and my passion now is to … we need to start steering ourselves in the right direction cause I find the youth following this gang mentality that comes from America

A focus on local news and issues was motivated by a need empower members of African communities and to provide information lacking in the mainstream media, such as news about employment, policing, housing, culture and language. Several participants spoke with pride about the information, sense of community and general well-being afforded to their listeners and readers. Another less common reason behind a focus on local issues is a lack of resources with which to source news from Africa and the African diaspora. Major news events from Africa were

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still covered; however, priority was often given to local issues due to the desires of audiences and the comparative ease of finding such news.

Reaching out to the Mainstream: Impacting on media practices and public debates

Despite a focus on community, cultural maintenance and local issues, ethnic minority media are far from "homeostatic devices" (Bauman 2011: 32). Indeed, according to Amin Malouf (as cited in Bauman 2011) if migrants feel their original cultural practices are respected, safe and strong, they are more likely to engage positively with the cultural practices of the country of settlement. African-Australian media are involved in the constant change of cultural adaptation and political and social relationships of power and inequality. This change comes through generational change as first, second and third generation migrants engage with media for different reasons (Hickerson and Gustafson 2014). Even amongst the sample for this study, in which all participants are first generation migrants, gazes are focused towards the wider cultural institutions and social structures of Australian society. This is not a teleological march toward a point of integration or assimilation at which ethnic media are no longer needed (Hickerson and Gustafson 2014; Park 1922), but rather part of complex relationships between minority and majority cultures. According to Browne (2005), reaching out to a non-ethnic audience is not a common goal amongst ethnic media producers. In many ways, however, the findings of this study are not surprising, and can be seen as a logical extension of aims and motivations discussed earlier, in particular the need to counter negative media coverage and provide a more positive image of minorities. African-Australian media producers take this a step further and directly and indirectly reach out to a non-African audience and attempt to, or desire to, impact the Australian media. All participants mention a desire to either reach out to or change powerful social or media discourses in Australia.

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For some this is a direct goal. The producer of a pan-African website actively monitors and tries to change the mainstream media reporting of African issues. As he says:

> [E]very time there is media publication that I see as negative for the African, I want to organise an interview with the journalist that published that, as a way to kind of say hey you know, it's okay, you can publish your media, but we would like you to be able to give us a little bit of the understanding why you're reporting in this way rather than the other way…I mean it's some sort of soft monitoring.

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Other participants take a more indirect approach, or aim to challenge mainstream media more in the future. Participant six, the young male host of a community radio program explained, "We try to do it indirectly…by…showcasing different successful Africans, their contributions to the community…but we don't actually directly contact those media agents and say…listen to us, which is what we should be doing, I think that's the next step." Additionally, some participants featured senior members of Victoria Police on their radio programs in order to question policing practices and policies in areas highly populated with African migrants.

This engagement with non-Africans is further demonstrated in the targeting of a white, or non-African audience. Participants implicitly and explicitly target a white audience through their media, and all are open to non-African readers and listeners. A content producer for the English language website, described her audience in the following way, "I think the main aim would be Australians, we're trying to sell our stories to them and to show them what we can do….". Another participant who hosts an Amharic language Ethiopian community radio program pointed to the reality of language restrictions while also acknowledging a desire to engage a white audience in the future: "I have to say Ethiopians, because our program … is in Amharic. But … I want to put it in English … for Ethiopian born in Australia and … for Australians".

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Indeed, even amongst those producers whose aim is to maintain cultures, communities and languages, the engagement with young second generation African-Australians, and a desire to promote their successful inclusion in Australian society, is evident. There is also anecdotal evidence of this approach to audiences having some sort of impact, with one participant suggesting that:

> …for Australians, even though they were not Africans, they appreciated it [his program], a lot of people did respond and just say 'thank you, you've really shown us like another side of Africa that we never imagined and certainly you've shown us African-Australians in a way that we've never really seen them'.

The above approaches to audiences, content and mainstream media problematize definitions of ethnic media as simply alternatives to the mainstream, with defined ethnic audiences. Analyses of their relationship to mainstream media have been restricted to the counter-narratives they offer, with little in the way of attempting to change mass media practices. The desire to impact on the mainstream media is evidence of a more active role for African-Australian media, one in which mainstream debates and discourses are engaged with in an attempt to change them. It is perhaps not surprising that one participant described his work as "advocacy journalism". Implicit in this process is recognition that the common aims and motivations – countering negativity, positive representations – will do little to directly change the discourse and attitudes of the dominant ethnic group.

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Discussion: Which Public Sphere?

This last point is worth expanding upon. As this study has demonstrated, there are certainly attempts to reach beyond a specific audience and social field amongst African media producers. There is also evidence of some success in doing this, whether it is small changes to mainstream

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media reporting or finding a receptive white audience in a way that might change attitudes toward migration. The question that needs to be asked is to what extent can such effects become sustained parts of a genuine process in which African, and other ethnic media producers, are able to influence the political, social, and cultural discourses that are formed and disseminated by powerful mainstream groups (mainstream media, police and legal institutions, government). In other words, what is the transformative potential of ethnic media outside of their fluid, ideal community of listeners and readers? This is a question that has been engaged with, although not in any particularly sustained fashion, through a critical engagement with the public sphere.

In light of the Bourgeoisie public sphere's very constitution through certain forms of exclusion and communicative bracketing, the original ideal of a single inclusive space for public deliberation has understandably relinquished ground to a model of multiple publics. Such publics are important in terms of both the content of public debate and the mode of that debate. What is worthy of public discussion (important public issues) is rarely agreed upon throughout civil society, and minority groups are in danger of having their concerns personalised or trivialised (Fraser 1990). The nature of communication within the public sphere has also been demonstrated as specific, rather than universal, resting on masculine assumptions of rationality and particular cultural behaviours. This is an important issue for ethnic minorities, for even if they speak English – as all of the participants in this study do – there are more subtle cultural differences in terms of cultural mores and status relations between interlocutors (Fraser, 1990). A historical exclusion of minority groups from the bourgeoisie public sphere had authors such as Fraser (1990) calling for a model of multiple counter-publics; subaltern public spheres which employ a strategy of 'engaged withdrawl' (Kurasawa 2014) through which they construct counter-

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discourses and communicative structures that directly challenge dominant public understandings of social issues.

However, the question that remains is one of political efficacy and inter-public engagement. It is useful to jump ahead to Fraser's (2014) discussion of the possibility of a transnational public sphere, for it raises questions pertinent to any consideration of the public sphere in an era of sub- and transnational identities and social and political formations. Here, Fraser reminds us that the public sphere's structural transformation in the post-westphalian global system raises questions of normative legitimacy (who belongs to the public) and political efficacy (the ability of public opinion to 'speak' to a sovereign political body). The prevailing question in regards to multiple, independent public spheres is not so much their existence, nor the utility of such a model to understand contemporary social relations (particularly in the field of media), but rather their correlation– or lack thereof – with a representative political body, and their (in)ability to resonate with a wider public, or publics. In other words, to what extent are separate public spheres able to articulate their desires into real political action through political means, and have their narratives heard and understood beyond their fluid boundaries? Within this model of multiple, contesting and interrelating publics, how can those in marginal positions be guaranteed access to the still largely centralised mechanisms of public policy, cultural formation and political decision making? How might a group of visible migrants, such as Black Africans, have their concerns heard and valued consistently within public discourses – concerns over housing, employment, institutionalised racism[ii]. These are questions beyond the scope of this paper, but we can take some clues from available literature.

There is ample evidence to suggest that at the discursive and symbolic level ethnic media reach beyond their assumed sphere of activity and facilitate inter-public dialogue, either between

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minority and majority publics, or between minority publics only (Forde at al. 2009; Deuze 2006; Couldry and Dreher 2007; Lay and Thomas 2012; Sreberny 2005; Husband 1998, 2005). In findings that correspond to this study, research suggests that minority ethnic media bring minorities into contact with mainstream organisations and structures by: providing information about the wider society; exposing migrants to social debates and issues that affect them and others; encouraging ethnic minorities to become involved in mainstream political process such as voting; and by bringing ethnic minorities and migrants into direct contact with people from both minority and majority ethnic groups through work in radio stations and organised community events (Forde et al. 2009).

For Fraser (1990: 67), the "concept of a counter public militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is publicist". The public nature of even a marginalised public ensures the exchange of views, dialogue, discourse and the potential expansion of debates to "ever widening arenas" (Fraser 1990: 67). Importantly, such an approach prioritises autonomy as a guard against subsumption into a wider, less representative public space tainted by structural power inequalities. For ethnic media, such autonomy is important and self-control. Take, for example, the way participants in this study spoke about the need to counter negative media portrayals. Not through a simplistic celebration but through a nuanced acknowledgement of both their positive contribution to Australian society as well as the issues facing their communities.

However, at what point does such autonomy leave itself open to marginalisation, particularly in the case of poorly resourced and under-funded ethnic minority media? Husband (1998, 2005) is less enthusiastic about the potential of counter-discourses and publicity alone to foster a more democratic and inclusive social system. He provides an evaluation of the underlying structural

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conditions necessary in order to achieve balance between self-representative publics and minority groups that are politically efficacious, and argues for a multi-ethnic public sphere with a strong ethnic media sector at its heart. He suggests that the "adequacy of a multi-ethnic public sphere will be measured by both the diversity of interests given a voice and the extent to which there are open channels of exchange between these voices" (Husband 1998: 143). Such exchange is not guaranteed by the public nature of dialogue or by "ethnically segmented media" (Husband 1998: 143). Rather, it rests upon a media environment that reflects two key political and rights based values.

The first includes a fundamental re-evaluation of communicative rights to include the right to be understood, and the obligation to seek comprehension of others. Even in Australia, where rights to freedom of expression are not enshrined in a human rights declaration or a constitution, the right to be understood is important for its implications of dialogue. In recent debates about free speech and freedom of expression, the political tone, and that within the mainstream media, has been one in support of individual rights to expression, and less embracing of concerns around racial vilification[iii]. What such a focus on individual rights of expression ignore, however, is the inevitable relative silence of minorities in a system in which some people's avenues of expression include powerful media, legal and political systems, while others' involve marginalised processes largely ignored by all but a minority of people. Effective cross-cultural and inter-public dialogue is thus dependent on an acceptance of both rights and obligations in the communicative process (Husband 1998).

This change in communicative expectations is to be matched with "an institutional pluralism consistent with polyethnic rights rather than a cultural pluralism consistent with multicultural tolerance" (Husband 1998: 143). Such a process would involve a level of institutionalized

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recognition and support for ethnic minorities that is more than simply token acknowledgement of difference, or of the kind of multiculturalism that Bauman (2011) critiques for masking inequality as cultural diversity. Rather it involves institutionalized changes in the structures of publicity, including media, and a greater investment in non-market funding and support. Within media organisations, such change may begin with what Sreberny (2005) refers to as 'mixedness'; the ability for minorities to exist outside of their designated 'communities' or archetypal 'roles' and to have a constitutive role in the production and dissemination of all sorts of media content. The question here becomes one of autonomy, and the possibility of genuinely alternative discourses emerging in a system of transformed, yet pre-existing, avenues of political representation. For participants it may mean engaging with questions over how much control of their media they are willing to sacrifice for a more sustainable and resonant voice in public debates. These questions are perhaps too reliant on a dichotomy between counter-publics and a mainstream public sphere. As even Habermas' more recent work attests to, the situation is often more complex. Couldry and Dreher (2007: 80) for example, challenge "the assumption that the public sphere model requires either a unified public sphere or a set of independent 'counter-public' spherecules". Their analysis of the Forum for Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR) is of note here. They describe FAIR not as a counter-public sphere, but rather "a space of information, deliberation and activism that seeks to reform the mainstream public sphere, but from a position at present outside it" (Couldry and Dreher 2007: 82).

Emphasising the importance of dialogue and affect between publics, Couldry and Dreher (2007) raise the possibility of a space between mainstream and counter-publics. Aspects of this certainly resonate with the attempts by African media producers to directly and indirectly communicate with and change mainstream media, public and political discourses in Australia. Such an

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approach recognises that both a single public sphere, or multiple publics, while conceptually helpful, are necessarily based on an implicit fastening of what are in reality porous and fluid 'boundaries' in between overlapping publics containing social actors who engage with a variety of communities in their everyday lives. Nonetheless, in trying to understand the role of ethnic minority media in Australia and other countries, a useful starting point is debates over the nature of public deliberation and political representation, and the questions they raise regarding the balancing of social and political affect with minority representational autonomy.

Conclusion

Browne (2005) argues that the most likely way that ethnic media will encourage participation in the public sphere will be indirect; curiosity and small group discussions. At present, it seems that African-Australian media producers are in the early stages of direct participation in the public sphere, certainly in terms of influencing the practices of major public institutions (police, mass media) and engaging in public debates and discourses. The question remains as to how best to understand the changing social and media landscape in complex, multi-ethnic societies. This paper has finished by raising more questions than it answers. However, these are questions pertinent to present and future discussions of ethnic media and political and social participation.

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[i] Although Australia does still have a public broadcasting sector, it is one that has recently suffered from funding cuts, political interference and the encroachment of commercialisation.

[ii] At the time of this study, members of the Victoria Police in Sunshine were found to have circulated stubby holders with images of mudfish on them, a derogatory term for Africans.

[iii] In 2014 then Attorney General George Brandis proposed a weakening of section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act in Australia. After protests from ethnic, migrant and community groups, the proposed changes were abandoned. However, both Brandis and Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson have publicly expressed their support for freedom of speech, with little consideration given to inequality and the vilification of minority groups.

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