

## Multicultural Sociability, Imperfect Forums and Online Participation

GEORGIE MCCLEAN

University of Western Sydney

This article explores the conditions for multicultural sociability facilitated by online current affairs forums hosted by Australia's multicultural public service broadcaster, SBS. Multicultural sociability is defined as exchange of opinion, information-sharing and mutual acknowledgement within a commonly understood framework for participation. The analysis suggests that conversations facilitated by multicultural online forums are an important resource in a culturally diverse society as they offer up important new forms of participation and opportunities for mutual recognition and the exchange of views.

### Introduction: Participation and Multicultural Sociability

Participatory media have been heralded as a radically democratizing force, with the potential to transform the contemporary public sphere (see e.g., Gillmor, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Rosen, 2000). This claim is often based on the capacity of user-generated content and online networks to allow for a new diversity of voices and a participatory culture of audience-led engagement (Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). Online chat and opinion offer new forms of conversations, constituting important forms of political and civic participation (Ackerly, 2006; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008; Green & Jenkins, 2011). Online possibilities for the production of new forms of citizenship are of particular importance for public service broadcasters, charged with creating inclusive platforms for engagement with public life. The public goods of public service broadcasting include universality of services; the provision of a diversity of views; and the vision of a desired public culture involving genuine cultural pluralism (see Costera Meijer, 2005; Jakubowicz, 2007).

Traditional models of public service broadcasting are, however, constitutive of particular, limited forms of sociability (Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000; Scannell, 1989) and have struggled to engage with the complexity of increasingly culturally diverse societies (McClean, 2008). Although increasing availability of information and content online has allowed engaged users to become more engaged (Norris, 2000), there is also potential for many to be left out of the national conversation. Opening these conversations has become more important and more urgent in the context of what Toby Miller (2007, p. 1) calls the "crisis of belonging" that liberal democracies are facing, in which "more and more people are seeking to belong and

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Georgie McClean: [georgina.mcclean@sbs.com.au](mailto:georgina.mcclean@sbs.com.au)

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more and more people are not counted as belonging." Miller relates this crisis directly to media and to the forms of citizenship, self-representation and engagement they enable or discourage. Morley (2000, p. 118) has argued that, "an egalitarian multicultural society depends on the creation and maintenance of a plurality of public arenas in which a range of groups, with a diverse range of values and rhetoric, can effectively participate." In this context, Australia's national public broadcaster the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), required by legislation to provide multilingual and multicultural services, provides a useful case study. This paper explores whether conditions for multicultural sociability are facilitated by the online chat and comments that follow *Insight*, an SBS television current affairs forum. Conditions for multicultural sociability are likely to exist when exchange of opinion, information-sharing, and mutual acknowledgement take place within a commonly understood framework for participation. I contend that multicultural sociability is an important element of civic engagement and participation in multicultural societies, drawing on an assertion by Dahlgren (2005, p. 149) that "democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other."

SBS has a public charter, enshrined in the Special Broadcasting Services Act, 1991 (legislated at the time of SBS' incorporation, 15 years after it started trial broadcasts) that requires it to provide multilingual and multicultural media services that reflect Australia's society. The history of SBS, since its inception in 1975 alongside the introduction of federal multicultural policies, has been indexed to the history of official Australian multiculturalism (Nolan & Radywyl, 2004). SBS has, in developing its services, reified certain notions of multicultural society that have been elsewhere criticized as exemplifying top-down policies that depoliticize differences (see, e.g. Stratton, 1998). It has also, however, expanded Australia's understanding of itself by normalizing cultural differences and assuming that "what Australians have in common *is* diversity" (Ang, Hawkins, & Dabboussy, 2008: 3). SBS Radio's multilingual programs provide news and information with an emphasis on local issues in 68 languages, including English. SBS Television produces a range of news, current affairs and sports programming; commissions Australian documentary, drama and entertainment programs; and screens subtitled, internationally sourced content. A significant part of SBS's offerings are online, including extensions of television and radio content, online-exclusive content and platforms for user engagement. Online interaction with content is now an expected part of the media experience for many Australians.

According to Michael Schudson (2008, p. 21), one of the most important functions of journalism, the provision of opportunity for the exchange of views in a public forum, has been made much more possible by low barriers to entry into public conversation online:

The public forum function of journalism has cracked wide open with the creation of the World Wide Web; the Internet opens up this journalistic function in the most wide-ranging and profound way. Its virtue is not individual but social, the virtue of interaction, of conversation, of an easy and agreeable democratic sociability.

In this article I will focus on the potential for platforms like SBS's *Insight* website to facilitate multicultural sociability. Sociability, defined by Simmel (1949) as association for its own sake, has been used to conceive of media as enhancers of communication and social ties between people. Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic (2011, pp. 414-415) define sociability as "a form of interaction which builds on

certain shared human competencies to relate to multiple other persons as well as the desire for human relationships that are not framed around specific utilitarian goals.”

This definition offers a useful framework for investigating online chat and comments, as it highlights the interactions, competencies, and relationships that are formed in less constructed forms of conversation. Glick Schiller et al. develop the notion of cosmopolitan sociability, which they describe as “consisting of forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world” (2011, p. 402). Here they draw on notions of cosmopolitanism developed by theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2007, p. 57), who suggests that “cosmopolitans assume that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation” an act of openness and receptivity to difference.

Glick-Schiller et al., (pp. 401–402) in their definition of cosmopolitan sociability, offer a criticism of multiculturalism as ultimately reinforcing of “naturalized and bounded difference.” Although such criticism is not uncommon, I argue that multiculturalism, as a policy platform, has a democratizing effect as it affords ethnic minorities some political agency via strategic identification within a community rights model, providing important access to services (Baumann, 1999; Morley, 2000). Multicultural policies incorporate cultural difference within an overarching framework of agreed terms for mutual recognition and coexistence, based on an understanding of the equal worth of all cultures (Taylor, 1994).

I suggest that the term multicultural sociability recognizes the contingency and contextuality of conversations within a multicultural society in which individuals may align themselves with (or distance themselves from) others through strategic processes of identification. This is particularly true in anonymous online environments where identity is not fixed (Dryzek, 1987; Poster, 1995). Multiculturally oriented media, such as SBS, offer an intervention in which the conditions for participation from a diversity of cultural groups and range of views are central to the broadcasting charter. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008, p. 485) claim that such an approach is crucial for participation, arguing that “representing a previously marginalized discourse may mean that a particular category of people gets constituted as agents within the discourse.”

S. Elizabeth Bird (2011, p. 491) describes how the “cultural significance of news emerges through everyday interaction” as audiences use news as resources about issues from “morality, to religion, to race.” Bird has a particular interest in what she calls trivial news. I suggest that this kind of talk also occurs in more serious-minded online news and current affairs sites that offer new opportunities for different forms of sociability. This study conceives of Web-based interactions as part of everyday life, reflective of everyday misconceptions and prejudices, as well as mutual curiosity. Janssen and Kies (2005, p. 321) note that online discussion sites on which no identification is required could have a “disinhibiting effect” on political conversation. Dahlgren (2005, p. 156) writes that “the Internet seems to offer opportunities to participate for many people who otherwise find that there are too many taboos and too much discomfiture in talking about politics in their own face-to-face environments.”

Online spaces can allow diversity of voices in a range of ways; however, as Bird (2011, p. 500) cautions: “. . . not all online news sites encourage collective, constructive interaction.” The online public

media space does not necessarily mean an ideal public sphere as conceived by Habermas (1989), in which public opinion is formed via rational public debate. For one thing, online debate is rarely rational—it is more frequently “fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion”—and there is difficulty in bringing together conflicting points of view (Papacharissi, 2002). As Ang and Pothen have noted, “‘contact’ does not necessarily equate to ‘dialogue,’ it may just as well involve conflict, passing association, or sheer indifference (2009, para. 55).” Dryzek (1987, p. 666) has expressed pessimism about online intercultural exchange, claiming that “people from different cultural backgrounds are unlikely to come to agreement, especially under real time constraints” as consensus requires “shared norms and socialization experiences on the part of participating individuals.” However, Appiah (2007, p. 85) notes that conversations across boundaries of identity do not require the development of consensus or agreement on common values. He asserts that conversations and encounters, properly conducted, are valuable as a form of engagement with the ideas of others, important to help people get used to one another, a key requirement for practical tolerance and coexistence in a culturally diverse society. The distinction here may be Appiah’s qualification that they be properly conducted, as encounters do not always represent a genuine form of engagement with others.

Some studies of online environments have pointed toward a kind of political narcissism in which participants seek out others who share their perspectives in a kind of echo chamber of self-affirming views (see Deuze, 2007). As Papacharissi (2002, pp. 14–15) notes, “these technologies carry the promise of bringing people together, but also bear the danger of spinning them in different directions.” Online forums, because of anonymity and unstable identity, may just as easily provide platforms free of personal accountability, frequently allowing for vilification and anonymous bullying (Curtis, 2007). Online discussions can tend to privilege opinion, subjectivity and the personal (Hartley, 2008), a kind of anonymous graffiti without requirements for personal accountability. It is important to explore the quality of online debate rather than equating interactivity *per se* with better democracy (see e.g., Bird, 2011; Macnamara, 2008).

### **About *Insight***

SBS’s online sites frame debates by setting agreed terms for participation. The sites (as part of multicultural public discourse) offer a common set of reference points that facilitate exchange within a mutually understood set of parameters. Forums, such as *Insight*, emphasize values of collective deliberation and norms of public debate strongly identified with national public service broadcasting (Barnett, 2003: 8). Such parameters encourage mutual acknowledgement in a culturally diverse society. This study explores the conditions for multicultural sociability and forms of audience participation, facilitated by online audience response to three *Insight* episodes broadcast between 2009 and 2010. I suggest that sociable talk and exchange among divergent positions and cultural perspectives represent important forms of participation in a multicultural society.

*Insight* is a televised current affairs forum program, extended in recent years into online audience conversations with guests from the program directly after each screening (Live Chat); an online comment section (Your Say); calls for audience participation and for new topics, participants and questions to be included in the television programs; a Facebook page; and a Twitter account. *Insight* is

self-described as the place to speak your mind. The program presents itself as a counter to the spin that some describe as a major source of the destabilization of contemporary democracy (see Dahlgren, 2005, p. 150) *Insight* says, on its site, that "there's no hiding behind press releases and spin on *Insight*, it's face to face debate." Of course *Insight* does not occupy a space outside mainstream public discourse. Topics are generally triggered by political developments or major news events, and the debates can echo dominant discourses.

This study explores an in-between space that is neither entirely user-led nor fully editorialized: moderated Live Chat and Your Say user comments sections on the SBS *Insight* website. In the weekly television program, host Jenny Brockie guides the one-hour discussion with about 50 invited guests, including public representatives, experts and politicians as well as ordinary individuals (although the higher-profile participants are often given more time).

At the end of each televised program, Brockie invites viewers to continue discussion online and notes that some program guests will be available to answer questions on the SBS website. This post-program discussion takes place in Live Chat, which runs for about an hour after the broadcast, moderated in real time by two or three SBS staff. Your Say is a comment section, with reply and agree/disagree functions, that stays active much longer online after the broadcast (with most comments accumulating in the week after the first-run broadcast). Topics with a high volume of participants tend to have a very slow pace of chat, significant limitations to the forum design. The SBS moderators activate each comment individually, rejecting comments, as required by legal requirements and SBS editorial standards. The online producer may intervene to draw attention to the moderation standards. An example:

*Hi everyone. We appreciate this is a hot topic of debate but remember ANY comments that are deemed to be racist in nature or racially vilifying will NOT be published. We reserve the right to edit your comments for brevity or if they are deemed to be offensive. Regards, The Insight team.*

Some participants resist the moderation of the forum. For example, one contributor responded to the above post thus:

*If you don't [like] racial comments—then don't start shows which are clearly related to race. Who gives you the right to say what is wrong and what is right? Aren't you a public broadcaster? Where does the money come from to pay your salaries at SBS? Don't tell us what we can write.*

This contributor expresses the view that participants should be allowed to set their own terms for debate. Others called for greater moderation. An example is this contributor, addressing the producer after a series of inflammatory statements about Islam posted by user MG:

*Insight Producer, is this being moderated? How are MG's comments getting through?*

The forums included a level of community regulation, with participants either ignoring or censoring inflammatory comments. Many applied their own norms to the forum:

*Micko if you're rigid enough to look at a problem and solve it by blaming it on the victims then maybe you shouldn't be on this chat.*

Several users asserted that racist contributors shouldn't watch or chat on *Insight*, believing that this forum was not for them. This may reveal a valuing of the forums as a space for tolerant or open exchange. Disruption of these norms elicited responses, mainly angry, from participants who felt comfortable acting within the shared terms of the multicultural environment of SBS sites. Moderators also contribute to the flow of discussion by not posting a number of repeated questions, irrelevant comments or repeated responses. This role is described by Janssen and Kries (2005, p. 231) as a "promoter of deliberation" who allows for a level of structure and continuity in debate and some system of synthesis. This, it must be noted, had limited success in the case of Live Chat in particular, and the chat threads were frequently confusing and disjointed, in part because of the time lag between comments.

In order to participate, contributors to the *Insight* online forums simply have to list a contact email, their name or moniker as a user name, and their location. Despite the lack of any explicit design feature of the forum to enable or encourage it, many self-identified in both the Live Chat and the Your Say by adding categories such as Somali, Indian-Australian, Muslim, Anglo Aussie, or a migrant. These forms of self-identification provide examples of the adoption or rejection of positions in a debate, explored later, which create a context for comments and questions to be read by other users.

### **Methods and Approach**

Contributions and comments made through *Insight* Live Chat and Your Say are available online in the public realm, along with vodcasts (online video on demand) of the TV programs, in the program archive. NVivo 8 coding software was used to create a instead of relying on an impressionistic reading. NVivo allows the researcher to create customized frameworks of analysis via open categories of classification. In this study, the customized NVivo frameworks were used to analyze the online comments for the kinds of contributions they represented rather than for the distribution of opinion. I was interested in what the participants were using the forums for and how they related to other users, rather than in contributors' opinions of the issues covered. Coding of the comments was an iterative process, as befitted the diversity of the data.

Janssen and Kries (2005), in their analysis of methodologies employed in the analysis of online discursive spaces, outline the problem of imposing frameworks or rigid models on fluid conversations:

Content analysis is an established method of the social sciences and carries with it implications of controllability and representativeness. The nature of the research question (how to get a true idea of the deliberative quality of an online conversation) however, begs for a more qualitative approach that enables the researcher to reveal

discourse patterns in a more inductive manner, instead of a top-down application of some content analysis template. (p. 332)

In attempting such an approach, I was required to continually reshape project categories according to trends that emerged through my analysis and track these back against earlier material. I was less concerned with the numbers of coded comments than with the ways classifying comments allowed themes to emerge in the data. The NVivo categories developed through this process classified several uses of the forums: as platforms for personal venting on the issue; as opportunities to connect and converse with others; as resources for information; or as sites for critiquing or analyzing the experience of watching the TV program. These classifications, grouped for my analysis into the meta-categories below, helped me to explore interactions between forum contributors. The meta-categories:

- **Expression of views:** This grouping comprised comments that asserted the participants' positions on the issue or related personal experiences without direct reference to other comments in the forum.<sup>1</sup>
- **Dialogue and debate:** These comments directly responded to other comments (agreeing or disagreeing) or continued conversations in the forums, including by asking or answering questions.
- **Exchange of information:** These comments sought or provided information, links, references or advice relevant to the topic in discussion.
- **Understanding:** These comments contained assertions that the televised forum and/or online discussion had deepened their understanding of an issue or the perspectives of others.
- **Comment on forum:** These involved commentary about the quality, limitations or problems of the forum in general.
- **Representation:** These are comments about the representativeness of guests or spokespeople on an issue, expressing disquiet with the official multicultural parameters of the debate.

The analysis used three case study programs from the 2009–2010 *Insight* seasons:

- Somali Australians (broadcast September 8, 2009) a forum with representatives of the Somali community on the threat of radicalization after the arrest of three men in Melbourne accused of planning an attack on an army base.
- At Risk (broadcast July 21, 2009) on violent attacks on Indian students and the issues related to international students in Australia, particularly those in vocational colleges offering diplomas in skills prioritized in permanent residency applications.
- Family (broadcast March 16, 2010) about children in unconventional families, featuring children from a range of non-traditional family arrangements, including those with gay parents, surrogacy and inter-country adoption as well as children raised in intentional communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Bird (2011) likens these kinds of comments to the debate structures used by political candidates, stating positions and not engaging with one another.

The first two topics are very obviously multicultural in that they draw on issues overtly tied to race and ethnicity within a culturally diverse society. The Family program engages with several kinds of diversity that provide useful case studies through which to explore sociability and the quality of online exchange. Specific examples or issues from each program are summarized in the case studies related to the key findings.

## Findings

### 1. Online Dialogue and Debate

Using the NVivo meta-categories described above, this analysis sought to establish whether participants were indeed reading others' contributions and engaging with one another or simply using the online space as an opportunity to vent after watching the program. About a quarter of the comments directly referenced or responded to others' comments in some way. There were also significant levels of interaction, in which participants corrected, challenged, endorsed or situated others' contributions. There were, for example, several instances in which individuals speaking from their own experiences were able to respond to critical comments in the same online space. There were many examples of reactive and polemic posts (which can characterize online participation), but there were also genuine questions and more considered or discursive contributions.

Many contributors expressed complex and at times contradictory views, in which they agreed or disagreed with others. These subtleties of position are far less represented in more heavily editorialized contexts such as televised current affairs, which have a requirement to represent a balance of views (see, eg. SBS, 2006). The online environment also created platforms for a more complex set of self-identifications in which certain cultural, political and regional identities were adopted or rejected in expressing views on an issue in which ethnicity played a major part. These kinds of identifications may have been examples of "enabling modes of objectification" in which "collectivities describe, redescribe and argue over who they are" (Werbner, 1996, in Morley, 2000, p. 236).

#### Case Studies:

##### (i) Somali Australians: Speaking Back

The Somali Australians program was broadcast after the arrest of several Somali men from Melbourne on terrorism charges related to a planned attack on an Australian army base. These arrests had prompted familiar panic about home-grown terrorism and extremism and radical Islam related to Australian Muslim communities (see Poynting, Noble, & Tabar, 2004). The Your Say platform for this program enabled Somali participants to respond to intolerant or critical postings (of which there were many, alongside roughly equal numbers of comments supportive of the Somali community). Several participants, identifying themselves as Somali, took the opportunity to make their case to the broader community by speaking for their own experiences. Several expressed a belief in the power of dialogue to

transcend difference of views. For example, Mariam Issa, a participant in the televised forum and an official guest online, wrote:

When we all come together with good intentions and sincerity and use dialogue activities we then have a better vision of living together (Somali Australians Live Chat).

For Issa, as evidenced by this and other comments, the forum itself created a better society, in which dialogue enabled a better future.

### **(ii) At Risk: Identifications and Complexity**

The At Risk televised program covered then-recent violence against Indian students in Melbourne and comments by senior police that the victims had been soft targets. Much of the debate focused on whether the violence against Indians had been racist or opportunistic. The program also explored, early in the public debate, a series of concerns about the conditions for international students in Australia. The unofficial links between fee-paying education and preferred status for immigration had been lucrative for Australia (as international student fees were a major source of income), but the poor regulation of the international education sector, particularly in privately run vocational colleges, had led to the exploitation of many international students seeking permanent resident status. Guests on the televised program included a number of Indian students, including those who had been victims of violence: senior police, student representatives, community leaders, and vocational college representatives.

The Your Say comments for At Risk contained by far the most that disagreed with other posts (around a third of comments) of the three forums in this study. Most of these were about whether racism was a major problem in Australia. The Your Say forum provided a platform for the articulation of positions that resisted the easy polarization of assumed Anglo-Australian racism and migrant Indian agitation.

If you want to say that Australians are racist than it should also be acknowledged that Australians are diverse, and there are many Australians who also identify with another culture such as Indian. . . . So by calling Australia racist you implicate many identities like Aussie Indians. (Suzu4381, Laverton, At Risk Your Say *Racism and Australian Identity*)

Others reaffirmed the diversity of opinion within the Indian community and rejected others attempting to speak for them.

Not all Indians have the same opinion; we would be a stupid, robotic race if we all believed the same thing. You do not represent the Indian voice. . . . (Vijay Sinha, Strathfield, At Risk Your Say).

Many self-identified Indian-Australians distanced themselves from the representation of Indians by the students' spokespeople. For example, in a comment titled "Not all Indians are like this," Arjun Pande of Sydney distanced himself from "uncouth" Punjabis, and Seema Singh of Melbourne described

"uneducated, misinformed and selfish" Indians "tarnishing our reputation." This kind of distancing represents a form of strategic non-identification, creating new subject positions in a debate in which race and ethnicity are politicized.

### **(iii) Family: Mutual Affirmation and Sociability**

Family was very different in feel from the other study programs. Rather than exploring recent political conflict in a multicultural context, it set out to question what makes a family in relation to recent changes to surrogacy laws in Queensland. The program guests were all young people who had been raised in unconventional family circumstances: children of gay parents; children conceived via surrogacy or donor sperm; inter-country adoptees; young people raised in communes or intentional communities in which parenting was collectively shared. Despite the disparate range of issues and experiences described in the program, the emphasis in the online debate was on mutual affirmation and consensus on values. The chat and comments after the program involved high levels of collective identification and endorsement of the program and its participants. Family's Live Chat and Your Say included a small number of highly engaged participants who tended to make multiple contributions. There was, among these comments and chat, the sense of being inside a community. There was a strong sense of easy and agreeable sociability among participants (including pleasantries such as "thank you" and "you're welcome" and "Goodnight, thanks for all the input"). Only four comments challenged the mutual support and agreement that permeated Live Chat and Your Say. One was from Ali, a self-identified Muslim, from Perth who suggested DNA tests before allowing people to become parents, sparking outraged responses from several participants. One urged him to watch the program again, as though that would change his mind, and another suggested he "read the rest of the comments if you disagree - your narrow view is not really supported." These contributions suggest a belief in deliberative consensus described by Ackerly (2006) in which participants are able to learn from other comments and come around to the prevailing view.

## **2. Online Resources and Information Exchange**

There was evidence in these forums of an exchange of information and advice as well as cross-cultural engagement with others' opinions (by, for example, seeking clarification of a viewpoint, asking questions or responding to other comments). Many appeared to treat the access to forum participants from other cultures as an opportunity to further their understanding of cultural difference, thus strengthening connections between groups, a kind of bridging social capital (see Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008: 105). Such exchanges represent mutual acknowledgement and a willingness to share information or views within an agreed framework in the context of cultural difference. These expressions of curiosity or self-identification, often answered with suggestions for offline connections, generate important resources for practical tolerance (for use of this term, see Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006, p. 37).

### **Case Studies:**

#### **(i) Somali Australians: Understanding Cultural Others**

Both Live Chat and Your Say following the Somali Australians program included many questions posed to

other participants in the forum, especially about Islam. Several participants appeared to view the forum as an opportunity to seek greater connection or as a resource for understanding. For example, one Live Chat participant, Melissa, says: "I was wondering if there is a Sydney-based Somali community where it may be possible to visit and become acquainted with Somali culture." Another suggests an open day for community contact:

Sheikh Isse Abdo Musse, I thought you spoke wonderfully tonight. Could you please tell me if your mosque has an open day to allow people from the wider community to see what happens inside? People have a general fear [of] the unknown and it may dispel some of the unfounded rumors relating to the religion of Islam. (Sarah, Somali Australians Live Chat)

Several self-identified Somali participants volunteered information or connections, attempting to find points of exchange, including for those who have no clue about Somali culture:

Most of Somalis arrive after 90s we are a tiny dot in a wider community. we are Australians as well, we are tax payers, we work in education, welfare, child services, employment services, broadcasting, hospitals, age care, [as] taxi drivers etc., most of the Australian communities are very gentle and nice people but we are willing that the others who have no clue about Somali culture and religion please let us do your research or contact us so we can chat me and you we are Australian. (Khadija, Somali Australian Live Chat)

#### **(ii) At Risk: Advice and Offline Action**

More than in the other forums, participants in the At Risk online discussions expressed the hope that the comments would somehow reach government. Many demanded that action be taken by either the Australian or Indian governments on the issue. These kinds of comments suggest that many participants saw this as an active actual engagement in political or policy processes, in a sense classic civic engagement. The online forums included a significant number of calls to action and arguments that people have to do something about the problems of private colleges. The comments urged others to contact representative bodies, complain, get legal advice, etc., exhorting students to work from within to improve the system.

The online forums following At Risk contained lots of personal stories, advice, information, and advocacy contacts supplied as part of the discussion. Some comments on Live Chat sought advice on the safety of specific locations in Australia, presumably from overseas participants canvassing the possibility of studying in Australia. These connections, suggestions and exchanges of information could be seen as direct results of the forum, whatever the broader impact on government or policy may be.

#### **(iii) Family: An Online Support Community**

The online discussions generally framed the young guests of the show as experts based on their own experiences and despite some resistance from them. One in 10 endorsed program guests in glowing terms. The participants formed an online support group, many seeking advice and providing links, information and reassurance. Live Chat contained many specific questions and advice. For example, participants asked detailed questions about intentional communities; lesbian mothers asked for advice on supportive schools; parents asked how old their kids should be before they can be told they were conceived by donor sperm; others asked about adoption experiences. Ann, the adoptive mother of a 15-year-old girl adopted from overseas, who had been asking Mauritian-born televised program guest Christina for advice, wrote:

Thanks you so much, Christina, for your reassurance. I wish I could have a hotline to you at any time to seek advice as I need it! (Ann, Families Live Chat).

Ann, like many others in the forum, appeared to consider this access to the forum guests as a resource for their own decision-making. Much of the online commentary took the form of descriptions or revelations of personal experiences. The forums, protected by anonymity, created a kind of online confessional. Forty percent of online Your Say comments and 30% of Live Chat comments described personal experiences either in response to questions or simply as contributions.

### **3. Frameworks of Analysis and Terms of Debate**

The frameworks assertion category was used to group comments that overtly asserted a new or individual way of understanding an issue. Expressions such as "the real problem is . . ." or "this is actually a problem of . . ." or "why aren't we talking about the real issues? We need to look at . . ." were common. The data revealed that the online environments were conducive to these kinds of assertions, more so when there was considerable controversy (such as the Somali Australians and At Risk programs) than in more mutually endorsing environments (such as the Family program). Assertions of individual frames of analysis also limited the possibilities for multicultural sociability, however, as they tended to disrupt the threads of conversation, making them incoherent and disjointed. In all of the case studies, there was a sense of multiple parallel attempts at conversations and a range of questions, many of which were lost through the slow pace of the chat.

In the Live Chat, the producer regularly interjected to remind participants this was an opportunity to ask questions of the guests and that participants could express their own views on the Your Say comments page. Despite these attempts to encourage reciprocity and exchange, there remained a significant volume of comments expressing individuals' own views. Some genuine questions—those that appeared sincere—were left unanswered in the noise and lag of the chat, and it was often difficult to tell which responses related to which questions. Frustration was evident in some comments, and some participants actively tried to shut down conversations they thought were irrelevant. The Live Chat, in particular, was confusing and difficult to follow. According to Papacharissi (p. 17), "When individuals address random topics, in a random order, without a commonly shared understanding of the social importance of a particular issue, then conversation becomes more fragmented and its impact is mitigated."

**Case Studies:****(I) Somali Australians: Anonymity and Self-Expression**

The Somali Australians online forums exemplified some challenging constraints to exchange and multicultural sociability. Because of Australian laws related to contempt of court, the specifics of the case at the center of debates to which the program was responding could not be discussed. The discussion was instead framed around concerns in the community about radicalization, a highly contested term (see Gillespie, Gow, Hoskins, O'Loughlin, & Zverzhanovski, 2010). A number of comments in the Live Chat and Your Say responses directly criticized the line of questioning in the televised forum that was set up with the opening comment to the Somali participants: "We want to talk to you about your community and about the concerns that you may have about potential radicalisation in that community, particularly of young men" (Insight, 2009). Several participants expressed the view that the line of questioning undermined the possibilities of the debate:

It was totally focused on what the media always focus on . . . .do you think the presenter was pressured into asking those types of questions? (farz, Somali Australians Live Chat).

Several of the participants appeared to expect that an SBS forum, particularly one with mostly Somali participants, ought to be different from other forms of Australian media. However, comments like the one above suggest that the televised forum was seen as limiting by many of the online participants, as it reproduced dominant discourses on Islam and radicalization. Several online comments followed on the curtailed discussion in the television program about the Al-Shabab movement in Somalia, a discussion that caused apparent discomfort among some TV participants, most denying there is support among Somali Australians for the movement. At the time of filming and broadcast, Al-Shabab had been classified by the Australian government as a terrorist organization, and expression of support for it could constitute an offence under Australian terrorism legislation. Despite this limitation to public discourse, some online participants criticized the guests on the program for not speaking as true Somalis:

Somalis never agree on anything, but throughout the show it seemed everyone was shitting on their pants when it comes [to] the issues of Alshabab. For god sake, say what you believe in like when we are at the coffee shops, don't play chicken. (Ismalure, Somali Australians Live Chat)

LiveChat offered a forum for some less publicly endorsed views, for example this one from Hameed: "I just wanted to make a comment about the support for Al-Shabab. . . . I think we are kidding ourselves by saying there is no support." These kinds of comments were possible because of the anonymity of the online forum, given the legal constraints on discussions about issues or groups like Al-Shabab. The online platforms, by virtue of their anonymity, may free discussion from the more guarded, self-censored positions generally represented in traditional media spaces. The online space allowed for complex positions and differing accounts of community sentiments from participants. By creating

opportunity for diversity of perspectives, online forums may overcome the problems of media use by individuals as representatives to speak for a heterogeneous community.

**(ii) At Risk: Terms of Debate**

The At Risk program on attacks on Indian students in Australia provided an example of the difficulty in reaching agreement on the definition of a problem or the framework within which to discuss it, which are preconditions for multicultural sociability. The program was broadcast soon after the attacks, in the early stages of the debate on this issue in Australian media; news of the attacks had, however, ignited huge coverage and outrage in Indian media (Ang & Pothen, 2011). Many of the Indian Australians participating in the debate were likely to have been drawing on knowledge of the coverage in Indian media, which contained none of the public messages from police and community leaders being aired in local Australian media (Visibility, 2010).

About a fifth of the At Risk Live Chat comments (69) and a quarter of the At Risk Your Say comments (252) involved participants asserting their own framework or analysis of the issue. These assertions often claimed to reveal the real problem or underlying issue. The level of detail about a range of concerns and the diversity of perspectives were certainly greater online than they were in the televised forum. The online chat and comments after At Risk reflected frustration among some participants with the move away from what they saw as the main area of concern.

What is the objective of this insight session? It started as a "poor boy, you were hit" and it has gone to "bad boy, why did you come here in the first place, to get PR [permanent residency immigration status]." (Gurbachan Singh, Melbourne, At Risk Your Say *Insight objective?*)

It was unfortunate to see the debate drift into the motives of Indian students in studying here and criticism of agencies that promote PR courses. It is a digression from the much larger issue of possible racism in Australia. . . . (Vidyasager, At Risk Live Chat).

The volatility of the terms of the debate may have been evidence of the previously underreported frustration and concern about these issues, which were becoming a major policy and strategic problem for the Australian government. Indian-Australian relations were tested, and Australia's international education sector was scrutinized, revealing a series of significant problems. The issue of racism was consistently downplayed by Australian authorities despite the expression of local and international concern about the issue (Ang & Pothen, 2011).

**(iii) Family: Co-constructing a Narrative**

The sense of common identification with different families appeared to transcend issues of cultural difference in the Family program, an interesting example of contextual identification (see Baumann, 1999; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Many participants in this study claimed that Family provided

support by creating a program that was about them. Beyond the role of normalizing difference, some claimed as transformational the experience of speaking up, hearing new perspectives or getting new information. These kinds of comments involved a level of reflexivity on the part of the participants in which the conversation was valued as a resource in itself. Many expressed the belief that they, or others, would develop better understanding through viewing the program:

I thought the family episode was a real eye opener and a great collection of young people. It was a very well handled forum and illuminated just how non-conventional lives can be and indeed are, making the nuclear family often with all its dysfunction not so idyllic. I do hope minds and hearts were broadened. (Dave Sydney, Family Your Say, *Alternative families*)

*Insight's* Family program explored diverse topics, but many attempts were made in the online forums to find common themes. The sense of community that emerged out of a diverse group of issues involved references to universal experiences, many of which verged on the platitudinous. Comments such as "all you need is love," "home is where the heart is," "what matters is parental love" were attempts to sum up personal experiences canvassed by the program and forums, which many of the other participants endorsed or extended. The participants in the Family program, as well as those who took part in the online platforms that followed it, overwhelmingly tended to express the view that the program would have some kind of transformative effect because of the differences and understandings of family it reflected.

#### **Conclusion: Multicultural Sociability and the Imperfect Forum**

The kinds of public conversations and interactions facilitated online are quite different from those in other public forums, such as editorially controlled television forum programs. Web contributions are not time-constrained, actively facilitated or required to achieve the same editorial balance as public television content. They are also freed by conditions of anonymity in which no participant is expected to speak for a particular position or view. As a result, a greater range of perspectives, forms of self-expression and types of interaction tend to take place online, in an often chaotic cacophony. The key value of the SBS online sites may be that they bring differing perspectives into one public space. Within the chat and comments sections of *Insight* online, divergent views definitely came together. But how much was clash and how much was conversation?

Within *Insight's* online forums, sociability was both enabled and contained by SBS's moderation and the common reference points established by the preceding television programs. Multicultural sociability, as I define it, is governed by frameworks that encourage participation by individuals from a wide range of perspectives but curb certain kinds of exclusionary expression. In the context of virulent debates about race-related problems, the parameters and safeguards set by SBS ruled out racial vilification or defamation, for example, which could have curtailed participation for many. The moderation did not regulate the kinds of "fragmented, nonsensical and enraged" discussion described by Papacharissi (2002, p. 10) but it did limit the kinds of anonymous bullying that can deter online involvement. In establishing such a framework, SBS may have facilitated a more inclusive or comfortable forum for participants from a wide range of backgrounds. In doing so under the umbrella of a national public

broadcaster, the forums promote the exchange and “engagement across differences with the ideas of others” that Appiah (2007, p. 55) describes as essential to the practical success of culturally diverse societies. This model can also counter the tendency of online debate to segregate positions into the politically polarized echo chambers described by Deuze (2007). The Family Live Chat was closer to an echo chamber than the other case studies, with the adoption of mutually affirming positions by most participants. It did, however, importantly “constitute as agents in the discourse” (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 485) individuals whose perspectives or experiences tend to be marginalized in discourses of family in Australia. Live Chat for the Somali Australians and At Risk programs represented more challenging conditions for sociability, comprising conflicting perspectives in the context of politically charged public debate about cultural difference. Participants in the Live Chat and Your Say for these programs were constituted as agents in discourses around Australia’s cultural diversity. They tended to employ a range of self-identifications to support their arguments, adopting unique subject positions in relation to the debates. The online forums provided some interesting examples of strategic identification with complex forms of ethnicity and identity, generating new subject positions within debates that are frequently over-simplified in mainstream media.

The *Insight* online engagements allowed for a complexity of views, a framework within which exchanges and mutual recognition between diverse subject positions can take place. These are keys to sociability as they “build on certain shared human competencies to relate to multiple other persons” (Glick Schiller et al., 2011, pp. 414–415). Many of the contributors articulated their opinions within their own framework of understanding; they tended, however, to address a broad imagined audience. Views may have been polarized and fragmented, but they were not ghettoized; the notion of exchange was a fundamental part of the experience of participation. This suggests that the public sphere, rather than being diminished by online fragmentation, is granted new life and new possibilities in online spaces. As Jensen and Helles (2011, p. 531) note, peer-to-peer/interactive audience-led technologies complement traditional broadcasting in modern forms of political democracy and cultural engagement, although they claim “the jury—history—is still out reflecting on what kind of public sphere and cultural forum the internet may become.” Despite their limitations, the platforms for multicultural sociability created by these forums are an important resource in a culturally diverse society. They generate opportunities for forms of civic and political participation negotiated within the framework of a public media space of mutual engagement.

Dahlgren’s (2005) assertion that talk is essentially democratic leads us to a new valuing of opportunities for public conversation in liberal democracies. Yale University Professor Seyla Benhabib warns, however, that we need to “establish a distinction between virtual conversation and concrete commitments of living together and life forms, which is what democracy is all about” and claims that “there is a danger in talking about Internet democracy . . . It confuses information and exchange of views with action commitments that need to be made over a long period of time” (in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008, p. 965). Perhaps the best we can hope for in online environments are conditions for mutual recognition and resources that form important preconditions to democratic action rather than any radically new form of it.

This study found evidence of significant recognition and exchange between a divergent positions and perspectives. These exchanges were encouraged by the conditions of each forum, contextualized within a commonly understood editorial framework and afforded a degree of legitimacy (and an audience)

through their association with a national public broadcaster with a multicultural charter. The conversations did not necessarily reach any consensus but, as Appiah (2007, p. 78) has noted, understanding doesn't have to lead to agreement: it just helps us to get used to one another. Many participants in the *Insight* forums described how reading others' comments had changed their thoughts or opinions, and a significant number claimed that the forums had led them to a better understanding of issues. These kinds of comments suggest the influence of the forum as a part of everyday life, and offering a resource for intercultural understanding and what Ang and Pothen have called "living together-in-difference" (2009, para. 11).

In an era when many public institutions are struggling to deal with the increasing cultural diversity of contemporary societies (McClellan, 2008), the conditions for multicultural sociability described in this paper provide a useful framework for other contexts for participation. Mutual recognition in the context of democratic participation may go some way to addressing the "crisis of belonging" described by Miller (2007, p. 35), which intersects with moral panics and dominant discourses in disengaging citizens from one another across lines of cultural difference. Inclusive conversations contained by broadly understood terms of debate encourage new forms of sociability in which we can finally, as Appiah (2007) suggests, begin to get used to one another.



*Georgie McClellan is Manager of Policy, Research and Community Engagement at SBS.*

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