

# What Indian media can teach us

Erin Jordan thinks Australian media needs a new approach to diversity

On May 18, I joined a number of fellow media and communications students in attending a guest lecture by Jawhar Sircar's – CEO of the mighty media conglomerate Indian Prasar Bharti Media. I will admit it wasn't until I heard someone whisper behind me "he has met Obama!" that my interest was piqued. Sircar, however, proved to be more than just some guy who's met Obama. He carried with him a very important message for Australian media: unity in the community can only be truly forged if we take representations of difference seriously, and put in place systems to hand power directly to unrepresented voices.

A week prior to this lecture, Australia was abuzz with Waleed Aly's "controversial" Logie win. It was only in reflecting on Sircar's words of wisdom that I could understand why Aly's win was so controversial. The truth is, we all grew up in an environment where Australia's ability to accept diversity was vacuously tooted by politicians, teachers and the media. It is because of this that we are unable to reconcile or understand the differences between what we have been told to be true and the actual racist reality of Australia. There are a myriad reasons for this, but our media does play an important role in perpetuating it.

The current state of the Australian media is, if the national shock of Aly's win is anything to go by, rather horrific. We don't have to peruse the public broadcast channels of radio or television for too long before we realise Australian media

needs to put in a lot more effort if it wants to claim that it represents diversity of any kind. The hosts, presenters, weather reporters and everyone really, are noticeably white and predominantly city-centric. As *Guardian* Indigenous editor Stan Grant recently highlighted, there are no places where Indigenous reporters are fairly employed as foreign correspondents, despite them being the most appropriate representatives of Australia. The ABC's dedicated Indigenous department attempts to confront problems of representation, but ultimately doesn't result in the space for a non-conventional presenter to be a part of the mainstream dialogue of Australia, or for regional diversity to be represented. Whilst it is important to recognise this evident representation gap in our media, it is more important to understand what there is to be done about it. So what does Sircar have to do with all of this? Well, I think we can learn from his media system.

The picture Sircar provides of the Indian media starkly contrasts the current patched-together broadcast that is Australian media. Instead it is a "pan-Indian service" comprised of 400 individualised but national radio stations, 125,000 newspaper publications and 15 commercial broadcast centres. Its coverage is far-reaching and all encompassing and each station or newspaper publication represents a different voice. Instead of attempting to insert the occasional arguably token minority (be it ethnic, regional etc.) into a

Sydney or Melbourne based media system, they have their own stations and platforms. It is precisely this management of regional diversity that Australia should take note of.

Not only does Australia have a system incomparable to what Sircar describes, but we are actively moving away from it. Funding pressures on the ABC that have seen regional and rural reporting take a hit would be seen as particularly fatal by Bharti Media. By eliminating regional services, Bharti Media would risk sacrificing the strength that these individualised areas give to the united construction of India. Beyond media, Sircar's emphasis on the importance of cooperation between the regional and the national provides broader lessons as to how we can overcome our problems of cultural diversity. In practice he describes this as dubbing the contents of regional radio songs into Hindi, a national language. The regional is woven delicately, but meaningfully into the national interest, fostering the modern Indian attitude that I would like someday to be echoed in Australia. Instead of requiring some level of cultural assimilation for diverse voices to be heard, their difference is respected and upheld.

It's hard to say exactly what this would look like in an Australian context, but in essence it involves destabilising the current city-centric system, handing power over to decentralised media outlets across the country: a grassroots approach to constructing a media landscape.

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