The Special Broadcasting Service and the future of multiculturalism: an *Insight* into contemporary challenges and future directions

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Abstract

In the past decade multiculturalism across Western nations has come under sustained critique and attack from its political opponents. It has been asserted that multiculturalism leads to the creation of ghettos and segregated communities, which undermine liberal democratic values and heighten the risk of attraction to extremist violence, particularly in regard to Muslim communities. The ferocity of these attacks has led many scholars to claim that multiculturalism is ‘in retreat’. But such claims have rarely been tested as they relate to publicly funded government agencies and institutions. These are key sites governing the daily practice and representation of multiculturalism that impact on populations in everyday life. In the Australian context, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) is a pivotal example of a multicultural institution, with its programming and community engagement widely considered among the world’s best practice in promoting pluralism and respect between cultures. In more recent times, however, a series of controversial episodes on the network’s flagship ‘ideas forum’, the *Insight* television program, have led to anger in Australian Muslim communities, and a boycott by a variety of community leaders, academics and activists. This study reveals a notable shift away from the core values of multiculturalism in the SBS and Australian society.

Keywords: Australian Muslims, Islam, multicultural broadcasting, multiculturalism, Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)

Introduction

The post 9/11 decade in Australia and many other Western states has been defined by the securitisation of governmental approaches to Islam and the Muslim population. Questions of loyalty and identity thrown at Muslim citizens have become commonplace in mainstream political discourse. As Mohamad Abdalla (2010, p. 26) argues, ‘post-September 11, 2001, Australian Muslims have increasingly been viewed as “culturally incompatible” [and] “as a potential political threat to national security”’. Events since 2001, in particular the 7/7 2005 London bombings conducted by British-born-and-raised Muslim men, have seen multiculturalism become entwined with the Muslim question and blamed in right-wing circles for creating ghettos of disloyalty. Debates...
about Muslim identity have become central to questions about the continued viability of multiculturalism as a social system (Modood 2010, p. 158; Levey 2010, p. 30).

In the wake of the European sovereign debt crisis and economic instability, 2010 and 2011 became milestone years for public condemnations of multiculturalism by national leaders throughout Europe. In February 2011 the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, declared that multiculturalism had ‘failed’ to provide a national vision to which Muslims would want to belong (Cameron 2011) while the Dutch Interior Minister released a report in June 2011 that stated:

The government shares the social dissatisfaction over the multicultural society model and plans to shift priority to the values of the Dutch people. In the new integration system, the values of the Dutch society play a central role. With this change, the government steps away from the model of a multicultural society.

(Donner 2011)

The Dutch Government outlined plans to follow the French in banning the burqa from 2013, following in the footsteps of strictly integrationist countries such as France.

In Australia and Canada, where multiculturalism has been a defining national characteristic in a bipartisan approach (Bowen 2011; Abbott cited in Lapkin 2011; Harper 2011), the topic of Muslim integration has over the past decade become a key platform for gaining political advantage. Australian Muslims have been consistently singled out for public rebuke by Australian politicians. Speaking in 2010 the current Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and Opposition leader Tony Abbott both labelled the burqa, worn by a small minority of women, as ‘confronting’, and in 2011 and 2012 successive Federal Attorney Generals strongly rejected any potential for legal pluralism and the accommodation of sharia, signalling a nascent desire to return to the assimilationist approach to Australian citizenship (McClelland cited in Karvelas 2011; Roxon cited in Karvelas 2012). Recent work by Maddox (2005) and Fozdar (2011) has documented the simultaneous emergence of public discourse emphasising Australia’s Christian heritage and values, and its role in acting to exclude citizens of other faiths, further undermining multiculturalism. The renewed emphasis over the past decade upon an increasingly vigorous approach to citizenship has led many scholars to argue that multiculturalism is ‘in retreat’ (Joppke 2004; Turner 2006; Poynting & Mason 2008) or even ‘purged’ (Colic-Peisker 2011).

The thesis that multiculturalism is ‘in retreat’ relies primarily on public speeches and policy statements written by politicians for political contingency, or broad quantitative datasets measuring individual attitudes. Far less work has been undertaken at the qualitative empirical level to understand how this ‘retreat’ from multiculturalism is enacted, if at all, in publicly funded institutions typically less influenced by the extremes of contemporaneous political debate, and how this plays out at the micro level in Australia’s diverse communities. Yet it is on this ground, the interface between powerful institutions and citizens, that these developments have the potential to have the most long-lasting effects and to shape the lives of those citizens most vulnerable in these debates. Religious minorities and, particularly in the current climate, Muslim communities are some of those most potentially vulnerable to the power of institutions. This is especially the case in Australia, where Muslims make up just over two percent of
the population yet experience extraordinarily high rates of poverty (Hassan 2009; Hassan 2010, p. 580) and imprisonment (Cooper 2008).

Media coverage of Islam and Muslims in Australia, particularly in the post-9/11 environment, plays a critical role in reinforcing negative stereotypes among the wider Australian public. Basic examples of negative coverage may include what Persinger (2010, pp. 50–1) considers prolific reporting ‘on radical Australian Muslims with extreme views while failing to comprehensively cover international news that could serve to educate audiences about the diversity of Muslim society and identity’. According to Anne Aly (2007, p. 28), ‘the underlying assumption in the media discourse in the so called “war on terror” is that Islam is backward, secular resistant and incompatible with the ideals and values of Western liberal democracy’. Samina Yasmeen (2008, pp. 50–1) has noted that the media is perceived by Australian Muslims as an active contributor to their exclusion and negative stereotyping. Yasmeen ascribes this to the media’s need to sensationalise and to make profit. Research by Halim Rane (2010, p. 108) in the traditionally conservative state of Queensland reveals that almost 80 per cent of the population rely on the media as their primary source of information about Islam and Muslims, with television news and current affairs programs the primary source of information about Islam and Muslims (for 62 per cent of those surveyed). When these findings are considered in relation to research conducted by Kevin Dunn (2005), revealing that over half of Australians surveyed know little about Islam and Muslims (and that significant numbers of respondents felt threatened by Islam), it is clear that television networks possess an extraordinary level of power in representing Islam to a broader non-Muslim Australian public and in shaping public perceptions. The effects of this power, if misapplied through the media, have real-life impacts on Australian Muslims. Drawing on a 2003 Racism Monitor and 2004 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Report authored by Scott Poynting and Greg Noble, Dunn, Klocker and Salabay note:

The negativity has material impacts upon Australian Muslims. Such constructions (mis)inform opposition to mosque development … , and lie behind arson attacks and racist violence … acts of discrimination, verbal abuse and violence were commonplace for Australian Muslims.

(Dunn, Klocker & Salabay 2007, p. 582)

In the Australian context, the SBS television network stands as the embodiment of a state-funded multicultural institution that has historically stood in contrast to such vilification. Founded in 1980 to promote the Australian government’s commitment to multiculturalism, the SBS differs significantly from the commercial networks. It has what may be considered a socially inclusivist approach built into its charter, provided in the Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991. The SBS Charter (SBS 2011a), based on the Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991, clearly projects a socially inclusivist vision reflecting the era in which it came into being. Key facets of the Charter state that the network must (1) ‘reflect Australia’s multicultural society’, (2a) ‘contribute to meeting the communication needs of Australia’s multicultural society’, (2b) ‘increase awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of Australian society’, (2c) ‘promote understanding and acceptance of the cultural,
linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people’ and (2h) ‘reflect the changing
nature of Australian society, by presenting many points of view and using innovative
forms of expression’ (SBS 2011a). These components of the Charter directly reflect
what Jakubowicz (2006, p. 254) has labelled the ‘transformational cultural interaction’
perspective of multiculturalism:

It recognises that in multicultural societies, there will always be intergenerational
melding and transformation of cultural expression with a healthy awareness of and
respect for the many trajectories that bring people into the same social world from
very different backgrounds ... In particular, its paradigm of reciprocal respect of
diversity would place obligations on everyone to recognise the human in other
members of society and be equipped through education and wider social debate
with the skills to engage sympathetically with views rather different to their own.

(Jakubowicz 2006, p. 254)

The contemporary SBS operating environment:
context and challenges

The SBS has faced a variety of well-documented challenges throughout its history as a
multicultural broadcaster. The two primary issues relate to recurrent funding challenges
(and adoption of advertising as a form of revenue) and questions about whether the
network truly reflects a multicultural society or merely reinforces hegemonic Anglo-
Australian values.

Funding challenges

Network funding has been an issue impacting on multicultural broadcasters worldwide,
as they have had to come to terms with an increasingly competitive environment; SBS is
no exception. Bruce Meagher (2009, p. 20), the former Director of Strategy and
Communication at SBS, states that in the six years leading up to 2009, the Australian
Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was ahead $270 million from government funding,
while the SBS was trailing significantly behind on just $17 million in government
funding.¹ This clearly places pressure on the network to raise revenue from other
sources—primarily advertising. Ratings are essential to advertising premiums; the
higher the ratings for a given program, the greater the market demand for advertising
space and the consequent exposure to potential customers. This is a challenge that finds
strong parallels with other multicultural broadcasters. In the case of the United
Kingdom’s Channel 4, Sarita Malik notes:

An increasingly competitive marketplace ... has undermined many of the values of
Channel 4’s original remit and, to a certain extent, the public’s trust in the
channel. In the past such developments has involved investment and
disinvestment, transparency and duplicity, and a trajectory that can most
straightforwardly be described as moving from the radical to the conventional.
The ‘duty to be different’ has therefore been challenged both by intensifying
market completion and the broader political emphasis on the ‘duty to integrate’.

(Malik 2008, p. 344)
In the New Zealand context, Donald Reid (2011) has argued the significance of tensions between commercial and public service programming that are evident in the TVNZ network. Such tensions have negatively impacted the quality of multicultural programming:

Because the majority of TVNZ’s revenue is generated from advertising, a logical choice for TVNZ (as a commercial broadcaster) is to screen populist high-rating imported material at primetime, with locally-made public service material screened at low rating (thus low revenue generating) periods of the schedule. But as the state-owned network, TVNZ faces political and public pressure to function both as a platform for local production (especially high quality material targeting a prime time audience); and as a forum to represent minority interest groups. (Reid 2011, p. 62)

SBS vigorously markets its advertising space as appealing to a higher educated and higher earning demographic passionately committed to the network, thus seeking to distinguish its program space as different from the mainstream television networks. But, of the SBS network’s top-rating programs for 2010, nine out of ten were either the Football World Cup or Top Gear, while the Football World Cup, Top Gear and Man vs. Wild combined to take 18 of the top 20 programs for the year. Another top-20 program, James May’s Toy Stories featured a host from Top Gear and may be included within the same genre. Nearly all (95 per cent) of SBS’s top-rating programs for 2010 were commercially oriented with very little to distinguish them from programs on mainstream free-to-air commercial networks.

The SBS network, then, faces the challenge of increasing its ratings and, thus, advertising revenue; commercial content is one of few mechanisms with which to achieve this. On the other hand, the network must still continue to abide by the SBS Charter and produce high quality (albeit lower rating) multicultural programming.

**Debates about SBS’s multicultural credentials**

Critics have focused on two core areas: first, the perceived relegation of ethnic minority concerns and representations to an individual television station, and second, an alleged shift in the service towards ‘addressing only a privileged Anglo-Australian audience interested in consuming representations of difference’ (Smaill 2002, p. 397). The SBS is cast as a ghetto of non-Australian cultures mashed together and away from the mainstream networks, and simultaneously as a place for more educated and wealthy Australians to consume ethnic cultures while maintaining their hegemony. Both of these developments are argued to have the effect of reinforcing the dominant national Anglo-Australian identity as the norm. These criticisms draw upon a wider body of literature critiquing multiculturalism, and fit especially well with the views of Ghassan Hage, who has famously posited the concept of ‘White multiculturalism’ in which Aboriginal people and non-white ‘ethnics’ are objects to be governed, ensuring a continuation of the core European national identity (Hage 1998, pp. 11–14).

Brett Nicholls (2011) argues a very similar line with specific reference to the SBS television program *East West 101*, produced by Knapman Wyld Television (2007–2011). In a well-articulated dissection of the program’s first series on SBS in 2007, Nicholls ably challenges the notion of the program as representing true diversity (and
acting as ‘edgy text’), revealing a reinforcement of integration narratives and white cultural hegemony pervading the vast majority of the program. But the program enjoyed broad popular support from Muslim communities. Shakira Hussein, a University of Melbourne academic with strong community links, noted that ‘on the drama front, East West 101 has been very popular among Muslim viewers (women in particular—hot male lead) …’ (interview 16 August 2012). Other programs about Islam that may be susceptible to critique and that have also been largely well received within Australian Muslim communities include the Halal Mate documentaries (Rebel Films 2007–); Muslim hosted panel television program Salam Café (RMITV 2005-2007; GNWTV 2008) (originally screened on community television network Channel 31); and The Trial (360 Degree Films 2010), a behind-the-scenes documentary featuring the family members of young Muslim men accused (and subsequently convicted) of terrorism offences. Importantly, the production of these programs is outsourced by the SBS to independent production houses, making them somewhat external to gaining an understanding of the true institutional habitus (or ‘matrix of dispositions’ [Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 136]) of the network.

This article seeks to explore one recent, yet particularly important controversy centring on a boycott of the SBS Insight program by a variety of Muslim community representatives, academics and activists. In May 2012, boycotters signed an open letter to SBS (see Veiszadeh 2012) expressing their deep concern about the representation of debates about Islam on two episodes of Insight: ‘Banning the Burqa’ aired 21 September 2010 (SBS 2010b) and ‘Fear of Islam’ aired 2 November 2010 (SBS 2010c). The open letter emphasised potential ‘adverse implications’ for the Muslim community in Australia (Statement on behalf of the Signatories from the Islamic Community quoted in Veiszadeh 2012). They signalled their refusal to participate in an upcoming program about polygamy that they were concerned would feature negative representations of Muslims. While not as visually spectacular as thousands of Vietnamese protesters in the streets outside the SBS headquarters (as in one 2003 protest about the choice of Vietnamese language news provider), the signatories collectively represented thousands of Australian Muslims, including those potentially most vulnerable to racism and social exclusion, such as migrant women. Significantly, this boycott occurred across Australian state borders and sectarian lines, a remarkable occurrence given the diversity of Australia’s Muslim populations, and illustrating widespread concern. That the boycott received such support irrespective of SBS’s history of promoting respect and recognition of Muslim communities also speaks to the deep breach of trust felt by signatories in relation to the Insight program. In exploring the dynamics of this controversy, it is important to consider contemporary SBS representations of Islam, and analyse the Insight episodes in question and the motivations of boycott signatories. These present a nuanced picture of a notable shift away from the SBS commitment to multiculturalism. This shift holds significant political implications when noting SBS as a barometer of Australia’s affinity with multiculturalism.

Research method

The study is part of a series of research projects funded by an Australian Research Council grant (DP0988246) examining citizenship and belonging among British and Australian Muslims. This research broadly set out to examine factors enabling and
inhibiting active citizenship. The research is based upon a wide variety of sources, including the open letter to SBS from Muslim signatories, interviews with former guests of the *Insight* program (de-identified for anonymity), interviews with boycott signatories, specially purchased SBS ratings data, engagement with the SBS board and current executive producer of *Insight* (as at May 2013), and a critical discourse analysis of the *Insight* episodes central to the controversy. This multifaceted approach enables the content of the programs to be analysed and reflected upon in adequate depth, revealing the key issues raised and their relationship to the SBS Charter (SBS 2011a).

According to Paltridge (2006, p. 179), critical discourse analysis is premised upon the view that ‘social and political issues are constructed and reflected in discourse’, that ‘power relations are negotiated and performed through discourse’, that ‘discourse … reflects and reproduces social relations’ and that ‘ideologies are produced and reflected in the use of discourse’. Critical discourse analysis is considered of particular utility in exploring ‘issues [of] gender, ethnicity, cultural difference, ideology and identity and how these are both constructed and reflected in texts’ (Paltridge 2006, p. 179).

This analysis adapts the key components of critical discourse analysis outlined by Paltridge to analyse the representation of Islam and debates about the place of Muslims in Australia on *Insight*. The analysis considers how the content of the conversation and debate is presented, including the physical position of the moderator, what concepts and issues are emphasised on the program and what are ‘played down’. It considers the background knowledge, attitudes and points of view that the debates presuppose and what the moderator foregrounded in the debates, that is, what the moderator emphasised as important in her comments shaping the direction of the debates. The analysis also considers power relations in discourse—who has the most authority and power in the discussion, as well as who is left out of the debate. Due to the multidimensional nature of the discourse, in this case played out through visual imagery accompanying the debate, it is also important to consider the physical positioning of guests. Cumulatively, these sources and this approach contribute to a better understanding of the pressure points on SBS, and by extension the Australian society, in relation to its commitment to multiculturalism.

**SBS’s *Insight***

The *Insight* program is funded and produced within the SBS network, with the production team granted full autonomy over form and content (*Insight* Executive Producer, interviewed 29 Jun. 2012). It is hosted by an experienced and articulate moderator, Jennie Brockie, and is marketed by the SBS as ‘Australia’s leading forum for ideas’. The SBS *Insight* website (SBS 2011b) claims the program is pioneering a highly interactive and engaging format unique to Australian television. Viewers can follow the program on Twitter and Facebook, subscribe to email alerts, be involved in a ‘live chat’ with program guests after the show and contribute to the ‘Your Say’ message board, with the option of ‘liking’ or ‘disliking’ others’ contributions. Viewers can also suggest topics, seek to join the studio audience, download the show either online or in podcast form and download transcripts of the show. Consequently, those at home and with internet access can feel like they have a significant stake in the program and its outcome. *Insight* may be considered at the forefront in using contemporary technology to foster democratic engagement and citizenship; this is certainly the case when comparing the show to the traditional mainstream networks’ programming for the Tuesday night
primetime slot in 2010: The ABC’s 7.30, Channel 7’s My Kitchen Rules, Channel 9’s Big Bang Theory and Channel 10’s Talkin’ ‘Bout Your Generation. The closest rival for the use of technology and wide studio and virtual audience participation is Q&A on ABC on Monday evenings nationally at 9.30 pm.

Topics on Insight seek to address contemporary public issues and have included diverse topics such as climate change, gambling, sexual consent and mental health. The Insight website promotes the program as:

… a great leveller, no one has special status. Politicians, business leaders and experts sit alongside kids and punters, swapping stories and arguing about everything from property prices to relationships, climate change or the nature of courage. Jenny guides the conversation, ensuring as many people as possible have their say. There’s no hiding behind press releases and spin on Insight, it’s face-to-face debate.

(SBS 2011b)

The Insight program format may be considered as having many attributes that can indeed contribute to the SBS Charter, particularly increasing the ‘awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of [Australian] society’, promoting ‘understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people’ and ‘reflect[ing] the changing nature of Australian society, by presenting many points of view and using innovative forms of expression’ (SBS 2011a). Insight has the potential to embody the socially inclusivist charter of the network and to achieve ‘transformational cultural interaction’ (Jakubowicz 2006, p. 254).

Given the current challenges faced in understanding the relationship between Islam and multiculturalism in Western contexts, it was perhaps predictable that Insight would face its greatest challenges in accurately representing the nature of debate in line with the Charter in episodes directly examining Islam.

The Insight episodes, ‘Banning the Burqa’ and ‘Fear of Islam’, must be understood in the broader context of the program prior to analysis. While the program features guests from a variety of faiths and religious traditions, Islam remains the only religion that has actively featured as the central topic of any Insight episodes. This is significant given that over 60 per cent of Australians identify as Christian, and 2.4 per cent Buddhism—the second largest faith in Australia. Furthermore, Hinduism is the fastest-growing religion. None of these faiths or religions have yet been selected as a focus, yet a variety of Insight episodes have brought Islam and Muslims into the spotlight. The first such episode dealt with controversial comments made by the Sydney based ‘Mufti’ of Australia, Sheikh Taj el-Din al-Hilali, and aired 7 November 2006 (SBS 2006). Subsequent episodes in which Muslims were central to the program included ‘Somali Australians’, aired 8 September 2009 (SBS 2009), in the wake of the 2009 arrest of several young Muslims for terrorism offences, and ‘Stopping the boats’, aired 1 June 2010 (SBS 2010a), a program framed primarily around Afghan Muslim refugees.

The program generally commences with moderator Jenny Brockie providing an overview of the topic and the goals of the show before asking questions of the two international keynote guests. These guests speak to opposing sides of the topic before
invited guests are asked to provide their perspective. After some initial exchanges, Brockie allows anyone appearing particularly keen to talk to provide their view, often having to choose between many people seeking to make a point. The microphone on a boom is then lowered over that individual. The moderator must be perceptive enough to have an awareness of the topic and who to choose to speak and when. Ultimately, this rests upon the aims of the program and its producers. Editing processes ensure a perspective of the debate for viewers that is vastly different from the bird’s-eye view of audience participants. Close-up shots, wide panoramic shots and focusing on some speakers over others (instead of screening the footage in its entirety) ensure a particular representation of the debate, and important insight into the matrix of dispositions informing the network’s approach.

**Guest selection**

Invited guests on *Insight* ensure an incendiary mix of polarised perspectives. Both episodes analysed feature two invited international guests screened live to the audience through satellite, and at least half a dozen local guests directly invited by SBS to participate in the show. Guests are almost exclusively activists and are clearly sought out for their established and often highly polarised political perspectives. A case in point is that of Hizb ut-Tahrir Australia media representative Uthman Badar, the only individual who gained speaking time on both *Insight* episodes about Islam. A transnational organisation with active branches in Europe, Australia and Central and South East Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir has emerged at the head of the Islamist challenge to the West. The organisation ‘presents democracy and multiculturalism as a ploy to weaken the faith, remove Muslims from the truth and subdue them’ (Akbarzadeh & Roose 2011, p. 314). A pamphlet produced by Hizb ut-Tahrir Europe (released in Britain) states:

> Since the ruling in the West is on the basis of *Kufr* and *Haraam*, then the parliament undertakes actions of legislation without referring to Allah … i.e. it undertakes actions of *kufr* and sin.

(Hizb ut Tahrir Europe 2010, p. 19)

The Australian arm of Hizb ut-Tahrir held a conference in July 2010 in the Sydney suburb of Lidcombe (in the demographic heartland of Islam in Australia). Widely publicised through both the internet and media coverage, the conference was attended by approximately 400 individuals from a Sydney based Muslim population of over 100,000.³ This represents less than half of a per cent of Sydney based Muslims and, certainly, not all attendees were members of the group. Yet Hizb ut-Tahrir was twice invited by SBS to address a national audience, conferring political currency for its perspectives.

Three narrow perspectives and their representatives appear to have been sought out by the program producers for these two shows: moderate Muslim, Islamist Muslim and far-right, often fundamentalist, Christian and anti-Muslim political perspectives.⁴ These are played off against each other to maximise tension. The vast majority of the *Insight* audience are left blind as to the political motivations of actors on the show and, importantly, to the marginality of many of these actors in key debates. It is here that arguments about audience agency and individual critical introspection of program
content are weak. Research considered above (for example, Dunn [2005] and Rane [2010]) reveals that the majority of viewers are very likely to have little in-depth knowledge of contemporary discourse or the legitimacy of key actors and program guests within it. Many guests have very little credibility in the community or with those they claim to represent, yet they are conferred authority by being on national television, presenting the uninformed viewer seeking ‘insight’ into the issue with a poor level of understanding upon which to make any critical judgement.

As an example of this, one young Australian Muslim woman found herself in a minority among fellow Muslims on the ‘Banning the Burqa’ episode. In a private interview, she reflected:

I feel they continuously pick and choose the not-so-good English speaking Muslim leaders to so-call ‘represent Islam’, but in actual fact they are doing more harm due to the lack of English. They always choose the same ones who don’t speak English well! In fact, in doing so, they are actually making a mockery out of Muslims.

(SBS Insight ‘Banning the Burqa’ guest, interviewed 24 Jun. 2011)

It is pertinent to consider that the largest demographic group of Muslims in Australia is second generation, born and raised in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, 2011). Yet program producers have substantively overlooked this, continuing to engage foreign-born males to speak on behalf of Muslim communities. Many of these foreign-born figures lack both the linguistic skills and cultural capital to make substantive contributions. As a primary example of this, the SBS Insight website for ‘Banning the Burqa’ (SBS 2010b) features four keynote guests, of whom three are middle-aged males and the other is a woman who wears the garment. In this way, the show in fact perpetuates stereotyping of Islam and sexism that are continually levelled against the burqa.

Right-wing guests on the show have often written books (printed and distributed by far-right publishing houses) critical of Islam, such as Mark Durie’s The Third Choice: Islam, Dhimmitude and Freedom (2010) and Nonie Darwish’s Now They Call Me Infidel: Why I Renounced Jihad for America (2006). These quasi-intellectual texts represent part of a broader assault by the Christian far-right against Islam in Western contexts. Within this schematic, the Quran is portrayed as an inherently violent book, and Western Muslims are viewed as seeking to Islamise the West. Individuals expressing these perspectives are utilised on the show as catalysts for debate.

Previous work by the authors of this paper has examined the debate about Islam being monopolised by moderate Muslims on one hand and extreme Muslim and right-wing perspectives on the other; the loudest voices dominant while the ‘silent majority’ remain largely unheard in debate (Akbarzadeh & Roose 2011). The nature of such debates confounds the fact that the vast majority of Australian Muslims are neither practising nor visibly ‘Muslim’ and nor are they highly politicised. These Muslims live their lives without engaging in public discussion about their religion, and make a valuable contribution to the development of whatever Western nations they live in. These stories, however, easily falling into the category of ‘confrontainment’ (Lorenzo-Dus 2009, p. 99), have not captured the attention of the SBS network or Insight
producers. It is clear that reaching consensus is not a goal of the program. As the creator of the ‘confrontainment’ concept, Lorenzo-Dus, points out:

The problem with the performance of both consensus and demurred dissent on television, of course, is that neither seems capable of generating half the entertainment that disagreements do, especially when viscerally performed.

(Lorenzo-Dus 2009, p. 99)

**Program analysis: ‘Banning the Burqa’ and ‘Fear of Islam’**

Both ‘Banning the Burqa’ (aired 21 Sep. 2010) and ‘Fear of Islam’ (aired 2 Nov. 2010) were screened in the context of wider contemporary political events of the time, and it is necessary to understand these in greater detail to situate the content of each episode.

The decision by *Insight* producers to focus on the burqa was a result of the topical nature of this garment at that time. France was enacting laws to ban the burqa across the Republic, and Australian political figures had discussed the issue throughout 2010. The debate was sparked by South Australian Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi who blogged in May 2010 that the burqa had emerged ‘as the preferred disguise of bandits and ne’er do wells’ (Bernardi 2010). Other conservatives quickly sought to add their voice to this perspective, and soon this topic had assumed national significance. In this context, *Insight* sought to examine the issue of the burqa with a clear reference to France, asking ‘what exactly is driving the ban?’ This episode promised to delve into the key underlying issues that relate to the burqa and its place in Western societies.

Less than two months later, the SBS broadcast another *Insight* episode on Islam. This was not situated in relation to any notable event at the time, though it sought to capitalise on rising criticism of multiculturalism across Europe, and anti-Islamic sentiments. It is likely that the success of the ‘Banning the Burqa’ episode, with 307,000 viewers nationally compared to an average of 207,000 for the *Insight* program throughout 2010 (OzTAM Pty Ltd 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), also influenced the decision to examine a similarly emotive topic in ‘Fear of Islam’. The key questions for the program were ‘is this anti-Islamic sentiment on the rise in Australia?’ and ‘what is driving this increased hostility?’. Both episodes stated that they would examine key drivers to the debates and reveal insights into the underlying causes. Instead, they merely provided entertainment by putting political views on display.

**Debate content**

The premise of the episodes was to examine the key drivers to banning the burqa, and discover why anti-Islamic sentiment is on the rise. It is instructive to consider the core themes of the episodes and key debates foregrounded. ‘Banning the Burqa’ examined the perceptions that (a) the freedom of Muslim women is undermined by the garment, and (b) the burqa poses a security threat in Australia and can be used to commit crimes while concealing identity. The episode also included discussion about whether the burqa was a central element to Islam. ‘Fear of Islam’ focused on arguments that (a) the Quran preaches violence and (b) Islamic and Western values are incompatible, particularly in relation to sharia law and human rights abuses in Islamic nations. None of these topics exhibit any reflexivity about the long history of xenophobia and racism that has been
entrenched in Australian and, indeed, broader Western cultural histories, and that may contribute to negative attitudes towards Islam.

The ‘Banning the Burqa’ episode embraces populist far-right criticisms as the starting point. Provocative proclamations act as incendiary devices for the program, effectively forcing Muslim guests to respond on the defensive, irretrievably polarising the debate. Early in the episode, Jacques Myard, a right-wing member of the French National Assembly that has continually campaigned against the burqa, asserts:

I will tell you something, I think when some people say we are stigmatising a religion, we are stigmatising women who are wearing such clothes, I’m sorry, I am the victim. I am the victim because those people refuse me to see their face, to communicate with them and I think this violates the common will to live together...

The manner in which a privileged white older male with considerable social status and power can claim victimhood may be laughable, yet it is taken seriously. The moderator clearly buys into the ‘Islam versus the West’ polemic that characterises this binary. Moderator Jenny Brockie points to a member of the audience and asks:

Amina, you are 22, you wear the burqa here in Australia, do you understand how a Western country could see it as a symbol of inequality, that women are being forced to cover their faces?

This question, addressed to an Australian Muslim woman challenges the authenticity of Amina as an Australian. ‘Here in Australia’ and ‘how a Western country … ’ are prefaces that automatically marginalise the guest and firmly place her as the ‘other’. Amina’s response is equally instructive, taking this distinction as the starting point:

It is not for the West or anyone else for that matter to decide what is inequality, our religion has given us equality. It is not for him or Cory Bernardi or Fred Nile to tell us we are oppressed or wrong is being done to us, we chose to wear this. So no I don’t understand where the West is coming from.

The argument made by Muslim guests, including Tariq Ramadan and Sibel Bennett, is that the burqa is a matter of personal choice and piety. Muslim women wearing the burqa felt that they had the right to choose to wear it and that it was in accordance with the example of the wives of the Prophet. But right-wing guests continued the polemical assault. Cory Bernardi, the Australian agent provocateur leading public condemnation of the burqa asks

... why all of a sudden are we … making exceptions for our security and our cultural practices in this country for a tiny subset of people who are adhering to a fundamental, an extreme fundamentalist version of a religion?

The episode clearly descends from its stated objectives into outright conflict, reflecting the manner in which incendiary comments and the specific mix of guests polarise the program. The premise clearly shifts from talking about ‘why people find the burqa
confronting’ at the beginning of the discussion to ‘whether the burqa should be banned’ by the end.

A very similar process of almost immediate polarisation of discourse can be observed in the ‘Fear of Islam’ episode. Brockie commences the program by asking what is driving the increased hostility to Islam in Europe and the United States. The first guest, Reza Aslan, an academic and author, starts by considering the potential influences of economic distress and war weariness and links the increase to historical incidents of religious discrimination in a response directly addressing the core premise of the show. The next guest invited to speak is Nonie Darwish an extreme right-wing anti-Muslim campaigner and Director of Former Muslims United, described by United States Democratic Senator Eric Adams, as ‘bringing hate, hate and poison to a diverse country’ (Daily Mail Online 2011). Darwish instantly places the blame directly upon Islam and makes the Islam/West distinction:

The West is very concerned and actually afraid because the media is not informing them. There are too many moderate Muslims who are trying to whitewash the fears and concerns of the West ... Islamic doctrine promotes violence and hatred against non-Muslims. 60% of the Quran is dedicated to cursing and spreading hatred and violence against non-Muslims who are called ‘Kaffir’ ... Islam looks at the outside world in a very—they want to achieve conquering the world ...

Muslims guests are forced to respond to Darwish on her terms, refuting the base of her argument that Islam is the problem, and disproving her empirically baseless assertions. Randa Abdel-Fattah, a ‘moderate’ Muslim, highlights precisely this point when she claims ‘We are starting from a point of view that Islam and Muslims—well Islam is a violent, misogynistic, hateful religion and that is where the debate always starts from’. Reza Aslan similarly responds:

... I have to say that it’s a weird feeling to have to respond to a Christian leader of an anti-Muslim organisation—it would be like having to respond to a Muslim leader of an anti-Jewish organisation about Judaism ...

Nonetheless, the program continues with Islam being examined as the problem, buttressed by the stoking of the conflict by Mark Durie who claims:

In the end, there are some disturbing messages in the Quran, there were declarations of war against non-believers, there’s a declaration that Islam should be triumphant over other religions. The problem is this is not just in the book, but preached throughout the Islamic world ...

While alternate positions are heard on the episode, the effect of extreme right incursions into the debate have the effect of pulling the discussion to the right, well away from potential examinations of underlying cultural causes such as xenophobia and cultural racism. This is clearly demonstrated when late in the program, after an advertisement, Brockie redefines the premise of the debate: ‘Tonight we are talking about Islam and whether its values conflict with democracy’. The program clearly fails to meet its stated objectives and contribute at a level beyond that of entertainment. Far-
right participants gain a national platform for their views, while Muslim participants buy into the debate and either criticise other Muslim participants’ views, or desperately struggle to defend Islam as compatible in Australia. A few guests raise the marginality or validity of the criticisms directed against Islam, but their appeal to commonsense is overshadowed by polarised views. This makes resolution of the debate and dialogue next to impossible, with a raft of potential negative implications for the attitudes of those watching at home, including, as noted by Dunn, Klocker and Salabay (2007, p. 582), the potential for this to contribute to increased racism and even violence from those viewers with the least awareness and greatest insecurity in regard to Islam and Muslims.

Dramatisation and conflict are tested and proven mechanisms for increasing television ratings and, by extension, the premium on advertising space. It is instructive to note that the ratings for the two 2010 Islam episodes were significantly higher than the average 2010 SBS Insight program7 (see Appendix: Table 2). Despite this, even with the emphasis on polarisation and conflict, Insight’s Islam based episodes did not come close to being top rating for the network in 2010 (see Appendix: Table 1). The critical discourse analysis reveals that power, as well as the ability to create drama and conflict, is firmly located in the hands of the moderator and producers of the program, and that through the selection of guests and discourse that Islam and Muslims are represented in a largely negative and polemical manner.

The boycott: an exploration of the events of May 2012
The impact of SBS representations on Australian Muslim communities was corrosive, undermining trust that many Muslims had placed in the network to provide a non-polemical representation of Islam and Muslims. When, just over a year later, the program featured an episode on arranged marriage focusing primarily on Muslims, distrust among community representatives, activists and academics began to rise. Shortly after, Insight researchers began approaching members of Muslim communities for a program on polygamy, and the distrust reached a critical mass. Muslim representatives were strongly concerned that the program would bolster the portrayal of Islam as a patriarchal religion. As one signatory colloquially explained, it was expected that the program would imply that ‘Muslim men are randy old buggers who can’t keep it in their pants and are always looking for a new sex slave’. Activist and Canberra based lawyer Mariam Veiszadeh orchestrated a collective response to the attempts by Insight to recruit guests.

An open letter petitioning SBS to inform the network of a collective decision to boycott participation was signed by ‘signatories from the Islamic community’ and dated 7 May 2012 (see Veiszadeh 2012). Signatories included representatives from the United Muslim Women Association, Lebanese Muslim Association (NSW), Islamic Council of Victoria, Affinity Intercultural Foundation, The Islamic Egyptian Society (NSW) and Islamophobia Watch Australia Group. Several individual academics also signed. Collectively, these organisations represent many thousands of Australian Muslims and span several states, a remarkable occurrence given the highly diverse and contested political space of Islam in Australia. The letter detailed the signatories’ reasons for choosing not to participate:
Previous *Insight* programs, including those which focused on the burqa and niqab and on Islamophobia have not done either of these topics any real justice. Instead, *Insight*’s producers have carefully selected guests from the Muslim community that they can pitch against one another in an attempt to show a diversity of opinions. While we welcome representations that acknowledge the diversity of opinion among Muslims, *Insight*’s producers have manipulated this diversity to create an environment that produces on-air conflict among Muslim guests. The end result is not audience appreciation of Muslim diversity, but rather further misunderstanding, negative perceptions and alienation of Muslim communities in Australia.

*(Statement on behalf of the Signatories from the Islamic Community quoted in Veiszadeh 2012)*

Under the heading ‘Impact on Muslim Community and Social Cohesion’, the letter continues:

We feel that *Insight*’s focus on the Muslim community is disproportionate. Irrespective of *Insight*’s stated good intentions, the end result is further alienation of the Muslim community. Signatories of this letter firmly believe in engaging with media, so to take an action like this highlights the seriousness of our concern.

*(Statement on behalf of the Signatories from the Islamic Community quoted in Veiszadeh 2012)*

The clear pattern of responses from this letter (and interviews) was the perception that the *Insight* episodes about Islam were damaging to the place of Muslims in Australia. One signatory from a major-city-based organisation stated in an interview their view that the proposed polygamy episode would contribute to increased divisiveness and misrepresent Australian Muslims to the detriment of Australian society:

An almost non-existent issue was being taken to centre stage on television. The polygamy issue like other similar issues covered in the media regarding Muslims would have given the impression that Australian Muslims do not accept the values of Australian people and culture and hence do not belong to the social and cultural fabric of Australia. In my view, such coverage of Muslims ultimately harms Australia itself by unsettling the delicate social harmony and goodwill within society.

Similarly another interviewee claimed:

We felt having Muslims on a show like this, often times conducted in a confrontation and in a defensive manner, only reaffirms the stereotypes and prejudice, rather than counters them. This is not helpful nor would it be of any benefit to the Muslim community. It may even be more damaging.
Yet another interviewee claimed, ‘By *Insight* focusing solely on these negative types of narratives, it gives the impression that this is the only reality ...’ But despite strong concern that *Insight* has the potential to be inflammatory and cause harm, the boycott letter and signatories also revealed a deeper level of trust in the SBS Charter to contribute to mutual understanding. The letter concluded by stating a willingness to work with the SBS:

In the long run we recognise that it is not feasible for Muslim community organisations to have a blanket boycott of *Insight*. We wish to develop a more constructive relationship with *Insight*’s producers and researchers. However, at present and with the current editorial line adopted by *Insight*, we have come to the conclusion that it is not constructive for the signatories of this letter to take part in your upcoming program on polygamy and plural marriages/relationships.

(Statement on behalf of the Signatories from the Islamic Community quoted in Veiszadeh 2012)

Importantly, signatory interviewees were largely positive in their summation of the SBS outside of the *Insight* program and unanimous in their view that the SBS has an important role to play in providing a platform for promoting inclusivity for Australian Muslims and in challenging negative stereotypes. As one signatory stated, capturing the group’s sentiment, ‘SBS should be working to quell the dissent that is rising in Australia that is faced by any ethnic group’. Another claimed, ‘As SBS is partly funded by the public, it needs to perhaps be socially responsible to ensure that all programs on its channel contribute to creating social cohesion and harmony’. The fact that despite the development of distrust about the *Insight* program signatories continued to display faith in the SBS is important. It is instructive that they sought to engage the SBS through the mechanism of an open letter and expressed a willingness to continue to work with the network in the future, revealing that the situation was not, in their eyes, irretrievable. This, and the response of SBS to the boycott reveal important evidence about the nature of multiculturalism in the contemporary SBS.

The SBS responded quickly to the open letter, meeting with Mariam Veiszadeh and others within days. While clearly taken seriously by the network and current program producers, the decision to boycott the program remained after the initial meeting. As Veiszadeh, reflecting on the experience, states, ‘we raised our concerns, and in turn listened to SBS clarify their position, but in the end we remained unconvinced of the merits of appearing on the show’ (Veiszadeh 2012). Signatories interviewed were unanimous in criticising the SBS response. One claimed it was ‘initially defensive’ and ultimately offered ‘platitudes in taking issues on board’. One interviewee stated:

I feel that SBS really tried to sidestep the issue, particularly with no written response from the general manager. Apparently our concerns have been widely circulated but this does nothing towards increasing dialogue between the signatories, community members and SBS producers.

One community leader highlighted what a more substantial response may have been:
An exemplary response would have been not to go ahead with the polygamy program at all. Not only they went ahead with the topic, they managed to find some unknown Muslims to bring up on the program. Very disappointing indeed …

The mistrust clearly remains between the SBS *Insight* program and many signatories of the letter, irrespective of attempts at mediation between SBS executives and leaders of the boycott. This reveals a clear rupture between a key group of Australian Muslim leaders, the program and, by extension, the wider network. While it remains unknown whether this trust will be rebuilt in future, it is clear that this controversy highlights a clear tension between the SBS’s socially inclusivist multicultural charter and actual practice.

## Conclusion

Multiculturalism is a victim of 9/11 and the politicisation of Islam. This research reveals that multiculturalism, at least in the in-house produced programs that best reveal the network’s approach and habitus, is in retreat. In the specific episodes of *Insight* examined, the SBS appears to have sought a compromise between commercialism and quality debate. Islam is commoditised, packaged and sold to a mass audience in a bid to increase the show’s ratings and commercial viability. Extremist voices have been brought in to contest the core propositions of the debate, providing them with a level of legitimacy that belies their actual weight in the wider community. For the ‘uninformed viewer’, watching these episodes with an intention of gaining an insight into Islam, the effect may be at best confusing, and at worst reinforcing stereotypes of Muslims as inherently fundamentalist, violent and in conflict with the rest of Australia.

The SBS may be rightfully proud of the contribution the network has made to Australian multiculturalism over the years, but this research reveals that the network, through its in-house *Insight* program, is edging away from the socially inclusivist vision articulated in the SBS Charter and moving into dangerous territory. The negative impact of this shift is already visible in relation to Australian Muslims. If, as Kevin Dunn (2005) has revealed, over half of Australians know very little about Islam, and many feel threatened by Muslims, the result of these polarising programs is arguably to decrease the level of acceptance of Australian Muslims among the viewing public. The *Insight* program manifests an identity crisis for SBS and points to growing strains on Australia’s commitment to multiculturalism.

## Appendix

### Table 1: Comparison between average 2010 *Insight* and SBS Network top 20 average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Net Viewers</th>
<th>% difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SBS Insight Average 2010</td>
<td>2010 Average</td>
<td>207,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 20 Programs 2010</td>
<td>2010 Average</td>
<td>745,700</td>
<td>Up 260%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Number of program viewers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Net Viewers</th>
<th>% difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SBS Insight Average 2010 (Base)</td>
<td>2010 Average</td>
<td>207,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banning the Burqa</td>
<td>21 September 2010</td>
<td>307,000</td>
<td>Up 48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Islam</td>
<td>02 November 2010</td>
<td>275,000</td>
<td>Up 33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OzTAM Pty Ltd. 2011 Tabulated Data (Special Purchase).

Table 3: Number of program online comments (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of comments</th>
<th>% difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SBS Insight Average 2010 (Base)</td>
<td>2010 Average</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banning the Burqa</td>
<td>21 September 2010</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>Up 163%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Islam</td>
<td>02 November 2010</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>Up 172%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SBS Insight Online Archives. Comments made on online program forum in 2010.

Endnotes
1 In early May 2012, the Australia Labor Government, with the support of the Greens, increased this dramatically to $158.1 million (Bodey 2012). While this may be interpreted as a renewal of an Australian Government commitment to multiculturalism, the impact of this on the program content on SBS remains to be seen and can only be measured over coming years.
2 Here we do not reference television shows that run on digital free-to-air networks.
3 Paper co-author Joshua Roose was in attendance. Figures are based on a headcount average conducted at the beginning and in the middle of the conference.
4 It must be understood that both ‘moderate’ and ‘Islamist’ Muslims are actively political. Moderate Muslims assert that the space exists for Muslims to engage in the West as citizens, while Islamists assert the incompatibility of Western and Islamic values as if these are easily defined and contrasted. The far right of the political spectrum, similarly to Islamists, argue the incompatibility of Islamic values and Western values and seek to attack what they view as the creeping Islamisation of Western society.
5 The burqa is a garment worn by Muslim women that covers the hair and face but not the eyes. It is worn by a small minority of Australian Muslim women.
6 Increased public interest was also highlighted by the considerably higher participation rates on the show’s online forum. The ‘Banning the Burqa’ episode registered 700 online comments between 21 September 2010 and 2 November 2010. The total as at June 2011 was 705 comments. Topics such as ‘A Bigger Australia’ on 18 May 2010 (428 comments), ‘Religion in the Classroom’ on 25 May 2010 (531 comments) and ‘Stopping the Boats’ on 1 June 2010 (478 comments) were less popular. The only polarising topic to beat ‘Banning the Burqa’ for total comments was ‘Fear of Islam’ with 737 comments.
7 An analysis of online comments on these programs mirrors the success in attracting viewers (see Appendix: Table 3). ‘Banning the Burqa’ and ‘Fear of Islam’ saw the highest number of comments posted online compared to other episodes for the whole of 2010. The next closest
episodes to yield a high number of online responses were ‘The [Climate] Sceptics’ (572), ‘Religion in the Classroom’ (528) and ‘Stopping the Boats’ (478)—all well behind.

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OzTAM Pty Ltd (2011b), television ratings data, audience survey information: Audience measures for program: Insight for two specific dates: Network SBS One, 5 city metro audience (000s) 21/09/10 and 02/11/2010.

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**Interviews**

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SBS Insight ‘Banning the Burqa’ guest, 24 June 2011.

Seven signatories of the open letter to SBS (see Veiszadeh 2012) were also interviewed between 31 July 2012 and 19 August 2012. These signatories are de-identified. Original records remain with the authors.

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