

Multicultural Television – The most exciting idea in broadcasting...

Multicultural Television – The most exciting idea in broadcasting, in Australia, since 1956.

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Mr President, Members, as I flew up to Canberra I was wondering how I could best encapsulate the idea of Multicultural Television, for this audience.

I came to the conclusion that the best way is this:

Quite simply, multicultural television is the most exciting idea in Australian broadcasting since September 16th, 1956.

I was fortunate enough to be the first person to appear on screen, on that night, and as I set about the task of developing Independent and Multicultural Television for its opening night, on October 24, 1980, United Nations Day, I feel the same excitement, the same unbounded enthusiasm, we all felt 24 years ago.

It's not often in a career, that you have the good fortune to be associated with one, let alone two significant events.

So I feel particularly honoured to have been given the chance to help Australia embrace - warmly - the idea of achieving community harmony, through the cultural enrichment, which Multicultural Television will bring us all.

For me as a practitioner in a medium described by Frank Lloyd Wright as "chewing gum for the eyes", - for me as an executive in an industry of which Philip Adams was acerbic enough to note on its twentieth birthday, that it had given the viewing public, not twenty years of service, but the same year, twenty times - for me, simply as an Australian, it is of particular joy to be associated with a television offering which will avoid the manifest shortcomings of the medium, to date, in this country.

Because, I believe the introduction of Multicultural Television will be seen, in future, as a major event in Australia's social history.

One, in which, once again, we have led the world. Just as we were the first country with an eight hour day in 1856, the first country to introduce social services in 1894, and the first to introduce universal suffrage in 1901, so, I believe it will be said, that in 1980, we were the first nation to seriously grasp the opportunity of achieving cultural harmony, with the introduction of a multicultural television service.

However, before I proceed further, I should perhaps define what is meant by multicultural television, since it is something very different from ethnic television.

Programmes are what television is essentially about, so the distinguishing differences will be seen in the selection, purchase, production and scheduling of programmes.

There is a whole range of programmes of high production values produced in languages other than English which are not currently available; programmes which show that the world is a little larger than New York, London and Los Angeles, and these programmes, together with our local productions, will offer a genuine

diversity of programme choice to that which is currently being offered by the ABC and the three commercial networks.

The programmes will be telecast in the original community language and made accessible to the broader Australian community by the use of sub-titling in English.

As our charter indicates, we will, in our scheduling of programmes, seek to complement and supplement that which is on offer on the other four channels.

Multicultural television, the fifth channel, will thus be an outreach to our dual cultural communities, and beyond, to all other Australians; it is like dropping a pebble into a pond and watching the concentric circles radiate out from it.

There has been a great deal of inaccurate, misinformed, and self-interested criticism of this idea, which has amounted to round-about ways of asking the fundamental question:

Is Multicultural Television necessary?

If, as a nation, we can't be certain that the answer to this question, the answer which lies behind all the wilder charges, isn't, at least, a very positive "absolutely", then the fifth channel does indeed deserve to cut off at the ankles - or is it the toes?

Let me answer the question this way:

Multicultural television will change the viewing habits of Australians, as a whole, for the better, as surely as God gave us eyes and minds to see ourselves as we are.

And we have had two years of investigation and market research to prove it.

The simple facts that everybody should recognise are these.

In Melbourne and Sydney no fewer than 25% of the homes with a television set are populated

by Australians, born in a non-English speaking country. These Australians, these voters, these taxpayers, have two cultures. The culture they have elected to live in and give to their children; AND, the culture of their tradition ... which, to our benefit, came along with the sweat of their brow - in factories, mines, development projects, service industries and the - professions, as a richly diverse, and fortuitous bonus, for the lucky country.

The children of these Australians share the same two cultures. These families, this quarter of our nation is giving us right now, the same enriching - of our basic experience, the beginnings of the new traditions of to-day's Australia

- as that Scots Ethnic, Macquarie, gave us our first notions of a fair go for all;
- as that Pommy Ethnic, Macarthur, gave us our notions of hardy enterprise;
- as that Irish Ethnic, Peter Lalor, gave us our first real notions of political independence at Eureka;
- as that Hebrew Ethnic, Sir John Monash, gave us our first real notions of valour and courage in France; and
- as that Norwegian Ethnic, Henry Larsen, gave us the beginnings of our literature at the turn of the century perhaps, the beginning of our culture.

You'd need the imperious blindness of a latter day Bligh not to see that - and we dare not perpetuate the arrogance of that ignorance. Unless we want our Fitzroys and our Bayswaters; our Leichhardts and Annandales to become mini Quebecs.

The results of the surveys of the two experimental cycles indicate overwhelming support for the concept of multicultural television and not only in their own community language.

I think we should all be most heartened that the research from the second experimental cycle of programming reveals that almost half, the very large sample, of Italians, Greeks and Yugoslavs surveyed, "liked" the programmes, they viewed, in "other" languages with the aid of our English sub-titling.

And, a further 25% of that sample liked "very much" programmes in languages other than their own community language. That's multicultural television performing its social role - creating community harmony.

Programmes showing different ways of life, lead to a better understanding; understanding leading, in turn, towards tolerance, and tolerance leading towards social cohesion.

We are, indeed, fortunate to have such a tool for social change which can foster harmonious interaction between our composite groups.

I might add that 98% of the people surveyed from the Yugoslav, Greek and Italian communities approved of the idea of multicultural television.

During my time as Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal we commissioned Beacon Research to conduct a survey throughout Australia and 2500 people were interviewed in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin.

The survey dealt with the perceptions people had about the existing television services provided by the ABC and the three commercial networks and the questionnaire contained some 52 questions and two of those questions related to the ethnic services.

In answer to the question:

"Do you think television stations should show more, less, or the same amount of programmes for migrants in their own language?"

31% believed there should be more programmes in a foreign language.

That is, 31% of the whole Australian community indicated that they believed that there should be more programmes available in a foreign language.

Further, in response to the question:

"Do you think television gives enough coverage or not enough coverage of the lives and problems of migrants in Australia?"

48% felt that the coverage was inadequate.

I believe the research indicates quite positively that there is a ready and necessary market for multicultural television and not just among the communities but also among the monocultural, monolingual Anglo-Celts.

Just as Australians as a whole are more adventurous in their travel, so are they more adventurous in what they want to see at home.

They've told us.

In research programme after research programme.

And, they're also trying to tell the existing national and commercial broadcasters, indirectly, by not watching television in increasing numbers.

So you can see that there is a double need for the fifth channel. A directly expressed need by the quarter or more of the Australian population, not born in Australia; and their children. Virtually to a man, to a woman, to a child, they want to experience both their Australian and their traditional culture. And there is obviously also a need, almost as directly expressed by existing English speaking audiences, for programming from a wide world, to complement and supplement what they have now.

In satisfying these common dissatisfactions with existing programming the Government is about to give us Anglo-Saxons the rewards of the best each-way bets ever made in the field of

broadcasting.

Because the Programming which fully a quarter of the nation has said in no uncertain terms it wants to see available is also the alternative programming which an increasingly restless "mass audience" wants to see also. The audience is starved of the programmes it wants to complement and supplement the existing fare of American and British programmers. It is not going to stop watching them in droves; neither are multicultural Australians.

Analysis of their viewing habits indicate that they exhibit precisely the same viewing pattern for top rating shows as the nation as a whole.

But, they do want an alternative. A fifth channel. From the outset the fifth channel will satisfy both these needs.

The Ethnic Television Review Panel in its third report which dealt primarily with Programming has as its first recommendation that we "televise multicultural programmes in community languages and English that appeal to, entertain, inform and educate both ethnic communities and the broader community and foster the appreciation and development of the cultural diversity of Australian society."

Because after 25 years in television, I'm not starry-eyed about what we're setting out to do. This is a task of development. A multicultural television service is a communications resource to be nurtured as-mindfully as we must nurture development of our physical resources, with as significant a regard for what's best for all Australians, as that we must exercise with our oil, our wheat, our minerals.

But as we approach our second centennial, it is a task which will prove to be a measure of the nation's maturity.

When the fifth channel evaluates its performance in 1985, as our Charter sets out, I hope the verdict of the Herman Kahns of that time will be that of all the countries with a future, Australia came closest to achieving

maturity, in that it accepted the challenge of realising the diversity of its cultural riches, and gave them expression; that we showed the world a way to live in harmony, which is uniquely Australian in that each citizen, no matter where he or she hailed from, could enjoy the esteem and self confidence of being the inheritors of all the great cultural traditions the world has to offer. And that's what made us so lucky.

Since 1976, the national and commercial broadcasters have had the opportunity to broadcast to any group of us, in any language, they like, or we like, and with a few exceptions they have failed to take advantage of that opportunity.

The fifth channel is not going to duplicate their performance, it is not going to be more of the same, it will genuinely complement and supplement existing programming by supplying the market with a new product which Australia has indicated it wants.

As I said earlier, we begin on October 24th, United Nations' Day. We've chosen that day for precisely that reason. Multicultural television is going to unite community to community, is going to form a bridge, which will represent the real Australia of today.

Let me give you some examples to consider:

Would a satellite feed of the European Cup Winner's Cup excite your interest more than an umpteenth re-run of Abbott and Costello?

Could the history of the Twentieth Century prove just as exciting from the point of view of some of the allies we fought with, other than Americans and English, and the people we fought against, as "The War at Sea" or "The World at War"?

Is Sophia Loren, merely an ethnic? Melina Mercouri, Marcello Mastroianni, Gert Frobe, Spanish Golf star Severiano Ballesteros, the world's best soccer player Johan Cruyff, Demis Roussos, are they people whose doings and performances we're not interested in?

You might as well ask is Tom Raudonikis, George Peponis or Alex Jesalenko an Australian?

But what effect is this going to have on a remarkably stable industry?

Let me suggest some consequences.

First of all, the fifth channel will introduce some overdue competition for audience share, precisely because it will offer viewers complementary and supplementary programming.

The effect of this will be to improve programming on existing outlets.

So we can look forward to five good diverse programs. Rather than four relatively similar.

Should the legislation charge us with the responsibility of offsetting the cost of the new channel, by achieving revenue from the sale of sponsorships and spot advertising, we will seek to join the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, at the first opportunity.

We will support, as a minimum, their codes of regulation.

We will contribute to the full extent of our resources, to their effort to provide the Australian viewing audience with the full range of programming it deserves.

I don't deny that one of the major reasons why the existing national and commercial channels have avoided the responsibility of providing all Australians with the full range of programming it deserves, is their assessment of the difficulty.

How can you appeal to a sizeable audience with subject material of presumed minority interest, in a language which the majority of the audience cannot understand, they ask?

In my view, that's looking at the problem from the wrong end.

I believe they should ask, the programming

question we're asking, what is common to human experience, which is powerful enough to communicate across, apparent, language barriers?

And, how do you reduce or eliminate any hurdles to understandings which do exist?

As English a writer as Shakespeare has provided non-English audiences with no greater difficulty than he provided us, in school; because he addressed himself to universal themes.

The audiences which pack the Opera House to hear Sutherland in La Traviata are not denied Puccini, simply because they don't speak Italian.

The cinemagoers who are currently making La Cage Aux Folles, one of the best money earners of the season, are laughing no less at this Italo-French comedy, because they don't speak the language.

They know the language. Humour. They see what's funny. And the subtitles dialogue is taken in as effortlessly by the eye, as the knockabout situations. In sport, is Franz Beckenbaur any less a pleasure to watch playing championship soccer than, say, Kevin Keegan?

Would Giuseppe Verdi's music be any less beautiful if it had been written by Joe Green, which is of course his name in Italian.

Was "Never on a Sunday" all Greek?

No spectacle which deals with experiences we share as human beings is foreign to our understanding, particularly if some effort is made to assist us to appreciate what's going on.

And in this respect the fifth channel is going to be exceptionally easy viewing for English only viewers, our sub-titling makes that possible.

In addition, we are going to re-introduce to television its greatest strength, humanity in presentation.

Each evening's programmes will be hosted, just

as they are on all channels in Athens, Paris and Rome, by a 'live' presenter - who will act as a knowledgeable guide to each programme.

I envisage our presenters recapping during natural breaks, and highlighting forthcoming peaks of interest in programming, just as a knowledgeable guide can help you experience the true grandeur of the Parthenon, the Louvre, the Rheingau or, say, the Topkapi, the seraglio of the Sultans in Istanbul.

There is no question in my mind that our hosts and hostesses will re-introduce some of the graciousness to viewing which we all thought was necessary when television itself was new, and which I believe we could do with now, whatever language we program in.

I have devoted the majority of my time to multicultural television, however it should not be interpreted as swamping radio because the proposed IMBC is a corporation with a radio arm - the EA stations.

They've been termed 'ethnic radio' during their establishment phase, and thanks to the dedication of some extraordinary programme people have achieved a remarkable degree of rapport with their audience.

For example:

97% of Turks listen each week to the Turkish programme. And the figures are no less remarkable for other language groups.

Perhaps this point is best illustrated by a letter from a listener who said:

"My husband and I and our children have been here for eight years now and we love Australia, yesterday I heard my own language on the radio and now I know Australia loves me."

What heartens me about that kind of response is that the listeners clearly understand what our radio arm is all about - multilingual radio.

It's an important concept to appreciate -

because of its very selectivity, radio can perform those individual community functions, which allow multicultural television to perform its role of providing programming which will appeal across language barriers.

Radio gives us the opportunity for television to do more.

In the year to come we will see a growing sense of assuredness, a development of the professionalism, already exhibited by broadcasters and, thanks to the extensive consultative process embodied in the Charter of the IMBC, a broadening of the engagement with all sections of the more than 40 'radio' audiences which multilingual radio now serves.

It is of the nature of the medium that multilingual radio cannot successfully function as a true multi-cultural medium during any one program- however, precisely because it fulfils its intra-community role so well - it does give television the opportunity to span all communities.

I think the more demagogic of our critics should appreciate this.

Perhaps they would be wise to see the spectrum of communication which will soon be available to, at the very least, a quarter of Australia.

Multicultural television, multilingual radio and the ethnic press, together form a network of communication which will hasten the spread of all the enriching elements of our common experience as Australians.