Comments on the Sophia Symposium

Kate Darian-Smith, University of Melbourne

It is my great pleasure to comment on the discussions in this symposium, which examines ‘A New Wave of Media in a Multicultural Society’. The issues raised are of pressing relevance to the contemporary moment, as we have seen extraordinary advances in the technology and social use of new media forms in ways that have transformed communications and personal and group behaviours.

We have also seen, from the end of the twentieth century and in the opening decades of the new millennium, an increasing mobility of people around the world. According to global migration compiled by the United Nations in 2013, there are at least 232 million people (or 3% of the world’s population) now living outside the place where they were born.(1) International migrants have moved in search of new economic, social or cultural opportunities, which include flight from poverty, war and persecution. The scale of such migration has meant it is a key feature of globalisation, but also one of national significance, as governments around the world seek to regulate and control the movement of people across national borders. The increased mobility of people has also spawned increasingly influential disporic communities, and led to changes in cultural and social values within nations.

The parallel developments in the expansion of new media and migration are important concerns in both Australia and Japan today, and contribute to the bi-lateral relationship between them. The papers in the Sophia Symposium tackle media and multiculturalism from a range of perspectives. The first two papers by Professor Barden Offord and Professor Catriona Elder examine aspects of contemporary Australia and signal how older understandings of Australian identity are changing. The final paper by Mr Takanobu Tanaka investigates how a Public Service Broadcaster, charged with the task of broadcasting official communications to all residents in Japan, must effectively accommodate differences in language and culture.

From the end of the Second World War when Australia launched a large scale migration program to support economic development, the national ethnic composition has shifted from over 90 percent of Anglo-Celtic origin to encompass a range of migrants from Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. Today over 25 per cent of Australians were born overseas, and while the largest country of origin remains the United Kingdom, there are substantial populations born (in order of descending numbers) in New Zealand, China, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Italy, South Africa and a host of other countries. In addition, almost 50 per cent of Australians have at least one grandparent who was born elsewhere. There has been a very high take up of Australian citizenship by new migrants, and the very swift changes to the
The ethnic composition of the nation has been heralded as a 'success,' and has generally occurred with understanding and goodwill. The official policy of multiculturalism, adopted by the Australian government in the 1970s, and Australia's own version of multiculturalism has become synonymous with national identity.\(^2\)

It is within this broader demographic context that Catriona Elder's paper explores the struggles of Australia’s Indigenous people to be heard. Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now comprise around 5% of the national population, but are much more prominent in the national imaginary. Elder uses a series of historic events to explore the 'unevenness of race relations' in Australia, tracking a series of recent political and legal discussions that restored equal rights to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and recognised their status as the original owners of the land. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia move towards a shared understanding of the colonial past, Elder asks us to consider not only the media representations of their concerns but older forms of communication - listening and talking. She concludes that the way forward for the greater legal, economic and social recognition of Indigenous people in Australia involves non-Indigenous Australians listening more carefully to what Indigenous people want, and including them as equals in establishing an agenda for cross-cultural reconciliation and national change.

Baden Offord's paper explores Australian multiculturalism through the media of film. He takes us to the classic Australian site of the beach to examine how new forms of media may create new social practices and senses of belonging. Offord provides an overview of the beach in Australian culture, from a liminal space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people first met to the rise of the surf lifesave, and the increasing popularity of surfing as a leisure and professional pursuit.

He then turns to the beach as a culturally diverse location, and one where new media and everyday life converge. Australians have always been early adapters of new technologies, and recent statistics demonstrate that use of digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr is relatively high. In his discussion of the racial and ethnic tensions that exploded on the beaches of southern Sydney during the infamous Cronulla Riots of 2005, Offord argues that new media, including mobile phone usage, was a contributing factors the eruption of violence in public space. The widespread public and official response to the Cronulla Riot, however, served to re-emphasise the ideas of tolerance and inclusion in Australian society.

Offord's second example looks at the role of new media in facilitating the production of a documentary film on gay and lesbian surfers. Those people featured in the film were recruited via websites and social media, though they subsequently told their stories through the older media of film. As Offord points out, the potential for media, including social media, to provide critical and creative ways to engage with cultural diversity and the idea of belonging in
Australia is increasingly significant.

This is also the case in Japan, a society that cannot be described as multicultural although the ethnic diversity of its population is increasing. However as Mr Takanobu Tanaka points out, there are around 2 million registered foreigners in Japan, concentrated in the Tokyo area. For national broadcasts NHK, the responsibility to inform all residents of Japan of emergency procedures in the event of a disaster poses a particular challenge. When the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in March 2011, information was given to foreigners through multi-lingual television and radio services. Subsequent surveys show, however, that foreign residents in Japan were unable to access emergency information. In response, NHK, has begun a new experimental service in transmitting essential information in ‘Simple Japanese’. There are also ongoing situations of how social media, such as tweeting, can be used to convey information in emergency situations.

A survey of foreigners conducted in the aftermath of the 3/11 disaster revealed that in an emergency situation the capacity for panic-based behaviours is increased. Moreover, many foreigners were unaware of evacuation procedures or emergency shelters, which was in contrast to the Japanese population. In a digitally connected world, coverage of news and disasters extends across national boundaries. Many foreigners in Japan turned to media outlets from their home countries to get news during the 3/11 disaster. This adds a new dimension to the planning by NHK to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers amongst Japan’s foreign communities’ relations to future strategies for the media transmission of emergency information. This fascinating study also highlights the complex role of Public Service Media in a multicultural society.

As the three papers in the Sophia Symposium on multiculturalism and media demonstrate, Australia and Japan are in a period of intense technical and cultural transformation. The case studies on important contemporary events – Indigenous participation in national development, the nexus between media and culturally diverse communities in defining national belonging, and the imperative to engage foreign populations across cultural linguistic barriers in emergency circumstances – attest not only to future challenges but also possibilities for both countries to use media as a tool for social inclusion and to strengthen national communities, and to learn from each other in this endeavour.

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