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Inventing SBS: Televising the Foreign

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The emergence and development of Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) is reasonably well documented. While it doesn't have the equivalent of Ken Inglis's blockbuster *This Is The ABC*¹, SBS does have a range of essays, book chapters and doctoral theses that explore how it came to be created and what form the institution has taken over the years. In other words, SBS has a history; its archive is well trodden and its story reasonably well known². And the story goes something like this: the creation of a *special* broadcasting service in 1975 to provide radio and then, in 1980, television for audiences whose first language was not English was prompted by the emergence and development of multicultural policy in Australia. Or, to use Tom O'Regan's famous catchphrase, SBS signalled the 'multicultural invention of TV'³.

As wonderful as this catchphrase is, it can limit the ways in which SBS's history is understood. Too often the assumption is that multicultural policy during the 1970s simply *determined* the evolution of SBS; it was the source from which SBS was *derived*. This approach can end up being blind to the specificities of media: to the actual ways in which the logics and structures of radio and then television mediated multiculturalism, giving it a distinct media modality. Framing SBS as a straightforward expression of multicultural policy risks under-appreciating exactly how 'particular policy demands were *translated* into a second public service broadcaster on national television. What did policy objectives like 'a service to meet the specific media needs of ethnic communities' or 'a service to complement and supplement the cultural and linguistic perspectives of other broadcasting sectors' (two recommendations from the 1980 *Third Report of the Ethnic Television Review Panel*)⁴ come to mean in televisual terms? What sorts of actions, choices and decisions did these very general prescriptions prompt? What sort of translatability and mutuality was established between the broad political frameworks for multiculturalism and a newly created public service broadcaster? Historical narratives framed by determinism make it difficult to answer these kinds of 'how' questions. They perpetuate an understanding of the policy of

¹ Ken Inglis, *This Is the ABC*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006.

² See, for example, Rosalind Patterson, 'The Special Broadcasting Service and the Construction of Ethnic Radio and Multicultural Television', PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 1988; Chris Lawe Davies, 'Multicultural Broadcasting in Australia: Policies, Institutions and Programming', PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, 1997; Belinda Smail, 'Amidst a Nation's Cultures: Documentary and Australia's Special Broadcasting Service Television', PhD Thesis, Monash University, 2001. Tom O'Regan's book *Australian Television Culture* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993) contains two chapters on SBS, co-authored with Dona Kolar-Panov.

³ Tom O'Regan, *Australian Television Culture*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993.

⁴ Third Report of the Ethnic Television Review Panel, *Programming for the Multicultural/Multilingual Television Service – Objectives and Policy*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1980.

multiculturalism as an ideal against which historical reality is measured-was multiculturalism realised by SBS or not? And if not, why not?

In this paper we want to develop a different method for understanding the history of SBS Television. We want to shift attention from notions of origins and derivation to notions of invention and translation. Rather than assessing the emergence of this unique television service as a good or had realisation of multiculturalism⁵, we want to take seriously the idea that multicultural television had to be *invented*, and investigate how complex and complicated decisions in the early days of SBS TV often had more to do with exploring and extending the possibilities of the television medium than with the social policy of multiculturalism. What our archival and interview work suggests is that while policy debates about multiculturalism were the big picture background, the political rationale that justified money and jobs, what really went on on the ground involved creating a television service where all the usual assumptions and institutional structures that had shaped Australian TV up until that time were out of bounds. SBS had to think of its audience as not comfortable with English, it had to find programming that reflected other sorts of televisual cultures beyond the usual Anglo nexus of US, British or local content. And it had to develop an on-air look and feel that distinguished it from the cosy culture of whiteness that characterised both the ABC and the commercials. SBS had to translate a series of broad political objectives and rationales into a specific communication medium-television-and in this process both the policy and the medium were mutually reconstituted.

This shift in historical approach also opens up another valuable perspective on SBS: the impacts and perceptions of this service, not so much on migrants or ethnic communities as on the Australian televisual landscape at the time. If SBS represented a new way of doing TV, how was this perceived by the rest of the Australian media? How was SBS represented on other channels, and how did they respond to its difference?

Some of the best evidence of the wider media impacts of SBS comes from commercial TV comedy. From the late 1980s on, SBS TV was regularly and relentlessly parodied on *Fast Forward*, a high-rating comedy show on Channel 7. There were two favourite targets: George Donikian, the first newsreader on SBS, who was sent up for his ability to pronounce long multi-vowelled foreign names; and SBS foreign movies that were ridiculed either for their seriousness and tedium or their explicit sex.

Over its history *Fast Forward* sustained a long term commitment to sending up SBS, and they were great send ups. Like all parody they showed a close understanding of how the form worked and an affection for it-but what else did they reveal? Without wanting to psychoanalyse the *Fast Forward* team, behind all the lampooning and laughs about long unpronounceable names and strange cinema, one can sense a certain *cultural anxiety*, a sense of uncertainty and unease about *foreignness*.

The history of Australian television prior to SBS is a history marked by a profound lack of curiosity about the foreign: a complete absence of any sort of exogamous drive to understand other cultures. This, of course, wasn't exclusive or peculiar to Australian TV; it was the norm.

⁵ For an example of this approach, see Andrew Jakubowicz, 'Days of our lives: multiculturalism, mainstreaming and "special" broadcasting', *Media Information Australia* 45, August 1987; David Nolan & Natalia Radywyl, 'Pluralising identities, mainstreaming identities: SBS as a technology of citizenship', *Southern Review: Communication, Politics and Culture*, vol 37, no 2, 2004, pp 40-65.

Broadcast television has been one of the central institutions for the construction of national identity, for mediating a national imagination. So its lack of interest in the foreign is not so much an object of criticism as simply a reflection of the structural logic of television in the modern era. And recognising this structural logic helps put *Fast Forward's* cultural anxiety into perspective. It foregrounds the fact that it wasn't simply foreignness *per se* that was the source of unease but the fact that it was *on television*, the fact that it had spread onto our cosy little national screen.]

When we interviewed George Donikian recently he said that prior to SBS's news service the standard practice on commercial channels, and to a lesser extent the ABC, was to avoid naming international figures: 'it was 'the Mexican President, the Polish President-never their actual names'⁶. In this light, it was no wonder that Donikian's extraordinary commitment to getting the names right had such an impact and prompted so many jokes. It was unusual, novel and completely outside the normative boundaries national television had set itself.

Making sense of *Fast Forward's* cultural anxiety and its wider implications prompts another key question that drives this paper: *what would it mean to think of SBS as the moment when Australian television discovered foreignness?* To pursue this question we are going to consider two case studies from the earliest days of SBS TV: the case of subtitling and the case of international news, where key decisions about how to deal with the foreign came to have significant effects on the look and feel of SBS and, eventually, on its wider social and cultural impacts. These two case studies show how SBSTV both exploited and managed foreignness. They reveal the kinds of textual and institutional practices it invented to translate the foreign into a new television service and how these practices had the effect of creating new publics and new uses for television.

Subtitling

Initially, SBS built its television service using imported programming from countries where the major migrant communities in Australia had come from. A complex politics of translation, both literal and metaphorical, surrounded how this foreign language programming was made accessible to Australian audiences. Although subtitling was a common international practice at the time when SBS TV started, it wasn't common in Australian television. One important reason for this was the dominance of English-language programs in the international flow of television since the 1960s. Subtitling in European countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, was generally *from* English into the national language concerned. For SBSTV, on the other hand, the task involved the much more unusual one of translating foreign languages programming *into* English.

When SBS was set up, the alternative method of dubbing, used in larger European countries such as Germany and Spain in place of subtitling, was a theoretical option. However, dubbing was never a serious consideration, not only because it was much more expensive than subtitling but, more importantly, because subtitling was regarded as much more reflective of the multicultural brief underpinning SBS. The choice to opt for subtitling rather than dubbing was a crucial moment where the policy demands for a service that provided both multilingual programs for ethnic communities and programs that would 'foster the appreciation and development of the cultural diversity of Australian society'⁷ were translated into a set of

⁶ Interview with George Donikian, 21 November 2005.

⁷ Third Report of the Ethnic Television Review Panel, op. cit., p 5.

practical choices about how to deal with foreign content. As the Subtitling Department put it in its 1985 submission to the Committee of Review of the Special Broadcasting Service:

televising programs in their original languages with English subtitles retains the integrity of the original languages and allows for adequate representation of Australian languages other than English⁸.

So, one of the first units set up at SBS was the Subtitling Unit. It rapidly became widely recognised as a pioneer in this field and was identified by many as the heart of the organisation, a central place where the diverse strands of multicultural Australia met. Subtitlers also came to play a prominent role in the evolution of SBS. Mary Kostakidis, for example, worked in Subtitling before she became the newsreader for SBS World News. SBS subtitles are generally considered of very high quality, both in terms of idiomatic aptness and in terms of readability. One reason for this, interestingly, was not just practical but also philosophical: it had to do with taking seriously the dialogic nature of 'translation'. That is, translation was seen as not just a technical transposition from one linguistic system to another but also as a much more delicate and empathetic engagement with how complex worlds of meaning could be communicated from one linguistic realm to another. As Andrew McCormick of the Subtitling Unit said:

The idea was that we needed to tackle this job from two perspectives: the perspective of the speaker of the language and the perspective of those people who didn't speak the language. Most of the subtitlers are native speakers of the language they work from, which is quite unusual because if you go to subtitling countries in Europe, you find that most of the subtitlers there are actually native speakers of the language they're translating into. So, in effect, SBS subtitlers conflated the two functions into the one person, and if the person's good, no problem, but we have opened it out because both of those aspects of the job -translating from and translating into - are so vital to the quality of the subtitles. First of all to ensure that the central thread of meaning and intention is not broken or betrayed. The second issue is that once the core has been translated, it has, in terms of idiom and colloquialism, to work in English too. So that's where the editor's skills come in. They are generally native English speakers and we rely heavily on them⁹.

In short, the invention of subtitling at SBS was (and still is) a matter not just of linguistic translation but also cultural translation, a process of making different worlds of meaning mutually understandable and commensurable.

As a translation practice, subtitling is much more culturally democratic than dubbing or dual sound transmission (which gives audiences the choice of listening to the original language or to the English language dub) because it forces all audiences to hear the original language, and thus familiarises them at the very least with the *sound* of other languages. Indeed, it is fair to say that one of the cultural innovations SBS brought forth, after a period of initial resistance, was a general public acceptance of subtitled films in Australia. According to a study commissioned by SBS in 2001, 64 per cent of Australians indicated that they watch subtitled films, mostly on SBS TV¹⁰. As such, SBS's role in combating cultural insularity and

⁸ Report by the Committee of the Review of the Special Broadcasting Service, *Serving Multicultural Australia – The Role of Broadcasting*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1985.

⁹ Interview with Gilbert Sant and Andrew McCormick, Subtitling Unit, SBS, 29 June 2005.

¹⁰ Ien Ang, Jeff Brand, Greg Noble & Derek Wilding, *Living Diversity – Australia's Multicultural Future*, SBS, Artarmon, 2002.

encouraging a more cosmopolitan habitus based on embracing global linguistic and cultural diversity cannot be underestimated. SBS TV brought into a singular multicultural public sphere a multiplicity of languages that are generally foreign to each other, and made them mutually understandable through their translation into the national *lingua franca*, English.

The practice of subtitled television that SBS developed enabled all sorts of cross-cultural flows. Here is Gilbert Sant, Manager of SBS Subtitling and Captioning, talking about his mother:

I mean, here was a woman who is Italian. She loves the Japanese programme. She's sitting at home watching the Japanese programme with English subtitles because she is rapt in that programme, so it's opened up a whole new world to her. She's seeing a culture that she's probably never seen in her life, understanding it all through the subtitles, so you bridge the gap, if you like, from one culture to another, through a different language altogether. I mean, English was not her original language either¹¹.

In the early years of SBS, subtitling acquired a real symbolic centrality in the organisation. It wasn't just what helped brand SBS as a unique, never-seen-before type of television in Australia, it was also a bridge that allowed foreign content to be used in a number of different ways. Subtitling reflected an awareness of the *cultural* (not just practical) importance of translation in nurturing a linguistically diverse national culture.

Subtitling also discovered foreignness within. Even though it was used primarily on imported programming, it was also used on locally made programs when migrants spoke in homeland languages. Its effects were powerful in terms of a multi cultural politics of recognition and in terms of decentring certain comfortable notions of linguistic homogeneity on TV and in the nation.

World News

The next historical example we want to consider is the invention of SBS's nightly news bulletin. Now called *World News Australia*, it was called *Worldwide News* at the commencement of SBSTV. This case study allows us to see how this service was created, to track the debates that took place within SBS over what sort of news would be appropriate and possible, and to see how news became increasingly central to the development of SBS. Like subtitling, the early choices made over how to create a news service for SBS TV came to have lasting effects on marking the service as different and on introducing another sort of foreignness, in this case an international focus that privileged world events before the local or the national.

Worldwide News went to air four days after SBSTV began on United Nations Day, 28 October 1980. It was hosted by George Donikian, a Greek Australian, and its place in the schedule was justified on the basis that, to quote the first annual report:

SBS was conscious of the trend of other television services in recent years towards parochialism and recognised that there was an identifiable gap which could be filled by a comprehensive news service. By making use of two satellite feeds a day from Europe and America, VISNEWS and UPITN, and establishing strong links with homeland

¹¹ Interview with Gilbert Sant and Andrew McCormick, Subtitling Unit, SBS, 29 June 2005.

television networks, Channel 0/28 has been able to fill this void and in the process help broaden the perceptions of viewers about the world beyond Australia¹².

Annual reports are of course very good at producing retrospective policy, at providing coherence to events that may not have been quite as logical as they appear. Indeed, what our interviews and archival research illuminate is that news presented a very complex set of problems when SBS TV was being planned. SBS realised that it had to complement rather than duplicate existing services, but what would this mean when translated into a nightly news service? More importantly, what form should news take in a service that was designed to provide, as the SBS Charter says, ‘multilingual and multicultural television that informed, educated and entertained all Australians’?

One model suggested early on was to present a multi-lingual news service providing stories from around the nation and the world that focussed on issues relevant to the major migrant community groups in the country. The problem with this model was that it would have involved massive resources: for example, bilingual staff or stringers in news bureaus in each capital city representing major language groups. There was also the problem of perspective, of negotiating political tensions within and between communities and tricky homeland biases. And if there was no language speaker available when a big issue broke then there would have to be a very fast turnaround in subtitling. There were also concerns about supply, of uneven levels of development in homeland media that could have led to a very erratic and patchy flow of stories from overseas. These were some of the main reasons why a daily multilingual news bulletin was considered unfeasible by the team charged with developing news at SBS: instead, the news was going to have to be in English and it was going to have to have a different orientation.

In response to these constraints the first head of SBS TV, Bruce Gyngell, whose official title was ‘Special Adviser to Multicultural Television’, and the tiny news team began monitoring what the ABC and the commercial networks were doing with the international newsfeeds coming into Australia from international news agencies. They realised that it was very little. While each news feed contained between eleven and fifteen stories, the commercial networks generally used up to two and the ABC would perhaps use four stories on a good night. Overall, at most five minutes of international news per evening bulletin was screened on the other channels¹³.

SBS decided to exploit the unused available material. The news staff saw that they could brand the service by doing what the other channels didn’t do: making the news primarily international in its focus, in sharp contrast to the parochialism of other media. Another factor in this decision was that SBS news lacked resources and had only one camera crew, making local and national stories very difficult to produce. The material from the international news agencies was relatively cheap, and privileging it was both an innovative response to scarce resources and an attempt to distinguish the new multicultural broadcaster as having a uniquely different orientation to what constituted news. International news was put *first* in the bulletin, a complete inversion of the standard format which, at the time, was local, state, national and finally, maybe, international. When *Worldwide News* began on SBS TV there was virtually no local news and perhaps a third to a quarter of the bulletin was national news, with a careful attempt not to favour an eastern seaboard view of the nation. SBS also decided

¹² Special Broadcasting Service, *First Annual Report*, 1980, p 27.

¹³ Interview with Claus Hannekum, News Services Manager, SBS, 20 May 2005.

to subtitle segments as much as possible, rather than use the English voiceover on the international feeds so that languages other than English were heard. This was a first in news on Australian TV¹⁴.

This creative exploitation of foreign news feeds also generated a very different perspective on the world. The SBS news bulletin rapidly evolved into a kind of outward-looking, analytical survey of the world that was not necessarily mediated by an Australian or national point of view. It wasn't 'global' in the sense that CNN and BBC World give meaning to that term; it was nascently international and cosmopolitan. In other words, the viewer of television news on the national multicultural broadcaster would first, and for most of the bulletin, be transported to somewhere out of Australia, somewhere 'foreign' (which, of course, was not necessarily foreign to all Australians, especially those of migrant backgrounds).

The impacts of this radically different news format were significant and rapid. Much press commentary was appreciative of how SBS was opening up the world to Australians. Claus Hannekum (now News Services Manager at SBS) remembers Kerry Packer ringing up the SBS news office a few months after the channel had started and asking: 'Where the hell are you getting your news from?' SBS was happy to reply 'same place as you', the only two international feeds available in Australia at the time. The difference was that SBS viewed this material completely differently: it was not dismissed as material Australians would find irrelevant and alienating and thus not commercially viable, which was the dominant assumption in commercial newsrooms. Rather, international news was viewed as information relevant to both migrant and non-migrant audiences, not just because items from homelands would feature but also because international news presumed a viewer interested in world events, a viewer who wasn't parochial, or uneasy about foreignness.

Another key issue was what the other channels saw as viable or relevant international news stories, that is, the kinds of news values that shaped the selection of segments. To quote Hannekum again: 'if there were two stories on the feed, one on Princess Diana visiting kids with disabilities in Wales and one on flooding in Brazil, the ABC and commercials picked the Princess Di item, SBS opted for floods in Brazil'¹⁵. From its earliest days SBS news sustained a consistent commitment to differentiating itself as significantly as possible from other channels.

What the case of news reveals is that the multicultural imperative to provide a service to culturally diverse migrant communities disadvantaged by the blindness of mainstream media was always connected to another imperative: an emerging commitment to internationalism. Inevitably, the multicultural policy objective of connecting audiences to homelands, that is, a cultural maintenance objective, was caught up in a variety of other televisual forces within SBS. These included: the pattern of media flows into Australia at the time; the logics of satellite services; an innovative response to a shortage of resources within SBS; and the decision to distinguish SBS as unique by challenging existing media parochialism and going for a broad overview of world and national events.

Specific migrant interests that were framed by particularity, by an intense interest in one other place, were inevitably expanded in this context. Diasporic longing for news from home was situated in the broader field of world events that offered news from a variety of other

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

places, not just where you came from. In this sense, internationalism and multiculturalism intersected. The multicultural logic of cultural diversity within the nation, or contained by the nation, was expanded to recognise identifications with or interest in other nations, and this is how news from 'home' became connected to news of elsewhere or 'the world'.

SBS *Worldwide News* had a significant impact on Australian mainstream media. After five years of SBS TV other news bulletins on the commercial networks and the ABC had changed, with a definite increase in international stories that is attributed directly to the influence of SBS. While this interest in the international may not have been anywhere near the extent of SBS's commitment, and while it may not have been sustained, it is fair to see this shift at least in part as a response to the example of SBS. SBS not only showed that there was public interest in an international perspective but also that there were plenty of sources of stories beyond the British/American nexus. It used a wide variety of material from Europe and Asia as well as current affairs video material airfreighted weekly from Greece, Germany, Italy and Yugoslavia. It had extensive and complex links with an enormous variety of television networks that substituted for the lack of overseas news bureaus on the ABC model.

It is possible to claim, then, that the establishment of *Worldwide News* and a variety of related news services invented by SBS didn't just pluralise Australian television news culture, but also added to the *density* of public culture in the sense that they did more than just *add on* a bit of difference and diversity. While conventional pluralism (and many versions of multiculturalism fit this category) tends to celebrate diversity within a fixed and unified national-cultural framework, an 'ethos of deep pluralisation', to use William Connolly's term, contests the idea of an unchanged dominant centre¹⁶. An ethos of deep pluralisation involves a network of multiple constituencies that displace claims by any one social group to embodying the core or essence of the nation. It involves a deep engagement with difference in ways that decentre the very idea of a singular majority culture. And this, in turn, is central to the possibility of a citizen cosmopolitanism.

The difference between *Worldwide News* and *ABC News* shows this very clearly. Obviously, the ABC has a distinct brief in relation to the nation and the national interest and its daily evening news program plays a key role in this project. The ABC's sources of international news stories show this well. In contrast to SBS, the ABC expanded its international stories in the 1980s not by using more foreign feeds but by developing overseas bureaus manned by Australian journalists. The function of these journalists was, and still is, to give an Australian point of view on world events. The ABC locates the significance of its international content in relation to viewer's assumed identification with Australia. It interpellates its viewers as Australians looking at the world. In this model the national not only mediates the international but also gives meaning to it.

SBS was not able to afford local, let alone overseas bureaus. It exploited as much of the available international news information coming into Australia that was possible, and developed a perspective on it that was expansive: it privileged what could be called a 'decentred internationalism', an 'open to the world' point of view based on valuing a cosmopolitan overview. This approach distanced national identifications even though this news was situated in and facilitated by a national public service broadcaster. From the beginning the terms of engagement with the world (and especially with the foreign) that SBS

¹⁶ William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p xiii.

offered were very different from those in play at the ABC. SBS news was implicitly open to the idea of an international public sphere, and to wider imagined political communities beyond the national¹⁷.

Conclusion

Worldwide News and subtitling are important markers in the history of SBS and its invention of 'multicultural television'. They show how this public service broadcaster not only made available programming never before seen on Australian television but also mediated this content with a very distinct set of orientations to 'the foreign'. These examples show how, within the general rubric of multiculturalism, a whole set of new television interfaces was invented that enabled SBS audiences to establish an international perspective on the world, and feel implicated in multiple public spheres and diverse communities both within and beyond the nation. Audiences were able to participate in transnational identifications and see the connections and interrelationships between their attachments to 'home' and the attachments of others.

At the same time as multi cultural policy provided the crucial conditions necessary to enabling this ethos of expansiveness, these examples show how, in turn, multiculturalism was enriched and extended by the televisual choices that were made in the first years of SBS TV. In other words, television revealed a whole set of wider and deeper possibilities for multiculturalism.

These examples also show how, in the case of the early days of SBS TV, it was very difficult to sustain any kind of fixed or essentialised distinction between the domestic and the foreign. From its inception SBS didn't necessarily oppose the foreign to the national, the foreign existed alongside or was *mixed up with* the other work SBS did in addressing multicultural Australia. It was both here everywhere around us and over there. What news and subtitling facilitated was a series of *eccentric* connections with the world that disrupted any kind of hierarchy from the local to the national and then the international. They disrupted the assumption that TV could only embrace the world in a series of cautious concentric steps from the narrow to the expansive, the familiar to the foreign. Often, the presence of these cosmopolitan orientations and identifications displaced the centrality of the nation as the primary mode of identification in relation to the world or to the political events of other nations. Or these expansive perspectives revealed nationalism's limits, the ways in which it can blind us to the contingency of our difference.

Finally, SBSTV news and subtitling have lasting significance because over the channel's twenty-five-year history they have consistently shamed the other channels over their extraordinary parochialism. This is more than just a question of pronunciation of foreign names, or a fear of subtitling anything, or the revelation that there was a mass of available international stories coming into the country that were ignored; it is about the limits and possibilities of television. What SBS TV has shown is that there are diverse publics and uses

¹⁷ It has to be said though that since 2007 the SBS news bulletin has been renamed *World News Australia*, signalling a shift in approach that does make the national grounding of international news more explicit. SBS's current Director of News, Paul Cutler, describes this shift as a necessary adjustment to the increased prominence of global news services such as CNN and BBC World Service, against which SBS news needed to differentiate itself. SBS also increasingly sends out its own journalists to the field (rather than simply rely on agency feeds), in line with broadcast news trends the world over. At the same time, SBS's commitment to privileging international news remains unchanged, distinguishing it from the other Australian broadcasters (interview with Paul Cutler, 14 July 2006).

of television organised around plural geographies and identifications. Understanding Australia is increasingly problematic without a recognition of how we are thoroughly interconnected with other public spheres, political processes and communities. And, in recognising this, SBS's exploitation of the foreign revealed the cosmopolitan possibilities of television.

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