PLURALISING IDENTITY, MAINSTREAMING IDENTITIES
SBS AS A TECHNOLOGY OF CITIZENSHIP

David Nolan and Natalia Radywyl

Abstract

This paper develops a theoretically and analytically informed response to recent public criticisms of Australia’s multicultural television service, SBS. To this end, it suggests how work on liberal ‘governmentality’ provides a basis for understanding SBS as a ‘technology of citizenship’ within a broader apparatus of liberal-democratic government. This framework is deployed in an historical analysis of how SBS’s performance of this role has been shaped by the field of political relations in which it is located. This analysis provides the basis for an assessment of SBS’s current situation, and the strategies adopted by the broadcaster in response to it.

Introduction

In April 2004, after seventeen years presenting The Movie Show on SBS television, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton announced that they were leaving to present a similar program at Australia’s other public service broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Newspaper commentary drew attention to the acrimonious nature of this departure, illustrated by their decision to make this announcement through an ABC press release (Warneke 2004b). Such perceptions were reinforced by the barely veiled criticism of SBS management in Pomeranz’s explanation of her departure:

All organisations go through change and SBS is heading in a new direction. As a passionate supporter of public broadcasting, I did not feel comfortable with this new direction (The Australian, 6 April 2004, p. 3).

Pomeranz’s reference to public broadcasting resonates with a broader criticism to which SBS has, in recent times, increasingly been subject: that its tendency to make decisions that are market-oriented, and specifically geared to increasing sponsorship revenue, are undermining its identity as a public service broadcaster. Such criticism has intensified since the controversial appointment of Shaun Brown as Head of Television in January 2003. Brown’s performance in this role at New Zealand’s public service broadcaster attracted similar criticism, with Prime Minister Helen Clark criticising TVNZ as ‘shamelessly ratings
driven and nowhere near good enough’ (Simper 2003a). Since Brown’s appointment, SBS has been subject to a range of criticisms, most of which centre on increasingly populist strategies adopted by the station. This includes, but is not confined to, shifts in programming increasingly geared to broadening SBS’s audience. Stratton and Pomeranz’s ‘defection’ follows a number of prominent staff departures, and it has been reported that programming staff are now required to report to Brown’s newly appointed marketing manager (Simper 2003a). Such developments have also been linked to government appointments made to the SBS Board which, critics argue, have rendered it increasingly ‘conservative and commercially driven’ (Enker 2004, p. 11). Concerns have also been raised regarding the degree to which SBS has lost touch with ethnic communities, an issue highlighted in 2003, when SBS acknowledged to a Senate estimates committee that an undertaking to consult with the Vietnamese community was not honoured prior to the screening of a program that many regarded as communist propaganda (Kremmer & Ketchell 2003).

This provides an initial basis for suggesting that there may be some real grounds for criticism of SBS’s current managerial direction. For a more considered assessment of the current debate however, it is necessary to move beyond a critique of SBS management to consider the historical situation in which, as policy actors, they exercise agency. As Pearce (2000a, 2000b) has argued, if policy analysis is to move beyond the tacit assumptions embedded in singular, overarching frameworks (including those embodied in media coverage), a multi-dimensional approach that pays attention to the mutually mediating nature of structure and agency within the policy process must be adopted. Similarly, Considine (1994) has highlighted the limitations of a ‘standard view’ of policy that concentrates on the agency exercised by key actors (such as Brown) without paying attention to the ‘policy systems’ in which they are institutionally located, which circumscribe the scope for (but do not fully determine) action.

Public service broadcasters are frequently represented as having an ‘arm’s length’ relationship to the state, a metaphor used to describe how they are expected to perform in conformity with statutory guidelines yet retain a considerable degree of formal autonomy. While this metaphor may serve as an important basis for defending the operational independence of public service broadcasters, however, it provides a rather inadequate basis for understanding how the rationalities and practices through which policy actors exercise agency can be understood in relation to the field of political relations in which they are situated. This article argues that analyses of liberal government informed by Foucault’s work on ‘governmentality’ provide a more empirically substantive basis for understanding SBS’s historical role as a technology and agency of citizenship implicated in processes of identity formation in Australia. This provides the analytical grounds for a consideration of the challenges that have faced SBS-TV over the
course of its history, and the strategies it has adopted in response to these. This, we argue, enables an understanding of SBS's current predicament that is sensitive to the complex interplay of factors that have worked to shape its predicament, and thereby provides a basis for an informed response to it. Ultimately, this paper argues that SBS's current strategies are politically questionable (i.e. hard to justify in public policy terms) and, equally significantly, place it at risk of losing the political support that has historically sustained it. While this suggests SBS's current direction may be rather misguided however, we distinguish our stance from arguments that suggest (and morally denounce the manner in which) SBS has abandoned its identity as a public service broadcaster. On one hand, an historical analysis suggests that, as a multicultural narrowcaster-cum-broadcaster that today carries advertising and gains an increasing proportion of its revenue through commercial operations, the degree to which SBS has ever unequivocally operated as a public service broadcaster is questionable. Secondly, we argue that such critique may be equally misguided since, in the present political climate, it cannot be assumed that either public service broadcasting or multiculturalism provide an effective consensual basis for recruiting public support for a reformed SBS.

**SBS and Multiculturalism**

To elucidate our understanding of SBS as a 'technology of citizenship', it is useful to consider how this approach relates to, and may be distinguished from, other theorisations of SBS’s role in processes of identity formation in Australia. Smaill (2002) has proposed that, by effectively functioning as a broadcaster and a 'narrowcaster' (in that it employs programming strategies which target particular segments of its overall audience), SBS simultaneously exerts both an integrative and pluralising influence over Australian culture:

As a national broadcaster, concerned with the management of national unity and harmony, SBS observes the authority of the nation and reflects the interests of a dominant culture and audience. Formations of community that are not as static or inscribed will also recognise themselves as communities through the way they respond to the address of SBS as a narrowcaster...It must be noted that the former mode of operation in no way diminishes the efficacy of the latter (Smaill 2002, p. 405).

Smaill’s assessment of SBS is rather idealised (a point addressed below), as it is precisely the issue of its ‘integrative’ operation that is being debated at present, or more specifically, the diminishing effect this may be having on its ‘pluralising’ dimension. Nevertheless, we largely concur with her suggestion that SBS has performed this dual role and note, furthermore, that in this regard it has reflected the janus-faced nature of the multicultural policy framework within which it is
situated. This policy framework has provided a basis (both conceptually and in the programs it supports) for an understanding of Australian society that involves a radical challenge to conservative conceptions of the nation as a ‘common culture’, while it has simultaneously functioned as a mechanism for the management of the potential of cultural diversity to produce socially disintegrative and transformative effects. In this way, multiculturalism has worked to subject Australian culture to processes whose effects could not be fully predicted, and as a conservative policy framework designed to preserve Australia’s core institutions and political culture (Castles et al. 1992; Stratton 1998). Although Smaill provides a useful theorisation of how subjects are interpellated through their affiliation to multiple communities in their engagement with different narratives, where our approach differs from hers is in its understanding of the politics through which SBS’s performance of its dual role is largely determined.

We have noted that, in her presentation of SBS as ‘balancing’ its integrative and pluralising aspects, Smaill provides a rather idealised assessment of SBS’s performance as a multicultural public service broadcaster. This is not to suggest that she is unaware of criticisms to which SBS has been subject, which are reviewed in the course of her argument. However, she passes over such criticisms (if not overtly dismissing them) in order to make the case that SBS does effectively balance its dual function, such that its role of representing the nation and contributing to the ‘management of national unity and harmony’ does not come into conflict with its role of representing cultural diversity. To some degree, this approach is characteristic of academic analyses of SBS, which have tended to either (a) provide critiques of SBS as a means of marginalising ethnic identities and broadcasters and/or catering to white cosmopolitan tastes (Jakubowicz et al. 1992; Hage 1995; Stratton 1998; Lawe-Davies 1998), or (b) defend SBS’s performance in light of the pressures to which it is subject and/or the positive contribution it makes to Australian cultural politics (Patterson 1992; O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993a, 1993b; Hawkins 1997). Such responses may, in part, be seen as related to SBS’s status as the most visible product of multiculturalism. As O’Regan and Kolar-Panov note, this has resulted in both its subjection to continual public criticism from all sides of politics (not least ethnic minority voices) and, simultaneously, its especial valorisation by ethnic communities (1993a, pp. 132–4). In Smaill’s case, however, her idealised account can also be seen as a product of the analytical framework she adopts. SBS is not treated as an institution that is borne of, and subject to, the vicissitudes of a policy process, in which unequal power relations serve to determine the variable resources available to groups competing to exert influence over institutional arrangements and practices. Instead, Smaill positions SBS in relation to (and ultimately as the embodiment of) a contemporary ideal of public service broadcasting. Indeed, Smaill views SBS as the fulfilment of Stuart Hall’s (1993) suggestion that, in
order to remain defensible, public service broadcasting must be recon-
cceived so that its educative function no longer reflects the cultural
elitism of a Reithian model but is representative of (and contributes to)
the cultural diversity of modern societies. A related problem emerges
in Smaill’s discussion of multiculturalism. She presents this not as a
policy framework that emerged from a process in which authorities
made decisions that attempted to mediate between competing policy
agendas and demands that could never be fully reconciled, but simply
as a ‘top-down initiative’ (Smaill 2002, p. 395). This produces a pecu-
liar aporia in Smaill’s argument. Although she acknowledges SBS to be
a product of multiculturalism, she positions its practices as represen-
tative of an ‘everyday multiculturalism’ as opposed to state policy. Thus,
despite its reliance upon public funding and a requirement that it fulfil
a legislatively defined charter, SBS is positioned as if it somehow oper-
ates independently of ‘state-sponsored forms of social management’
(Smaill 2002, p. 399).

What is apparent here are the limitations of the populist analytic
that underpins Smaill’s analysis, since, within its terms, both multi-
culturalism and SBS can only be understood as representative of either
‘government’ or ‘the people’, the binary framework embodied in the
official/everyday opposition. It is one thing to argue that, as it is artic-
ulated within policy, multiculturalism does not accurately or ade-
quately represent the cultural diversity of Australian society. It is quite
another to suggest that formations of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ exist
in a realm beyond policy. Such problems are not, however, restricted to
work that celebrates SBS’s contribution to cultural pluralism. For
example, Stratton (1998) argues that SBS reflects the shortcomings of
‘official multiculturalism’ (the ideology embodied in multicultural
policy) and the (misleading) image of Australian culture embodied
within it (1998, p. 35). Although this argument can clearly be distin-
guished from Smaill’s, once again the ideology of ‘official multicultur-
alism’ is explicitly contrasted with the presumed reality of ‘everyday
multiculturalism’ (Stratton 1998, pp. 15–16). Similarly, Hage argues
not only that the ‘fantasy structure’ embodied in policy may be con-
trasted with ‘the reality of an unproblematic and pervasive multicul-
tural interaction’ (1998, p. 233), but that ‘scrapping multiculturalism’ is
a ‘mystification’ of the political possibilities available to those who

It is instructive to contrast such perspectives with that offered by
Cunningham and Sinclair (2000), who assert the need to defend multi-
culturalism in the current climate. In taking this position, they are not
blind to the shortcomings of a multicultural policy framework which
‘can be criticised as co-optive insofar as it offers a space for cultural
maintenance, respect and tolerance while requiring conformity to
liberal democratic practices and acquiescence to the dominant
(British–Irish) cultural formation’ (2000, p. 30). Nevertheless, they
argue, such limitations must be weighed against the more serious
threat posed by recent attempts to achieve a ‘re-liminalisation of “Asian-Australian” ethnicities’, manifest in the relative success of the populist political stance promoted by Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, a stance both tacitly legitimated by the Howard government and reflected in its marked retreat from a strong commitment to multiculturalism in both rhetoric and policy practice (Cope & Kalantzis 1997; Nolan 2004). In light of such developments, they suggest it is:

...imperative that [multiculturalism] is defended vociferously, even as its limits are explored. Acknowledging that the basic assumptions of Australian multiculturalism are distinctly better than other policy frameworks which could be conceivably won politically in the climate of our times marks out our stance from...strong critiques of the policy (Cunningham & Sinclair 2000, p. 30).

While the argument that multiculturalism is worth defending is important, what distinguishes this approach is that it does not view it as a misrepresentation of an everyday cultural reality, an ideology that secures the hegemony of a dominant ‘core’ culture, or a set of ‘top-down’ initiatives that are inflicted upon the people by a monolithic state. Rather, it is understood as a social and cultural policy framework that provides an (albeit limited) basis of both rhetorical and material support for cultural pluralism that has been won politically, may be lost, and has (arguably) already been substantially compromised.

**Public Service Broadcasting: a ‘Technology of Citizenship’**

What this discussion highlights is that, for an informed assessment of SBS’s performance of its role as a multicultural public broadcaster in the current climate, its relationship to both its audiences and the state requires clarification. A useful starting point for this is provided in Terry Flew’s (1995) consideration of how theorisations of ‘technology’ might provide a basis for understanding media. Through a critical history of various theoretical perspectives, Flew develops an account of technologies as both socially mediated and mediating, and suggests how this history may be deployed in support of a specifically Foucauldian approach:

It is universally accepted that broadcast media are apparatuses—technologies of production-consumption—that produce messages and meanings, or technologies of signification. In addition, it can be noted that the audiences of broadcast media adopt certain dispositions—technologies of the self, in Foucauldian terms—that are both provoking of and responsive to the tactics of broadcast media producers and distributors. Where dispute arises between different schools of thought about the media, such as liberal and critical theorists, it is about whether these technologies of production and signification are also technologies of power (Flew 1995, pp. 50–1).
Flew notes that a major question within this dispute surrounds the relation between institutions that attempt to regulate media and the output they produce: namely, the question of whether ‘regulatory institutions [are] a countervailing force to semiotic power, or are...themselves constitutive of the conditions under which regimes of broadcast media can exist and operate’ (1995, p. 51). This dispute has, atypically, involved the question of whether forms of state regulation in general tend to regulate media institutions in the public interest, or as an element within a broader political economy and/or hegemony. However, the debate discussed above may be considered a variation of this: whereas defenders of SBS have viewed it as an agency that counters the top-down, managerial excesses of government, its critics have regarded it as an extension and expression of a form of rule secured, in part, through the state.

A similar ambiguity arises in work that has focused on the manner in which media are implicated in formations of citizenship. From one perspective, media provision has been viewed as an important dimension of citizenship rights, a position exemplified in Graham Murdock’s assertion that ‘if people were to become full citizens they had to have access to the material and symbolic resources that secured social inclusion and facilitated participation’ (1999, p. 10). Like others who have developed versions of this approach (Keane 1991; Dahlgren 1995; Atkinson 1997), Murdock addresses the media’s citizenship role in relation to citizens’ entitlements to participate in the cultural life of the political community. A complementary approach views media as a means by which subjects are constituted as members of a national community (Schlesinger 1991; Hall 1993; Hartley 1996; Dunn 1997). In relation to public service broadcasting, Paddy Scannell has provided perhaps the strongest argument linking these two dimensions of citizenship. The BBC, Scannell argues, ‘brought into being a culture in common to populations of a whole new kind’ (1989, p. 138) and thereby provided a means ‘whereby common knowledges and pleasures in a shared public life are maintained as a social good for the whole population’ (1989, p. 164). Thus, while (like Murdock) Scannell defends broadcasting as a citizenship right, he also enunciates a republican defence of it as a means by which qualities of citizenship are promoted that benefit the whole community.

By contrast, although Morley (2000, pp. 105–27) supports the view that public broadcasting plays a constitutive role in the production of forms of national consciousness, he suggests that Scannell’s equation of the BBC’s representation of a ‘common culture’ with the fulfilment of citizens’ rights provides an overly idealised account of the role broadcasting has played in the production of citizenship formations. He argues that public broadcasting in Britain, through its production of gendered and ethnicised representations of national life, has been both inclusive and exclusive for different audience members:

By the very way (and to the very extent that) a programme signals to members of some groups that it is designed for them
and functions as an effective invitation to their participation in social life, it will necessarily signal to members of other social groups that it is not for them and, indeed, that they are not among the invitees to its particular forum of sociability. Only a programme constructed within the terms of some form of cultural Esperanto could hope to appeal equally to all, without favour or division. Sociability, by definition, can only ever be produced in some particular cultural (and linguistic) form—and only those with access to the relevant forms of cultural capital will feel interpellated by and at home within the particular form of sociability offered by a given program (Morley 2000, p. 111).

Morley’s perspective not only explains how modes of national citizenship facilitated through broadcasting can work to produce forms of social exclusion, but also how modes of representation may serve to support a sense of belonging. In this respect, it enables an understanding of both the strongly emotional response reported by SBS viewers who saw aspects of their cultural identity represented for the first time (O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993a, p. 121), and the particular value placed on SBS by migrant communities infrequently interpellated in terms of their cultural specificity. What Morley’s analysis suggests, ultimately, is that the question of whether public broadcasting operates as a technology of freedom or a technology of power is undecidable because it may be both on different occasions, and even simultaneously.

From a Foucauldian perspective, by contrast, this question may be viewed not so much as undecidable, but as an articulation of a problematic that is characteristic of liberal approaches to government. Following Foucault’s analysis of liberalism as a particular mode of ‘governmentality’, a number of political theorists and historians have argued that, rather than simply a political theory or doctrine, liberalism can be more accurately understood as a particular approach to the problem of how to govern (Burchell et al. 1991; Barry et al. 1996; Hindess 1996, 1997; Dean 1999). What is specific to liberalism is its combination of three elements: a novel specification of the subjects of rule as active in their own government; a demand that government should ensure, as far as possible, that subjects exercise their autonomy in a responsible manner; and a characteristic tendency to place the legitimacy of authority under suspicion. This critical aspect of liberalism may be regarded as axiomatic to the former two elements: that is, if effective and legitimate government relies upon the collective exercise of autonomy, and the scope of that autonomy is not to be placed in jeopardy, then the necessity and legitimacy of authority itself must be continually questioned (Röse 1996).

There are two important points that serve to distinguish this view of liberalism as a mode of government from more conventional accounts, where it is viewed as a political doctrine or philosophy. First, in its material operations, liberal government does not implicate subjects simply as
its objects, but as its means and objects simultaneously. In this respect, liberalism works to both position and produce civil society ‘as an interface between the projects of government and the objects those projects construct’ (Bennett 1998, p. 75). Second, while the state certainly exists as an important element within the matrix of liberal rule, it is not one that may be understood as either a monolithic centre of power exerting its will over populations in a ‘top-down’ fashion, or as (actually or potentially) expressive of the popular will. Rather, the scope and exercise of state power is enabled, maintained and transformed through the exercise of forms of governmental authority and technical processes that are both socially dispersed and non-uniform. In effect, the co-ordination of dispersed practices and programs of government through the state has provided a means by which these can be, to a greater or lesser extent, mutually accommodated, legitimised and regulated, and thus a practical ‘response’ to a liberal problematic of government. In this respect, as Rose argues:

The ‘power of the State’ is a resultant, not a cause, an outcome of the composition and assembling of actors, flows, buildings, relations of authority into relatively durable associations mobilized, to a greater or lesser extent, towards the achievement of particular objectives by common means (Rose 1996, p. 43).

Jennifer Craik has criticised approaches to policy analysis informed by Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ analytic, arguing that these present government as an instrumental process wherein a state executive, alongside governmental agencies and agential experts, moulds a citizenry ‘characterised as obliging’ (1995, p. 203). However, Foucauldian analyses of liberalism provide little support for such a view of government. Rather, they recognise that citizens (as well as other agents within the political community) exercise governmental power as well as being subject to it, albeit to varying extents, depending upon the degree of social, cultural and economic resources at their disposal, and the technical capacities they have acquired. Indeed, in this respect they are theoretically consistent with Craik’s own call for analysis that takes into account the materiality of the policy process. Furthermore, the Foucauldian focus on the means by which operations of government work through technical means allows a consideration of the concerted operations of various groups involved in struggles over SBS’s policy formations. This supports an analysis of how a field of political relations and practices serve to inform, but not determine, how professionals within SBS deploy their technical capacities to produce forms of programming that interpellate subjects as part of a national community, and the manner in which that community is characterised.

In short, then, while SBS-TV can be viewed as a technology that plays a part in constituting formations of citizenship, its performance cannot be fully understood without a consideration of how it is shaped by the exercise of heterogeneous forms of agency. Clearly, this
approach is quite at odds with one that positions SBS simply as a means by which ethnic identities are ‘ghettoised’ by the top-down exercise of (white) governmental power (Stratton 1998). The implicit denial of the agency of ethnic subjects in such a judgement is both politically and historically questionable. However, neither does an understanding of SBS as an element within a broader apparatus of citizenship involve a romanticisation of it as an expression of ethnic self-empowerment. Instead, the practices of SBS management and staff can be seen as subject to a complex interplay of factors and influences. At the most local level, SBS’s operations can be seen as an outcome of the technical skills and professional/political dispositions of its staff. To consider how these translate into programming, however, we must consider how they are mediated by a range of external factors, which have included the changing nature of multicultural policy, and the ethnic and racial politics that have shaped it; the shifting ecology of ethnic politics at both national and international levels, and its local impacts; the political resources deployed by various groups to exert direct or indirect influence on SBS; its reliance on funding sources, and the extent to which these dictate sensitivity and responsiveness to social policy objectives and/or particular markets; developments in technologies of production, transmission and reception; forms of programming available via local and international television markets; the effects of broader changes in media policy on SBS; and the emergence of both opportunities and new competitors with the advent of ethnic video networks, pay TV and the Internet. In the next section, we review how SBS has negotiated such factors through the specific modes of practice that have characterised its performance as a technology of citizenship over its relatively short history.

From ‘Narrowcaster’ to Broadcaster

It is on the basis of this understanding of SBS, as a technology of citizenship embedded within (and subject to the influence of) a broader apparatus of liberal-democratic government, that we argue that an informed assessment of SBS’s current strategies requires an historical awareness of both its identity as a public institution and the dilemmas it faces in the present. This position rests on our contention that, rather than being the embodiment of a political ideal or ideology, SBS is best understood as the product of a specific political history. It is primarily in these terms that we would question arguments, such as that presented by Hawkins (1996), that defend SBS’s performance as representing the political virtues of cosmopolitanism. Hawkins acknowledges that, in its appeal to ‘serious viewers’ of ‘quality’ international television, SBS-TV caters to a ‘privileged constituency’ with which she identifies (1996, pp. 50–4). However, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, she argues that this is politically defensible, since the values of worldliness and openness to difference that are characteristic
of this taste formation are values that are deserving of public promotion. She thus defends SBS’s performance against those, such as Andrew Jakubowicz and Ghassan Hage, who have criticised it for being increasingly responsive to the consumption practices of class elites rather than the preferences, needs and values of ethnic viewers. The baleful subtext of such critiques, according to Hawkins, is that moves away from ethnocentrism have little political value, and that an openness to multiple cultural perspectives is merely a ‘class-based privilege’ (1996, p. 52).

This argument appears questionable on several grounds. Firstly, in defining her position against arguments that she presents as politically questionable, Hawkins fundamentally misreads the basis upon which these arguments are made. Hage and Jakubowicz do not, as she contends, lay claim to an authority based on a claimed ‘politically correct’ class identity (Hawkins 1996, p. 51). Rather, they suggest that the communication demands and tastes of specific ethnic audiences are irreducible to those of a cosmopolitan viewership defined in terms of class. In short, whatever faults one might have with the respective theoretical grounds upon which Jakubowicz and Hage base their critiques, in both cases it is ethnicity rather than class that constitutes their primary focus of concern. More significant, however, is that Hawkins’s defence of SBS as representing the ethical virtues of cosmopolitanism rests on the tacit assumption that the service is best understood as the embodiment of a political philosophy. If, instead, we view SBS as a product of the materialities of a policy process, this shifts our focus from the overly abstract question of whether SBS is ethically defensible to more practical issues. For example, if SBS may be characterised as a ‘cosmopolitan’ broadcaster, what are the politics through which this identity emerged? What are the interests that are served by such a definition of SBS’s role, and to what extent is multicultural broadcasting politically sustainable if conceived in this manner? By repositioning the debate in this manner three points arise that appear vital to a grounded consideration of SBS’s current situation. Firstly, whatever might be seen as its virtues or deficiencies, a view of SBS as a cosmopolitan broadcaster is a far cry from the public policy role that it was originally mandated to fulfil. Secondly, if SBS fails to attract viewers beyond the ‘privileged constituency’ to which Hawkins argues it is responsive, it becomes very hard to justify supporting it on public policy grounds. Finally, an approach that addresses SBS’s current predicament as an ethical-theoretical question provides an inadequate basis for addressing the diversity of material and political factors that must of necessity circumscribe any practical response.

Hawkins’s view contrasts sharply with that of O’Regan and Kolar-Panov who, though they acknowledge SBS does promote itself as a television service that offers distinctively ‘quality’ programming, do not argue that this claim is supported by any universally defensible aesthetic or social value. Rather, they argue that it constitutes a ‘necessary
fiction’, borne of policy pragmatism, by providing a point of appeal to cross-ethnic and mainstream audiences that allows a negotiation of the (somewhat contradictory) demands placed upon it (O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993b, p. 154). The distinction between ‘ethnic’ and ‘mainstream’ invoked here derives from SBS’s history as a television service specifically catering to ethnic needs and interests. As they point out, in the Australian context the term ‘ethnic’ is used to refer to communities based around non-English speaking background (NESB) migrants. These communities defined their identity as ‘ethnic’ because of a ‘sense of cultural and social distance from the Australian mainstream’ (O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993a, pp. 126–7). Such details are important precisely because SBS’s institutional identity and practices have not derived primarily from political philosophies (whether ‘multicultural’ or ‘cosmopolitan’) but rather from the political history through which these emerged, developed and have been transformed over time. In this regard, it is important to reiterate that, as the most visible and most expensive commitment to the public policy of multiculturalism, SBS originated as part of a broader social policy framework rather than from a media portfolio. Because of this, SBS’s history is indexed, though not identical, to state policies of multiculturalism.

The establishment of SBS-TV followed an election campaign policy commitment by Malcolm Fraser in 1977 that his government would establish an ethnic television service. This commitment was backed by the 1978 Galbally Report recommendation that ethnic television be included as part of a broader framework of public support for migrant services (Galbally 1978). Some critics have taken this as grounds for viewing SBS as a product of a top-down governmental dictate (Patterson 1992; Smaill 2002). Others have noted, however, that Fraser’s commitment to migrant services at this time stemmed from an appreciation of the electoral significance of the ethnic lobby, and the government’s need to boost its credentials in this area (Jakubowicz 1987; O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993a). This led to the establishment of an Ethnic Television Review Panel (ETRP) in 1978, which proposed the establishment of an Independent Multicultural Broadcasting Corporation (IMBC), envisaged as a hybrid public/commercial service that would carry some advertising and sponsorship. This proposal was drafted as legislation, but was defeated in the Senate following a range of objections. Some of these arose from commercial broadcasters and the ethnic press, who feared that the proposed IMBC would divert their advertising revenue. Notably, however, it was also opposed by, among others, the Labor opposition on the grounds that the new television service would produce ‘electronic ghettos’ and encourage social division (Patterson 1992, p. 45). Despite its failure to establish the new service as an independent corporation, the government pressed ahead with multicultural television, establishing SBS on the basis of recommendations made by the ETRP, even though those recommendations were proposed for a very different institutional entity.
As part of a social policy framework of migrant services, SBS was very much envisaged as an ethnic television service meeting the specific needs of ethnic communities, albeit in a way that would be accessible to a more general audience. In certain respects, SBS’s early programming reflected the conservatism of the Fraser government’s ‘ethnic group model’ of multiculturalism. This model, as outlined by Galbally and the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs’ 1982 document *Multiculturalism For All Australians*, configured Australia as consisting of a series of discrete and coherent ethnic groups, indiscriminate of overlaps and conflicts within and between ethnic communities and their differential class and gender composition, whose integration within Australian society was to be facilitated by policy (ACPEA 1982). SBS contributed to this by carrying programs targeted at specific ethnic groups, and offering migrant services in the form of community announcements and English-language teaching programs. In addition, public affairs program *S*C*O*O*P* accompanied the news service as a means of informing Australians about the lands from which migrants had come (SBS 1981). Further efforts to bolster SBS’s accessibility to a general audience were made through the decision to use, where possible, English narration in factual programming, and to carry sports programming of special interest to ethnic audiences that also attracted more general interest, particularly soccer (SBS 1981, p. 25). However, while such moves can be seen as informed by the ETRP stipulation that the new service be generally accessible, it is important to note that SBS was not subject to a demand to feature programming of universal appeal, a point often regarded as characteristic of public service broadcasting (see Siune & Hultein 1998; Jacka 2002). Indeed, this led some to argue that SBS is better understood as a ‘narrowcaster’ targeting specific audiences rather than a ‘broadcaster’ (Hartley 1992; O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993b).

While this provides a very useful basis for understanding SBS in its earlier formations, it is less clear that such a distinction remains applicable today. Indeed, in one sense SBS’s history may be viewed as a gradual transformation from ‘narrowcaster’ to ‘broadcaster’. This is not to suggest, however, that it is appropriate to view that history as a narrative of the regressive decline of a specific commitment to services for ethnic communities. Similarly, the development of multicultural policies informed by a rhetoric of ‘mainstreaming’ during the Hawke era (1983–1991) would be ill-understood as simply a return to earlier migrant policy models of ethnic assimilation and integration. Indeed, its emphasis on ensuring that Australia’s core institutions were capable of responding to the needs of ‘all Australians’ could, to some extent, be seen as a renewal of Whitlam-era initiatives to address the access and equity concerns of ethnic communities (Castles & Vasta 2000). In this light, the 1984 Connor enquiry’s recommendation that SBS be amalgamated with the ABC may be viewed, in part, as the product of a progressive politics that saw the distinction between the
ABC (as the national broadcaster) and SBS (a service for ethnic communities) as both symbolic of, and contributory to, the political marginalisation of ethnic groups. Jakubowicz (1987), for example, notes that for some on the progressive left an integrated multicultural broadcaster represented a preferred option at this time, and that the SBS Board was itself divided on this issue. ‘Mainstreaming’ did not, however, represent an unambiguously progressive policy approach. The increased emphasis on addressing the needs of all Australians could be seen as an expedient response, in the wake of the 1984 ‘Blainey debate’ on immigration, to right-wing criticisms of multiculturalism as divisive because it made services available to specific groups rather than the whole population. Furthermore, as Lawe-Davies (1998, p. 89) has suggested, during an era in which Treasury demands to cut government spending increasingly informed social policy, mainstreaming multiculturalism was seen as an approach that promised to yield ‘economies of scale’. The ABC/SBS amalgamation proposal provides a clear instance of this. The strong opposition of ethnic communities to the merger plan (which eventually forced its abandonment in 1987), by contrast, demonstrated their sense of ownership in SBS as a political achievement that would not be easily foregone. Notably, SBS contributed to this resistance, arguing that it be given the status of an independent statutory authority (SBS 1984, 1985). Despite its precarious institutional position, such defiant proposals demonstrate the degree to which, as a governmental authority, SBS was increasingly defining its role independently of the state executive.

Nevertheless, SBS was not immune to the influence of mainstreaming. Programming policy became increasingly concerned to address more general audience interests in addition to those of metropolitan ethnic communities. In part, this was a result of the impact of policies of ‘equalisation’ that resulted in SBS-TV gaining a more national reach, but it was also informed by the development of multiculturalism as an increasingly national project. Again, this had ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, it resulted in a stronger local programming emphasis, with ethnicity increasingly being represented on SBS in relation to Australian-ethnic issues and experiences rather than ethnic homelands. On the other, it resulted in the adoption of policies aimed to universalise the service, such as the restructuring of programming schedules to include informational English language programming at prime-time, on the grounds that this would encourage migrants to view programs in English whilst simultaneously informing the general public on migrant and international current affairs (Duffy 2001, p. 28). In addition, SBS adopted a standardised scheduling format, a move also aimed at increasing SBS’s general accessibility. In 1990, Head of Television Andy Lloyd-James justified this move by suggesting that it would ‘provide a previously lacking predictability to the network’s programming, together with an
easy accessibility in all areas of mainstream programming...to attract audiences when they are most on the move around the dial’ (SBS 1990a, p. 27). The overt concern in this statement to attract audiences reflects the degree to which, at this time, SBS was re-conceiving itself through a movement away from its original identity as an ethnic ‘narrowcaster’ to embrace a new role as a multicultural national broadcaster. Furthermore, it illustrates how SBS was now overtly preparing itself for the challenge of attracting audiences that would secure commercial sponsorship.

Such developments demonstrate how, at this time, SBS’s institutional practices remained largely indexed to developments in multicultural policy. Indeed, SBS’s place within national broadcasting became increasingly assured as a result of the way multiculturalism had transformed during the 1980s from a policy framework targeted at ethnic populations to one that informed national social, cultural and economic policy. Extending the economic aspect of ‘mainstreaming’, a new rhetoric of ‘productive diversity’ involved a shift from a focus on universal access and equity to one that sought to harness the potential economic benefits of multiculturalism through, for example, attracting highly-skilled NESB migrants and programs promoting bilingualism to improve trade and economic relations. In this environment, SBS was valued both as a means by which such programs could be supported and for the contribution it could make to economic efficiency. For example, in 1988 a government paper proposed the permanent adoption of sponsorship and advertising on SBS (DOTAC 1988). While SBS had thus become valorised for its contribution to ‘productive diversity’, this paper’s recommendation of the establishment of a multicultural charter alleviated ongoing institutional insecurity at SBS. Its position within national policy was further assured when, in the 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia (Office of Multicultural Affairs), multiculturalism was officially inscribed as a right of citizenship, a document which defined the ‘three dimensions of multicultural policy’ as structured around cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency (Castles & Vasta 2000, p. 126). SBS’s place within national broadcasting policy was finally secured with its incorporation through the Special Broadcasting Service Act (the Act) in 1991.

From Mainstreaming Multiculturalism to Mainstream Australia?

The public broadcasting framework established in the Act positioned SBS as a key element of multiculturalism, which was now articulated as a right of citizenship. SBS’s role within this framework was defined by its new mission statement, which committed it to ‘providing an innovative and quality multilingual and multicultural radio and TV service which depicts the diverse reality of Australia’s multicultural society and meets the needs of Australians of all origins and backgrounds’ (SBS
The commitment to ‘quality’ broadcasting was also in line with government policy direction, which was, in light of deregulatory trends in media policy, concerned to ensure that ‘market failure’ would not result in a reduced range of program provision and quality (Patterson 1992, p. 48; O’Regan & Kolar-Panov 1993a, p. 135). SBS’s incorporation also bolstered it against political interference by establishing an ‘arm’s length’ relationship from government which paralleled that of the ABC, making it more resistant to political pressure than it had been during the 1980s. However, through its introduction of five minutes of advertising per hour, the Act had also effected a structural transformation of SBS’s institutional identity such that it now existed as a ‘hybrid’ public/commercial broadcaster (Lawe-Davies 1998, p. 92). In one sense, this change was not so radical. The move to adopt advertising had been supported by SBS management, who had already accepted that its role was to be increasingly defined by an economic rationale, a view reflected in the statement by Dr Peter Shergold, the founding director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, that ‘multiculturalism and the SBS is about the economic benefits of our cultural diversity, the dollars and cents of multiculturalism’ (SBS 1990c). There is an important distinction, however, between adopting an economic rationale indexed to shifts within a framework of state policy and doing so as a relatively independent commercial concern. This shift would see SBS increasingly determining its policy direction in relation to commercially-oriented modes of technical calculation.

While SBS gained institutional security through the Act it is possible that, in the long term, this may be viewed as a development that put its multicultural identity on a rather precarious footing. Until this point, SBS had always operated on a public service basis, its governmental role primarily positioned within a broader framework of social policy provisions. Its repositioning is characteristic of a broader trend toward ‘advanced liberal’ modes of economic government, wherein a variety of public agencies have been granted new levels of autonomy in their governance, while remaining linked to the state through mechanisms designed to ensure such autonomy is exercised responsibly. In particular, what some have described as a ‘de-governmentalisation of the state’ (Barry et al. 1996, pp. 9–10) has involved a process whereby institutions of government are increasingly required to regulate their activities in relation to market-derived norms of accountability (Dean 1999, p. 205). SBS’s re-establishment as a quasi-commercial broadcaster provides a clear example of this. While SBS remains subject to the requirements of a public service charter, it is required to negotiate the role this defines in relation to economic norms because the social value of multicultural policy has been defined in increasingly economic terms and because it is in its own commercial self-interest to do so. It is in this light that Lawe-Davies’s (1998) study, examining how demographic data was used by SBS to inform strategies geared towards increasing audiences viewed as potentially valuable, can be
understood. This analysis demonstrates how demographic research that would inform SBS’s 1994 advertising campaign, *The World is an Amazing Place*, was informed by three aims derived both from SBS’s Charter requirements and its own strategic planning: to broaden SBS’s audience, to bind different audience segments together, and to build ratings that would contribute to SBS’s overall corporate goals (Lawe-Davies 1998, pp. 92–5). Lawe-Davies demonstrates how, partially as a consequence of industry practices of audience measurement, it began to appear self-evident that:

…the job of combining the three aims of the advertising campaign—broadening, binding and building—proved only possible if some of the less marketable groups were shifted out of the equation. One of the clear losers in this ‘homogenising’ process was the ordinary blue-collar ethnic community members who found sub-titles too demanding, only watched their own language material and preferred commercial television anyway (Lawe-Davies 1998, p. 95).

As Lawe-Davies points out, the fact that this marginalised group was demographically larger than the AB viewers seen as vital to attract as a committed audience demonstrates this campaign was not simply about increasing viewing figures, although this was one important aspect of SBS’s strategy. Rather, increasing general AB audiences provided a means by which SBS could negotiate its role by simultaneously upholding its status as a ‘quality’ broadcaster, producing and carrying programming of interest to ‘multicultural Australia’ (rather than simply specific ethnic taste formations), fulfilling the public service demand to educate audiences, and attracting commercially attractive audiences for potential advertisers. It is in this way that a multicultural policy framework, redefined to refer to Australia in general, became articulated to a cosmopolitan class formation through SBS.

This is not, of course, to directly criticise SBS programming during this period. Certainly, there were shifts that were aimed to attract a broader audience. A decision was made to present lighter, magazine-style programming in the early evening, mirroring the strategy to capture viewers adopted by other channels. Such changes would, SBS argued, ‘make the choice to switch to SBS easier for viewers, and of course will lead to our strengths as a multicultural entertainment and information broadcaster. To encourage more viewers, more often, and for longer viewing periods’ (SBS 1994). However, it is arguable that SBS also extended its agenda as both a multicultural broadcaster and narrowcaster, on the one hand launching *World Watch*, a series of international news services presented in their original languages without subtitles, while also introducing a nightly English-language news bulletin seven nights a week (SBS 1994). This was, in short, an enormously productive period for SBS, in which it expanded its operations through a range of initiatives. This was not only because of SBS’s increased institutional security, but its success in attracting government funding
for new projects. For example, as part of the Creative Nation program, SBS received $14 million over a four year period to commission high-quality Australian programs. These funds were managed separately from the general SBS budget by the new financing arm, SBS Independent (SBSi), with all submissions required to reflect the multicultural nature of Australian society, in both on- and off-screen dimensions of production, ‘to extend the range of voices and visions currently available in Australia’ (SBS 1995, p. 2). SBS began producing ICAM in 1995, a program on Aboriginal cultural issues and perspectives designed to be accessible to a general audience (SBS 1996, p. 8). SBS also launched its pay TV channel, World Movies, through the Foxtel and Galaxy networks in 1995. The world’s only pay TV channel to exclusively screen foreign films with English subtitles, within nine months it had attracted 30,000 subscribers (SBS 1996, p. 9). Again, this was a strategic move that enabled SBS to build upon its charter, protect its product lines and raise revenue (Brewster 1996, p. 27).

Other aspects of SBS’s new institutional status also had ambiguous implications. As a quasi-independent, quasi-commercial public service broadcaster, SBS was both mandated to support multiculturalism and had strong political and commercial reasons to publicly represent the concerns of its ethnic, minoritarian and cosmopolitan constituency. This was particularly important when, with the election of the first Howard government in 1996, government policy shifted away from ‘mainstreaming multiculturalism’ and became informed by a logic of policymaking for an Australian ‘mainstream’ defined against both minority and ‘elite’ interests in addressing aspects of social and cultural marginalisation, which were repositioned as ‘special interest’ concerns (Greenfield & Williams 2001). Thus, public policies based on populist rationales involved a marked withdrawal of public support for multiculturalism, as well as cuts in funding for organisations concerned to address social inequity and represent minority interests, especially Aboriginal, ethnic and women’s organisations (Johnson 2000; Jupp 2001). The government’s tacit legitimation of, and willingness to exploit, Pauline Hanson’s racist statements regarding multiculturalism and immigration also contributed to a markedly different, and more divisive, political climate. In this environment SBS’s own role was, rather than indexed to government policy, increasingly defined against it. For example, where the Howard government has been notable for its marked retreat from support for a multicultural and anti-racist agenda, SBS justified its social value in exactly these terms:

This year, the issues of race and national identity surfaced as important matters of public debate, focusing unprecedented attention on the very concept of multiculturalism...SBS was heartened by the results of a Newspoll survey which found that 73 per cent of respondents agreed that SBS Television ‘gives Australians a better understanding of people from overseas who now live in Australia’ and 68 per cent agreed that SBS
Television ‘gives Australians a greater acceptance of people from overseas who now live in Australia’ (SBS 1998, p. 3).

This agenda was also reflected in programming, such as the documentary on racism, Blue Eyed, which became the most watched documentary in SBS history with an audience of 1 million people (SBS 1998, p. 2). SBS also commissioned groundbreaking local productions through SBSi, such as the first Australian-made foreign language feature, Floating Life, a story of Chinese migrants in Australia (SBS 1997, p. 1). Also of note was The Masters, the first Aboriginal sit-com to screen on Australian television, part-funded by ATSIC and produced by the SBS Indigenous unit, Kuri-Gnia (SBS 1997, p. 2).

While such initiatives can be seen to have made a positive contribution to cultural pluralism in the Australian broadcasting environment, in certain respects SBS’s institutional position has, in recent years, appeared increasingly precarious, particularly given that the government has withdrawn virtually all support for multiculturalism as a social policy framework. Support for multiculturalism, insofar as it exists at all, is articulated through a conservative discourse of tolerance and an economic discourse of comparative advantage. It is notable also that multiculturalism has been redefined in policy discourse as ‘Australian multiculturalism’. Thus, in Howard’s foreword to the 1999 New Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, titled ‘Australian Multiculturalism for a new Century: Towards Inclusiveness’, he states that ‘we are an open and tolerant society that promotes the celebration of diversity…Our diversity is a source of competitive advantage, cultural enrichment and social stability’ (1999). This shift is symbolic of how, in contrast to previous approaches that saw ‘mainstreaming multiculturalism’ as a valuable project in both economic and social terms, any support for multiculturalism on social grounds is now qualified, and conditional on its subordination to ‘mainstream’ Australian culture. While SBS’s chairman acknowledged that the broadcaster faced a challenge in maintaining programming standards as a result of a general tendency toward public sector funding cuts (SBS 1996, p. 8), this changed political environment also means that SBS’s social performance provides little basis for attracting continued public funding (although it might provoke punitive cuts). In this situation, it becomes doubly imperative to perform strongly in commercial terms, both to conform to governmental expectations of economic performance and to be able to sustain programming in the face of a withdrawal of public funding.

**Conclusion: A Risky Strategy?**

[Multiculturalism] has...attempted to apply rigid public service criteria to activities and processes which are often vaguely defined, contested and controversial. These criteria are not only shaped by the requirements of public accountability, but also by influences from those that believe multicultu-
turalism is an illegitimate use of public funds or that the state should not have a directive cultural role (Jupp 2001, p. 273). The aim of this article has been to provide an historical perspective on how SBS-TV’s performance as a ‘technology of citizenship’ has been shaped by the field of political relations in which it is located, as grounds for assessing its current strategies. Clearly, SBS’s identity has shifted markedly from its early days as an ethnic television service embedded within a public policy framework of migrant services that was, to a large extent, informed by the political pressure exercised by the ethnic lobby. This framework informed techniques of community representation and consultation which provided a means by which SBS’s practices were regulated, and directly informed the programming techniques through which SBS connected to its viewerships. At the same time, SBS’s institutional insecurity during this period made it vulnerable to political pressure, and somewhat compromised its ability to autonomously define its role. SBS’s incorporation both consolidated its status as a quasi-independent agency and formalised its centrality within a framework of national citizenship. However, its transformation from a public service to a hybrid public-commercial entity resulted in SBS increasingly measuring (and reforming) its performance in relation to market-based techniques of calculation. Such techniques served to inform the manner in which SBS strategically positioned itself as a multicultural public service broadcaster rather than an ethnic narrowcaster, and particularly targeted a cosmopolitan audience to ensure its capacity to operate in the face of potential cuts in public funding. This transformation was not simply forced upon SBS by the state, for SBS itself lobbied to be allowed to carry advertising. It may be suggested, however, that such moves were less a matter of choice than necessity. On one hand, SBS’s comparatively miniscule budget (in comparison with that of the ABC) severely limited its operations to the extent that it was forced to explore alternative avenues for funding. Secondly, this move may also be seen as informed by prudent recognition of the degree to which multiculturalism itself, despite its incorporation within citizenship frameworks, remained contingent upon (politically precarious) national support. A successful demonstration of market responsiveness would both satisfy the neo-liberal performance criteria increasingly adopted by the state, and forestall criticisms that sought to position SBS as a mode of unrepresentative cultural engineering and a burden on the taxpayer.

In this way, SBS’s performance in the late 1990s as a multicultural and cosmopolitan broadcaster can be understood, historically, as a largely successful negotiation of the specific political challenges it faced at a particular moment. With hindsight, however, it may be argued that this success may also have contributed to the difficulties it faces at present. Although the dramatic expansion in ratings may have worked (in the short term) to consolidate SBS’s position of a public service broadcaster under a neo-liberal policy regime, the exponential
audience increases of the mid 1990s were never likely to be sustainable. On one hand, this creates problems in a situation where success is measured in terms of growth and economic expansion, and any drop in ratings may risk the viability of future operations. On the other, what at one moment may look like an expansion in the audience profile may later be viewed as a rather narrow appeal. Here, the limits of arguments that defend SBS in terms of the virtues of cosmopolitanism become apparent. As a ‘taste formation’, the cosmopolitan audience can be understood as a group who, in line with their ‘worldly’ ethical standpoint, already approve and identify with the idea of multiculturalism. If this group may, then, be characterised as the ‘already converted’ (Lawe-Davies 1998, p. 104), and SBS fails to attract audiences that are not similarly characterised by such an ‘openness to difference’, then it is difficult to see why, in public policy terms, it should attract continued support. In short, if SBS’s purpose is defined in terms of the virtues of an ethos pertaining to a specific group (rather than as social policy), however admirable that ethos may be, arguments that ask why that group should not pay for its taste preferences gain a plausibility, particularly in light of that group’s socio-economic profile.

For its part, SBS has not restricted itself to defending its performance in these terms, but has attempted to expand its audience base, while continuing its focus on what remain commercially attractive audiences who enjoy ‘quality’ broadcasting. Shaun Brown has been quite explicit about the rationale informing SBS’s current strategy:

I want SBS to connect with all Australians. I want more Australians becoming aware of the richness of our schedule so that more of them watch our programs. To that end our viewer-marketing functions are being overhauled and given greater resource. ‘What?’ say the purists of public broadcasting. ‘Are we talking about that ugly word, ratings?’ To which I answer, without apology, ‘absolutely’ (quoted in Simper 2003b).

This strategy has produced an increased focus on quality lifestyle programming, with examples such as Fashionista, The Iron Chef and the companion programs Food Lovers- and Wine Lovers Guide to Australia. In recent years, programming has also prominently targeted youth, through such programs as the popular South Park and John Safran’s Music Jamboree. SBS’s strategy of carrying popular programming that demonstrates a commitment to cultural pluralism is also exemplified by the US series of Queer as Folk. This is also evident in the series Storyline Australia, a series of commissioned documentaries on a wide range of subjects, but which are characterised by their representation of a broadly defined cultural pluralism rather than being focused specifically on ethnicity. As Brown has stated, ‘we’re not an ethnic television channel—we reflect multicultural society’ (quoted in Casellas 2004, p. 5).
In the current political climate this strategy is quite understandable and, in social terms, such moves cannot be viewed as unequivocally negative. It appears, however, that there are strong grounds to question whether it is prudent. Firstly, SBS is now at grave risk of losing its traditional base of political support. In December 2003 the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils threatened to withdraw its support from the broadcaster and focus instead on community television (Kremmer 2003). Similarly, Hass Dellall of the Australian Multicultural Foundation recently declared that SBS-TV had ‘lost its community base—this is now found much more on SBS radio’ (Harford 2004, p. 12). Although such criticisms are not entirely new, such developments should not be regarded as negligible, given that it is the support of ethnic groups that has, over the course of its history, ensured SBS’s survival. Secondly, by strongly articulating its goals to an expansion of its national audience, and increased ratings, SBS a) increasingly moves away from the specific multicultural rationale that has provided the justification for its independent existence, and b) becomes highly vulnerable should such ‘success’ fail to materialise (as it has in recent times). It is notable, in this light, that recent media commentary has not only treated a decline in overall ratings as a signifier of ‘crisis’. It has also suggested that SBS management has forgotten why the channel exists (Warneke 2004a, p. 7), and questioned whether SBS now offers a service distinct enough to justify its maintenance as an independent broadcaster. As Casellas has put it, ‘if the plan is to offer an alternative version of what is already on offer from other networks, let’s do away with SBS and give its $137 million to the other government broadcaster, the ABC, and be done with it’ (2004, p. 5).

It should be acknowledged that, to some extent, SBS’s predicament is not of its own making, but is a product of the retreat from (and a conservative circumscription of) multiculturalism that the Australian Right has achieved in recent years. However, what our analysis suggests is that, in this political environment, a move to conform with the multicultural policy position adopted at state level may now be much more risky than it has been previously. It is notable, in this respect, that Labor leader Mark Latham’s recent comments on multiculturalism appear to position it as a self-supportive aspect of a mainstream Australian culture rather than something that requires governmental support (Latham 2004). As some have argued (see Karvelas 2004) such statements appear to support a conservative, integrationist policy framework that would provide little basis of support for a multicultural broadcaster. This suggests not only that there is good reason to question the wisdom of SBS’s strategies in the current environment, but also that a qualified defence of SBS cannot rest there. Rather, such a defence must be presented alongside much more substantive arguments regarding the continued necessity to support multiculturalism as a social policy framework in the present, the form that framework might and should take, and the role public broadcasting (and SBS) might play within it.
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