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# Mobilising the Audience



edited by  
Mark Balnaves,  
Tom O'Regan and  
Jason Sternberg

CURRENT AND MEDIA POLICY

edited by  
Mark Balnaves,  
Tom O'Regan and  
Jason Sternberg

# Mobilising the Audience



*Mobilising the Audience* is the first comprehensive integration of industry and academic audience research in Australia. Introducing new directions in method and analysis, this contemporary probe into 'audience-making' illustrates the ways marketers, producers and governments mobilise an audience. Included are case studies of Generation X, computer gaming, the child audience, TV ratings, Aboriginal media, and Asian community television. Such a diverse range provides real life contexts for students, professionals and industry workers, introducing them to the critical links between research about media audiences and use of that research in making decisions about policy and content. Readers will be interested, too, in the significance of geo-demographics in public opinion polls, and the influence of audience in the shaping of our cultural institutions.

**CMP** AUSTRALIAN KEY CENTRE  
FOR CULTURAL AND  
MEDIA POLICY



by artist Garry Anderson (1994), courtesy of  
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# Introduction

*Mark Balnaves and Tom O'Regan*

This is a book about mobilising audiences — what James Ettema and D. Charles Whitney (1994, p. 5) usefully call “audiencemaking”. Its central concern is how diverse communicators — TV stations, museums, gaming companies and arts agencies — “mobilise their audiences” through their use of audience research. The focus is therefore upon how audiences are enlisted, projected and in some cases brought into being by the actions of particular corporate, government and other actors. This is audience research designed to develop audiences for particular purposes — to quit smoking, to promote the value of the arts, for online services, to arrest newspaper readership declines and so on.

The conception of audience worked with here is necessarily an “institutional” one, inasmuch as the audience research examined here is integral to various management modalities. With its fourteen case studies, the book is designed to demonstrate some of the scope, diverse purposes and varied character of this “institutional” audience research. It asks and answers several questions. How has audience research become implicated in and an integral part of larger processes of decision-making? How are audiences enlisted? How do they (and the audience research on them) become integral to the systems of evaluation and accountability of diverse actors? In short, how are audiences “governed”?

There is a growing need on the part of a variety of people inside and outside the media and arts industries to become “audience minded”. This is not just a management issue for upper levels of organisations; it is also an issue for various practitioners, from journalists to exhibition curators to theatre producers. They share a common need to better understand their audiences, readers, users, visitors, voters and clients. They face the common challenge of developing a working facility with the techniques, scope and limits of



audience research. They are increasingly required to develop strategy and implement changes based on audience evaluation. Bearing in mind this steadily growing institutional requirement, this book provides a series of case study snapshots to illuminate the available methods and techniques of research likely to be encountered and the ways this research can be used in decision-making processes. In documenting actual cases where these techniques and methodologies are being used, we aim to provide an informed understanding of the nature, character and opportunities available from utilising audience research.

This book fills three very large gaps. While there are numerous titles on audience research, these are usually either general discussions on the changing nature and character of the audience for a medium like broadcasting, or contributions to the development of audience theory and modelling. Such studies leave out of consideration the increasingly diverse (in terms of method and actors) practice of audience research covered in this book. Second, existing studies generally omit a significant shaper of audience research in the ways audience research is informed by and located within a larger cycle of decision-making — a central theme and innovation of this book. Third, there is a dearth of literature covering instances of empirical audience research. Our aim is to showcase the uses of audience research by various actors, identify the different kinds of audience research practice currently being undertaken, and draw out the implications of audience research processes of the wider strategic and policy processes within which such research is situated.

Within audience studies, “industry” or “structural” research is often derided as one-dimensional and instrumental, and is seen as not having the audience’s best interests in mind. On the evidence provided in this book, these research undertakings are inventive, multi-dimensional, challenging, publicly minded and often collaborative undertakings between researchers and their subjects.

The book is structured around audience research projects mostly commissioned by a variety of actors. The first chapter, Mark Balnaves and Tom O’Regan’s “Governing the Audience”, takes a social communication campaign — the Quit smoking campaign — to indicate broader cycles of governance within which audience research is

implicated. Here health ministers and ministries commissioned research as a part of the wider “government of health” within which “communication strategies” play an increasingly important part.

In Chapter 2, “The Ratings in Transition: The Politics and Technologies of Counting”, Balnaves and O’Regan consider how television stations, advertising agencies and their audiences negotiate the form and character of audience measurement technologies and methodologies to capture the broadcast day. By focusing on the ratings service provider, the authors emphasise the public “service” character of syndicated research and explore the nature of the consensus required among those who pay for and use the ratings by attending to controversies over different ratings systems.

In Chapter 3, “Small Worlds: Research on Children and the Media in Australia”, Patricia Gillard considers how research on the child audience has undergone constant change and innovation over an extended period. Her analysis shows how diverse educators, regulators and broadcasters have instigated — singly and collectively — research on the child audience, and how the public discussion of audiences, shifts in government policy and changes in the media industries have both enabled and constrained that research.

Jason Sternberg takes up the issue of how audiences are “created” and subsequently used as the basis for public commentary and market development in Chapter 4, “‘I didn’t get it, but I liked the name’: Generational Profiling through Generation X”. Sternberg focuses on how a set of contingent circumstances led novelists and ad agencies to develop and promote the idea of “Generation X” as a generational profile distinct from “Baby Boomers”. He charts the emergence and subsequent deployment of the term as a means of focusing public and marketing attention on the nature and character of supposed generational differences. “Generation X” is simultaneously an object of description and commentary and a project for market and product innovation.

Following this principally broadcast media focus, there are three chapters on arts and cultural audiences. In Chapter 5, “Arts Audiences: Becoming Audience-Minded”, Tom O’Regan situates the diverse and multi-faceted audience development program of the Australia Council as part of a broader international response to changes in

cultural policy and cultural consumption. Here the adoption of paradigms of mobilising the audience within the subsidised cultural sector has focused attention in two related but distinct areas: on the building of arts audiences; and on the building of broad public support for the arts. O'Regan sees the different Australia Council research projects reported in the chapter as part of broader processes in which the arts sector and arts audience are becoming increasingly regularised, normalised and thought of as differentiated along similar lines to the commercial cultural industries.

In Chapter 6, "Towards an Ecology of Cultural Attendance", Tom O'Regan and Stephen Cox are concerned with the emergence of ways of thinking about audiences as audiences for and consumers of several cultural, entertainment and leisure forms. In this case, knowing one's audience increasingly means knowing what else your audience does in its cultural and leisure pursuits. O'Regan and Cox posit an ecology of cultural attendance as a way of understanding the place of the different cultural venues for diverse populations within the broader ensemble of cultural forms.

In Chapter 7, "Museum Visitors as Audiences: Innovative Research for Online Museums", Patricia Gillard considers the ways in which the contemporary movement to build new museums and renew existing ones has generated a growing interest in the museum visitor and developing audience research services for museums. This new visitor research inescapably connects the new museology and new technology applied to the museum context (in the form of online and interactive components) as museums are now not only interested in the visitor in the museum space (usually a building) but also in the virtual visitor via the museum's internet site. Gillard identifies the central problem facing museums as one of understanding how "visitor experiences build on each other across the material and virtual sites".

John Banks takes up the theme of mobilising the audience in his study of the important relation between gamers and computer game companies in Chapter 8, "Gamers as Co-creators: The Virtual Audience — A Report from the Net-Face". Banks considers how gaming fans have become increasingly important in the very development and marketing of games software, to the extent that managing "community relations" is becoming an explicit feature of gaming company innovation and product development.

In Chapter 9, “Mobilising Readers: Newspapers, Copytasters and Readerships”, Kerry Green evaluates the evidence for the takeup of reader and audience research in Australian newsrooms. The problem of declining newspaper circulation has led newspapers to increasingly carry out reader research. But this research has typically not gone much beyond senior figures in the newsroom. Green suggests that Australian newsrooms would benefit greatly from restructuring the flow of this market research within newspapers and other news organisations to include practising journalists, to help them better understand their readers.

Mark Balnaves outlines audience research undertaken for its predictive value in Chapter 10, “Finding an Audience for a New Service”. Using the Telstra-commissioned “Gungahlin study”, examining the factors affecting the likely uptake of new media in the home, and the Productivity Commission’s 1999–2000 Broadcasting Inquiry which projected the likely failure of the government’s high-definition digital television model, Balnaves shows how audience research can be used to question and subsequently reformulate strategies for the development of new media services.

In Chapter 11, “‘Tell Me What You Want and I’ll Give You What You Need’: Perspectives on Indigenous Media Audience Research”, Michael Meadows starts from the premise that both government agencies and the audience research industry know little about Indigenous people and how and why they use media and communication technologies. Such audience research is identified as critical to improving interaction among government agencies, service providers and Indigenous people to facilitate strategic planning at national and international levels. Meadows indicates the need for a holistic research approach utilising culturally appropriate methodologies rather than mapping existing commercially driven approaches over Indigenous communities.

For Stuart Cunningham in Chapter 12, “Theorising the Diasporic Audience”, the central issue is the nature of the public spheres generated by the substantial use by ethnic minority communities in Australia of their own media — usually, but not exclusively, video. Building on previous studies which indicate how ethnic video functions for communities as a parallel TV service, Cunningham theorises the

communicative space these videos operate in as a number of “sphericules” which raises important cultural and communication policy issues.

In Chapter 13, “After *South Park*”, Chris Lawe Davies provides a detailed examination of the SBS-TV audience, showing how SBS conducts its audience research to simultaneously check on how it is meeting its charter obligations by appealing to a broad range of language and interest groups and to promote SBS as an advertising vehicle by building strong audience figures around a narrow band of program genres. In this context, SBS has been “patiently ‘turning around’ the expectations of the advertising industry to accept a high quality viewing environment, with smaller average audiences”.

The final chapter, John Penhallurick’s “Voter Communication”, outlines how political parties are increasingly understanding their voters in both geodemographic terms and through cognitive mapping techniques. Geodemographics is based on the insight that like-minded people generally live in proximity to each other — for example, in suburbs or parts of suburbs — so it is possible to describe several identifiable population clusters. Cognitive mapping techniques in political campaigning are based on models of human information processing which assume that it is extremely difficult to convert voters, but it is possible to “shift voters a small distance in the desired direction”. The focus, therefore, is on identifying the “persuadables” and tailoring communication strategies for that cohort.

### **Cover Image**

Garry Anderson’s painting on the cover of this book, “The Potato Eater”, is a compelling representation of the audience. The “Potato Eater” of the painting’s title is eating in front of the television and has one pea left on his plate. He appears to be giving the TV his undivided attention but he does not appear to be watching anything. He looks pasty and thin, he might be unhealthy, he has a sunken chest (is he undernourished?). His lack of a shirt might indicate informality, a working-class status, institutionalisation or impoverishment. Certainly the TV set is modest — it looks like a portable set. He is not one of TV’s beautiful people. Perhaps he is

one of its social problems. Or just maybe he is an ordinary viewer watching TV informally for relaxation. He is certainly looking intently at the screen and is involved with it in some way.

We are watching someone watching. We are measuring him, arraying him, inspecting him. To be an audience is to watch and be watched; and just as importantly to give consent to be watched. Just as this is a book about this audience relation, this painting is about the important audience relation so representative of our contemporary experience.

The painting also has a sense of it being a representation of a representation. This is enhanced by the presence of a vertical line on the TV screen — the sort you get either when the picture needs adjustment or when a TV camera is trained on a set. So, on closer inspection, we might not be able to see the image on screen because of the presence of another camera — a TV camera taking this picture of a viewer watching TV. That there might be others seeing this man seeing is a nice metaphor for the external window on to the audience provided by the various audience research represented in this book.

The painting's title — "Potato Eater" — and its use of colours connect this painting to Rembrandt's famous painting of a family group eating. The potato has become a pea. The group has become the single viewer. Viewing — being an audience — becomes our everyday condition, as apparently basic as other conditions like eating. Our surveillance, his intense engagement with the television and eating are intertwined.

The eponymous "Potato Eater" could be a representation of the passive "mass" audience. Like the TV zombies of lore, he does look intently at nothing. Perhaps the one pea on his plate suggests the impoverishment of the experience — promising much but delivering little. He could be an alienated individual cut off from the world and social intercourse and his viewing might not be helping him. Perhaps he is seeking and gaining comfort from a relation with TV, substituting technology for real experience.

Then again, he could equally well be the recalcitrant audience resisting TV's blandishments. He is watching under imperfect conditions. He is looking at a small (black and white?) screen. Perhaps he is one of those viewers more taken with the test pattern than with

the programs. He may be sitting and attending closely but we really are not sure just what he is attending to. Is his intensity itself a kind of wandering off? If this is the case, he's not the passive viewer but the feral viewer — highly individualistic with his own ways of dealing and connecting with television (a Mr Bean, perhaps?). Certainly his TV is on a padded surface — a chair or couch of some kind — rather than the more normal supports for a TV set. Watching black and white TV, he might be the “problem viewer” resistant to taking up new technologies in the home. Perhaps he is an unwanted viewer in that he is not likely to be a consumer advertisers are interested in.

This uncertainty about him mirrors the considerable uncertainty and provisionality about audiences, visitors and users attending all kinds of cultural consumption and service delivery. Our uncertainties about him usefully point to the more general problem experienced by those who interact with audiences of whatever kind — audiences are individualistic. From an institutional perspective, they are “feral”, protean, mobile (and immobile), resistant to the intended message, capable of doing too much, too little or not the right kind of thing with the service, the program, the art objects provided. Those who do audience research and those who rely on such audience research as the basis for making judgments, taking decisions and making plans routinely encounter such problems with contemporary viewers, listeners, visitors to museums and galleries, and gamers.

The painting is playing with us. Our eye is drawn along the subject's line of sight to the TV set only to find nothing on it to see — instead, our eye must travel straight back to our viewer. We don't see through him to the television — we see through the TV to him. The audience relation is the central feature of this image. Is that why this is such a confronting picture? The painting is the most controversial in the art collection at Murdoch University in Perth. Wherever it goes, the university receives complaints about it. No one wants it around. People don't like looking at him — they would rather look at the something he should be looking at but that's not provided. He gives rise to all sorts of unsettling questions. Why can't he sit further away from the TV set? Why can't we see what he's watching? And what are we doing complaining — why can't he do what he's doing? Isn't the privacy of one's own house, one's own TV chair, one's own TV

viewing one's own and not anyone else's business? The painting throws back to us the complexity of the audience relation — something to be represented, surveilled, but at the same time a private experience.

The painting is a metaphor for the focus of our book. Our various contributors are attending to this viewing, consuming, attending, visiting and playing relation. At its heart is the figure of the audience. Rather than taking this shadowy, recalcitrant figure as disrupting the carefully laid-out strategies of the demand management system of advertising agencies, program producers and technological entrepreneurs, our book begins with the assumption that this audience relation is a foundational starting point for any industry audience research. The process of mobilising audiences — the subject of the chapters in this book — does not have perfect communication as its starting point, but rather its imperfections. The various organisations reliant on audiences — whether they be gaming organisations, museums or children's TV producers — face the same problem of identifying, attracting and keeping audiences. They do research on audiences not to discipline them, but to figure out ways of gaining their trust and attention. They often fail — they don't get any audience; they get only some of the target audience; they get an audience they don't want; they lose their audience. They do research to try to minimise the risks of audience, visitor and gamer ungovernability. They undertake audience research as part of their systems of accountability — to shareholders, to advertisers, to investors, to the public; consequently, audience research is part and parcel of contemporary evaluation.



## CHAPTER 12

# Theorising the Diasporic Audience

*Stuart Cunningham*

### **Introduction**

The dynamics of “diasporic” video, television, cinema, music and Internet use — where peoples displaced from homelands by migration, refugee status, or business and economic imperative employ media to negotiate new cultural identities — offer challenges for how public media and public culture generally are thought about in our times. Drawing on research published in *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas* (Cunningham and Sinclair 2000), on dynamics which are industrial (the pathways by which these media travel to their multifarious destinations), textual and audience-related (types of diasporic style and practice where popular culture debates and moral panics are played out in culturally divergent circumstances amongst communities marked by internal difference and external “othering”), this chapter will interrogate further the nature of the public “sphericules” formed around diasporic media.

The research team that authored *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas* mapped the mediascapes of Asian diasporic communities against the background of the theoretical and policy territory of understanding media use in contemporary, culturally plural societies. In this chapter, I will expand upon the nature of the public spheres activated around diasporic media as a specific form of public communication, by engaging with public sphere debates and assessing the contribution that the research conducted for *Floating Lives* might make to those debates.

The public sphere, in its classic sense advanced in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989, 1962), is a space of open debate standing

over and against the state as a special subset of civil society in which the logic of “democratic equivalence” is cultivated. The concept has regularly been used in the fields of media, cultural and communications studies to theorise the media’s articulation between the state and civil society. Indeed, Nicholas Garnham (1995) claimed in the mid-1990s that the public sphere had replaced the concept of hegemony as the central motivating idea in media and cultural studies. This is certainly an overstatement, but it is equally certain that, almost 40 years since Jürgen Habermas first published his public sphere argument, and almost 30 years since it was first published in outline form in English (Habermas 1974), the debate over how progressive elements of civil societies are constructed and how media support, inhibit, or indeed are coterminous with, such self-determining public communication continues strongly.

The debate is marked out by those, on the one hand, for whom the contemporary Western public sphere has been tarnished or even fatally compromised by the encroachment of commercial media and communications (e.g. Schiller 1989), and by those for whom the media have become the main, if not the only, vehicle for whatever can be held to exist of the public sphere in such societies. Such “media-centric” theorists within these fields can hold that the media actually *envelop* the public sphere. For John Hartley (1999a, pp. 217–18):

The “mediasphere” is the whole universe of media ... in all languages in all countries. It therefore completely encloses and contains as a differentiated part of itself the (Habermasian) public sphere (or the many public spheres), and it is itself contained by the much larger semiosphere ... which is the whole universe of sense-making by whatever means, including speech. ... [It] is clear that television is a crucial site of the mediasphere and a crucial mediator between general cultural sense-making systems (the semiosphere) and specialist components of social sense-making like the public sphere. Hence the public sphere can be rethought not as a category binarily contrasted with its implied opposite, the private sphere, but as a “Russian doll” enclosed within a larger mediasphere, itself enclosed within the semiosphere. And within “the” public sphere, there may equally be found, Russian-doll style, further counter-cultural, oppositional or minoritarian public spheres.

Hartley's topography has the virtue of clarity, scope and heuristic utility, even while it remains provocatively media-centric. This is mostly due to Hartley's commitment to the strictly textual provenance of public communication, and to his interest in Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, more so than Habermas's modernist understanding of the public sphere standing outside of and even over and against its "mediatisation".

I will complicate this topography by suggesting that minoritarian public spheres of the type constituted by diasporic communities are rarely sub-sets of classic nationally bound public spheres, but are nonetheless vibrant, globalised but very specific spaces of self- and community-making and identity (see, for example, Husband 1998, p. 47). I agree with Hartley, however, in his iconoclastic insistence that the commercial realm must be factored into the debate more centrally and positively than it has been to date. There is typically no or very marginal involvement of the public sector courted for diasporic media, in part because the intellectual property and copyright status of much of it is dubious.

I will also stress another neglected aspect of the public sphere debate developed by Jim McGuigan (1998, p. 92): the "affective" as much as "effective" dimension of public communication, which allows for an adequate grasp of entertainment in a debate dominated by ratiocinative and informational activity. McGuigan (1998, p. 98) speaks of a "rather softer" conception of the public sphere than is found in the work of Habermas and others, and develops these ideas around the significance of affective popular politics expressed through media mobilisation of Western responses to poverty and aid campaigns. Underdeveloped, though — and tantalisingly so — is the role played by the entertainment content of the media in the formation and reproduction of public communication (McGuigan 1998, p. 98, quoting Garnham 1992, p. 274). This is the domain on which such strongly opposed writers as McGuigan and Hartley might begin to at least share an object of study.

Todd Gitlin (1998) has posed the question of whether we can continue to speak of the ideal of *the* public sphere/culture as an increasingly complex, polyethnic, communications-saturated series of societies develop around the world. Rather, what might be emerging

are numerous public "sphericules". Gitlin (1998, p. 173) asks: "Does it not look as though the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury?" Gitlin's answer is the deeply pessimistic one of seeing the future as the irretrievable loss of elements of a modernist public commonality.

The spatial metaphor of fragmentation, dissolution and of the centre not holding assumes there is a singular nation state to anchor it. Thinking of public sphericules as constituted beyond the singular nation state, as "global narrowcasting of polity and culture", assists in restoring these sphericules to a place of undeniable importance for contemporary, culturally plural societies and any media, cultural and communication studies claiming similar contemporaneity. This place is not necessarily counter-hegemonic, but it is certainly culturally plural and dynamically contending with Western forms for recognition.

There are now several claims for such public sphericules. One can speak of a feminist public sphere and international public sphericules constituted around environmental or human rights issues. They may take the form of "subaltern counterpublics", as Nancy Fraser (1992) calls them, or they may be termed taste cultures, such as those formed around gay style (which does not, of course, exclude them from acting as "counterpublics"). As John Hartley and Alan McKee put it in *The Indigenous Public Sphere* (2000, p. 3), these are possibly peculiar examples of public spheres, since they are not predicated on any nation that a public sphere normally expresses. Rather, they are the "civil societies" of nations without borders, without state institutions and without citizens.

These authors go on to suggest that such public spheres might stand as a model for developments in late modern culture generally, with do-it-yourself citizenship based on culture, identity and voluntary belonging rather than on rights derived from, and obligations to, a state. My present argument is in part a contribution to the elaboration of such a project. However, there are still undeniably relations of dominance, and "mainstreams" and "peripheries". The metaphor is not simply a series of sphericules, overlapping to a greater or lesser extent. While this latter explanatory model goes some distance towards explaining the complexity of overlapping taste cultures, identity

formations, social commitments and specialist understandings which constitute the horizon of many — if not most — citizen-consumers in post-industrial societies, there are broad consensus and agenda-setting capabilities which cannot be gainsaid in enthusiasm for embracing *tout court* a “capillary” model of power. The key, as Hartley and McKee themselves identify (2000, pp. 3, 7), is the degree of control over the meanings created about and within the sphericule, and by whom this control is exercised.

In contrast to Gitlin, then, I argue that ethno-specific global mediatised communities display in microcosm elements we would expect to find in “the” public sphere. Such activities may constitute valid and indeed dynamic counter examples to a discourse of decline and fragmentation, while taking full account of contemporary vectors of communication in a globalising, commercialising and pluralising world.

Ongoing public sphere debates in the field, then, continue to be structured around dualisms which are arguably less aids than inhibitors of analysis: dualisms like public–private, information–entertainment, cognition–affect or emotion, public versus commercial culture and — the “master” dualism — public sphere in the singular or plural. What follows makes no pretence at catching up these dualisms in a grand synthesis, but rather offers a contribution to a more positive account of the operations of media-based public communication — in this case, ethno-specific diasporic sphericules — which place a different slant on highly generalised debates about globalisation, commercialisation and the fate of public communication in these contexts.

### **The Ethno-specific Mediatised Sphericule**

First, they are “sphericules” — social fragments that do not have critical mass. Nevertheless, they share many of the characteristics of the classically conceived public sphere. They provide a central site for public communication within globally dispersed communities, stage communal difference and discord productively, and work to articulate insider ethno-specific identities — which are, by definition, “multi-national”, even global — to the wider “host” environments.

The audience research for *Floating Lives* was conducted in communities in Australia. While Australia is, in proportional terms, the world's second largest immigrant nation next to Israel, the relatively low numbers of any individual group (at present, over 150 ethnic groups speaking over 100 different languages) has meant that a critical mass of a few dominant non-English speaking background (NESB) groupings has not made the impact that Hispanic peoples, for example, have made in the United States. No one non-Anglo Celt ethnic group has reached "critical mass" in terms of being able to operate significantly as a self-contained community within the nation. For this reason, Australia offers a useful laboratory for testing notions of diasporic communities which need to be "de-essentialised": adapted to conditions where ethnicities and sub-ethnicities jostle in ways that would have been unlikely or impossible in their respective homeland settings or where long and sustained patterns of immigration have produced a critical mass of singular ethnicities.

Sinclair et al.'s (2000) study of the Chinese in *Floating Lives* posits that the sources, socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances of Chinese immigrant arrivals in Australia have been much more diverse than those of Chinese communities in the other great contemporary immigrant-receiving countries such as the United States, Canada, Britain and New Zealand, or earlier immigrant-receiving countries in Southeast Asia, South America, Europe and Africa. To make sense of "the" Chinese community is to break it down into a series of complex and often interrelated sub-groupings based on geographical origin — mainland (PRC); Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore); Taiwan; Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia); Hong Kong — together with overlapping language and dialect use.

Similarly, Cunningham and Nguyen's (2000) Vietnamese study demonstrates that there are significant differences amongst a quite small population along axes of generation, ethnicity, region of the home country, education and class, recency of arrival and conditions under which arrival took place. And, for the Fiji Indians in Manas Ray's (2000) work, if it was legislated racial discrimination that compelled them to leave Fiji, in Australia they find themselves "othered" by, and othering, the mainland Indian groupings who contest

the authenticity of Fiji Indian claims to rootedness in Indian popular culture.

The formats for diasporic popular media owe much to their inscription within such “narrowcast” cultural spaces and share many significant attributes: karaoke, with its performative, communal and de-aestheticised performative and communal space (Wong 1994); the Vietnamese variety music video and “Paris/Sydney/Toronto by Night” live show formats (Cunningham and Nguyen 2000); and the typical “modular” Bollywood film and accompanying live and playback music culture (Ray 2000).

Against the locus of examination of the “diasporic imagination” as one of aesthetically transgressive hybridity produced out of a presumed “ontological condition” occupied by the migrant subject, these are not necessarily aesthetically transgressive or politically progressive texts. Their politics cannot be read off their textual forms, but must be grasped in the use to which they are put within the communities. In *Floating Lives*, we see these uses as centring on popular culture debates — where communities contend around the politics, identity formations and tensions of hybrid popular forms emerging to serve the diasporas.

Much diasporic cultural expression is a struggle for survival, identity and assertion, and it can be a struggle which is as much enforced by the necessities of coming to terms with the dominant culture as it is freely assumed. The results may not be pretty. The instability of cultural maintenance and negotiation can lead, at one extreme, to being locked into a time warp with the fetishised homeland — as it once might have been but no longer is or can be — and, at the other, to assimilation to the dominant host culture and a loss of place within one’s originary culture. It can involve insistent reactionary politics. Due to the necessity to fund expensive forms of media for a narrowcast audience, it can lead to extreme over-commercialisation. Naficy (1993, p. 71) cites a situation in 1987 when Iranian television in Los Angeles was scheduling over 40 minutes of advertising per hour. And it can also lead to textual material of excoriating tragedy — such as the (fictional) self-immolation and (actual) atrocity scenarios played out in some, respectively, Iranian and Croatian video — as recounted by Naficy (1993) and Kolar-Panov (1997).

Second, there is explanatory payoff in pursuing the specificity of the ethno-specific public sphericule in comparison to other emergent public spheres. Like the classic Habermasian bourgeois public sphere of the café society of eighteenth and nineteenth century France and Britain, they are constituted as elements of civil society. However, our understanding of civil society is formulated out of its dualistic relationship to formal apparatuses of political and juridical power. Ethno-specific sphericules constitute themselves as potentially global civil societies which intersect with state apparatuses at various points (immigration law, multicultural public policy and, for the irredentist and the exilic, against the regimes which control homeland societies). It follows that ethno-specific public sphericules are not congruent with international taste cultures borne by a homogenising global media culture. For diasporic groupings *were* parts of states, nations and polities, and much of the diasporic polity is about the process of remembering, positioning and, by no means least, constructing business opportunities around these pre-diasporic states and/or nations.

It is out of these realities that the assumption grows that ethnic minoritarian publics contribute to the further fragmentation of the majoritarian public sphere, breaking the “social compact” subsuming nation and ethnicity in state which has been foundational for the modern nation state. Irredentist politics and “long-distance” nationalism, where the prime allegiance continues to be to an often defunct state or regime, are deemed non-progressive by most commentators. However, a focus on the popular culture of diasporas and its place in the construction of public sphericules complicates these assumptions, as it shows that a variety of voices contend for recognition and influence within the micro-polity, and great generational renewal can arise from the vibrancy of such popular culture.

Sophisticated cosmopolitanism and successful international business dealing sit alongside long-distance nationalism — the diasporic subject is typically a citizen of a Western country, is not stateless and is not seeking the recognition of a separate national status within their “new” country, like the prototypal instances in the European context such as the Basques, the Scots or the Welsh. These sphericules are definitively transnational — even global — in their constitution, but are not the



same as emerging transnational polities and cultures of global corporate culture, world-spanning NGOs and international bodies of governments.

Perhaps the most consistent relation, or non-relation, that diasporic media have with the various states into which they are introduced is around issues of piracy. This gives another layer to the notion of civil cultures standing over against the state. Indeed, given that significant amounts of the cultural production exist in a para-legal penumbra of copyright breach and piracy, there is a strong desire on the part of the entrepreneurs who disseminate such product to keep their distance from organs of the state. It is apparent that routinised piracy makes a “shadow system” of much diasporic media, as Kolar-Panov (1997, p. 31) dubs ethnic minority video circuits as they are perceived from outside, operating in parallel to the majoritarian system, with few industry linkages.

Third, they reconfigure essentialist notions of community and reflex anti-commercialism. These sphericules are communities in a sense which goes beyond the bland homogeneous arcadia that the term “community” usually connotes. On the one hand, the ethno-specific community assumes an importance greater by far than the term usually means in mainstream parlance, as the community *constitutes* the markets and audiences for the media services — there is almost no cross-over or recognition outside the specific community in most cases of diasporic cultural production. The “community” therefore becomes an economic calculus, not just a multicultural demographic instance. The community is to an important extent constituted *through* media (cf. Hartley 2000, p. 84), insofar as media performance is one of the main reasons to meet together, and there is very little else available as a mediator of information and entertainment. These media and their entrepreneurs and audiences work within a de-essentialised community and its differences as a condition of their practice and engagement.

Diasporic media are largely commercially driven media, but are not fully fledged markets. They are largely constituted in and through a commercial culture, but this is not the globalising, homogenising commercialism that has been posed by neo-Marxist political economists as threatening cultural pluralism, authenticity and agency at the local

level. With notable exceptions like global Chinese popular cultural forms such as cantopop and Hong Kong cinema, which have experienced significant cross-over into both dominant and other emerging contemporary cultural formations, and the Indian popular Bhangra music and Bollywood cinema which are still more singularly based in Indian homeland and diasporic audiences, this is small-business commercialism which deals with the practical specificities of cultural difference at the local level as an absolute precondition of business viability.

Fourth, the spaces for ethno-specific public communication are media-centric, and this affords new configurations of the information-entertainment dualism. Given the at times extreme marginalisation of many diasporic groupings in public space and their lack of representation within leaderships of influence and persuasion in the dominant forums of the host country, ethno-specific media become, by default, the main organs of communication outside certain circumscribed and defined social spaces, such as the Chinatowns, Koreatowns, the little Saigons, the churches and temples, or the local video, spice and herb parlours.

It is a media-centric space but, unlike the way that media-centricity can give rise to functionalist thinking (media are the cement that forms and gives identity to the community), it should be thought of as rather “staging” difference and dissension in ways that the community *itself* can manage. There are severe constraints on public political discourse amongst, for example, refugee-based communities like the Vietnamese. The “compulsive memorialisation” (Thomas 1999, p. 149) of the pre-communist past of Vietnam and the compulsory anti-communism of the leadership of the Vietnamese community is internalised as unsavoury to mainstream society. As part of the pressure to be the perfect citizen in the host society (Hage 1998, p. 10), there is considerable self-censorship in the public critical opinion expression. This filtering of political partisanship for external consumption is also turned back on itself in the community, with attempts by members of the community to have the rigorous anti-communist refugee stance softened (by the mid-1990s, only 30 per cent of the Vietnamese community in Australia were originally refugees) met with harsh rebuke. In this situation, Vietnamese

entertainment formats (discussed below) operate to create a space where political and cultural identities can be processed in a self-determining way, where voices other than the official, but constitutive of community sentiment, can speak.

Media-centricity also means, in this context, a constant blurring of the information–entertainment distinction, giving rise to a positive sense of a “tabloidised” sphericule wherein McGuigan’s (1998) *affective* as well as *effective* communication takes on another meaning. The information–entertainment distinction — usually maintained in the abundance of available media in dominant cultures — is blurred in the diasporic setting. As there is typically such a small diet of ethno-specific media available to these communities, they are mined deeply for social (including fashion, language use, and so on) cues, personal gossip and public information as well as the entertainment of singing along to the song or following the fictional narrative. Within this concentrated and contracted informational and libidinal economy, “contemporary popular media as guides to choice, or guides to the attitudes that inform choices” (Hartley 1999a, p. 143) take on a thoroughly continuous and central role in information and entertainment for creating a negotiated *habitus*.

### The Vietnamese

The Vietnamese are by far the largest refugee community in Australia. For most, “home” is a denigrated category while “the regime” continues in power, so media networks — especially music video — operate to connect the dispersed exilic Vietnamese communities. As Cunningham and Nguyen (2000) argue in *Floating Lives*, there are obviously other media in play (community newspapers, Hong Kong film and video product), but music video carries special significance and allows a focus on the affective dimension of public communication. Small business entrepreneurs produce low-budget music video, mostly out of southern California (but also Paris), which are taken up within the fan circuits of America, Australia, Canada, France and elsewhere. The internal cultural conflicts within the communities centre on the felt need to maintain pre-revolutionary Vietnamese heritage and traditions; to find a negotiated place within a more mainstreamed culture; or to engage in the formation of distinct hybrid identities around

the appropriation of dominant Western popular cultural forms. These three cultural positions or stances are dynamic and mutable, but the main debates are constructed around them, and are played out principally within variety music video formats.

Whilst by no means exhausting the media diet of the Vietnamese diaspora, live variety shows and music video are undeniably unique to it, as audio-visual media made specifically by and for the diaspora. These media forms bear many similarities to the commercial and variety-based cultural production of Iranian television in Los Angeles studied by Naficy (1993) in his benchmark *The Making of Exile Cultures*, not least because Vietnamese variety show and music video production is also centred on the Los Angeles conurbation. The Vietnamese grouped there are not as numerous or rich as Naficy's Iranians, so have not developed the extent of the business infrastructure to support the range and depth of media activity recounted by Naficy. The business infrastructure of Vietnamese audiovisual production is structured around a small number of small businesses operating on very low margins.

To be exilic means not — or at least not “officially” — being able to draw on the contemporary cultural production of the home country. Indeed, it means actively denying its existence in a dialectical process of mutual disauthentication (Carruthers 2001). The Vietnam government proposes that the Viet Kieu (the appellation for Vietnamese overseas which carries a pejorative connotation) are fatally Westernised. Ironically, the diasporic population makes a similar counter-charge against the regime, proposing that the homeland population has lost its moral integrity through the wholesale compulsory adoption of an alien Western ideology — Marxism-Leninism.

Together, the dispersed geography and the demography of a small series of communities frame the conditions for “global narrowcasting” — that is, ethnically specific cultural production for widely dispersed population fragments centripetally organised around their disavowed state of origin. This makes the media, and the media use, of the Vietnamese diaspora fundamentally different from that of the Indian or Chinese diasporas. The latter revolve around massive cinema and television production centres in the “home” countries that enjoy international cachet. By contrast, the fact that the media uses of the

Vietnamese diaspora are globally oriented but commercially marginal ensures that they flourish outside the purview of state and major commercial vectors of subvention and trade.

These conditions also determine the small business character of the production companies. These small enterprises run at low margins and are constantly undercut by piracy and copying of their video product. They have clustered around the only Vietnamese population base that offers critical mass and is geographically adjacent to the much larger entertainment–communications–information complex in Southern California. There is evidence of internal migration within the diaspora from the rest of the United States, Canada and France to Southern California to take advantage of the largest overseas Vietnamese population concentration and the world's major entertainment–communications–information complex.

Over the course of the 20 and more years since the fall of Saigon and the establishing of the diaspora through flight and migration, a substantial amount of music video material has been produced. Thuy Nga Productions, by far the largest and most successful company, organises major live shows in the United States and franchises appearance schedules for its high-profile performers at shows around the global diaspora. It has produced over 60 two- to three-hour videotapes since the early 1980s, as well as a constant flow of CDs, audio-cassettes and karaoke discs in addition to documentary specials and re-releases of classic Vietnamese movies. The other companies, between them, have also produced hundreds of hours of variety music video.

Virtually every overseas Vietnamese household views this music video material, most regularly attend the live variety performances on which the video material is based, and a significant proportion have developed comprehensive home libraries. The popularity of this material is exemplary, cutting across the several axes of difference in the community: ethnicity, age, gender, recentness of arrival, educational level, refugee or immigrant status, and home region. It is also widely available in pirated form in Vietnam itself, as the economic and cultural “thaw” that has proceeded since Doi Moi policies of greater openness has resulted in extensive penetration of the homeland by this most international of Vietnamese forms of expression.

As the only popular culture produced by and specifically for the Vietnamese diaspora, these texts attract an emotive investment within the overseas communities which is as deep as it is varied. The social text that surrounds — indeed engulfs — these productions is intense and multi-layered, and makes its address across differences of generation, gender, ethnicity, class and education levels, and recentness of arrival.

The key point linking attention to the textual dynamics of the music videos and media use within the communities is that each style cannot exist without the others, because of the marginal size of the audience base. From the point of view of *business* logic, each style cannot exist without the others. Thus, at the level both of the individual show/video and company outputs as a whole, the organisational structure of the shows and the videos reflects the heterogeneity required to maximise audience within a strictly narrowcast range. This is a programming philosophy congruent with “broadcasting” to a globally spread, narrowcast demographic: “The variety show form has been a mainstay of overseas Vietnamese anti-communist culture from the mid seventies onwards.” (Carruthers 2001)

In any given live show or video production, the musical styles might range from pre-colonial traditionalism to French colonial era high modernist classicism, to crooners adapting Vietnamese folk songs to the Sinatra era and to bilingual cover versions of *Grease* or Madonna. Stringing this concatenation of taste cultures together are comperes, typically well-known political and cultural figures in their own right, who perform a rhetorical unifying function: “Audience members are constantly recouped via the show’s diegesis, and the anchoring role of the comperes and their commentaries, into an overarching conception of shared overseas Vietnamese identity.” This is centred on the appeal to “core cultural values, common tradition, linguistic unity and an anti-communist homeland politics” (Carruthers 2001).

Within this overall political trajectory, however, there are major differences to be managed. The stances evidenced in the video and live material range on a continuum from “pure” heritage maintenance and ideological monitoring to mainstream cultural negotiation, through to assertive hybridity. Most performers and productions seek to situate

themselves within the mainstream of cultural negotiation between Vietnamese and Western traditions. However, at one end of the continuum, there are strong attempts both to keep the original folkloric music traditions alive and to keep the integrity of the originary anti-communist stance foundational to the diaspora, through very public criticism of any lapse from that stance. At the other end, Vietnamese-American youth culture is exploring the limits of hybrid identities through the radical intermixing of musical styles.

### The Fiji Indians

In a remarkably short time — essentially since the coups of the late 1980s which pushed thousands of Fiji Indians out of Fiji and into diasporas around the Pacific Rim in cities like Vancouver, Auckland and Sydney — the community in Sydney has fashioned a vibrant popular culture based on consumption and celebration of Hindi filmdom and its associated music, dance and fashion cultures. It is an especial irony that a people “extracted” from mainland Indian polity and culture a century or more ago — for whom the relationship with the world of Hindi film is a purely imaginary one — should embrace and appropriate such a culture with far greater strength than those enjoying a much more recent connection to the “homeland”.

Manas Ray’s (2000) analysis of the Fiji Indian public sphericule in *Floating Lives* is structured around a comparison with the expatriate Bengalis. The two groups are contrasted on a caste, class and cultural consumption basis, and Ray stresses that, given that there is no critical mass of sub-ethnicities within the Indian diaspora in Australia, cultural difference is definitional. The Bengalis are seen as locked into their history as bearers of the Indian project of modernity which they assumed centrally under the British Raj. The once unassailed centrality which the educated Hindu Bengali gentry, the *bradralok*, enjoyed in the political and civic institutions of India has been challenged in the decades since independence by the subaltern classes:

It is from this Bengal that the *bradralok* flees, either to relatively prosperous parts of India or, if possible, abroad — to the affluent West, taking with them the dream of a nation that they were once so passionate about and the cultural baggage which had expressed that dream”. (Ray 2000, p. 142)

The Bengali diaspora, argues Ray (2000, pp. 14–43), frames its cultural life around the high culture of the past, which has become a “fossilised” taste culture.

In startling contrast to the Fiji Indian community (which is by far the highest consumer of Hindi films) for the Indian Bengalis, Indian-sourced film and video is of little interest and is even the subject of active disparagement. The literature and other high cultural forms, which once had “organic links to the independence movement and to early post-independence hardship and hope”, have fossilised into a predictable and ageing taste culture remarkably similar whether the Bengali community is in Philadelphia, Boston, London, Düsseldorf, Dubai or Sydney (Ray 2000, p. 143). The issues of inter-generational deficit as the young turn to Western youth culture are evident.

The politics of popular culture are fought out across the communal fractions and across the generations. The inter-communal discord between mainland Indians and Fiji-Indians, which are neither new nor restricted only to Australia — where many mainland Indians continue to exhibit deeply entrenched casteist attitudes and Fiji-Indians often characterise mainland Indians with the same kind of negativity they were wont to use for ethnic Fijians — are often played out around media and film culture. There are elements of a fully blown popular culture debate being played out. At the time of a particularly vitriolic controversy in 1997, the editor of the mainland *Indian Post* argued that, while the Fiji-Indians are “good Hindus” and “they are the people who spend”, their “Westernised ways” and “excessive attachment to filmy culture” bring disrepute to the Indian community as a whole (Dello 1997). The resolution to these kinds of issues is often found in the commercial realities that Fiji Indians are the main consumers of the products and services advertised in mainland Indian shops!

Despite virtual slavery in the extraction period and uprootedness in the contemporary period, the affective dimension of the Fiji Indian public sphericule is deeply rooted in Hindu belief and folklore. The *Ramayana* thus was used to heal the wounds of indenture and provide a cultural and moral texture in the new settlement. A strong emotional identification to the *Ramayana* and other expressions of the Bhakti movement — a constrained cultural environment, continued



degradation at the hands of the racist white regime, a disdain for the culture of the ethnic Fijians, a less hard-pressed post-indenture life and, finally, a deep-rooted need for a dynamic, discursive site for the imaginative reconstruction of motherland — were all factors which, together, ensured the popularity of Hindi films once they started reaching the shores of Fiji. This was because Hindi film deployed the *Ramayan* extensively, providing the right pragmatics for the “continual mythification” of home (Ray 2000, p. 156).

As a result, second-generation Fiji-Indians in their twice-displaced settings of Sydney, Auckland or Vancouver have developed a cultural platform that, though not counter-hegemonic, is markedly different from their Western host cultures. In contrast, “the emphasis of the first generation Indian Bengali diaspora on aestheticised cultural forms of the past offers to second generation very little in terms of a home country popular youth culture with which they can identify” (Ray 2000, p. 145).