

## **‘It dampens the conversation’: no more excuses for Australian media’s lack of diversity**

*Journalists and advocates say the talent pool is there but the country’s reporting still does not reflect who we are*

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*Screengrab from Channel Nine’s Today Show: Brooke Boney speaks about why she supports changing the date of Australia Day. Photograph: Channel 9/Today Show*

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter protests in Australia, journalists have spoken up about a lack of racial and socioeconomic representation in the media industry.

Helen Vatsikopoulos, a Walkley-award winning former foreign correspondent, calls it “enlightened management”. Nakari Thorpe, a reporter for SBS and former political correspondent for NITV, says the burden needs to shift from the reporters to the editors, the producers, and the people doing the hiring and the firing.

Reporters, academics and advocates say the talent pool is there, the gaps are glaring, and the excuses are running out for why Australia’s reporting does not reflect Australia’s population.

“Non-Indigenous journalists need to speak up and make a change,” says Thorpe, who is a Gunnai, Gunditjmara and Gooreng Gooreng woman. “It is something the industry must own up to.

“So often the onus is put on us, as Indigenous or non-white journalists, to change it, or to know what to do. It is exhausting. The change needs to come up from the top.”

This month, the ABC's flagship political program, *Insiders*, featured its first ever Indigenous journalist, the ABC's Europe correspondent, Bridget Brennan.

It came after the show was heavily criticised for programming an all-white panel on 7 June, on a show primarily analysing the Black Lives Matter protests. The next week, host David Speers acknowledged that the program "needs to do better". "Normally I run the ruler over the government or opposition," he said. "Today it's a comment on our own program."

The next week, staff at the *Age* newspaper wrote an open letter to editors highlighting the fact it had only hired one Indigenous reporter in its 166-year history. "Sadly, our newsroom does not reflect the diverse and multicultural state in which we live and work," they wrote.

The newspaper had also recently apologised for a front-page story claiming Indigenous activists were planning to spit on police, attributed to only one unnamed source. At that weekend's eventual protest, no people were arrested or charged with spitting.

While covering protests in the US, a reporter from Channel Nine's *Today* show was criticised for telling American protesters that "people in Australia don't have the understanding of the history of police killings". And last week, two arts critics resigned from the *Sydney Morning Herald* after the paper's editors chose five different critics who were all white for the newly created roles of "emerging arts critics".

Jack Callil and Bec Kavanagh gave up their roles, saying, "This selection fails to reflect Australia's diverse literary community ... we are complicit in the problem."

The positions were funded by the Copyright Agency and the Judith Neilson Institute, but both organisations told *Guardian Australia* they were not involved in the selection.

*Guardian Australia* understands that, until 14 June, *Insiders* had not featured an Indigenous journalist in its history, or a journalist from a non-European background.

On the 14 June episode, Brennan made the point that diverse voices should be on the show every week.

Thorpe said it was a huge oversight that the show had never featured an Indigenous journalist before.

"First Nations media that have been there for decades, talking about these issues for a long time," she said. "It is not a trend – it is something that goes decades and decades back.

"There have been a raft of Indigenous political journalists who were before me, going back to at least the mid-2000s. There is a vast array of Indigenous talent. And we shouldn't just be pigeonholed either. We can talk about other affairs. We are diverse in ourselves."

And diversity is not an end in itself, it is a prerequisite of quality journalism. A lack of representation dampens the conversation, Thorpe said. "It doesn't give it that depth it needs."

“It is one thing to have someone reading the news of varying shades of colour,” says Vatsikopoulos, who works as a media academic at the University of Technology Sydney. “It is about editorial content.”

“On commercial stations we have Tracey Vo, Brooke Boney, who are amazing. Last year when Brooke was on air saying ‘Why I’m not celebrating Australia Day’, there would have been households across Australia choking on their cornflakes. That is the outcome of having diverse, not just faces, but editorial content.”

This week, *Insiders* hosted Triple J Hack’s political correspondent, and a former Guardian Australia reporter, Shalailah Medhora, on the show.

Thorpe said that *Insiders*’ track record was a function of the Canberra press gallery itself. The show does not hire its own correspondents but features senior reporters from other outlets: the ABC, SBS, commercial TV and print and radio.

Vatsikopoulos says the media still doesn’t accurately reflect Australia’s own population, even in the 38 years since she was a cadet.

“I started at the ABC in 1982. I was very much the little Greek girl from Port Adelaide who arrived at a very middle class ABC, you know, I barracked for the wrong football team.

“I thought, if I don’t make too much noise, and they won’t notice I slipped in here. Back then it was easy to say the children of migrants don’t have the skills. That is not the case today, there are no excuses. But still the average journalist doesn’t look like you, or like me.”

She also says the media needs to do better on reflecting socioeconomic diversity.

“Journalism is becoming a middle class profession, where all the views that reflect it are entirely middle class,” Vatsikopoulos said. “This is a huge problem.”

“Last year we had tutorials during the election campaign. I asked students to get me a snapshot from your electorate. I remember one tutorial, all the stories were on Warringah [on Sydney’s northern beaches]. Warringah has the highest concentration of bankers living in Australia.”

“We had many, many other tutorials with stories from other electorates,” Vatsikopoulos says. “But are they going to get the jobs? That is the question.

Antoinette Lattouf, a senior journalist at Channel 10 and director of Media Diversity Australia, agrees with Vatsikopoulos, saying economic pressures combine to lock out people from non-white backgrounds.

“Too often internships and work experience pathways are informal so it’s who you know and who can afford to work for nothing to get a foot in,” she says. “This excludes people from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as minorities who don’t have ‘people on the inside’, so to speak.”

Both say that financial problems – with cuts announced at the ABC and News Corp, and the closure of outlets such as 10Daily and BuzzFeed News Australia – will unfortunately make the media less diverse.

One of the most tragic things is the attack on public broadcasting and the ABC.

“And now, when they want to implement these [diversity] changes, they don’t have the money.”

Lattouf agrees. “Given the economic and political climate, the news business model is struggling to be sustainable. And it’s difficult for news leaders to prioritise and put money towards diversity and inclusion policies.”

But she says new audiences could be the solution to the problem too.

“We believe our increasingly culturally diverse population will connect and engage more with content that speaks to them rather than just about them.

“Only a couple of the major media players actually have a policy or plan in place to address this gaping cultural hole in newsrooms. And it doesn’t have to be quotas or targets, it can be a mentorship or scholarship program.”

Thorpe says while it’s crucial to talk about the importance of diversity, too often the questions go to the underrepresented journalists themselves, not the editors and decision-makers.

“When diversity isn’t represented, it’s more than just an oversight. At some level there has been a decision to exclude certain voices.

“The industry usually defaults to white. White is seen as the norm. It is the standard voice. And that’s not just in Australia, it goes beyond that. Whiteness is not even seen as a race sometimes.

“When you include another voice it is diverse. That is an idea from a white perspective. From our perspective we are just ourselves.”