

1-1-2000

Home Invasion: television, identity and belonging in Sydney's western suburbs

Tanja Dreher
University of Wollongong, tanjad@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dreher, Tanja, Home Invasion: television, identity and belonging in Sydney's western suburbs 2000, 131-145.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/502>

HOME INVASION: TELEVISION, IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN SYDNEY'S WESTERN SUBURBS

ABSTRACT

Television occupies a central place in most Australian homes, and 'TV talk' is an important process in negotiations of individual and group identities (Gillespie, 1995). TV is the focus of many private, family interactions. As a 'window on the world', television is also a primary source of information about public life. Thus TV is deeply implicated both in interactions within the home, and in our understandings of the wider 'home' of the nation. This paper draws on discussions with diverse community groups in and around Cabramatta to explore the crucial role of TV in negotiations of 'home' and 'belonging' in Australia's most culturally diverse local government area.

People who live and work in Cabramatta feel passionately about news reporting of the area. Most feel frustrated at recurring images of crime and drugs in Cabramatta on nightly television news bulletins:

Well we never get to hear about good stuff.

It would be a change if they talk about better things in Cabramatta that's happening rather than all these gangs and drugs.

News and current affairs reporting of heroin dealing and associated crime has prompted community meetings, alternative media production projects and training of media liaison staff within many community organisations.¹ Television coverage is also the topic of countless casual conversations. In talk about television, Cabramatta residents challenge and subvert popular and stereotypical representations of their suburb and its communities. TV talk also allows people to explain and explore questions of culture, identity, community and belonging.

This paper examines the complex role of television and mainstream media in Cabramatta residents' experiences of 'home' and 'belonging'. In conversations about media, participants in this research shared experiences of many different 'homes', including family, neighbourhood, communities and homelands. Television shapes interactions within each of these homes, contributing to highly ambivalent and precarious feelings of belonging for many people in Sydney's western suburbs. Television provides cultural resources for the daily micro-processes of negotiating, constructing and contesting identity and belonging. In talk about television, people who live and work in the Cabramatta area negotiate between cultures and develop complex and flexible self-understandings. However, people that I spoke to also discussed the ways in which TV both represents and shapes a sense of national identity or home in which participants feel marginalised or do not recognise themselves

at all. Thus television provides cultural resources for negotiating identity and community, but also makes visible the limits of belonging in the wider home of the nation.

In a typical discussion, a women's conversation group contested narrow definitions of Islam and the role of stereotypes in shaping perceptions and interactions:

You have to meet people and talk to people and not believe what they say on television. Never judge the person by what they say in the papers, because they always say the bad things.

That's true.

I've seen things that I don't know about my Muslim people, you know what I mean? They said things I don't know about, it's not me.

Yeah.

There was one lady who said to me: 'I get very bad ideas the way you dress. But when I met you, I think completely different about your whole people, the way you dress.' It's always the media what's giving people the bad ideas. Sometimes, not all the time. When she met us, and she knew exactly what we're like, she said: 'I'm really, really surprised at what I heard in the news and what I read in the papers, about your culture and your people.'

Residents of Sydney's south-western suburbs are highly critical and creative consumers of television images. Members of this women's group used many examples of media representations to negotiate individual and group identities and to assert empowering definitions of themselves, their families and communities. However, people in and around Cabramatta also share stories of social interactions informed by mainstream media representations, such as the woman described above who associated the wearing of the *hijab* with negative stereotypes of oppressed or backward Muslim women. In shaping the perceptions of the wider community, in its language and routine modes of representation, mainstream television contributes to feelings of marginalisation and insecurity within the home of the nation and public life amongst diverse groups in Cabramatta.

LISTENING TO DIFFERENT STORIES

This paper is the result of audience research carried out in and around the western Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, during which I met with five existing community groups² for informal discussions about Cabramatta and the media. Cabramatta is a suburb with a particularly high media profile, and is a household name in Sydney. It lies within one of the most culturally diverse local government areas in Australia (Fairfield City Council, 1996: 17). Mainstream media routinely present images of Cabramatta to a city-wide, and often a nation-wide, audience. People I spoke to are acutely aware of Cabramatta's high media profile: 'You see it on the news

every day, it's got a very bad name from what you see on TV.' There has been a long history of media interest in the suburb, with stories on 'Asian' immigration and teenage gangs, heroin dealing, refugees, multiculturalism, exotic cuisines and illegal immigrants often focusing on Cabramatta. During the 'heroin debate' in mid-1997, and again during the New South Wales Drug Summit in May 1999, policy-makers and interested parties debated the merits of drug law reform via the forum of mass media, and news outlets and the sources they reported often used Cabramatta as the example of, and the vision for, the 'heroin issue'. In 1997, two national television current affairs programs, the ABC's *Four Corners* and the Seven Network's *Witness*, both produced one-hour specials which named Cabramatta as 'Australia's heroin capital' and in early 1999 viewers again saw extensive footage of Cabramatta train station, of overdoses, arrests and drug deals in the area.

Categories which recur in media representations of Cabramatta are youth, gangs, refugees, the Vietnamese as a tight-lipped community, corruption, murder, immigration, heroin and crime. In much of the extensive literature discussing these categories, there is broad agreement that all are routinely reported in narrow, negative terms, as outside and threatening to 'mainstream' society.³ On television, Cabramatta appears as a site of many of Sydney's feared, exotic 'others'. Most Sydneysiders, and many Australians, will know or have perceptions of Cabramatta, whether or not they have any first-hand experience of the area.

People from the inner city or the north or those areas, you tell them you come from the Cabramatta area, they say, 'ah, Vietnamatta', 'ah, how can you live out there?' you know.

People do put you down, when you live out here.

To research the consequences of this coverage, I specifically chose not to use a journalist's methodology. The categories of race, class, age, location and culture which intersect in news reporting of Cabramatta are not only represented negatively, they are denied any legitimate speaking position in mainstream media. Criminals, youth, refugees, 'westies' generally appear in news reporting only in response to issues or agendas determined by others. For this research, my aim was to develop different types of interactions, to aim for cooperation and self-representation. I felt it was vital that my research did not simply repeat the assumptions and categories of mainstream media and in particular it was very important that I not restrict my discussions merely to the Vietnamese community, and that the topics of conversation not be confined to crime, drugs and gangs. The aim was to listen to participants' interests rather than assuming what the story was. Dianne Powell reminds us that Sydney's western suburbs are always spoken *for* (1993). I have aimed to create spaces in which participants' voices are heard, where they determine the language, issues and ideas for discussion. During group discussions there was little direction on my part, and an emphasis on listening rather than interrogation. As far as possible, topics arose naturally and were explained by participants rather than

myself. I have taken seriously David Morley's reminder that the researcher should leave her/himself open to being surprised, to having their theories and assumptions proved wrong (Morley, 1992: 181).

The research did not focus on textual analysis of media representations of Cabramatta, nor did it examine the news production process behind those representations. Rather, I was interested to understand the implications of news reporting of Cabramatta in residents' daily lives — what does it mean to live in a suburb which is routinely associated with crime and drugs? While the research is not an in-depth ethnography, it was informed by an interest in the micro-processes of audience activity and the place of media in everyday life. Above all, I am interested to understand the 'embeddedness' (Ang, 1996) of audience activity — the ways in which individual negotiations of media representations are embedded in a context of wider social interactions and inequalities. The reception and discussion of media is a daily activity in which social life is understood and negotiated, and in which identities are constructed (Ang, 1996; Thompson, 1990; Gillespie, 1995). My analysis arises from a deep scepticism at 'optimistic' views of active audiences which stress resistance, choice and subversion in the appropriation of media texts. Rather than characterising Cabramatta residents as either passive dupes or as sovereign consumers, I am interested to explore the limits as well as the variety of audience activity. Thus I argue that people in and around Cabramatta are active, creative and highly critical in their negotiation of television representations, but this activity takes place in a social context in which media images may contribute to prejudice, disadvantage and discrimination. This research aims to privilege the perspectives and experiences of people who are often represented, but usually under conditions over which they have very little control.

Through community consultations, I arranged and conducted a series of lengthy group discussions with existing community groups. These discussions were informal and largely unstructured, and most participants talked amongst themselves at least as much as to me directly, giving some insight into the daily conversations prompted by television. Transcripts and interpretations of the conversations were also workshopped at follow-up meetings, where the titles and descriptions of the groups prompted passionate discussion of the complexities of identity and representation in any community group. This open, organic approach enabled many issues to be raised and discussed which I would never have predicted in a closely structured interview.

EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF TELEVISION AND HOME

For most people that I spoke to, television formed an important part of daily life. Many participants described watching news and current affairs programming every day:

Current affairs, I love this one. I never miss any news. Every day. Any channel they put the news I change it, so you know everything about the government.

All men, all our men — I'm talking about these ladies here — they all sit and watch the news, they change it from one channel to the other so they don't miss any channels.

The central role of television was reflected in several comments: here participants describe the importance of news and current affairs programming, and the common routine of switching from one channel to the next to view a succession of such programs. Television is important even for those people who claim not to watch TV; some participants said they didn't have time or really weren't interested in TV, yet these same participants were aware and often highly critical of prominent news and current affairs reports. Participants with little English language competence often watch mainstream news programs — as described here, news and current affairs is where viewers find out 'all about the government'.

For many people, television news and current affairs form their most regular participation in politics apart from triennial elections — it is where the affairs of the nation are made visible and policy is debated. Television contributes to experiences of several different 'homes': the domestic home or family and the public home of the nation whose contours are shaped by political debate. Participants' TV talk included discussions of daily family interactions, relations between generations, local politics and crime, aspects of community, culture and religion and figures and events in state and federal politics. Where Benedict Anderson posited the press as the central technology in developing 'imagined communities', that role is increasingly performed by television (Thompson, 1995; Papastergiadis, 1998). Television is both central to many mundane, domestic interactions within the private home and a vital site where the wider 'home' of the nation is narrated and debated.

This paper is concerned primarily with 'home' as a symbolic space (Papastergiadis, 1998; Hage, 1996; Chambers, 1998), rather than as a physical location. Home is a space of security, stability, integrity, of community and familiarity. Such feelings of belonging and integration are constructed and negotiated; feelings of home and belonging are often more aspired to than realised. In this symbolic project, questions of representation, language and silence may have profound consequences for experiences of home.

NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY BELONGING: CABRAMATTA TV TALK

Television is also central to processes of group and individual identity formation in mass-mediated societies (Thompson, 1995; Gillespie, 1995). In a study of young Punjabi Londoners, Marie Gillespie found that the use of television and video is central to young people's negotiations between cultures, and talk about television plays an important role in transformations of cultural identity and aspirations to cultural change. Gillespie uses the term 'TV talk' as a shorthand way of referring to these negotiations. TV talk is thus central to feelings of belonging or of being 'at home': it is implicated both in negotiations and understandings of self and community, and also in our understandings of the 'home' of the nation or homeland.

TV talk is not only a form of social interaction integral to the peer group's sense of common identity. It furnishes and refines shared cultural resources which young people collectively harness, for purposes of comparison and critique, as they negotiate relations within the peer group, with parents and other elders, and with the 'significant others' of the wider world, in Britain, in the Punjabi diaspora and beyond. TV talk is a major forum for debate over 'old' and 'new' identities, and for the formulation of cosmopolitan aspirations. (Gillespie, 1995: 24)

'TV talk' is 'talk about TV, occasioned by TV or informed by the experience of it. TV talk is a crucial forum for experimentation with identities.' (Gillespie, 1995: 25) Television is a source of much of our daily gossip and forms the basis of many mundane social interactions. Thus talk about television is not only an expression of individual opinions, it is also a part of ongoing processes of understanding oneself and others. Talk prompted by television also turns easily to discussions, explanations and explorations of politics, culture and values.

The concept of 'TV talk' points to the role of television as a central cultural resource in the construction of identity and understandings of self, community and nation. In this research, residents of Sydney's south-west used television images as a shared reference point in similar processes of comparison, contradiction and critique. Participants in every group challenged sensationalism in television coverage of Cabramatta and its communities.

I think in a lot of cases the media plays things up, it over-reacts.

They over-react, they over-react.

I think so.

They carry on. They interview one person and they say, 'Oh, I've got to keep my doors locked' and 'I'm too scared to go out in the backyard'. Garbage! Then they play that one up and they say everyone is too scared, and that's not true.

These comments among members of the craft group led to discussion of the positive aspects of living, working and shopping in Cabramatta, emphasising friendly neighbours and an ethic of hard work. Following Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a positioning, as an open-ended process (1990), TV talk can be understood as an everyday micro-process of constructing or contesting both group and individual identities.

For many participants in this research, television provided resources for powerful and assertive definitions or constructions of community and identity. Participants' 'TV talk' takes many different forms. Sometimes widely circulated media images are used as examples or reference points; others may be used to explain concepts or opinions to an outsider such as myself; often common stereotypes are contested and alternative redefinitions are asserted.

Like in Cabramatta, not all people are drug dealers there, not all are bad, some of them are ...

There is good people over there.

There's good and bad people every suburb, every religion.

Members of every group that I spoke to described the diversity and complexity of Cabramatta and its many communities, in contrast to the narrow range of representations which circulate in mainstream media.

For many people I spoke to, representations of religion, culture and community provoked at least as much discussion as reporting of crime and violence in Cabramatta. In some instances, these discussions involved complex appropriations and renegotiations of television texts. One woman used a current affairs story as a shared example for an exploration of aspects of religion, culture and identity:

Media can never separate the culture from religion. Look at the *Witness* program in Pakistan. Culture and religion are not the same thing. They burn the women, they cut off the hands, that's the culture, that's not my religion. Pakistan, India, Fiji, that's the culture, that's not the Arabic culture. My religion doesn't tell me to do that — bride burning or dowry deaths — my religion tells me a woman can marry the man she loves. That's not my religion. People put the culture and the religion together, but not all Muslims are the same.

This comment refers to a report by Jana Wendt for the *Witness* current affairs program. The story focused on domestic violence in Pakistan, and featured an interview with a woman who had been horribly scarred in an attack in which her husband doused her with acid. For people I spoke to, the issue was the program's confusion of Pakistani culture with the religion of Islam. Here a high-profile television text provided the basis for a complex negotiation and explanation of cultural identity, of gender and community. The speaker asserted the complexity of identity, family and culture as opposed to the television report's conflation of Islam and the culture and traditions she sees as specific to Pakistan. Participants emphasised women's freedom and choice as opposed to simple assumptions of intolerance and oppression in all Islamic cultures. There was also an intense frustration at the consequences of constant misrepresentations in a multicultural society where television is the forum of many of our experiences of other cultures and religions.

People who live and work in the Cabramatta area are active in responding to media coverage of their suburb and its communities. Many community workers have taken part in television debates and formed a media monitoring group. Various organisations have been involved in video production, and projects such as the 'Wall of Silence' photo exhibition (Maher and Ho, 1998). Plans are underway to set up a public journalism newsroom in Fairfield to increase the diversity and distribution of alternative stories about Fairfield–Cabramatta. These projects stress

self-representation and a collaborative production process. The Fairfield Community Arts Network develops performances and public art projects which challenge stereotypes about refugees, young people and diversity — highlighting cross-cultural interactions and the complexities of life in Sydney's south-west. There is no shortage of creative responses to Cabramatta's negative and narrow media profile. Most people I have spoken to do, however, remain frustrated at the difficulty of effecting lasting change in mainstream news representations of the area.

In every group that I spoke to there was some challenge to television coverage of the Cabramatta area, with opposing definitions asserted. Some participants stressed the level of multicultural interaction in Sydney's south-west; others mentioned standards of service and comfort, a strong sense of community, hard work and self-reliance; most complained of the lack of 'good news' stories about the area. These discussions developed much more subtle and varied understandings of Cabramatta and its communities than those represented in mainstream television. I will now explore some of the more complex and ambiguous negotiations and understandings of home and belonging occasioned by experiences of TV.

INSECURE BELONGINGS: TV TALK AND THE NATIONAL 'HOME'

In an analysis of migrant home-building, Ghassan Hage identifies security, familiarity, community and a sense of possibility as key features of feeling 'at home' (1997: 102). A feeling of security requires the ability to remove or exclude threats, yet for several people that I spoke to, television news of crime and violence in and around Cabramatta was a source of great fear. In several discussion groups, talk about petty crime, about fears for personal safety and practical advice on how to avoid danger occupied a significant proportion of conversation. A more complex issue in regards to 'threatening otherness' (Hage, 1997) arose in a group which complained about scenes of kissing in *Neighbours*. Here participants objected to the intrusion, through television, of unacceptable cultural norms and behaviours into the private family home.

Before my children was in school, *Neighbours* very good, but now no more, now it's very bad for the children under 15 years. Eating, sex, everything they put on *Neighbours* and the other one, *Home and Away*.

For the children under 15 they are not allowed to see those things, kissing and sex and whatever, and that's why they feel like sometimes their children are not allowed to watch such things, you know?

At least if there's going to be such movies at half past 10 o'clock, the kids when they go to sleep you know? Not at five or six o'clock when the children like to open the TV and watch the television.

So here what are marketed as quintessentially homely, Australian and family-oriented television products, the soap operas *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, are experienced as a threat within the home over which the speakers have very

little control — a very different type of ‘home invasion’ to that routinely reported in the evening news. Here the uninterrupted and undifferentiated ‘flow’ of television described by Raymond Williams (1990) is experienced as threatening — in later conversations, participants complained that it is impossible to adequately guard against scenes of kissing because ‘it might be in the ads’. Intimate behaviour might appear on television in a range of unpredictable contexts such as movie previews or advertisements within familiar programming. If television is the ‘glue’ that binds the nation, if it is one of the mundane sites in which the ‘home’ or ‘family’ of the nation is narrated and debated, then scenes of kissing on *Neighbours* can unsettle feelings of security and belonging for those who do not see aspects of their traditions or cultures represented.

In Hage’s analysis of the feelings of being ‘at home’, community is crucial. Here community requires ‘a feeling of shared symbolic forms, shared morality, shared values and most importantly perhaps, shared language’ (1997: 103). While the discussion of kissing on *Neighbours* was somewhat specific in its focus on values and morality, the vast majority of participants talked about issues of language. At first I was surprised to hear that most participants feel it is important to watch mainstream English-language news programs, even if they do not understand all that is being said. Many people reported ‘just watching the pictures’, or schoolchildren translating and explaining the bulletins for parents or grandparents. Although participants valued many news sources in languages other than English very highly, most felt that it was still vital to access news services addressed to a broader, Sydney-wide or national audience. In fact, for some participants the use of English-language news served as a marker of distinction, with those reliant on other sources described as ‘living in another world’ or ‘wanting to live in another country’. My intention here is not at all to devalue community media; it is simply to highlight that many people in and around Cabramatta feel that English-language television is a crucial site for understanding political debates and national affairs, to find out ‘what is going on in the world’. The medium of television offers a visible representation of the home of the nation, but usually addresses viewers in a language which not all participants equally share.

Bammer (1992) and Hage (1996, 1997) point out the similarities between the family home and the national home: both are hierarchical and allow for different modes of belonging or feeling ‘at home’. For Hage, in the patriarchal family, all members may be at home, but not all enjoy the authority over the home of the father — while all family members may be accorded a place within the home, not all may contribute equally to its rules, values and norms. Similarly in the nation, migrants may ‘belong’ only ‘by submitting to the topography of the dominant and by knowing [their] place in it’ (1997: 48). As a medium for describing ourselves to ourselves, television is a site where this ‘topography of the dominant’ — the contours and boundaries of the national home — is made visible. Individual projects of constructing identity and a sense of home are embedded in social structures which shape and limit the possibilities of belonging.

On mainstream television, English language is a ubiquitous aspect of this national 'topography'. One participant described the frustration of those who lack English language competence to contribute confidently to negotiations of the shape and norms of that home:

We're second-class citizens, because we're in the West, we are unemployed, there are immigrants, there are a lot of people that don't have any hope. The fact that we don't speak English well, a few doors are closed to you because you don't speak the language, and that has a huge impact on your self-esteem. Whatever you do, then your self-esteem is low, because you can't express yourself. You can't do what you want to do, and it's really hard. Then we two-times are second-class citizens, because we don't even have the language.

While mainstream television provides an important resource for understanding and negotiating public debate and popular culture, it also reproduces a topography which privileges English.

MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

In talking about television, participants often described interactions informed by television or media generally. One participant talked about the movie *Not Without My Daughter*, a Hollywood film set in Iran, saying: 'that's not my Iran, and ever since that movie my neighbour, she doesn't speak to me, she thinks that's me.' This participant is clearly able to contest the film's representation of her 'home' in Iran, but in the 'home' of her neighbourhood the film serves to ascribe her an identity which is not welcome. A young man described experiences at a job interview where questions focused on his country of birth and his place of residence:

It's really, like when you apply for the job it's trouble if you come from Cabramatta ... 'cause I was applying for a job in the city once, he was just like a guy, and he asked me 'where do I come from?' I said, 'Vietnam' and he asked me, 'where do I live?' I said, 'Bonnyrigg', because I was actually living there, and he asked me, 'is that close to Cabramatta?' and I said, 'yes' and he said, 'sorry, we can't hire you', but on the actual position ... they said they will train, so there's no other reason that they can't employ me. Because of living near Cabramatta, not actually in Cabramatta, and 'cause I'm an Asian ... that's the excuse.

Through television, many people outside Cabramatta may 'know' the suburb, they may form opinions of its inhabitants and communities. In interactions with other Sydneysiders, residents of Sydney's south-west often feel stigmatised, or 'looked down upon'. In such interactions, feelings of security, community, familiarity or belonging may be precarious, or even completely absent. For young jobseekers frustrated at being associated with images of gangs and drugs, television news may limit their sense of possibility, their homely desires for opportunities or advancement, for 'a better life'. In talking about television, many participants described themselves

as 'voiceless', as 'neglected' and as 'second-class citizens' whose interests and concerns were largely ignored. While television is a site for narrating the nation, for making visible the 'home', its norms and those within it, many people that I spoke to either do not recognise themselves on television at all, or do so only in representations which they contest and subvert. Papastergiadis argues that, crucially, home is 'the space where you will be recognised by others' (1998: 3), yet many people that I spoke to experience television as contributing to misrecognition or denial. Aspects of language, culture, tradition or identity which are vital to participants' assertive definitions of home as family or community are largely absent or marginal in everyday representations of home as nation which circulate in mainstream television.

I would like to stress that this discussion does not imply a crude cause-and-effect view of media influence. I do want to suggest that media representations may contribute to perceptions of people and places of which we have little other experience. Both the National Inquiry into Racist Violence (HREOC, 1991) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) found that 'the media play a key role in shaping attitudes *where direct contact is absent*' (Meadows, 1995: 183, my emphasis). What is at issue here is not so much the truth value of news reporting — indeed, there is a great deal of 'truth' to many representations of the area, which residents and those who work in the area acknowledge. The broader issue is the range, variety and distribution of representations of Cabramatta and its communities. Participants in every discussion group complained of the lack of 'good news stories' about their area, of the lack of representations of the diverse and complex realities of their neighbourhoods and daily lives. While Cabramatta residents negotiate creative and assertive understandings of identity and community, those redefinitions rarely appear in the mass media alongside familiar representations of crime and disadvantage.

These comments raise some broad questions about community media or alternative public spheres. Television has been of particular interest for feminist critiques of the public sphere, as mass media bring public issues and political processes into domestic spaces. Just as importantly, in an analysis of audience discussion programs, Sonia Livingstone argues that programs such as *Oprah* may open up discursive spaces in which women's concerns and issues can be raised, and in which experience, emotion and empathy are valued above rational, expert opinion (Livingstone, 1994: 430). Television may provide opportunities for publicity and visibility for identities and issues which have traditionally been invisible or marginalised, and for the development of 'alternative' public spheres. People in and around Cabramatta often described the importance of 'alternative' or community media outlets. Local newspapers, non-English language radio stations, community TV and gossip or 'street talk' were all highly valued sources of information. However, participants still stressed the importance of accessing and being included in mainstream news and current affairs outlets — representation in the mainstream public sphere remains a central concern.

Mainstream news and current affairs address a general, metropolitan or national audience, rather than specific communities of language or interest. Watching the evening news is an important ritual where the national community is 'imagined' and public debates are made visible. Many participants whose first language is not English feel it is important to access English-language news even though they do not understand fully what is said. In many different ways, the concerns, values, issues and traditions which are central to the lives of people I spoke to are not visible in this mainstream media. Local and community media outlets were not described as adequate substitutes for representation in the mass-circulation 'public sphere' of mainstream media.

The local paper is good, it's balanced, it has good stories as well, but it's only for us, it's not everywhere, it's not for all of New South Wales. We probably already know that, it's old news.

While other media outlets certainly perform vital complementary or compensatory roles, I would suggest that participation, and silence, in the public sphere of metropolitan and national mass media are questions of continuing importance. Where participants and community media are able to develop complex and specific explanations of their identities and communities, such representations rarely circulate in the wider mainstream media — yet the perceptions of outsiders and public policy are often shaped by representations in metropolitan and national media outlets.

DISCUSSION

While I have presented a general argument about the role of television in participants' complex and ambivalent feelings of 'home', I also want to highlight the importance of distinguishing between groups and individuals. Amongst participants, there is a wide diversity of aspects of identity such as dress, geographic location, culture, religion, language, age, gender, place of birth, experiences of migration, employment, education, class and status. Experiences of 'home' are very different for a white woman who feels 'voiceless' in political debates than they are for a young Vietnamese-Australian jobseeker or for a woman who is verbally abused on the street when she wears the *hijab*. Concern that hospital waiting lists and underfunding of schools are rarely addressed in metropolitan media is different to the worry of those who see television bringing unwelcome cultural norms into the home, which is different again to the frustration of someone who is associated with news reports of teenage gangs in Cabramatta. While participants who feel 'voiceless' may believe they have lost control over the national 'home', other people in and around Cabramatta enjoy only a precarious feeling of being at home, of being accepted, of belonging, of having a place. As Ghassan Hage constantly reminds us: 'National belonging is not just an either/or matter. It varies both quantitatively and qualitatively.' (1996: 466) The very ambiguous feelings of security, community and sense of possibility narrated in TV talk varied considerably both within and between the groups that I spoke to.

Television is one of the most widely available cultural resources, and thus talk about television plays an important part in negotiations of 'home', in understanding and constructing feelings of belonging and community. Far from merely reflecting or re-presenting notions of home, television and the experience of it is a site at which home is negotiated, constructed and contested. In talk about television, people I spoke to negotiate 'home' and belonging, community and culture in creative and assertive ways. Television is a vital resource for negotiations between cultures and for developing complex and flexible self-understandings. However, people I spoke to don't merely contest TV images or use them creatively; they do so in a context in which TV both represents and shapes a sense of national identity or home in which participants largely do not recognise themselves, or do not feel at home.

Television circulates representations which describe or ascribe homes and identities. While constructions of identity and home involve positioning and negotiations, television often serves to position participants within a topography over which they feel they have little control. Mainstream media provoke feelings of belonging which are cross-cutting, even contradictory, varied and diverse. For many people I spoke to, television contributes to highly ambivalent experiences of 'home'. It structures the deep disjuncture between local, private feelings of home and community and much more precarious feelings of belonging in the wider home of public debate and mainstream media.

NOTES

- 1 Examples of community-based media projects include the *New Image* publication (Cabello, 1994), youth media writing projects (Vietnamese Community in Australia, 1995) and the *REAL Kit* (REAL, 1990), which all address mainstream media coverage of Cabramatta.
- 2 Participants in this research belong to several heterogeneous groups which meet regularly in Sydney's south-west. These groups meet for diverse reasons — such as weekly craft lessons, general conversation and informal support services, volunteer workers at a local community centre, and activities for language and cultural maintenance, as well as welfare provision. All groups were established long before my research, and involved a great deal of informal conversation and interaction as well as other activities. All participants remain anonymous. Groups did not wish to be identified by broad categories of language, ethnicity, culture, religion or specific locale, particularly as our discussions revolved around the complexity of identity and community. Participants did not speak as representatives of any discrete cultural, religious or language group, and were invited to take part in discussions as people who lived or worked in and around Cabramatta. A great deal of our discussions focused on the diversity of experience which is too easily subsumed under easy labels such as 'Vietnamese', 'Arab' or 'Muslim', with many participants providing examples of discrimination or disdain occasioned by association with such categories. This paper aims to highlight the complexity and diversity of participants' experiences rather than explaining comments by reference to any one specific aspect of identity.
- 3 Relevant studies of the news values and representations typical of news reporting of these categories would include: Hall (1978), Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1991) on crime, ACIJ (1992) on youth, Van Dijk (1991) and Jakubowicz et al. (1994) on race, ethnicity and immigration, Carruthers (1995) and Loo (1994) on the Vietnamese community in Australia in particular, and Powell (1993) on Sydney's western suburbs.

REFERENCES

- ACIJ (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism) 1992, *Youth and the Media: A Report into the Representation of Young People in the New South Wales Print Media*, ACIJ, University of Technology, Sydney.
- Ang, I. 1996, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Bammer, A. 1992, 'Editorial', *New Formations: The Question of Home*, no. 17, Summer, pp. vii-xi.
- Cabello, M. 1994, *Cabramatta: The New Image*, Fairfield Community Arts Network and Young Christian Workers, Sydney.
- Carruthers, A. 1995, 'Suburbanasia!: Ways of Reading Cultural Difference in the Mainstream Australian Media', *Media International Australia*, no. 77, August, pp. 86-93.
- Chambers, I. 1998, 'A Stranger in the House', *Communal/Plural*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 33-49.
- Ericson, R., Baranek, P. and Chan, J. 1991, *Representing Order: Crime, Law and Justice in the News Media*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Fairfield City Council 1996, *Social Services Division 1996, Fairfield City Community Profile: 1996*, Fairfield City Council.
- Gillespie, M. 1995, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*, Routledge, London.
- Hage, G. 1996, 'The Spatial Imaginary of National Practices: Dwelling-domesticating/Being-extermimating', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 14, pp. 463-85.
- 1997, 'At Home in the Entrails of the West' in H. Grace, G. Hage, L. Johnson, J. Langsworth and M. Symonds (eds), *Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Sydney's West*, Pluto Press, Sydney, pp. 99-153.
- Hall, S. 1990, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, pp. 222-37.
- Hall, S., Crichton, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. 1978, 'The Social Production of News' in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Macmillan, London.
- HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) 1991, *Racist Violence: Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra.
- Jakubowicz A., Goodall, H., Martin, J., Mitchell, T., Randall, L. and Seneviratne, K. 1994, *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Livingstone, S. 1994, 'Watching Talk: Gender and Engagement in the Viewing of Audience Discussion Programmes', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 429-47.
- Loo, E. 1994, 'Riding on Platitudes and Prejudice: Media Coverage of John Newman and Vietnamese', *Media Information Australia*, no. 74, November, pp. 73-77.
- Maher, L. and Tiet Ho 1998, *Wall of Silence: Stories of Cabramatta*, Street Youth Catalogue for Exhibition held at Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 23 October-14 November 1998.

-
- Meadows, M. 1995, 'Voice Blo Mipla All Ilan Man: Torres Strait Islanders' Struggle for Television Access', in J. Craik, J. James Bailey and A. Moran, *Public Voices/Private Interests: Australia's Media Policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Morley, D. 1992, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London.
- Papastergiadis, N. 1998, 'Introduction: The Home in Modernity' in *Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity*, Rivers Oram Press, London and New York, pp. 1-15.
- Powell, D. 1993, *Out West*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- REAL Project (Racial Equality Action Lobby) 1990, *The REAL Useful Media Kit*, updated in 1996 by Tuyen Tran, reprinted by Ettinger House Inc., Fairfield West, Sydney.
- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991, *National Report* by Elliott Johnston, AGPS, Canberra.
- Thompson, J.B. 1990, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 1991, 'Editors' Introduction', in P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 1994, 'Social Theory and the Media', in D. Crowley and D. Mitchell (eds), *Communication Theory Today*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 1995, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Polity Press/Basil Blackwell, Cambridge.
- Van Dijk, T. 1991, *Racism and the Press*, Routledge, London.
- Vietnamese Community in Australia 1995, *Integration*, ed. Xuan Duong ed., vol. 3, no. 8, August–November.
- Williams, R. 1990, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, 2nd edn, ed. Ederyn Williams, Routledge, London.

I would like to thank Mandy Thomas for her helpful comments on this paper and Penny O'Donnell for her unfailing support and inspiration.

Tanja Dreher is a doctoral candidate at the Research Centre in Intercommunal Studies at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean and teaches media studies at the University of Technology, Sydney.