

Milestone study of diversity on television released

EMBARGOED 9AM Wednesday 24 August, 2016: Screen Australia has released the most significant study of diversity on Australian screens since television began in 1956, entitled *Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on Diversity in TV Drama*.

The study analysed all 199 dramas (fiction excluding animation) that aired between 2011 and 2015 inclusive, finding 18% of main characters in the period were from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, compared to 32% of the population. A notable exception to this trend is Indigenous representation, making a dramatic turnaround in screen presence.

Only 4% of main characters had an identified disability compared to an estimated 18% of Australians, whilst 5% of main characters were identified as LGBTQI, yet this group is estimated to be up to 11% of the population.

“Diversity on screens has been a hot topic in recent years locally and abroad, so in undertaking this milestone study, Screen Australia sought to empower the industry with a baseline of data that could become a springboard for change,” said Graeme Mason, CEO of Screen Australia. “Throughout the year-long process of completing this study, it is clear there is an appetite for change within the industry and for that change to be authentic rather than tokenistic.”

THE METHOD

“Measuring on-screen diversity involves considering a range of subjective issues such as perception and personal identification. To produce a set of benchmarks that acknowledge these concerns, we used multiple methods and contextualised the numbers with surveys and interviews,” said Rebecca Mostyn, Manager of Research and Strategy at Screen Australia.

“The 1,961 main and recurring characters across all 199 dramas in the five year period were analysed by identifiable cultural background, disability status, sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“The results were then mapped against the cultural backgrounds of the actors playing these characters based on their country of birth and that of their parents. Both measures were compared to Government data on the population.”

Beyond the numbers, *Seeing Ourselves* also provides a frank insight into industry thinking courtesy of the 214 survey responses and 39 consultations with all manner of screen professionals, from casting agents through to producers, broadcasters and actors at all career stages.

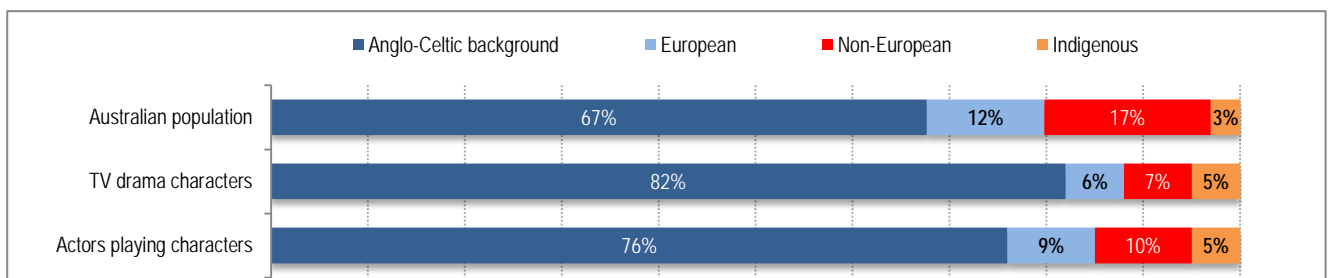
RESULTS: Cultural Background

The study found that although 32% of Australians have backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic, only 18% of main characters were not Anglo-Celtic. 24% of actors were of diverse cultural backgrounds which suggests a degree of ‘blind’ casting - the practice of casting a role without prescribing the actor’s background.

This practice is valuable as it normalises diverse casting, resulting in a greater level of ‘incidental’ diversity and opportunities for culturally diverse actors beyond those tied to the story. However, survey respondents did caution against ‘ethnicity substitution’ (e.g. a Chinese person playing Thai) being considered interchangeable with blind casting.

Overall, 64% of all programs included at least one character which was not Anglo-Celtic. Children’s shows and comedies tended to be more diverse than other dramas.

The surveys and consultations noted that the high cost of drama, along with the imperative to attract broad audiences and international buyers, can make investing in untested diverse talent and stories risky. Whilst broadcasters have displayed a willingness to cast diversely once talent is established (e.g. Miranda Tapsell in *Love Child*), there is evidence audiences are starting to look elsewhere for diverse content (e.g. online) and diverse talent are seeking work overseas.



Based on 1,961 main/recurring characters across 199 TV drama programs broadcast 2011 to 2015. Australian population based on 2011 Census of Population and Housing.

Media enquiries

Tel 0403 937 074 | scott.dawkins@screenaustralia.gov.au
www.screenaustralia.gov.au



Twitter



LinkedIn



Facebook



Instagram

Indigenous representation has bucked this trend. A 2002 study entitled [Broadcast in Colour](#) found that in 1992 there were no Indigenous Australians in sustaining roles on Australian TV, and by 1999 there were two. This latest study reveals a remarkable shift, with 5% of main characters being Indigenous, despite making up 3% of the population. The 5% figure matched exactly to the proportion of Indigenous actors in the period, suggesting authentic casting of Indigenous actors in Indigenous roles.

The change in Indigenous representation is no accident, but rather the result of decades of work by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department (and its various previous incarnations), the pivotal role of the ABC's Indigenous Department, as well as other organisations and production companies including [Blackfella Films](#), Brindle Films, [CAAMA](#), [Goolarri Media](#), state screen agencies, broadcasters and training institutions like AFTRS. There is evidence this trend will continue, with *Cleverman* already aired this year and *The Secret Daughter* soon to premiere.

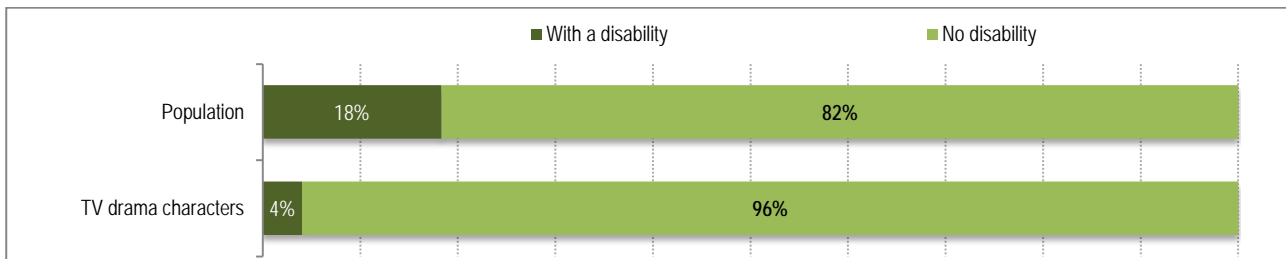
"You cannot underestimate how powerful it is for Indigenous people to turn on the TV and see a face that looks like their own," said Penny Smallacombe, Head of Indigenous at Screen Australia. "Whilst overall diversity on Australian screens clearly has a very long way to go, what the Indigenous experience shows is when you have Indigenous decision makers within funding bodies and broadcasters, coupled with initiatives that support Indigenous writers, directors, producers and actors, diversity and good entertainment can be one in the same."

RESULTS: Disability

The percentage of Australians with disabilities is more than four times the percentage of characters with disabilities on TV. Only 10% of dramas had at least one character with a disability.

Some disabilities are not outwardly visible, so parity in representation is not necessarily a practical goal. Nevertheless, the study revealed Australians with disabilities have lacked opportunities to be involved with behind-the-scenes decision making, such as a presence in writer's rooms or on-set, which in turn can flow on to a lack of diversity on screens.

The survey results showed mixed feelings around the ongoing practice of non-disabled people being cast in disabled roles, and a call for greater opportunities for actors with disabilities.

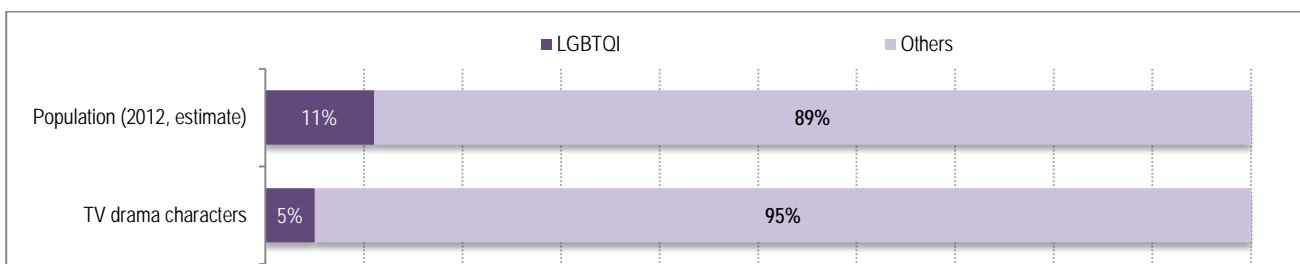


Based on 1,961 main/recurring characters across 199 TV drama programs broadcast 2011 to 2015. Australian population based on Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2012*

RESULTS: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Up to 11% of Australians are of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity, but only 5% of characters in TV dramas were identifiably LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or intersex).

The study period included shows where a character's sexual or gender identity was central to the plot (e.g. *Carlotta*, *Please Like Me*, *Peter Allen: Not The Boy Next Door*), however it was also common for major dramas to include characters where their diverse orientation was simply incidental including *Offspring* (Kim Akerholt), *Househusbands* (Kane Albert), *Janet King* (Janet King), *Neighbours* (Aidan Foster and Aaron Brennan) and *Winners & Losers* (Jonathan Kurtis). Although the signs of authentic representation are welcome, the volume is arguably underwhelming.



Based on 1,961 main/recurring characters across 199 TV drama programs broadcast 2011 to 2015. Australian population based on Department of Health, Australian Government, National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) Ageing and Aged Care Strategy (2012).



NEXT STEPS

The surveys and industry consultation sessions reveal an almost universal preference for authentic representations of diversity rather than mandated controls like a quota system.

However, there are some clear logistical problems that have been hampering the path to more diverse television. For instance, it's rare that writers have paid research time to investigate diverse stories and characters, so if they don't have any personal experience with disability, for example, it can be difficult to write a disabled character authentically. Furthermore, many survey respondents argued diversity in the writer's room itself was a priority.

Ensuring there is enough diverse on-screen talent coming into the industry to be able to cast appropriately is also a challenge, and some of the structures in place in other markets to encourage diversity have not eventuated in Australia. For example in the USA it's common for casting calls to include 'send any ethnicity' roles.

Self-censorship was a recurring theme in the survey responses, and this can materialise throughout the creative process, from pre-conceived notions about what the audience want, right through to avoiding casting non-Europeans as villains for fear of being seen as racist.

"With 94% of Australians watching TV regularly, the medium remains powerful and influential, so the need for greater diversity is essential and we have been buoyed by the industry enthusiasm to engage with this study," said **Graeme Mason, CEO of Screen Australia**. "We don't want tokenism, but we don't want inaction either. Now we have the numbers, we need to work out a path towards diversity on screens together that is genuine, lasting and both creatively and commercially fulfilling."

The screen industry will have two opportunities this year to further the dialogue on diversity, firstly with the 1 September presentation of interim findings of the [Australian Film Television Radio School's](#) paper on worldwide best-practice in diversity equity and inclusion. This will be followed by [Screen Producers Australia's](#) Screen Forever conference (15-17 November) which will include a session on diversity.

Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on Diversity in Australian TV Drama is available to read at screenaustralia.gov.au

Join the conversation #SeeingOurselves @ScreenAustralia

AVAILABLE INTERVIEWEES

Screen Australia book through Scott.Dawkins@screenaustralia.gov.au
Graeme Mason, CEO | Rebecca Mostyn, Manager Research and Strategy | Penny Smallacombe, Head of Indigenous

ABC book through Corlette.Imogen@abc.net.au
Richard Finlayson, Director Television

SBS book through Jessica.Harris@sbs.com.au
Michael Ebeid, Managing Director | Benjamin Law, Creator of *The Family Law*

Australian Human Rights Commission, book through dominic.ogrady@humanrights.gov.au
Tim Soutphommasane

IMAGERY

<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/newsroom>