

## **“Proudly multicultural” – a critical examination of the inclusion of multicultural voices in Australia’s COVID-19 response**

Australia positions itself as a proud and successful multicultural society (Australian Government; Department of Home Affairs). However, in times of crisis, how are these multicultural voices included and recognised? This paper takes a critical look at the representation and inclusion of multicultural communities and voices in Australia’s 2020 COVID-19 response.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities have featured commonly in media reporting in relation to the global pandemic and its implications for Australian society. However, reporting has been dominated by finger pointing and condemnation of multicultural communities, frequently singling out individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds as responsible for non-compliance and hence outbreaks of the virus (Kurmelovs, 2020; Renaldi, 2020; Weedon, 2020). Further debate tends to ignore socioeconomic factors and cultural preferences, instead shifting to a focus on English language skills (Dalzell, 2020; Grey, 2020; Karp, 2020).

This focus on language very much reflects the Australian Government’s approach to communication with diverse communities. The “Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)” (Department of Health, 2020) report emphasises “paid advertising” and the enlisting of a “creative agency” as core elements of its communication response. Explicit references to CALD communities, classified alongside “groups at risk or with specific needs”, are limited and execution appears to have largely relied on the translation of official government communication into different languages (with mixed results (Dalzell, 2020)).

Indeed, the Australian Government, responsible for the coordination of health pandemic communication, has largely relied on mainstream, traditional media channels for the dissemination of COVID related information. This approach has two key limitations: First, it is underpinned by the assumption of a compliant media, who would simply report evidence-based information (Snowden, 2020). Secondly, it ignores shifting media and information consumption preferences, CALD community specific communication channels and access issues. This one size fits all, information dissemination driven approach is furthermore illustrated by the government’s identification of spokespeople, limited to Health Ministers, the CMO and Chief Health Officers, with the Prime Minister assuming primary responsibility. This approach fails to acknowledge that people look to trusted leaders, who are relevant and accessible, for crucial advice and guidance. Failure to engage trustworthy community leaders is particularly relevant as multicultural communities have been identified as particularly vulnerable to mis- and disinformation (Wild, 2020).

What becomes apparent is that Australia, like many other governments around the world, has failed to learn from previous health pandemics, such as Ebola, SARS or H1N1 (Snowden, 2020). Indeed, at a time where virus elimination does not appear to be a realistic solution to the current crisis, learnings across 35 years of an effective public health response to the HIV pandemic may be particularly valuable (AFAO & ACOSS:, 2020), given the communication response's focus on community partnership, the empowerment of community leaders and grassroots campaigns.

Despite emphasising two-way communication in its report, the Australian Government's COVID-19 response appears to be largely designed around information dissemination. This paper seeks to initiate further debate and closer, critical examination of CALD communities' recognition in public health communication campaigns. The author argues that there is a need for public relations to perform a more visible role in shaping public communication campaigns, leading a shift from public information to public interest communication focused approaches, with an emphasis on inclusive, lasting and positive change.

AFAO, & ACOSS:. (2020). Learning from one Pandemic to live with another Retrieved from

[https://www.afao.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2887\\_afao\\_jointAFAO\\_ACOSS\\_report\\_webart.pdf](https://www.afao.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2887_afao_jointAFAO_ACOSS_report_webart.pdf)

Australian Government. Our country Retrieved from <https://info.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country>

Dalzell, S. (2020). Government coronavirus messages left 'nonsensical' after being translated into other languages. *ABC News*, (13th August). Retrieved from

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-13/coronavirus-messages-translated-to-nonsense-in-other-languages/12550520>

Department of Health. (2020). *Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/australian-health-sector-emergency-response-plan-for-novel-coronavirus-covid-19>

Department of Home Affairs. Multicultural Australia. United, Strong, Successful - Australia's multicultural Statement Retrieved from

<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/Statements/english-multicultural-statement.pdf>

Grey, A. (2020, 19th June). Australia's multilingual communities are missing out on vital coronavirus information. *ABC News*. Retrieved from [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-29/coronavirus-multilingual-australia-missing-out-covid-19-info/12403510)

[29/coronavirus-multilingual-australia-missing-out-covid-19-info/12403510](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-29/coronavirus-multilingual-australia-missing-out-covid-19-info/12403510)

- Karp, P. (2020). Minister downplays concerns Australia's Covid crisis has hit multicultural communities harder. *The Guardian*, (28th August). Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/aug/28/minister-downplays-concerns-australias-covid-crisis-has-hit-multicultural-communities-harder>
- Kurmelovs, R. (2020, 23rd November). South Australia makes pizza worker scapegoat for Covid-19 failures. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/21/south-australia-makes-young-pizza-worker-scapegoat-for-covid-19-failures>
- Renaldi, E. (2020, 15th July). Melbourne Muslims feel 'unfairly tarnished' by reports linking them to rising COVID-19 cases. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-15/muslims-melbourne-raising-concern-over-covid19-reports/12454846>
- Snowden, C. (2020, 20th October). *COVID19 Public Information Confusion and Disinformation: It's NOT the "Messaging" !!!* Paper presented at the PRIA Research Symposium.
- Weedon, A. (2020). Melbourne's public housing coronavirus lockdown tells a story of two cities. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-09/flemington-north-melbourne-public-housing-lockdown-two-cities/12431898>
- Wild, A. (2020, 7th September ). Rethinking the COVID message for multicultural communities. *Monash University* Retrieved from <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/09/07/1381215/rethinking-the-covid-message-for-multicultural-communities>