



Reality TV Stirs Emotions on Refugees

Broadcast on SBS during Refugee Week in June, "Go Back To Where You Came From" was a confronting and controversial series, that followed six Australians on a reverse refugee journey. Part documentary, part reality TV, the series put the plight of refugees on the agenda of mainstream Australia and sparked debate across the country. RICHARD WALKER spoke to series director IVAN O'MAHONEY.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SBS

INTERVIEW

RW: Something like this, as far as I'm aware, has never been done before. Where did the idea come from and how did it start?

IO: It is kind of hard to pinpoint the exact beginning because, like so many projects in television there is an idea somewhere that somebody has, and in this case that idea was with Peter Newman, the commissioning editor at SBS, who wanted to find a new way of telling the refugee story, and the story of asylum seekers as well.

And I think he was right in wanting a new way because the old way, the tried and tested way of doing either a presenter-led current affairs program or a beautifully shot observational film, is not really getting the audience that this issue deserves. So then you start looking at other ways of telling the story.

RW: Was there an intended result starting out? Did you know what to expect or what you wanted to achieve?

IO: A lot of people have suggested that because it's an SBS program that we intended to change people's minds. Because that is what's expected of the multicultural broadcaster – that it is left leaning, bleeding heart, so to speak. We came at it with a slightly different attitude. We wanted to explore whether or not people's opinions would actually change when you put them in that position. Now obviously if you look at it

from a televisual point of view, the fact that some of them had a change-of-heart worked a treat because it makes for a better story if there is development in somebody's character.

But truthfully, if all of them had held on to their beliefs, despite seeing all this stuff in real life, that would probably have made a very interesting story as well! So no, we didn't really have an agenda, and the fact that it wasn't an agenda-driven program added to its credibility and made it watchable for people on both sides of the debate. And I think the fact that not everybody changed their opinions also added to that.

RW: What about the participants, particularly the Australian participants, what was the process for finding them?

IO: We wanted a diverse group. Obviously we wanted a fair few of them to have critical opinions when it came to asylum seekers and refugees, because that would make an interesting program, but we knew we needed at least one person who was already very sympathetic towards asylum seekers, and that person would then help stir debate within the group.

Within the group of people who were not so sympathetic we also wanted a wide range of opinions there, because there are a wide range of opinions in society as well. So we looked at pressure groups on the internet, we went to town hall

meetings where people were railing against the building of detention centres, we spoke to the youth wing of political parties. We also just stood in shopping centres in areas where there had been a large influx of refugees in the last few years – Blacktown for instance. And, we found Adam because we thought that having someone from Cronulla, a lifeguard, given the history of the riots there, might bring an interesting perspective. And it did, in fact he turned out to be one of the most interesting people in the group. On the one hand we cast the net really wide, but on the other we really knew the type of people that we wanted.

RW: Once they were in these situations, they really went on an emotional rollercoaster, which was very interesting to watch. Were you surprised by how the experience took them to places that they weren't expecting, or that you weren't expecting?

IO: Yes, I was somewhat surprised, and I think my surprise came from the fact that I have been doing these kinds of stories for the last 10 years and you grow a bit of a thick skin. So you sometimes forget that, for people whose job is not to go into conflict zones, it is actually terrifying, it's unsettling, it's emotional.

I was surprised by just how much impact it made. But of course when it happened it was thrilling at the same time, because the social experiment that we'd set up at the beginning of the film was really working, it was having an effect. It really hit them hard.

RW: I was quite surprised, in some circumstances, by the behaviour of the participants. A couple of examples that come to mind are during the Malaysian raid some participants seemed to almost enjoy it and even assist the authorities, and others seemed quite horrified. And also in Kakuma there were quite differing reactions.

IO: Yes, I thought that the Malaysian raid, from a psychological point of view, was incredibly interesting. It was almost as if they had no place to hide anymore in terms of where they stood. They were in such an extreme situation and it was always bound to bring out some sort of profound reaction. In Darren's case, he identified with the people in uniform. Later on, during "The Response", he said it was because his military training kicked in and he had that automatic reaction to the uniform.

He said he became "task oriented"

IO: Well, that is one way of explaining it. Raquel thought "this is fantastic, this is amazing, this is what they should be doing in Australia". I am not quite sure that she understood the complexities of what was going on, but that was also quite revealing. And of course later on she had quite a big u-turn. Roderick virtually disappeared from the scene. If you think about that Malaysian scene he is hardly in it, and he literally just disappeared. We did not know where he was for a lot of the time. And I think that's because it was perhaps quite hard for him to marry his opinions with what he was experiencing. So he stayed away

from the camera, which for me was very revealing.

Then there was Gleny, who expectedly was very upset, but what I thought was also quite interesting with her is that she got quite angry with us the next day, that we had put her through this experience and then asked her to immediately reflect on it. She was very moved by it, but not very happy with what we'd done.

And then there was Rae and Adam, who I think were both on a very similar emotional path throughout the series, who were both horrified. Even though Adam had an initial almost puppy-like reaction to the excitement, but then realised that what was going on was pretty full on.

RW: You said earlier that part of the goal of the series was to explore people's reactions when placed on a journey like this. That process raised a lot of questions, and one of the ones that recurred throughout the series was "Would you get on a boat?". Some people obviously changed their opinion on this – Adam was a particular example – whilst others, no matter what they saw, couldn't change their views. Do you think the series helped to resolve that question in any way?

IO: No. I don't think the series provided any clear-cut answers on any issues. I think what it helped do was it helped people form an opinion, and it is a better-informed opinion now. I think the fact that these two guys had radically different opinions on that particular subject shows that you can't come to a conclusive answer, because a

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF SBS

conclusive answer presupposes that ultimately we'll all think the same when confronted with the same challenges or experiences, and we don't.

So there was never going to be an answer to that question, but there was always the possibility of at least making sure that people would have a better informed opinion and were able to participate in the debate in a more informed way.

I think that one of the big problems is that this debate, which is on the front page all the time, gets played out through the eyes of politicians and advocates on both sides, but hardly ever through the eyes of normal, ordinary Australians – people who don't have a direct vested interest in the outcome of the debate.

And therefore what you are hearing and seeing is always incredibly coloured. It's either a right-wing person who basically says we need to stop the boats and shut the borders, or it's someone on

the opposite side of the spectrum. But what about that huge grey area where most Australians live? What about them? I think what I'm most proud of is that for a period of time at least we seem to have wrestled that debate from policy makers, op-ed. writers, and advocates, to the public, and I think that was really valuable.

RW: I agree, and I think that one of the great strengths of the program was that it seemed to have this tremendous reach, which most current affairs programs don't usually have. It seemed to create huge debate in mainstream Australia.

IO: What we tried to do was draw an audience that wouldn't normally tune in to SBS. We really wanted to get the people who, you know, watch FOX 8 and watch channels 9 and 7 and 10, because their opinion is no less valid than the regular SBS crowd, and they're the people that we should be talking to.

But I think it was not only the program but the rise of social media as well. Twitter played a massive role; it was extraordinary. We had a Twitter fall projected on the wall on the night of the first episode and it showed all the tweets that were coming in that related to the program, and it was thousands and thousands, and people were telling each other to watch the program, and it was a really interactive way of experiencing the program. People were saying things like "Hey Roderick, you have got 20 minutes to form an opinion", almost as if they are talking to them! And I think that that just started to create quite a buzz.

RW: I read that on the first night it was the highest trending Twitter topic worldwide.

IO: Worldwide, that is right. And it just meant that tens of thousands of people were tweeting at the same time about this particular topic. It does not mean that around the world people were

watching it, but it does mean that, numerically, the most people were talking about this particular topic on Twitter at that time.

RW: Were you surprised by the sometimes negative and quite vicious responses on Twitter towards some of the participants?

IO: Maybe not surprised. It is kind of strange, as much as I disagreed at times with things that our participants would say, I became quite protective of them because in the back of my mind was always this notion that whether or not you agree with them they're very brave to voice those opinions in such a public manner and really make themselves quite vulnerable and open to criticism, and really just lay it out and I ended up having a great deal more respect for our participants than I did for all those people who, in the anonymity of Twitter, were spewing all this bile and saying really outrageous stuff at times.

RW: Do you think it's a case of people being quite hypocritical and preaching tolerance yet practising intolerance towards the views of other people?

IO: Having done this stuff now for 10 years or so, I have really come to appreciate that the left can be as intolerant and vitriolic as the right and that when we preach tolerance we should examine what that means in the way we voice our own opinions. I actually thought that the response to the program cast the "do-gooders" in quite a bad light.

RW: The other question that came up quite a lot in the pro-

gram, and also after the program, was the distinction between the "real" refugees, which in this case usually referred to Africans who'd come via the UNHCR, versus the "boat people". Obviously this is the same question we are often debating in society. I was interested to hear your thoughts, and the participant's thoughts, on that distinction.

IO: It is a difficult one because I think that if you look at it in legal terms then of course there is no distinction, because by the time that they're processed their claims have been assessed and they have been found to be refugees, real refugees just as real as the people who are coming from Africa through UNHCR.

So what seems to upset a certain segment of the public is this notion that by coming on a boat you are bypassing the system, you're somehow making sure that where millions of other people will have to wait 10 or 15 years in a camp, you're actually making it happen within a year or six months.

I think it very much goes to this notion of "fair play", that somehow it is not fair play, without people then thinking of course, well what would be the alternative? Which is what we tried to explore, and I would have liked to have been able to do that in greater detail. Because what are your options?

I think Malaysia was at least a good example of that. If you stay in Malaysia then this is what you are opening yourself to. And what we showed was only a tiny part, you know, we didn't show the caning, the random arrests on the

street and the corruption and the bribing and all this kind of stuff.

I think the other thing that certain people have a hard time with is this idea, and this is Darren's main thing, that if you are already physically safe outside your country of origin then you should not be coming to Australia because you're not fleeing persecution anymore.

Now the UNHCR's take on that, of course, is that whether you are a refugee or not does not depend on where you are but on what the situation in your country of origin is. I think some people who will watch this will understand that people who get on boats can very well be genuine refugees and have a reason for not accessing the UNHCR system that could ultimately bring them to Australia. The distinction is not that black and white, and understanding that the area is grey is very important.

RW: Soon after the series was broadcast, Paul Sheehan wrote an article in the Sydney Morning Herald saying that the show was "strictly for the gullible". How do you respond to that?

IO: We had a chat amongst ourselves here on whether or not we needed to respond to the article, and eventually decided that his response was just part of the debate that followed the broadcast so there was really no need to respond to it 'one-on-one'.

If I am not mistaken I think there might have been one or two factual inaccuracies in it, and I also think he did not watch the entire show. I think that, from memory, he wrote that we put people on an "enforced empathy march" and

that we were not upfront with the participants about the fact that they were not on a sinking boat and stuff.

But then I thought, the first thing that we said in the program, in the first three minutes, was that this is a social experiment and you'll be taken on a journey and you will see things that will make you uncomfortable. That it was a "set-up" situation, a situation that we had

They were people who would have identified with Raquel, and who went on the same emotional journey with Raquel, when she said "I'm not anymore, I get it. It does not matter what colour your skin is". There were a lot of people like that. I got phone calls from friends who work in corporate Australia who said that in their department, people from their team had started to volunteer in the Migrant

worries about. But he is now volunteering in the Chin community in Adelaide. But other than that I think people are still pretty much where they were. The other thing that I hope that the series has done, and I have some reason to believe that it might have, is that it's taken some of the sting out of the debate, some of the vitriol towards the asylum seekers themselves, by showing the human side of the debate.

RW: Lastly, something that was interesting to me was that just at the end of the show, Dr Dave Corlett said "an appreciation of the complexity of the refugee issue is often missing from public debate". To me, that summed up exactly what you achieved with the documentary. You didn't necessarily provide a clear answer to every question, but there was much more understanding of what the issues were. Would you agree that that was the case?

IO: Yes, I don't think it provided clear-cut answers to clear-cut questions, but I do think that it's made people appreciate that it is a complex issue, there are many facets to it, and that understanding that something is complex is a very good way to start taking off the sharp edges, because once you understand that things are not black and white it also means that you might think twice about what you say publicly, and I think that's where informed opinions start.

And if we can debate with informed opinions rather than just regurgitating what other people tell us to think, then we're heading in the right direction. **R**

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created for them, we were completely upfront about that.

So I did not quite understand some of what he was saying. It felt a little bit like it would be cool to criticise it when everybody else was raving about it. But it didn't bother me, and in a way I'd almost be more upset if nobody criticised it!

RW: Do you think, now that the show has finished, that it has contributed in any way to tangible change, either positive or negative, in the area of refugees?

IO: Yes, I think it certainly has. If you look at the responses, for instance on talk-back radio which is always a reasonably good way of measuring the nation's pulse, there were people calling in to shock-jock shows and literally saying "I used to be a racist, but actually I get it now".

Resource Centre.

These guys in three-piece suits all of a sudden realised that there are people out there who really need help and that we can contribute to them building a new life by just doing a little bit. There are other examples of people who told us that either they, or their colleagues, had started to do volunteer work after watching the show, and I thought that was quite extraordinary.

RW: And, what about the participants? Several months on, do you know where they stand now?

IO: I think they're pretty much where they were in the immediate aftermath of the film. Darren, I think, was a bit shaken by the response to him and I think he is really wanting to make it clear in blogging on the web that he's not anti-refugee, it's the process that he