TELEVISION IN CABRAMATTA:
A story of home invasion, identity and belonging

How would you feel if your suburb were constantly in the news for violence and drugs? TANJA DREHER ran focus groups with Cabramatta residents to find out the impact of bad television coverage.

It is depicted a site of Sydney’s feared, exotic others. The picture is captivating with ‘Asian immigration’, teenage gangs, heroin dealing, refugees, multiculturalism, enticing cuisines and illegal immigrants. This is the Cabramatta that many Sydneysiders come to know through their television sets, although they often have no first-hand experience of the area. 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”. Early last year viewers again saw extensive footage of Cabramatta train station, overdoses, arrests and drug deals in the area.

Located in Sydney’s southwest, Cabramatta lies within one of the most culturally diverse local government areas in Australia. In Cabramatta, daily television news brings the affairs of state and public debate into residents’ homes. But also, it brings very close to their homes, images of Cabramatta train station, of the shopping mall, of apartment building stairwells and needles in gutters and parks which occasionally circulate across Sydney through the same news outlets.

The aim of my research in Cabramatta 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 of mainstream media and in particular it was very important that I did not restrict my discussions merely to the Vietnamese community, and that the topics of conversation were not confined to crime, drugs and gangs. I wanted to listen to participants’ interests rather than assuming what the story was. Through community consultations a series of lengthy group discussions were arranged with existing community groups. These discussions were informal and largely unstructured to allow participants to determine the issues and the direction of the discussion. This approach enabled many issues to be raised and discussed which I would never have predicted in a closely structured interview.

The central role of television was reflected in several comments where participants described 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, and some participants said they didn’t have time or really weren’t interested in TV, yet these same people were aware of and often highly critical of prominent news and current affairs reports. Participants with little English language competence often watched mainstream news programs. The benefit of watching news and current affairs was that they were able to find out “all about the government”.

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
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 erasure her 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 "travel" to Cabramatta and form opinions of its inhabitants and communities. In interactions with other Sydney-siders, residents of Sydney's southwest 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 job seekers frustrated at being associated with images of gangs and drugs, television news may limit their sense of possibility, their 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 are largely ignored. While television is a site for narrating the nation, making visible the norms of 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. Aspects of language, culture, tradition or identity which participants relate to are largely absent in everyday representations which circulate in mainstream television.

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 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. 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. It is a very different type of "home invasion" to that routinely reported in the evening news.

In talking 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 a home in which participants largely do not recognise themselves, or do not feel at home.

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 that there was a high level of multicultural interaction Cabramatta, others...
mentioned the standards of service and comfort, a strong sense of community, hard work and self-reliance and most complained of the lack of "good news" stories of the area. These discussions developed much more subtle and flexible understandings of Cabramatta and its communities than those represented in mainstream television.

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 were dissatisfied with the lack of representations of the diverse and complex realities of their neighbourhoods and daily lives.

Representations of religion, culture and community provoked at least as much discussion as reporting of crime and violence in Cabramatta. 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 horrifically scarred in an attack in which her husband doused her with acid. 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 homogenisation of Islam and the culture and traditions she sees as specific to Pakistan. The emphasis was on women's freedom and choice as opposed to simple assumption that intolerance and oppression are inherent 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 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 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. 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.

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, status. Experiences of "home" are very different for a white woman who feels "voiceless" in political debates, than for a young Vietnamese-Australian job seeker, than for a woman who is verbally abused on the street when she wears the hijab. Concern that hospital waiting lists and under-funding 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. This is different again to the frustration of someone who is associated with news reports of teenage gangs in Cabramatta. The result is that many people in and around Cabramatta enjoy only a precarious feeling of being at home, of being accepted, of belonging or of having a place.

Tanja Dreher is a PhD student in journalism at the University of Western Sydney and a tutor at the University of Technology, Sydney.