
*The SBS Story*, written and researched by Ion Ang, Gay Hawkins, and Lamia Dabboussy, reads as an historical narrative about a noteworthy organisation striving to achieve a revolutionary charter while structured as two separate entities with individual philosophies on the question of multiculturalism. The 360-page text has minimal front matter, a body of eight chapters and limited back matter. Front matter is a basic table of contents, a brief preface and acknowledgements, followed by a half-page extract of Section Six from the SBS Charter. Back matter is two appendices; 1) SBS Timeline, 2) a list of interviews, a reference list, selected bibliography and an index.

In eight chapters the authors obtain sufficient narrative energy from a Brobdingnagian array of historical detail. Moreover, the story shows the value of the Special Broadcasting Service in the recent evolution of Australia’s national culture. With straight historical chronology drawn from interviews with staff and public documents, the authors articulate a strong correlation between multicultural broadcasting in Australia and the development of a social reality founded on principles that affirm cultural diversity. Nor do the authors ignore or efface the strong tension that exists within the broadcaster. In fact, the authors made this tension between SBS Radio and SBS TV the dramatic kernel of their story. The two media play important roles in reforms to the SBS Charter and provoked intense and often hostile debates about the role of the broadcaster in respect of Australia’s growing awareness of cultural identity. Within the SBS debates on pluralism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and management by predominant Anglo-Celtics, the authors trace out a reflection of the changing face of Australian politics.

But all is not well, for the authors repetitively put forth the value of SBS, and the text *per se* displays three contradictions that diminished the value of the book. The contradictions manifest as a referencing system of dubious utility, a stacked-card argument and a modernist monologue. What is more, the text offers an ambiguous read at a pace slowed by the burden of surplus particles and unimaginative prose.

The referencing system employed by the authors has the benefit of giving priority to the text. Using direct quotations from the interviews the authors do not insert conventional albeit intrusive semiotics of citation. Thus, the text reads easily because the eye encountered fewer distractions and interruptions. However, the absence of any recognition of voices in this work evidenced an academic contradiction – the effacement of the distinctions between source materials. Third-party commentary, interviewee opinion and anecdote, theory and analysis seem all too ready to merge into the familiar and immaterial voice of the disembodied academic. Moreover, the reader obtains no motivation or provocation to link the text to the list of sources or other sections of the book. Thus, the parts of the text are not coordinated and the uninterrupted text remains centre-stage.

One might think, at the end of a chapter, despite the blur of citations, the list of sources would come into play. Or perhaps after reading one wanted to explore the theorists or interviewees used in the text. Here, the referencing system offers little help.

Without clear marks citations become difficult to discern from the rest of the text. With an author’s name from the list of sources the reader must search for that name reported in a direct quotation; a form adapted from narrative prose. However, the reader must first find the opening quotation mark and read to the end of the quotation before deciding if the quotation was relevant – the same source name often appeared several times in one paragraph or on one page. So, the referencing system in this text functions counter-productively to the needs of academic researchers who need a familiar system that allows rapid identification and assessment of quotations.

The second contradiction that diminishes the academic value of this text stems from lack of argument. Strictly speaking, stacking the cards is the omission of all counter-debate. The stack-card argument of *The SBS Story* shows in the presentation from a single point of view of a multi-perspective story. While the narrative point of view is the disembodied academic, the point-of-view of the argument is that of the object of analysis. Thus the absence of counter-argument, within the chapters, and between chapters, produces a one-sided argument wholly sympathetic to the organisation. What is more, the text spills over with grand assertions that the authors do not support with theory, analysis or data. Thus, the academic rigour of the text could come in for scrutiny and fail to pass muster.

The third contradiction, a modernist monologue, enables the authors to assimilate diverse and disparate contributions into a single and coherent text. However, given that the story of the SBS is a thick tapestry of cultural voices the authors reduce this variety to the monotone of the universally disembodied academic narrator. Thus, the narrative point of view in the story of the organisation retains little connection to the philosophy of the organisation in the story. While the contradiction does not distract from the story, the contradiction raises questions about the analysis. For example, in the production of the text, who understood and drew on the post-modern perspective that ignited the explosion of cultural identities that provoked the creation and evolution of a national multicultural broadcaster?

While the strength of *The SBS Story* is a historically accurate tale of the rise-and-rise of multicultural broadcasting in Australia, the contradictions in the text mean this book belongs on coffee tables not university reading lists.

Paul Burger

---