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TV Still Failing to Reflect Our Multicultural Society

Ian Kilroy

Technological University Dublin, ian.kilroy@tudublin.ie

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Media still fails to reflect society of multiculturalism



**Ian
Kilroy**
Opinion

Broadcast media has not opened its doors to second-generation immigrants

It is surprising that France only got its first black newsreader in 2006. Harry Roselmack became the first non-white news presenter on France's TF1, just eight years ago.

For Trinidadian Trevor McDonald, it was way back in 1973 that he went before the camera for ITN News in Britain, first as a reporter, later as main anchor. However, looking at the Irish news media landscape, you'd be forgiven for thinking there are no ethnic minorities here at all. An English accent is as exotic as it gets.

Search for "RTÉ policy on diversity" online and you'll find that "the page cannot be found" – only a broken link to a page that was once headed "RTÉ Supporting Interculturalism". It speaks volumes.

RTÉ is aware of the problem, though, with the director general having set up a working group on diversity in staffing and programming. Its recommendations are due before the summer.

As it stands, however, Irish broadcast media harbours a notion of "home" that is outdated and out of touch with the multicultural realities of contemporary Irish life. The Irish homeland is a white, Christian place, where we're "up for the match" or down for the Rose of Tralee.

Recently there has been comment that women are under-represented, but isn't the more startling fact that our media is almost totally an ethnic-free zone?

And more so in recent years, with cutbacks seeing off any programming previously targeted at new communities.

It may be true that as a country without a colonial history we have only recently become a multiethnic society, but the early 1990s, when the ethnic make-up of the population really began to change, is over 20 years ago. With the growing maturity of our second-generation population from ethnic backgrounds, the white bias in our media looks increasingly embarrassing.

First generation

One defence is the argument that first-generation immigrants do not have the written or spoken English to operate proficiently in an overwhelmingly Anglophone media environment.

A strong Nigerian accent is hard to understand for an Irish audience; a first-generation Chinese or Polish immigrant maybe cannot write proficiently enough in English to work in the print media.

However, as a lecturer in

journalism, I've seen some good students from ethnic backgrounds pass through to graduation in recent years.

These are second-generation immigrants, people who have grown up in Ireland. Their accents are Irish, although they do not look "Irish".

Their written expression is indistinguishable from their ethnically Irish classmates, but not one of them has found their way in front of a news camera or behind a radio microphone. Broadcast media has not opened its doors to them – and neither has print.

Because of the unique presence of the reporter or news-caster in broadcast media, the issue is a much hotter one on radio and TV. We see their faces, we hear their accents and, in Irish broadcast media, those accents are almost totally Irish and if not, their faces are white.

It appears that the gatekeepers of Irish media have not sought to redress the ethnic make-up: of course, they are not explicitly required to under the 2009 Broadcasting Act.

Even where an English accent tells us our news, what follows is a stream of complaints to the broadcaster.

A friend with an educated, "received pronunciation" English accent was taken aback by the reaction to his voice on national radio. The gist of much of the reaction was, "get that Brit off air".

The problem with a white-only, Christian-only, monocultural media is that it has a massive blind spot. Just as male-dominated newsrooms ignore or butcher stories of interest to a female audience, so it is that a white-only, native-dominated media ignores, is not even

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aware of the stories happening in ethnic communities

Greater ethnic and religious diversity would make our media more representative and a better mirror of the society we live in.

Institutional racism

Of course, Ireland is not unique in what is, arguably, media institutional racism.

Following recent criticisms, the BBC has announced new measures to address the lack of diversity, such as internships for graduates from ethnic backgrounds and a ringfenced commissioning fund – measures we could learn from here. As things stand, our broadcast media often appear like a bizarre exception in European broadcasting.

Ireland is no longer an isolated, colonised, put-upon, church-dominated outpost of fair-skinned, sometimes sunburnt inhabitants. It is a multiethnic, multicultural European state with a thriving immigrant population here to stay.

We are part of a wider European cosmopolitan society. It is time for a first black newsreader, a first ethnically Asian reporter. It is time for Ireland as it is to proudly show its face.

Ian Kilroy is a writer, journalist and lecturer in journalism at DIT's school of media