

# Moving beyond the media's 'deficit lens' is essential for racialized people to claim belonging

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Credit: Shutterstock

Australia's mainstream media has long viewed refugees, migrants and Indigenous communities through a "deficit lens." That's where these populations—in all their glorious complexity—are framed simply as a "problem" that needs to be "fixed." Never achieving enough. Never grateful enough. Just never quite deserving enough to be seen as legitimate Australians.

This deficit discourse is created, in part, by a [mainstream media](#) and screen culture that is overwhelmingly white and doesn't reflect the cultural diversity of its population. [Media Diversity Australia reports](#) that 75% of presenters, commentators and reporters have an Anglo-Celtic background, while only 6% have an Indigenous or non-European background. This is despite [Census data](#) indicating nearly half of all Australians had at least one parent born overseas.

Fixing this under-representation in the media workforce is only a starting point. As I describe in my [new book](#), second-generation migrant content-creators are taking matters into their own hands.

Moving beyond the deficit lens is essential for racialized peoples to claim belonging, and have agency in their own stories. Here are some examples of how they're doing it.

## **Moving beyond 'precarity'**

When I see writer Hani Abdile [perform her poetry](#), I also witness my research participants—many of whom are migrants or their children—nod their heads in collective validation.

[Abdile](#) is a Somali-Australian civil war [refugee](#) who credits poetry as having saved her.

[My book chapter](#) looks at how Abdile's work avoids the lens of "precarity" usually applied to the work of refugees. "Precarity" is part of deficit discourse. It's where a refugee is framed as having to be in real need or distress to be accepted here; to have a refugee story "good enough" to justify their presence in Australia.

Abdile's poem "[I will live, survive and be asked](#)" recounts the story of leaving her country of birth and boarding a boat. She wrote it while in a

refugee detention center.

This poem is peppered with questions you can imagine Abdile has faced again and again. Being asked to recount the details of her escape story and perform for us the "right" emotions. To prove she has a "good enough" plan for her future. This poem analyzes questions mainstream Australia and its legal system ask of refugees to justify their presence and account for future plans.

On the surface, this poem might sound like any other precarious story expected of a refugee or ex-refugee subject. On closer examination, a subtext of defiance is revealed.

When asked, "what do you want to be in the future?" she replies she wants to be a journalist, thereby defying the expectations of a grateful refugee who does not question the establishment.

This is a poet critiquing and moving beyond the deficit lens and firmly in control of her own story.

## **Change is underway**

My previous [research](#) has looked at the lack of representation in TV and film of Australians who aren't white and middle class.

And it's not just my research participants saying this. [Ayesha Madon](#), a young Australian actor of South Asian origin who plays the feisty Amerie Wadia on [Netflix's Heartbreak High](#), has also noted she never saw people like her on Australian media when she was growing up.

But change is underway. The arrival of online streaming platforms, the popularity of "ethnic" comedy, and the relatability of social media accounts of young politicians of color means the tide is slowly shifting.

Second and further-generation migrants like [Que Minh-Luu](#) (Netflix head of content for Australia and New Zealand) are now in decision-making roles. That helps.

Change is also occurring because people of color are finding platforms to self-represent.

Take for example, Indian-American [Hasan Minhaj](#). In his Netflix series, [Patriot Act](#), Minhaj uses political satire to draw in an international audience of racialized millennial youth.

Newsy bits are interspersed with ethnic and generational in-jokes, covering everything from US-Saudi relations, the role of Amazon, social media content moderation and free speech, to Asian Americans in politics.

Minhaj is both "[unapologetically Indian](#)" and the "[rapper who made it](#)." As one writer [put](#) it:

"For many brown Americans [...] he's the kid from the block that people within our communities take a look at and think: "I could do that, too.""

In other words, Minhaj appeals to both ethnic and mainstream cultural spheres—and he does so by laying claim to both cultures. When South Asian-Americans are critiqued, such as in relation to attitudes to racial justice issues in the US, the approach is educative rather than one of otherness or deficit.

## **Telling your own story**

There's also a lesson to be learned in the social media profiles of young politicians of color, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) in the US and Jagmeet Singh in Canada. They're using social media to build digital

intimacy and collective aspiration for their followers.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for instance, uses Instagram and Twitter strategically and creatively to build an engaging, personalized, and professional persona. On Instagram, she is talking policy details one minute and cooking an Instant Pot mac and cheese the next. She is in firm control of the way her story, in all its nuance, is told.

Over on Canadian politician Jagmeet Singh's [Instagram](#), serious policy discussion is mixed in with family Halloween pics as well as mentions of Diwali and the Sikh celebration Bandi Chhor Divas.

## More to be done

We can celebrate the strides made by the children of migrants and refugees who have access to education and the mobility it enables. But it's also important to underscore that many newly-arrived refugees have to strive harder to feel a sense of belonging.

For these communities, it is vital the mainstream media disavow the deficit lens, take [ethical obligations](#) seriously, and create space for racialised peoples to tell their own stories.

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