

## Losing The Plot

# Do multicultural ghettos inside our film, TV and stage industries affect how culturally diverse communities see themselves?

**ECCV's 8th social cohesion roundtable in Melbourne revealed an entrenched ghettoization of culturally diverse actors, writers and plotlines in Victoria's and Australia's film, TV and stage industry. Community feedback to ECCV indicates that stereotyped or absent media representations of ethnicity and faith is contributing to their disengagement from society. As government policy makers and security agencies try to strengthen our community safety, is it timely to invite the producers of our cultural imagination to the social cohesion table?**

ECCV is the peak policy advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria and consults with communities when their voices are not heard in the policy process. In October 2016 we consulted with culturally diverse actors, writers, directors and stage professionals in partnership with Actors Equity, one of the most established union and industry advocates for Australian screen, TV and stage professionals within the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA).

Despite recent controversy over Waleed Aly's Gold Logie and the racial storm at the Oscars ceremony overseas, discussion over diversity in Australian film and television is not new. Controversies include the lead casting of actor Cameron Daddo in the 1993 remake of early 1970s Indigenous detective drama *Bony*; the Australian Film

Commission's report *Broadcast in Colour: Cultural Diversity and Television Programming in Four Countries* (2002) and more recently Screen Australia's diversity report *Seeing ourselves: Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama* (2016). Widespread media commentary has characterised the debate which ECCV considers relevant to its intersectional policy work on social cohesion. ECCV found that culturally diverse actors and writers struggled to portray ethnic characters with humanity, career pathways, or lead roles in Australian society. In the current political climate the industry's influence on role models for multicultural communities concerns us.

Screen Australia's diversity report takes stock of how culturally diverse communities are represented on our TV screens. The 26 actors, writers, and screen and stage professionals from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds who took part in ECCV's roundtable represent the lived experience of diverse communities on both our screen and stage. They act as avatars for Victoria's diverse ethnic and faith communities; using character and script to shape the cultural imagination of what it means to be Australian.

***"There's no two ways about it: Australia has a problem with diversity on television."*** SBS, 8 April, 2016

Culturally diverse actors, writers, their peers and supporters work in the margins of this industry – but rarely in the main cast or as featured stories. Their careers are often defined by tokenism, with characters that lack humanity and narratives that reinforce negative cultural stereotypes. In contrast, producers and their investors represent a strongly Anglo-Celtic Australian demographic and professional culture that participants described as 'white', while citing examples from film and TV. What is clear to ECCV is that a process of ghettoization in Australia's creative industries contributes to a surplus of onscreen characters and plots which do not represent Victoria's multicultural society.

With almost half of Victoria's population born overseas or with one or two parents born overseas, ECCV see cultural ghettoization in our cultural products as detrimental to disengaged culturally and ethnically diverse youth disconnecting from images of Australian values. Participants questioned if Australian producers and networks have enjoyed certain interpretive freedoms to exclude culturally diverse lived community experiences under section 18D of the Anti-Discrimination Act.

Screen and stage and television network business models also measure and evaluate narratives using the emotional response from their audience. ECCV see opportunities for social cohesion policy makers attempting to understand why multicultural communities feel disengaged to look at Australia's screen and stage culture. The Strategic Plan of Victoria's Community Resilience Unit (CRU) within The Department of Premier and Cabinet is seeking to understand how young people "feel a sense of belonging" or "feel empowered and able to actively participate in the community, in order to disengage from extreme views which may undermine community harmony". ECCV thanks the roundtable participants for their honesty.

## Key Consultation Insights

ECCV commend the Screen Australia report (2016) and seek to build on it from a Victorian community perspective in relation to its policy and advocacy for multicultural Victorians. The participants discussed their working lives as actors, writers, creative and casting directors as well as managers of mainstream theatre companies.

Several participants had appeared in iconic Australian dramas and ECCV found strong awareness of their unofficial place in the industry as supporting "ethnic characters". Participants' insights mirror ECCV community feedback about stereotyped media representations, and the erasure of their lived experience from the cultural imagination presented on screen and stage. Participants are not named, but

some names of films, television shows and theatre companies remain.

### Participants' insights

***"It's difficult to understand how important it is for future generations of Australians from diverse background to have role models in the media."*** The Sydney Morning Herald, May 14, 2016.

ECCV roundtable participants expressed their disappointment in the Australian film, TV and theatre industry due to the limited parts played by culturally diverse actors. Their comments were:

- It's not just about security issues. It's not just about political thrillers. It's about people wanting to engage in their daily life. That's really

important, because it's about how people connect with what we can call the general society and to feel a sense of loyalty.

- When you keep reproducing the same narratives over and over, we reproduce our unconscious bias. We reproduce self-fulfilling prophecies or truths which then become reality and the lens refracts and refracts and you end up in this kind of cull de sac. So for me it isn't even remotely surprising that what we create in art, the stories we read from infancy, that we see on television, that we absorb through theatre, the story of who we are individually, as a community as a nation then impacts how we legislate that body of people. Who is included and who is excluded. Who is suspect and who is not.
- We make dramas about dreams and anxieties we have about our insecurities as a culture and it's not that we don't have a diversity of experience represented, but all too often that's not what we use it for.
- I know a woman and her mother was an actress and she played one role her whole life. For a long time, there was one role for a woman of colour in Australia and I think that's the point.
- I work in the theatre. Some things are quite pervasive. So even in the Screen Australia report the categorizations are, are you Anglo Saxon, Celtic, European or Non-European? That's problematic for me. I come from Singapore and I'm Eurasian, so I'm half Chinese and half Eurasian come from Singapore so already its complex. I don't have the same reference point. I come from a country where the cultural majority is Chinese, but nobody ever talks about other people as non-Chinese. So I think that's something to think about.
- Our cultural preoccupations tell a story, supposedly, of where our identities are deposited. Who is self and who is other.
- This really goes to the heart of our cultural imagination or what someone said was this idea of this imagined space called *Wonderland*, the Australian romantic comedy TV series. This continuum throughout cultural production where in this imagined space Australia is white. And it never was. So what is being consistently reproduced?

- We know it's important to people's mental health. Representation is not a side issue. It really is an issue of social cohesion, identity and validity.
- If you say something to someone over how many years, everyone's got battle scars from that. Some more visible than others.

***"...until [Waleed] Aly drew attention to the elephant in the room: the subtle, and not so subtle, racism of network television in this country."*** The Sydney Morning Herald, May 14, 2016.

ECCV participants expressed their dismay that the culturally diverse characters in Australian TV are often less prominent and portray negative stereotypes despite a population of viewers who make up about 50 percent of people born overseas. They commented:

- I think we want to see ourselves represented. We want to see what we see when we walk down the street. We want the art to reflect real life right? I think it starts to get a bit tokenistic when it has to be explained, and it's *always* explained. So we can't just be the son. You have to be the Malaysian one with the black story about the thing and the brother and the weird stuff that happened and oh we don't talk about that side because that will explain away your identity.
- I've been working in television and I found in talking to my fellow actors of different races, that there is a lot of so called, let's just categorise it as this - supporting roles for people with different backgrounds.
- I'm trying to navigate the fact that I'm playing a character who was written as Asian. She started off basically as the T&A of the show, the lesbian lover, the sexual kind of thing. That's what I was there for. The Asian spice. And then she's turned into a drug addict and now she deals drugs, so all through this I have no issues, and a lot of my colleagues have no problem with playing sex workers because these are real people [defining themselves] in society. But the problem I'm finding is the lack of humanity – and I know that's been discussed before – whether or not that's because that character is a supporting character and obviously is not 'a story' or her own storyline, therefore as a writer knows, there's not much opportunity to flesh that out.
- It's interesting as you get to the point where you say, what am I actually perpetuating? We've got all the Asian characters on [our TV show] at the moment. Characters who are around and don't

have any humanity. I've begun to have a problem with that as an Asian woman and also because of how I see the industry, how I see TV. I look at the [Screen Australia] Report. I read it thoroughly and noticed that a lot of the statistics was about the classification of 'main cast – re-occurring roles'. So I'd be very interested to know when we're talking about lead roles, because we're talking about leadership. If you're always on the outskirts doing things you're reinforcing in society's mind, that's the Asian girl's place in society. I'm not really sure how to shift that.

***“...we respond emotionally to both fictional narratives and media streams of world events in a complex range of ways ... [that] allow for the development of empathy”*** Associate Professor Marcus O'Donnell, Deakin University in *The Conversation*.

One culturally diverse participant commented on how TV shows reflect and shape society.

- I'd say Jack Bauer in *24*. So basically, Bauer's character type, [the hyper vigilant law enforcer] could be alive and well and living in the minds of [our] policy mentalities ... we see a black president on *24* and suddenly we've got a black president.

Other participants talked about the power TV shows have to affect social change in a good way and the subsequent missed opportunities and limitations in the Australian screen and stage community. Typical comments were:

- I just need to make a few points about things that need to happen in television that may change our social cohesion. I don't think Obama would have happened if Morgan Freeman had not been cast as the president over and over. The imagining of the nation is activated and they started to think about it. So social cohesion and social change can happen through film and television - absolutely. Yes, producers make all kinds of decisions but I think it has to come from making the producers accountable.
- A week ago I was sitting with these girls and we were writing hip hop songs and tunes. And they looked at me as if, oh my god, you're a person from the real world. We've been in media for 20, 30 years and we're not part of the real world and what hit me was that, these panel shows are full of people who are not interacting with young people of colour. There's a lot of amazing things about their culture [but] the first time that [they] get focused on, it's this negative story.

- So when my little ones, and particularly my younger one who is fifteen months, when she grows up and watches television she's going to learn very quickly, who she is or where she sits adjacent to narratives. She's going to know that most of them are boys. And most of them are white. And that her role sits off to the side. My son, when he was at school he used to draw himself as a brown person and pink over the top so he has this sense of himself that he's not quite – you know. I don't know where he will sit in a cultural production [where] they don't get to be heroes in their own narratives.
- Young women of colour coming up are still going through this same thing, not feeling that they can take leadership roles and be writers and be actors and that for me is basic discrimination; that you can live in a country like Australia and can't be anything you want to be.
- As an Indigenous person I can understand the apprehension of the mob not wanting to approach theatre companies with all these white faces. If there were more multicultural presences in theatre companies, like in the Malthouse, you'd feel a little bit safer, and there's more people to talk to because otherwise you go there and think they don't want to know my story they want to put on Shakespeare and there's that *thing*.

***“The lack of humanity is what upsets me. So I cannot do that role or I can do it and try to work things on the inside”*** an ECCV roundtable participant.

Victorian graduates from culturally diverse backgrounds, in the areas of performance and screen production, were enthusiastic as well as fearful and frustrated about their future career opportunities. They commented on the unfair constraints and stereotyping they faced in their professions such as:

- In my 20s, I was the only black woman in the comedy festival for something like five or six years. I know how that feels, that sense of, 'I've never seen this body, I've never heard my voice, I've never heard these issues'. And I don't know why as a country we think that's ok or normal and say, 'just take the gig'.
- I'd like to speak about my appearance at the moment. I work in a new TV series.... They wrote a character my cultural background, who spoke with an accent and there was some highly caricatured issues with that character. I really wanted the job and liked the premise of the whole show, so in

giving my script feedback I encouraged them and didn't want to piss anyone off. So I then start mentioning about the cultural representation [and] stripping back the accent. I'm a person of colour in this country.

- I graduated from VCA and I was like, I just want any job they can give me. I'll put a foot in the door and then I'm going to change it. There are a lot of us (culturally diverse actors) coming out of NIDA or drama school at the moment and they're really keen to fill this spot, and they don't necessarily know (the barriers) as well as we do.
- Nobody's putting a gun to my head. I mean its work and I can fund the other project that I'm working on that means a lot to me to get my voice out there. It's a constant negotiation. So with earning that money, while I'm on the set, while I'm on the stage, when I get given stuff. What I do with it matters. People say, it's only one line but you're a good actor you can do amazing things with it. That's [rubbish]. So it's almost like I'm trying with what I get, clutching at straws, to give that person humanity. The lack of humanity is what upsets me. So I cannot do that role or I can do it and try to work things on the inside.

**“We need to have circuit-breakers to challenge audiences to see what Australia is really like”**

actor/writer Benjamin Law speaking to Fran Kelly on ABC's RN Breakfast, 13 January 2016.

The roundtable participants talked about how industry leaders did not see culturally diverse writers and actors as an untapped resource for example:

- I think it has to change in very tangible ways from the top down. We need to look at ways to see diversity in leadership and I think that leads into far more culturally diverse writers being conditioned to write stories from lived experience [and] transfers down from the director to the actors performing them.
- I mean artistic directors, executive producers, funding bodies and companies that are very white, they need to take responsibility so in the future, their companies won't be so white. And you do that by opening up opportunities 360 degrees. House staff, front of house, in the leadership of the board, it actually needs to happen in every way.
- The question then is also to recognize diversity is also not just in representation but in process. And

it's important to keep re-shaping those models because those models haven't worked – full stop.

- It's time the leaders of the theatre companies, the television networks, and top production companies step up to the plate. It's time. You know, I don't want to see this anymore.

***“[We're used to] thinking that we're post-racial and celebrating multiculturalism when it suits us, claiming that we are a multicultural society when it's on the world stage or when it comes down to tokenistic things like food or festivals. But when it comes down to our cultural production I think we're really lagging behind”*** Randa Abdel-Fattah speaking to Fran Kelly on ABC's RN Breakfast, 13 January 2016.

The under-representation of culturally diverse actors was of concern to the participants. Their comments were:

- There are very few examples we can give you where not most of the characters, if not all of the characters on the screen, are white. So at the moment, I was just kind of flicking through tele because I don't watch it much these days, and looking at things like Moody Christmas (the Australian comedy drama) and there's *The Wrong Girl* (Australian drama series) coming up, a whole heap of new shows coming up.
- I know you have the best of intentions [and] the Screen Australia report has done that [but] we continue to have such dialogues about how do we actually shift that language without them [Producers] having to say oh African or Chinese or Indonesian or what if the primary protagonist in the story is just human?
- [It's] where the producers are and where the money is and where the money comes from because people often say we're speaking about seeing a very white show like [TV show] *Wonderland*, possibly the most unfathomable show I've ever seen. An apartment block in Bondi Sydney that was entirely white. And had one token one out of town guy who was Spanish or something like that. I'm sorry that was Sydney-for one, and that's Bondi-for two, and I don't see anyone but white people. It was actually not believable.

Participants expressed their disappointment about limited character roles for actors from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia for example:

- So my character is also gay-tick, and evil-tick (*everyone laughs*). They had to make it worth the producer's time by making him brown, by making him the bad guy, so that's why he could get his story told. So the producers accepted the original story but then started to pull back once it was approved to make it more marketable
- I'm always slightly hopeful that there might be more of us on the telebox [*everyone nods*] and, I think we're in the sixth season of [TV show] *Offspring* and, I think second of [TV show] *Hospital* and there's like this great game that if you woke up in that hospital and you woke up and looked around everybody was white. You think I better get off this set because I'm not in a real space and you know when you're watching this that it doesn't reflect the space, that you would find when you walk out onto the street.
- About fifteen years ago I used to hear this about this idea that we export this, and this is what the Brits, this is what they want to see over there about Australia. They want to see this bleached blond so we have to give the people what they want right? And then, it was the UK that voiced the concern by saying hey, your show's really white. The Indian family on *Neighbors* came about through the criticism of the mono-culturalism on Ramsey Street.
- Just on that as well... hearing it in the studios, it was Australia that asked for more colour and it was the UK who said we don't want that. But then I've also heard the opposite as well

***"I would love to get a job and there be a cultural advisor so I could just relax and not put myself at risk every time I go to work"*** ECCV roundtable participant.

The narrow stereotyping of stage and screen characters was reflected in the following comments:

- Look why is every Asian in this series running a restaurant (*everyone nods*). I would love to get a job and there be a cultural advisor so I could just relax and not put myself at risk every time I go to work.
- At one point when I was on my last day there were no people of colour in the background and I was kind of really upset about that. And the director came up to me and said, you're not your usual bubbly self and I said, I don't want to say it but, I'm really a brown person. I've been here every single day and I've seen a mixture of cultures and all that stuff as well, it's been fantastic, and today is my

last day and it's like, look he's leaving so let's go back to whiteness.

- I've been very lucky. I've been able to work in what some people would call a very white arena. But you know ... it becomes a bit problematic and they think maybe they can explain me as the adoptive one or she is the only person of colour [so] we'll cast her as the outsider within the story who has the unrequited love or is the odd person in town.

***"The casting directors and producers are trying to not break the spell. They're putting on TV what they think, in their mind, the audience is expecting"*** Article in *Reportage Online*, 15 September, 2014.

Roundtable attendees commented on the constraints of the profit-oriented film industry, and that producers saw diversity as an economic risk. In doing so they miss opportunities to empower their audiences through a greater exposure to diversity, for example:

- They're being written (multicultural scripts) but ticked off because you hear this so many times: 'Oh but people won't watch that. We can't put a person of colour on the poster because it won't sell tickets' or 'we won't do that because it's not what people want to see'. Isn't it? Or is it just not what the people *you* know don't want to see because they live in a tiny bracket of the people the producers know?
- You're exactly right and I would say I would love to walk into a room of sponsors and see some people of colour there. (Everybody nods in agreement). My job now is behind stage. Being a businessman as well now, being national manager of a company who understands the dollar, I want to see some really good multicultural businesses out there giving money back into the Arts.
- The marketing [is] the problem. What we see in our world is something like this. You walk down the street and you will see the ratio that looks pretty right. The producer's world, when they walk down their street is actually a roomful of white people with the same amount of money as they have...So when we say this isn't a representation of Australia, their Australia is what we see on television and they're the people who get to make the decisions.

***“It comes down, she thinks, to the writing”*** The Sydney Morning Herald, May 14, 2016

One person talked about dashed hopes and dreams and the misrepresentation of real people in our local migration context:

- Sometimes what happens is that they (diverse scripts) are written [but] once the producer comes on board,...and now because you are brown, but we want you to be black, we want you to be Sudanese, but you’re clearly not Sudanese so we’re just going to fling the Sudanese person into you. We want you to represent every single migratory person across African communities and it ends up where writers are trying to be inclusive, but they’re being inclusive by [separating us]. So they’re trying to include stories that will be seen as inclusivity but they write the story in a way that removes the humanity of this person. It turns the person into an idea.

***“In LA, he has been feted for his ethnicity. “There’s huge competition between networks to find the top ethnic actors of the year,... it’s not about being philanthropic, it’s about booking talent that can sell product at home and internationally”*** The Sydney Morning Herald, May 14, 2016.

Our participants noted that the international scene is doing much better than the Australian screen and stage industry around policies and legislation to ensure fair and equitable culturally diverse representation. Some typical comments included:

- When this changed in places like the UK and the US, most meaningfully, it was when legislation was brought in [and] around anti-discrimination legislation and quotas.
- The thing that I always rail against is I hear that people of colour won’t get the ticket sales that someone else will, which is why their face is not on the poster. Which I think is nonsense because I know amazing actors with amazing reputations.
- I am really interested how a recent production with a very multicultural cast with only two white people in it will go in Queensland. The Melbourne season sold out before we even started rehearsals, and now it’s sold out, Geelong is selling out really quickly and I’m standing watching everyone going out and they’re all white people. The marketing people are being asked by me, why has this show done so well?

- I think we need policy and laws that make these people accountable. I think you need people of colour at the writing table ... and policy around that – around building people’s skills base up so that they can be there at the table creating those stories.
- If you have some codes and principles that you can use as a framework, that does still have diversity policies in place, then at least these companies will be accountable for reflecting real life
- To get around unconscious bias ...there’s an exception in [this] industry for legislation that other sectors have to follow and abide by.
- In [the past] there was this whole discussion which has been ongoing. This discussion around casting Cameron Daddo in the role of (TV show) *Boney*, you know, and a group of people were brought together and I was one of them. It was one of those moments, and very early in my career, but I could see the significance of it and the affect it would have on many of us. If they could get away with doing something like that and make any excuse they wanted to, then they will continue to do it and they have since then. And you know I always been aware of this quota that they have in the States. This country is so far behind...

## Future Directions

- Specifically consult with ethnically and culturally diverse youth on the messages of Australian screen and TV narratives.
- Review government grants to build the capacity of culturally diverse writers to participate in telling more representative Australian plots and characters on the Australian screen and stage.
- Initiate conversation with Australian media producers to raise awareness of the effect of screen and stage narratives on social cohesion in Victoria.
- Initiate discussion on the role of legislation, codes of practice and targets to address the lack of diversity in Australia’s cultural production.
- Fund cultural advisors to work alongside producers, directors and casting professionals to build their cultural capacity.

## About ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs

ECCV’s social cohesion policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on social cohesion issues. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members,

leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We aim to post our briefs online within four weeks.

The information is a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 42 years of policy research and consultation with multicultural Victorians.

To receive future ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs please subscribe by emailing [eccv@eccv.org.au](mailto:eccv@eccv.org.au) with the subject 'Subscribe to Social Cohesion PB'.

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## Select Government & Industry Report

Seeing ourselves Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama, Screen Australia, 2016  
<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/157b05b4-255a-47b4-bd8b-9f715555fb44/TV-Drama-Diversity.pdf>

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[http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/images/documents/about\\_dpc/Strategic\\_Framework\\_to\\_Strength\\_Victorias\\_Social\\_Cohesion.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/images/documents/about_dpc/Strategic_Framework_to_Strength_Victorias_Social_Cohesion.pdf)

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[http://afcarchive.screenaustralia.gov.au/downloads/policies/broadcast\\_colour.pdf](http://afcarchive.screenaustralia.gov.au/downloads/policies/broadcast_colour.pdf)

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<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/the-family-law-and-challenging-televisions-white-australia/7085900>

As life imitates art, how are we to read terror plots in film and TV?, Marcus O'Donnell, *The Conversation*, 21 July 2016.

<https://theconversation.com/as-life-imitates-art-how-are-we-to-read-terror-plots-in-film-and-tv-62695>

Australian TV is not diverse enough. For screenwriters like me, it's a relief to have proof, Niki Aken, *The Guardian*, 25 August 2016

[https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/aug/25/australian-tv-is-not-diverse-enough-for-screenwriters-like-me-its-a-relief-to-have-proof?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/aug/25/australian-tv-is-not-diverse-enough-for-screenwriters-like-me-its-a-relief-to-have-proof?CMP=share_btn_fb)

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<http://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2016/08/24/why-australian-television-needs-makeover>

Why you should care about the casual racism on television

*SBS New*, 8 Apr 2016, Osman Faruqi,  
<http://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2016/04/06/why-you-should-care-about-casual-racism-television>

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<http://www.reportageonline.com/2014/09/does-australian-tv-have-a-white-australia-policy/>

Ethnic diversity on Australian TV: are we finally ready for colour on our screens? *Sydney Morning Herald*, Karl Quinn

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/ethnic-diversity-on-australian-tv-are-we-finally-ready-for-colour-on-our-screens-20160513-goug2.html>

*How Movies Can Change Our Minds*, John Guida, The Opinion Page, *The New York Times*, February 4, 2015  
<http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/04/how-movies-can-change-our-minds/?r=0>

Typecast as a terrorist, Riz Ahmed, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/15/riz-ahmed-typecast-as-a-terrorist>

Photo from Creative Commons adjusted:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jeepersmedia/13866683774/>