

Commentary

Instrumentalization of Ethnic Media

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ABSTRACT *The ever widening gap in public discourse within a multicultural society is of concern. Among many factors, continuing and emerging practices of marginalization of ethnic minorities, ethnic media, and ethnic discourse in the media industries in Canada deserve attention. Parallel to the under-representation of ethnic minorities in mainstream media production and content, ethnic media organizations and the discourse they produce are equally under-represented in the media industries and public discourse. A recent new shift in this practice is the “instrumentalization of ethnic media”—that is, a strategic use of ethnic media as an instrument to serve the interests of stakeholders rather than of the general public. This commentary problematizes this new shift and calls for more research and policy attention.*

KEYWORDS *Race; Ethnicity; Ethnic media; Media industries*

RÉSUMÉ *Un écart sans cesse grandissant dans le discours public au sein d'une société multiculturelle est préoccupant. En effet, entre autres facteurs, des pratiques continues et émergentes de marginalisation de minorités, médias et discours ethniques dans les industries des médias au Canada méritent une attention particulière. En plus d'une sous-représentation de minorités ethniques dans la production et le contenu des médias dominants, les organisations médiatiques ethniques et le discours qu'elles produisent sont aussi sujets à une sous-représentation. D'autre part, un développement récent de cette pratique est « l'instrumentalisation de médias ethniques », c'est-à-dire l'utilisation stratégique de médias ethniques comme instruments pour servir les intérêts de parties prenantes plutôt que du grand public. Cet article problématise ce développement et recommande davantage de recherche et d'attention politique.*

MOTS CLÉS *Race; Ethnicité; Médias ethniques; Industries des médias*

Under-representation or misrepresentation of ethnic minorities in mainstream media production (as producers) and in media content (as subjects of representation) is rather common in North America. Studies continue to find such cases in media in general and news media in particular (see, for example, Gandy, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2005; Mahtani & Mountz, 2002; Tator & Henry, 2006; Yu & Ahadi, 2010). Indeed, it is one of the factors that propel the growth of ethnic media, by encouraging minorities to set up media by and for themselves (Gandy, 2000). The number of these media to date

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certainly illustrates this growth. According to national ethnic media networks such as the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada (NEPMCC, n.d.), and New America Media (NAM) of the U.S., there are roughly 300 ethnic print media in Canada and 3,000 print and broadcast media combined in the U.S. The significance of this media sector reaches beyond the growing numbers: it is the “only print media sector that is growing in the United States,” and one in four Americans depend on it for their daily news feeds (Pew Research Center, 2006).

This growing media sector of business and editorial interest, however, is not quite visible in the broader media industries, as well as in public discourse—as in the case of ethnic minorities in mainstream media production and content (Yu, in press). In Canada, there is no accurate national count of the sector: subsequent studies have proved that the counts provided by NEPMCC, for example, represent only a part of the larger sector (see, for example, Murray, Yu, & Ahadi, 2007). More importantly, to what extent ethnic news produced by these media reaches a broader audience still warrants further research. This is an important question considering that the rest of the so-called multicultural society is in an information void about ethnic discourse, and the proper exercise of citizenship is at risk. While this calls for greater policy attention, cases such as “ethnic media monitoring” by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in 2012 and the “ethnic vote scandal” by the BC Liberals in 2013 suggest a new shift in marginalization of ethnic minorities. Indeed, “instrumentalization of ethnic media”—that is, a strategic use of ethnic media as an instrument to serve the interests of stakeholders rather than of the general public—is under way and calls for greater public attention. This commentary problematizes this new shift in Canada and calls for more research and policy attention.

Under-representation of “ethnic minorities” in mainstream media

Under-representation of ethnic minorities in Canadian mainstream media is no surprise. As discussed elsewhere (Yu, in press), under-representation of ethnic minorities in media production and content is an ongoing phenomenon despite Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism. In media production, for example, the Employment Equity Policy (Public Notice CRTC 1997-34) requires all broadcasting licensees with 25 to 99 employees to report on “the on-air presence of members of the four designated groups (women, aboriginal persons, disabled persons and members of visible minorities)” (CRTC, 1997, last para.). However, the reality is that “visible minorities” account for only 8 percent of the permanent positions in Canadian public broadcasting (i.e., the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) as of 2014 (CBC, 2014). In the commercial sector, two of CTV British Columbia’s four morning news hosts are from visible minority groups, and 12 percent of CTV Calgary’s on-air staff are from either visible minority or Aboriginal groups (Bell Media Inc., 2013). The focus on such “reporting” has been proven ineffective elsewhere. Since 1971, the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) program of the Federal Communication Commission in the U.S. has required stations with more than five employees to report the race and gender of their employees (Hollifield & Kimbro, 2010). However, no significant change has been seen over the years, and instead “structural factors” such as “[the] diversity of the surrounding population, a station’s desire to target minority audiences, minority own-

ership of the station, and the size of the market in which the station was located” were found to be more important predictors of workforce diversity (p. 243), suggesting a significant gap between policy and practice in addressing the areas in need. As evidence of lack of diversity, less than 1 percent (or 0.33%, to be exact) of the television stations in the U.S. are owned by African Americans, and slightly over 1 percent (or 1.11%) are owned by Latinos (Waldman & Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, 2011).

In terms of the representation of ethnic minorities in media content, under-representation or misrepresentation of ethnic minorities continues despite the presence of policy directives such as the Policy Framework for Canadian Television (Public Notice CRTC 1999-97; see CRTC, 1999) and the Equitable Portrayal Code (Public Notice CRTC 2008-23) that are *supposed* to ensure quantity and quality of minority representation (Yu, in press). Specifically, the Equitable Portrayal Code was developed to address this issue in order “to overcome unduly negative portrayal and stereotyping in broadcast programming, including commercial messages, based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability” (CRTC, 2008, Appendix, para. 10, “Statement of Intent”). Nevertheless, studies such as a comparative news analysis of English and Korean newspapers during the 2008 federal election (Yu & Ahadi, 2010) found significant under-representation of ethnic minorities, in that less than 5 percent of front-page news in Vancouver’s local English newspapers dealt with ethnic minorities, in contrast to 27 percent in Korean-language newspapers. Minorities are also misrepresented. Studies (see, for example, Henry & Tator, 2005; Mahatani & Mountz, 2002; Tator & Henry, 2006) continue to document misrepresentation of minorities and confirm that the discourse presented in Canadian media “serves to stigmatize whole communities of people based on their ethnicity and/or skin colour” (Henry & Tator, 2005, p. 35).

Additionally, ethnic minorities are not only under-represented or misrepresented but also under-served, regardless of whether they are considered as a general public or consumers. Gandy (2000) argues that when ethnic minorities are considered as a public, provision of services targeting this group in public broadcasting often varies depending on the subscription to diversity and commitment to multiculturalism, and that commercial media tend to be “not only capable, but ultimately more efficient than state-run media in responding to a host of concerns subsumed under a public interest umbrella” (p. 47). Likewise, when considered as a commodity and market, the advertiser-driven market where the majority audience is considered “desirable,” ethnic minorities are “under-[supplied]” (pp. 48–49) with content, although they may be served relatively better than in the public sector. Canadian media are no exception. In terms of the provision of content, the commercial sector—such as multicultural television stations like Rogers Media’s OMNI and Shaw’s Shaw Multicultural Channel—may seem more capable and efficient, as Gandy argues. However, Rogers Media’s decision in May 2015 to eliminate OMNI’s multilingual local news (in Cantonese, Italian, Mandarin, and Punjabi) as a solution to deal with OMNI’s “financial crisis,” according to Rogers Media president Keith Pelley (Haupt, 2015), questions the commercial sector’s relative capacity to serve ethnic

minorities. Indeed, “TV’s diversity die-off has just begun,” as Michael Geist has rightly stated in his comments to *The Tyee* (Geist, 2015).

Under-representation of “ethnic media” in the media industries

Such under-representation or misrepresentation and under-service of ethnic minorities in production and content are important motivators for ethnic minorities to create media by and for themselves. The number of ethnic media has grown significantly in the past few decades, especially in cities like Vancouver and Toronto, where over 40 percent of the population speaks languages other than the official languages (Statistics Canada, 2011). Nevertheless, these media are equally under-represented in the media industries (Yu, in press): there is no accurate national count of this growing media sector. Commercial and grassroots organizations provide estimates; however, none of these offer a comprehensive national picture of the sector. The commercial media directories such as Canadian Advertising Rates and Data (CARDOnline.ca) offer a self-verified national list of approximately 300 ethnic media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio, and Web sources combined). Similarly, grassroots initiatives such as the aforementioned National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada (NEPMCC)—a non-profit network of ethnic print media—offer a national count of ethnic media, yet it is “print media” only, listing approximately 300 media outlets. When compared to aggressive regional mapping completed by academic institutions, however, these counts prove to capture only a small portion of the sector. Indeed, a study conducted by Simon Fraser University titled *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Media in BC* (Murray et al., 2007) identified approximately 150 ethnic media outlets in the Metro Vancouver area alone (see School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, n.d.) compared to just over 20 outlets each (25 and 26 outlets, respectively) in the province of British Columbia, as of 2015, listed by CARD Online and NEPMCC. In addition, a study conducted by Connectus Consulting Inc. for Canadian Heritage published a list of “ethnocultural publications” in 2013 and reported a total of 427 publications, including 68 in BC (Connectus Consulting Inc., 2013). Nonetheless, the list was again the print media sector only rather than the entire ethnic media sector.

What does this under- or misrepresentation and under-service imply? The political economy of the media industries in general is one explanation. As Gandy (2000) has argued earlier, no matter how loud ethnic media owners shout about the growing potential of the ethnic market, their voice is met with cold indifference by the industry stakeholders who are not convinced about the value of ethnic minorities as a commodity and market. Instead, only those that are “commodified” such as *Sing Tao* receive attention for cross-ethnic partnerships, as in the case of *Sing Tao* and Star Media Group (Jin & Kim, 2011). Nonetheless, the political economy of the media industries is not solely to be blamed when we think that intercultural outreach should be two-way. The low rate of voluntary registration of ethnic media with commercial media directories leads to self-perpetrated under-representation in the media industry, as these directories depend largely on voluntary registration of media outlets. Only leading ethnic media outlets such as *Sing Tao* or Fairchild TV appear in commercial directories, suggesting low awareness of and/or motivation

for affiliating with industry associations, especially among smaller-sized mom-and-pop-type ethnic media outlets.

Under-representation of “ethnic discourse” in the public discourse

If ethnic media outlets are visible mostly within the ethnic media sector, what about the news produced by these media outlets? One of the mandates of ethnic media is to connect the local community to the country of origin, or to serve as “a focal point for the development of a local consensus and a means of expression of the community’s demand upon the wider host community” (Gandy, 2000, pp. 45–46). The latter role is particularly important for ethnic discourse to be part of broader discourse, not only for ethnic minorities to have their voices heard, but also for the rest of the society to be properly informed. And yet this mandate is still questionable. In Toronto alone, there are four daily newspapers in Chinese, along with the ones in Indian, Korean, and Spanish (Kuttenbrouwer, 2013). However, to what extent news produced by these media outlets reaches a broader audience remains a question.

One of the problems pointed out by earlier studies is a lack of intercultural dialogue initiated either by mainstream or ethnic media, as is evident in major headlines, which vary across languages (Murray et al., 2007). Mainstream media present limited coverage of countries where new immigrants mostly come from (Murray et al., 2007). Indeed, only 14 percent of news in mainstream media is dedicated to international news that is not directly related to Canada, while 74 percent is dedicated to local and national news in which ethnic minorities are rarely seen (Murray et al., 2007). Similarly, ethnic media deliver news about broader society to their respective communities but not necessarily news about other ethnic communities. Lindgren’s 2012 content analysis of a Chinese-language daily newspaper in Toronto, *Ming Pao*, found that ethnic groups other than one of their own were significantly under-represented and, to a certain extent, misrepresented. With this apparent disconnect in the public discourse, another problem (or basic assumption) that has been pointed out is the language in which ethnic news is produced: ethnic news is not accessible to a broader audience because its content is primarily in third languages other than English or French. Would ethnic news produced in the official languages then be more likely to reach a broader audience, beyond their respective ethnic communities? In fact, more than 10 percent of media outlets listed in the *BC Ethnic Media Directory* produce their content in English. As well, in the U.S., more than half of the 3,000 members of New America Media (equivalent to 1,527) provide content in English (see *NAM National Ethnic Media Directory* at New American Media, n.d.). Although this question warrants further research, Karim’s 2002 study of a South Asian newspaper in Vancouver suggested limited reach due to a lack of intercultural strategies.

Instrumentalization of ethnic media

Interestingly, however, intercultural strategies are actively pursued by mainstream media as a means to expand their market. Ongoing ad hoc trial-and-error attempts by mainstream media to offer multilingual services to tap into the growing ethnic market are a case in point. CBC British Columbia, for example, launched online news in Chinese (www.cbc.ca/bc/chinesenews) in 2008 “to serve the rich diversity of British

Columbia, not only in the content of our news but also in the way we deliver it,” according to CBC BC regional director Johnny Michel (“CBC British Columbia . . .,” 2008). Although the service is now discontinued—interestingly, we know why it was launched but not why it was discontinued—the *Vancouver Sun* described CBC’s intent as a way to “widen its customer base” (“CBC British Columbia . . .,” 2008, para. 1). Initiatives such as this, however, are only a one-way form of communication, as access to the mainstream news headlines is available to Chinese readers while access to local Chinese news headlines for broader readers is not.

In recent years, such strategic intercultural strategies are beginning to emerge in politics: Ethnic media are *instrumentalized*—that is, there is a strategic use of ethnic media as an instrument to serve the interests of stakeholders rather than of the general public. In late 2012, it was reported that the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Privy Council Office (PCO) spent over \$700,000 and \$450,000, respectively, since 2009 to monitor ethnic media (Cheadle & Levitz, 2012). The 7,000 pages of released documents revealed that issues concerning public policy and beyond, including the “assessments of election campaign events and perceptions of Minister Jason Kenney,” (Cheadle & Levitz, 2012, para. 1) had been monitored. In response to this, Kenney, then Minister of CIC, mentioned that ethnic media monitoring was important, as these media provided “stories, issues, voices and perspectives . . . that are often not reflected in so-called mainstream media” and these stories are “very valuable” and “critical sources of intelligence” (The Canadian Press, 2012b, para. 12; 2012a, para. 3). Kenney further acknowledged that “ethnic media sources are the new mainstream media” and “more people follow ethnic media than mainstream sources” (The Canadian Press, 2012a, para. 4). Added to these comments, PCO spokesman Raymond Rivet also noted that “cultural news outlets are an important source of news for many Canadians” (The Canadian Press, 2012a, para. 9). Another controversy that followed in 2013 was the so-called “ethnic vote scandal” by the BC Liberals, when their “multicultural strategic outreach plan” for the May 2013 general election was accidentally leaked (MacLeod & Smith, 2013). The 17-page document listed strategies for “quick wins” of ethnic votes, and ethnic media were discussed as a means to reach ethnic voters. As part of their “Coordinated Media Strategy,” it was emphasized that the BC Liberals’ approach to ethnic media should be redefined “from being ‘add-on’ to being viewed as part of the mainstream media” (CBC News, 2013; MacLeod & Smith, 2013).

Based on these comments, the ways in which ethnic media have been instrumentalized as a tool to serve the interests of political groups raise a great deal of concern. First, the importance and significance of ethnic discourse is recognized, yet it is considered only as a subject of analysis for strategic planning rather than as a voice to be included in broader public discourse. Why is the news that is “valuable” and “critical” to many Canadians available only to a limited few, without reaching a broader audience? Second, if “stories, issues, voices and perspectives” in ethnic media “are often not reflected in so-called mainstream media” and therefore even these interest groups have to use taxpayers’ dollars to monitor ethnic media, where would the general public obtain news about ethnic communities? More importantly, where is the policy that enables access to ethnic discourse?

For a functioning democracy in an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual society, the public sphere and the discourse produced and disseminated within that sphere is expected to be multicultural and multi-ethnic, if not multilingual. In the discussion of this “multi-ethnic public sphere,” ethnic media’s role has been seen either pessimistically as ever fragmenting “sphericules” that are disconnected from the public sphere (Gitlin, 1998, p. 173), or optimistically as a part that constitutes a “multi-ethnic public sphere,” which serves as a civil society and facilitates intercultural dialogue (Husband, 1998). Considering the recent controversies around ethnic media, the general attitude toward ethnic media is vaguely somewhere in the middle. In other words, ethnic media have been considered as an “add-on” at best rather than part of the broader media system, and the discourse they produce is considered “valuable” and worthy of “monitoring,” but not worthy of wider distribution in the broader public sphere. This narrow sense of public discourse—in which *their* discourse is set apart from *our* discourse—is detrimental to our democracy. Beyond the under-representation of ethnic discourse in the public sphere, “the right to communicate” or “communication rights”—where the former is considered as “a right enshrined in international law” whereas the latter is considered as “an expression of social justice on the ground” (Ó Siochrú, 2010, p. 41)—for all members of broader society is at risk. Whether it is lawful rights or a mode of expression of social justice, the general assumption has been that it is the rights of marginalized groups that need to be protected. Interestingly, however, the cases of ethnic media monitoring and the ethnic vote scandal suggest that limited rights are not a matter specific to ethnic minorities, but also to the rest of society. After all, it is the rights of all members of society, regardless of ethnicity, that are at risk, and at our own expense (through taxes).

The road ahead

The ever widening gap in public discourse in a multicultural society can be seen as a result of the under-representation of not only ethnic minorities in mainstream media production and content, but also ethnic media organizations and the discourse these media produce in the media industries and public discourse. Although intercultural outreach may be the responsibility of all involved stakeholders—ethnic and mainstream media, media industry associations, and policymakers—the instrumentalization of ethnic media suggests that greater research and policy attention are needed. More research attention is needed as the contribution to public knowledge is proven in the case of ethnic media mapping projects. Proactive approaches by academic institutions have provided a far clearer picture of the sector compared to commercial directories, which depend largely on voluntary registration of media outlets, thereby excluding those that are not aware of the existence of these directories. Furthermore, research findings from these projects have been shared publicly, thereby contributing to increasing awareness and use of ethnic media and ethnic discourse to a certain extent, unlike commercial directories that are available to industry stakeholders only. Without such research efforts, ethnic discourse, which some political groups consider “valuable” and “critical” to many Canadians, is simply out of reach of the general public, who are ironically in an information void at their own expense. More policy attention is also important since existing policies focus on quantity and quality of minority

representation in employment and programming, although no substantial improvement has been seen even in these areas (Yu, in press). The new shift in the marginalization of ethnic minorities requires new policy initiatives that address the under-representation of ethnic media as businesses, and the discourse they produce as viewpoints, in the media industries and the public sphere. In a positive light, the instrumentalization of ethnic media has brought our attention to the importance of ethnic (or third-language) news monitoring. If a wider distribution of such results is guaranteed, ethnic news monitoring can be an instrument that helps to ensure the citizenship rights pertaining to communication and facilitate intercultural dialogue.

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