

The Inevitably Dialectic Nature of Ethnic Media

A Review Article by

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Global Communication: New Agendas in Communication
Edited by Karin G. Wilkins, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and Shanti Kumar
New York: Routledge, 2014. 206 pp.
ISBN: 9780415828970.

The Media Gaze: Representations of Diversities in Canada
By Augie Fleras
Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. 300 pp.
ISBN: 9780774821377.

Understanding Ethnic Media: Producers, Consumers, and Societies
By Matthew D. Matsaganis, Vikki S. Katz, and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach
Los Angeles: Sage, 2011. 314 pp.
ISBN: 9781412959131.

I have been writing about ethnic media over the past few years, and some of the comments that I have received have made me think about what I would see as stereotyping of ethnic media within the research community. There seems to be a rigid perception that ethnic media are media *only* by, for, and about ethnic communities, and any attempt to extend their role to broader society is questioned at best or dismissed entirely as nonsense. Perhaps a short introduction to the diversity within the ethnic media sector may help diminish some of the perceptual confusion of those who have not looked into the ethnic media sector closely and facilitate the discussion of the inevitably dialectic nature of ethnic media—the very nature that many often overlook.

Inward-Outward, Reactive-Proactive Media

Ethnic media comprise various types, ownership, content, and target audiences, just like the operation of any mainstream or alternative media in the media industries today (Murray, Yu & Ahadi, 2007). Ethnic media are available in different types (e.g., newspapers, magazines, TV,

radio, websites, blogs, online streaming), in different genre (e.g., news, entertainment, culture/lifestyle), and in different languages (ethnic languages, official languages), and are distributed on different platforms (online, offline) at a different frequency (e.g., 24/7, daily, weekly, monthly). These media have different types of owners (e.g., local first- or second-generation immigrants, transnational media of the country of origin) whose businesses operate on different scales (e.g., mom-and-pop, medium-size, corporate) and on different geographic levels (local, national, transnational). These owners pursue different projects (e.g., settlement, integration, cultural retention, advocacy, political, hybrid identity construction, intercultural dialogue, entertainment) that serve the interests of a range of different audiences within and across communities. These audiences may differ by census ethnic/racial categories (e.g., ethnic, single race, mixed race), by generation (e.g., first-generation, second-generation), by citizenship (e.g., temporary residents, immigrants or permanent residents, dual or multiple citizens), and by many more social categories that are created and used to categorize the population.

In *The Media Gaze: Representations of Diversities in Canada*, Augie Fleras (2011) discusses this dialectic nature of ethnic media, or in Fleras' term, the "dialectical dynamic": "the interplay of the reactive-proactive with the inward-outward generates an insular and integrative process that pushes as it pulls—bonding and buffering as well as transcending borders and building and bridging" (2011: 248). In short, ethnic media are inward as they focus on local ethnic communities and respond to the needs of geographically specific communities of their own. In doing so, ethnic media can be reactively "constructing buffers" in order to "react to media negativity/invisibility by offering a minority perspective, including access to local and homeland information" or proactively "creating bonds" to "focus on creating both personal and community accomplishments to foster community cohesion and culture pride" (Ibid: 247). Simultaneously, ethnic media are outward by reaching out to broader society and advocating ethnic voices. In doing so, ethnic media can be reactively "crossing borders" in order to "counteract social injustice (prejudice, discrimination) by advocating for positive changes and levelling the playing field" or proactively "building bridges" to "utilize positive images of minority success for bolstering minority civic participation in an inclusive society" (Ibid).

Certainly, the inward-outward orientation of ethnic media reflects various projects that these media pursue, and yet it is the inward orientation that is often perceived as the only role of ethnic media among those who dismiss the outward orientation as nonsense. Specifically, the reactive-proactive inward orientation is a natural consequence, as I have argued elsewhere (Yu, forthcoming), considering that mainstream media continue to underserve immigrants in terms of programs or information needed for settlement in and integration to broader society, not to mention under/misrepresent immigrants and the countries they come from. One of the studies that illustrate the latter is Mahtani's (2008) work on the perception of Iranian and Chinese immigrants toward mainstream English language television news in Canada. Focus group participants share their frustration through anecdotes such as: "The media tell misleading stories about Iran on purpose. They never show successful people or successful stories. They are always showing bad things about Iran; it affects our community" (Ibid: 648).

In effect, the reactive-proactive outward orientation is the direct response to mainstream media's institutional bias, which is both "systematic"—"conscious and deliberate intent by institutional actors who act on behalf of institutions to deny or exclude others"—and "systemic"—"both impersonal and unconscious, yet no less invidious or invasive" (Fleras, 2011: 75). To this end, ethnic media mobilize community action to not only properly respond to this bias but also proactively communicate the significance of ethnic minorities in a multicultural

society. Indeed, it is only recently that ethnic minorities' disposable income has grown to the point that they have begun to be considered as important consumers in the market (Jin & Kim, 2011).

As such, Fleras' inward-outward orientation of ethnic media confirms that ethnic media are not *only* about ethnic communities in isolation from broader society, but about *all* local, national, and transnational communities of diaspora, the country of settlement (physical location), and the country of origin (ethnocultural location). Interestingly, the scope of the dialectical dynamic of ethnic media is organically expanding beyond looking into their own ethnic communities and looking out to broader society. Ethnic media move forward by linking all interest groups through various new projects pursued by increasingly dialectic producers and users of ethnic media. It is thus important to address *by* and *for* whom and in what dimensions such a transformation is emerging.

By and For Immigrants, Ethnic Minorities, or the Mainstream Population?

To begin, who are ethnic media *by* and *for*: immigrants, ethnic minorities, and/or the mainstream population? In *Understanding Ethnic Media: Producers, Consumers, and Societies* (2011), Matthew D. Matsaganis, Vikki S. Katz, and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach define ethnic media as “media produced *by* and *for* (a) immigrant, (b) ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities, as well as (c) indigenous groups living in various countries across the world” (2011:10). To note, the definition of ethnic media varies widely and largely depends on national discretion. As I have argued elsewhere, the Canadian definition of ethnic media deliberately excludes indigenous people as well as individuals of dominant European heritage (French and English groups), and officially claims that ethnic media are media *only* for visible minorities (Yu, forthcoming). According to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, ethnic media (or more specifically “ethnic program” in broadcasting) are “one, in any language, that is specifically directed to any culturally or racially distinct group *other than* one that is Aboriginal Canadian or from France or the British Isles” (CRTC, 1999, July 16: 117, *emphasis added*). Interestingly, in this definition, the emphasis is only on who these programs are *for*—specifically cultural and racial groups—but not on who these programs are produced *by*. Even with such variations, however, the bottom line is that ethnic media are media *only* for *minorities*, not for the *majority* (or mainstream).

For minorities, Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach (2011) argue that ethnic media serve different groups for different purposes, which, in fact, corresponds to Fleras' inward-outward orientation. For immigrants, ethnic media assist their settlement and integration by providing information such as current affairs of the country of settlement and the country of origin, their rights as new members of society, and classifieds. For ethnic minorities, on the other hand, ethnic media serve as a venue to develop an independent voice, advocate against social injustice, or more loosely as a source of family entertainment across generations. Such differences indeed reflect different experiences in society and subsequently different media needs, since immigrants may be part of ethnic communities, but not all of those within ethnic communities are immigrants. Projecting on Fleras' dialectical dynamic, ethnic media for immigrants characterize the inward orientation, whereas that for ethnic minorities characterize the outward orientation.

Then, are the majority not users of ethnic media at all? Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach (2011) contrast mainstream to ethnic by referring to Alba and Nee's definition of “mainstream”: “part of society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts

on [an individual's] life chances or opportunities" (2011: 10). Based on this, Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach avoid any rigid distinction between European and non-European heritage, and use a broader definition:

The mainstream includes the ethnic majority in a society, but the mainstream and the ethnic majority are not identical. The boundaries of mainstream society are broader. In the United States, for instance, individuals with European heritage are considered part of the mainstream. Through multiple waves of immigration, particularly during the first half of the 20th century, European cultures mixed to create a composite culture that people started to identify as America. As new groups of people arrived in the country from other parts of the world, their cultures influenced and slowly changed that composite culture. Hence, the boundaries of the mainstream expand over time.

(Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach, 2011: 10-11)

The question, however, is that if individuals with European heritage are only *part* (and not the *whole*) of the mainstream, who else (individuals, not just cultural practices) is also considered as part of the mainstream? Mainstream may not be an ethnic majority, since ethnicity is no longer discussed for the mainstream, at least in the census in which European ethnicities have been integrated into the white category through upward sociocultural and economic integration and assimilation (Glazer, 2005), while visible minorities are persistently entitled to their original ethnicity regardless of the level of integration and assimilation. However, mainstream is certainly a racial majority, as over 70% of the U.S. population identify themselves as "white" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Thus, when it comes to ethnic media, it almost naturally excludes the mainstream as users of these media, at least perceptually. Then, does the mainstream produce and use *only* mainstream media? According to Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach, mainstream media are "those media that are produced *by* and are produced *for* the mainstream of society" (2011: 11). Or does the mainstream *also* produce *and* use ethnic media?

Ethnic Media Typology and the Transformation of the Dialectical Dynamic

Fleras' (2011) conceptualization of ethnic media guides us to understand ethnic media typology and trace the transformation, if any. Indeed, the inward-outward orientation of ethnic media is fluid rather than fixed, and thus it is continually transforming, with this transformation being driven by increasingly dialectic producers and users of ethnic media and the various new projects they pursue. Specifically, the inward orientation is evolving to embrace pan-ethnic (or pan-visible minority) identities beyond a single ethnic group. As I have argued elsewhere, cross-ethnic, cross-cultural spaces such as *Schema Magazine* (schemamag.ca)—a Vancouver-born online space for people of multiple identities—emerge to facilitate dialogue among individuals from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds on issues that are not only specific to minority groups, such as identity and identity orientation, but also universal to all ethnicities, such as fashion and pop culture. Such a pan-ethnic initiative is possible for the younger generation, as their perception toward color is relatively more relaxed and "fluid" (Chuang, 2010, December 14). As Sandy Close, the founder and executive director of New America Media puts it: "This is a generation for whom identity is a choice" (Ibid). If *Schema* focuses inwardly on pan-ethnic culture and lifestyle, the [Alhambra Source](#)—an initiative of University of Southern California's

Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism—focuses on outward post-ethnic news production and distribution. Local residents, students, and journalists collaborate to offer hyperlocal (the City of Alhambra) *and* multilingual (English, Spanish, and Chinese) news to the residents. A more professional effort of this nature is a longtime project by [New America Media](#), which consolidates and delivers hyperlocal and national ethnic voices to broader society.

More nuanced evolution of the outward orientation is seen in the entertainment industry, which invites *mainstream media* into the production and distribution of ethnic content. Aswin Punathambekar’s chapter, titled “After Bollywood: Diasporic Media in an Age of Global Media Capitals” in *Global Communication: New Agendas in Communication* (2014), edited by Karin G. Wilkins, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and Shanti Kumar, discusses how diasporic media emerge as “brokers” linking a diasporic audience with industry stakeholders in the country of settlement and the country of origin. Drawing on Anna Tsing’s notion of “scale” and “scale-making”, Punathambekar introduces the case of *Saavn.com*—a New York based distributor of Bollywood programming, founded by a South Asian-American, Vin Bhat—and explains how this diasporic digital media venture has successfully mediated scale-making projects of Indian film, television, and music companies (which wanted to expand their business overseas, but did not have effective strategies) and American cable companies (which wanted to respond to the request from South Asian audiences for Bollywood channels, but had no capacity as satellite service companies). Cutting across the intersection of business and audience needs, *Saavn.com* linked the two stakeholders by offering Bollywood programs initially for a video-on-demand service, and later on, for the Internet and mobile phone services, and helped industry stakeholders of both countries “to forge a fragmented, yet lucrative South Asian-American audience” (Punathambekar, in Wilkins, Straubhaar & Kumar, 2014: 79).

This case demonstrates, as Punathambekar argues, that diasporic media production and distribution are increasingly influenced by global media capitals. Whether or not ethnic media respond to such pressure is up to individual discretion; however, it is undeniable that it certainly adds a new dynamic to the ethnic media sector as a whole and pushes it to go beyond the traditional practice. By moving beyond and linking all three interest groups to benefit all, the ethnic media sector demonstrates new possibilities—including having *mainstream media* partake in the production and distribution of ethnic content—by effectively navigating the political economy of global media in the digital world:

Far from being exilic or interstitial, these media initiatives cannot be grasped without accounting for the ways in which relations between global media capitals—in this case, Mumbai and Los Angeles—have begun to define media circulation in the diaspora and structure the conditions for diasporic media production.

(Punathambekar, in Wilkins, Straubhaar & Kumar, 2014: 79)

Similarly, the plethora of new media technologies coupled with interesting cultural phenomena from the East to the West, such as the Korean Wave, also facilitate the outward orientation to head in a new direction, and this time, invite *mainstream users*. One example is *DramaFever*, a New York-based online streaming service which provides “Korean dramas, Latin American Telenovelas, and a wide selection of Asian TV shows and movies for free” (DramaFever, 2015a). Launched by Korean-Americans Seung Bak and Suk Park in 2009, with an intention to show Korean dramas to North Americans, the company claims it has grown to be “the largest

online video distributor of international televised content” with 21 million unique visitors, over 70 content partners, 14,000 episodes in their library, and 800 million minutes/month streamed, as of 2015 (DramaFever, 2015b; 2015c; Wong, 2010, May 17). The company’s success is not unrelated to the spread of the Korean Wave and the locally-developed fandom of K-pop culture. Indeed, what differentiates *DramaFever* from *Saavn.com* is that if the users of *Saavn.com*’s services are South Asian-Americans or *Desi*, the users of *DramaFever*’s are *mainstream*. Nawaz (2015, February 13) notes that according to the company, the primary viewers are young girls from diverse racial backgrounds who are mostly white (40%), followed by Latino (30%), Black (15%), and Asian (15%). This is, in fact, a general trend in North America: a survey conducted by YA Entertainment (YA Entertainment, 2006, August 6), a major Korean drama distributor, also reported that already in the mid-2000s, over 90% of Korean drama viewers in America were non-Koreans.

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Ethnic media are undergoing a transformation which makes the already dialectic media sector even more dialectic. Their inward orientation expands to embrace pan-ethnic projects, and the outward orientation becomes more post-ethnic and transnational, influenced by global media capitals. One of the many factors that drives this trend is the producers and users who are increasingly more dialectic in their production and consumption, and go beyond the traditional practice and find new paths in order to satisfy individual goals, whether that be profit-making or entertainment-seeking purposes. In tandem with reactively or proactively consolidating their respective ethnic communities and responding to social injustice within broader society, ethnic media take charge in cross-ethnic and cross-cultural partnerships that effectively benefit all. As a consequence, the boundary of ethnic media is becoming increasingly relaxed and expands to embrace broader industry stakeholders, as well as audiences. That said, are ethnic media still *only* by, for, and about ethnic communities? I will leave this for readers to decide.

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