

Ethnic Media and the Social Incorporation of New Americans

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Ethnic media, which we define as media created for (and generally by) immigrants, ethnic and language minority groups, and indigenous populations, are growing in size, audience, and visibility worldwide, as well as in the USA. In 2014, the National Directory of Ethnic Media contained information on over 3000 ethnic media organizations in the USA. Additionally, Allen's 2009 study indicated that nearly 60 million Americans regularly get their news and other information from ethnically targeted television, radio, newspapers, and websites; that figure was 16 percent lower just four years earlier. These data suggest that increased demographic diversity in the USA is correlated with increased diversity in the media landscape.¹

Research documents the multiple roles that ethnic media serve for their audiences. They help immigrant populations, in particular, to *stay connected* to their country of origin (e.g., by keeping them informed about breaking and developing news). They also perform a *symbolic role*

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by building knowledge of what it means to embody a particular ethnic identity, supporting performance of related behaviors, and instilling a sense of belonging to a particular community. Ethnic media produced in the local communities where immigrants and their families settle can also contribute to the creation of what Anderson called “imagined community,” thereby building social cohesion at the local, community level. In addition, ethnic media have historically supported, and still facilitate, the integration of immigrant and ethnic populations into the social fabric of US society by serving the critical information needs (CINs) of these populations across the USA. Because mainstream media are interested in appealing to the broadest possible audience, they tend to overlook CINs specific to these vulnerable populations. As a result, ethnic media are a crucial feature of the media landscape for many Americans.

The audiences of ethnic media include both immigrant and ethnic minority communities; in the USA, these include media targeted to African-Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and the descendants of immigrants. Since these audiences are social groups that have historically been socially marginalized and disenfranchised, they frequently face greater challenges in meeting CINs than members of the ethnic majority (i.e., English-speaking, European-origin individuals) and more privileged social groups (e.g., with higher levels of income and education). They may battle to afford new technologies and access to broadband Internet, the latter increasingly becoming a crucial resource for information to avoid threats (e.g., the spread of a disease, a possible natural disaster) but also for accessing a range of opportunities (e.g., jobs, scholarships, healthcare, and business-development programs).

Additionally, immigrant and minority populations often live in under-served communities where they cannot count on broadband access being freely available to them if they cannot afford it. These constraints disproportionately affect African Americans and Latinos, who are now collectively the majority population in seven of the ten largest urban centers in the USA. And for minorities who move outside of larger cities, they often encounter even fewer resources for addressing CINs, as smaller cities and suburbs are frequently not as well-equipped to serve non-English speakers. For example, in Hudson, New York (120 miles north of New York City), Matsaganis and Golden found that residents had virtually no local broadcast media, expensive options for accessing the Internet (relative to residents’ incomes), and only one local newspaper, which few residents identified as a source they could depend on for health information.

As Noam has shown in his work on media concentration and ownership in the USA, the media landscape of Hudson is similar to that of many smaller cities that represent small media markets. In the case of Hudson, this media environment made it difficult for residents (especially for African-American residents with low incomes) and local health providers to reach each other, thereby contributing to the underutilization of available reproductive healthcare services by African-American women in the community and the generation of related health disparities.

In addition, immigrant and ethnic minority populations may be less able to “afford” to go without resources to address CINs than more affluent or longer-settled populations. This is clearly evident in the case of new immigrants who, as newcomers, often live in survival mode. Helping immigrant individuals, families, and groups to overcome barriers that lead to social inequalities, become integrated into the American mainstream, and thrive, requires enabling them to easily address their CINs.

THE AUDIENCES OF ETHNIC MEDIA AND THE CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS THESE MEDIA HELP ADDRESS

Low-income immigrants and minorities face a range of challenges in addressing their CINs, and resulting knowledge gaps which contribute to persistent social disparities related to education, health, and overall well-being. A growing body of research has moved away from a deficit-oriented approach to documenting their challenges, by instead focusing on uncovering how individuals and families develop innovative strategies to address their CINs. Connections to ethnic media are often an important feature of the strategies that individuals and families develop to do so.

Katz has found that families often pursue collective strategies by drawing on their relative strengths and fluencies in different languages, and with different media and technology platforms, to locate and understand resources that address their CINs. For example, immigrant parents’ fluency in their native languages can open their children to an entire set of ethnic media information resources and help to encourage the second generation’s maintenance of their mother tongue. And conversely, children in many immigrant families *broker* parents’ connections to English-language media as well as to Spanish-language content available through online platforms, both of which are often less familiar to parents.

While there are no nationally representative data to document how many children broker media and technology for their parents, 2010 US

Census data indicate that 61 percent of children of immigrants in the USA had at least one parent who reported difficulty speaking English, up from 55 percent in 2000, and 49 percent in 1990.² These findings suggest that for children of immigrants, having a parent who needs help navigating English-language resources is more likely to be the norm than the exception. Furthermore, Louie reports findings from a representative survey of US adolescents with Central American, Mexican, Dominican, and Chinese parentage, which indicated that only 20 percent of respondents watched television “mainly alone,” and that most co-viewing occurred with family members. By contrast, a representative survey that Rideout and colleagues conducted of all US teens during the same time period found that more than one-third watched TV “mainly alone,” and that co-viewing with friends was common. Taken together, these findings indicate that immigrant families’ media connections span ethnic and mainstream media, across both online and offline platforms—and that variations in language and media literacy capabilities within families contribute to shared sense-making activities. Katz documents how these collective, family activities enable immigrant families to address CINs related to health care, education, and civic information.

In our own work, we have documented how ethnic media address a range of goals related to CINs. We take an ecological approach to understanding the relationships between ethnic media and their audiences. An ecological approach emphasizes: (a) the importance of local context when assessing what resources residents have available to address their CINs; (b) individual choice, by focusing on differences in residents’ strategies for addressing their CINs; and (c) the relevance of local constraints that residents encounter as they try to address their needs.

Wilkin, Ball-Rokeach, Matsaganis, and Cheong provide a relevant example of this approach. Their analyses focused on the media connections residents make to address their health-related CINs. They found, for instance, that residents who were not connected to the Internet depended primarily on ethnic media—including newspapers, television, and radio—for finding health information and resources. Residents in those same communities with an Internet connection indicated that going online was one of the top two ways they located health-related information.

Building on this earlier work, Matsaganis conducted a study of Latino populations living in Chicago, Charlotte (North Carolina), Los Angeles, and New York. He found variations in the communication ecologies that residents constructed to decide what technological

services and devices to purchase. Latinos with a broadband connection in the home had appreciably different communication ecologies from those of mobile-only broadband users, nomadic Internet users (e.g., individuals who connected at a local library or the home of a relative), dial-up users, and individuals with no Internet connection (non-connectors). For example, ethnically targeted television was especially important to Latino Internet users who did not have broadband at home; 77 percent of those who identified television as their top communication resource relied on Spanish-language channels. While Latinos who had broadband at home relied on the Internet more frequently, one-quarter (23 percent) still relied primarily on television, and two-thirds of those specified Spanish-language channels.

Online communication resources are, of course, not distinctive from ethnic media, especially in today's rapidly transforming media environment. Like other news organizations, ethnic media are increasingly likely to be online. In a 2015 study, Matsaganis reported that over 90 percent of surveyed New York City-based ethnic media organizations had a website, more than 80 percent had a social media account, and 30 percent had their own mobile application (i.e., an app).

Collectively, the findings from these studies underscore the importance of ethnic media in the lives of diverse populations. They also stress the importance of these media evolving to online formats that can facilitate audiences' quick and easy connections to online resources that are becoming increasingly important for addressing CINs.

As further evidence of how ethnic media enable their audiences to address relevant threats and opportunities in their environments, we discuss three categories of CINs among those Friedland and colleagues identified in their review of scholarship on CINs for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Emergencies and Public Safety

Ethnic media are trusted resources for disaster preparedness. Mathew and Kelly reported that by not providing information resources in accessible languages, the City of Los Angeles was not adequately prepared to provide immigrant communities with information immediately following disasters, such as earthquakes and wildfires. However, they found that Chinese, Spanish, and Vietnamese speakers all indicated that ethnic radio is the first place they turn for information during an emergency, followed by ethnic television, community organizations, and local schools.

These findings suggest that immigrants activate the limited, local options available to address their CINs during emergencies, and that ethnic media compensate for the city's failure to make information directly accessible to local residents. Mathew and Kelly concluded that the City of Los Angeles needs to pursue meaningful partnerships with ethnic radio stations to provide listeners with information in the aftermath of a disaster, so that they can mobilize accordingly.

Health Information

Ethnic media are crucial connections for addressing health concerns—especially, it appears, for individuals who were not early Internet adopters. Individuals who are slower to adopt new technologies often also face more personal constraints than their neighbors; in an immigrant community, these may include limited education, English-language capability, income, and unfavorable residency status, all of which Katz, Ang, and Suro reported are associated with less access to a broad range of communication resources for addressing health-related CINs.

Political Life

Ethnic media are also key resources for political information about candidates and public policy initiatives, and often strongly encourage constituents to become citizens and to register to vote. Prior to the 2012 US presidential election, Matsaganis and Katz conducted focus groups with ethnic media producers in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles, to identify what political issues they were covering for their audiences, and how. The manager of a television station serving Brazilian immigrants in New England illustrated how ethnic media address audiences' political CINs while increasing newcomers' familiarity with American civic history:

The producers of that show felt that it would be very good for them, for the community, to understand the workings of the State House. So, I mean nobody does a show on the State House, right? (*Laughs*) But they decided to produce a program on the State House, and it was great! [The audience] *loved* it! I mean, even I learned things about the State House that I probably should have known.

The Pew Center has also reported that ethnic media keep a close eye on potential irregularities at voting booths by explaining what people should do if turned away from a polling station if they have been registered to vote.

ETHNIC MEDIA'S CONSTRAINTS ON MEETING AUDIENCES' CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS

The evidence clearly demonstrates that ethnic media are essential elements of residents' communication ecologies in many ethnic and immigrant communities. Overlooking ethnic media in any academic—and, most importantly, in any policy-related—discussions about how to best address the CINs of an increasingly diverse US population is likely to lead to less informed, and less effective, public policy choices. We consider three different levels of constraints that hamper ethnic media's capabilities to help ethnic communities address a broad array of CINs

Organizational-Level Constraints

Ethnic media can produce and disseminate critical information in part because they have a special relationship with their communities. These relationships are rooted in media producers coming from, and frequently living in, the communities they serve, in addition to speaking their audience's language. Ethnic media are often trusted sources of information that are treated as authentic “voices” of their communities, and these bonds of trust facilitate ethnic media acting as important connections between individuals and families, local services, and businesses. Ethnic media can also be key players in the diffusion of new communication and information technologies. We have argued elsewhere (with Ball-Rokeach) that ethnic media can be “anchor institutions” (akin to local libraries and community technology centers) to facilitate broadband diffusion in underserved minority and immigrant communities.

Performing all of these roles is not easy for ethnic media producers, whose organizations vary in size from mom-and-pop type of operations to global media enterprises. Most ethnic media are small organizations. In his 2015 survey of ethnic media organizations in New York City, Matsaganis reported that 47 percent of the 103 producers who participated had a staff of four or fewer people. Another 27 percent said their staff comprised five to nine individuals. Small ethnic media outlets often cover and produce fewer stories for their audiences due to limited human and financial resources. In the aforementioned survey, ethnic media organizations reported annual operating budgets ranging between less than \$150,000 and over \$1.5 million, but 44 percent of these organizations reported a budget of under \$150,000 and another 28 percent between \$150,000

and \$349,000. With constrained budgets, ethnic media producers may update hardware less regularly and have less support for staff in using new communication technologies to stay connected with their audiences.

Media Market-Level Constraints

Ethnic media producers' limited financial resources are, at least in some cases, related to the size of their intended audiences. Media serving small ethnic communities face an inherent disadvantage. A more limited audience base means lower circulation figures or ratings (compared with larger ethnic media organizations, and especially, with larger mainstream media), which translates into a smaller potential advertising base. In addition, many ethnic media producers have access to fewer financial resources because reliable data on ethnic media audiences (e.g., their sizes, composition, and media consumption behaviors) is sorely lacking. One consequence of these missing data is that advertising professionals and their clients do not have information that they customarily need to make their ad-buying choices. This ultimately translates into less advertising revenue for ethnic media.

Nielsen and Arbitron, two of the most prominent agencies rating the size of media audiences, have both been challenged in recent years with regard to sampling methodologies that systematically underrepresented minority audiences. In the case of Arbitron, collective efforts of ethnic communities, journalism advocacy groups, and the Attorneys General of New York and New Jersey ultimately compelled Arbitron to improve its methodology. Accurate audience ratings help provide ethnic media the opportunity to attract advertising revenue commensurate with their market share.

There are also insufficient data on ethnic media at the federal government level. The FCC tracks and reports on the number of broadcast media licenses that are awarded to organizations owned by individuals of minority backgrounds. According to Eggerton, just 3 percent of all full-power television stations and 7 percent of radio stations were owned by all racial minorities combined in 2014. However, minority ownership does not necessarily make those holdings ethnic media, nor does it guarantee that they serve information needs of ethnic communities. The lack of data on ownership across media (mainstream and ethnic), media content, and of course, media audiences makes it difficult to accurately assess whether local media markets serve the CINs of an increasingly diverse US population.

Macro or Policy-Level Constraints

While national-level provisions are important, policy constraints on ethnic media are more clearly evident at the local level, where media market boundaries generally overlap with the administrative boundaries of cities, counties, or large metropolitan areas. In New York City, for example, there are over 270 ethnic publications published in 36 languages. The circulations of some ethnic newspapers is astounding; according to a recent report by the New York Press Association (NYPA), the combined circulation of 95 ethnic newspapers in New York City is 2.94 million—approximately 30 percent of the city’s population. For the sake of comparison, the approximate circulation of *The New York Times*, which is based in New York City but enjoys wide national distribution, is 1.6 million.

Despite their broad circulation, ethnic publications secure less than 18 percent of total monies that the City of New York spends on advertising.³ Because such ads frequently promote critical city resources and programs, this discrepancy in ad placement effectively means that the city does not support ethnic media at a level commensurate to the population that they serve. Even more importantly, this discrepancy means limited dissemination of critical information to the communities that often need it most.

While progress has certainly been uneven, there is growing recognition that increased population diversity requires shifts in how powerful individuals and institutions relate to their constituencies—and the media that serve them. For instance, Barack Obama, as President-elect in 2008, put legacy media like *The New York Times* on hold and gave his first interviews to ethnic media, starting with *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise* magazines, and then went on the air with radio talk show hosts “El Pistolero” and “El Piolin” of Radio La Que Buena 105.1 FM and Radio La Nueva 101.9 FM, respectively. His first television interview was on the Arab language channel al-Arabiya. At a more local level, some governors and mayors have also begun to pay more attention to ethnic media. For example, in 2009, Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts held his first press conference in Boston for ethnic media serving the state’s Armenian, African-American, Haitian, Hispanic, Portuguese, Brazilian, Irish, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Indian communities.

When it comes to serving historically marginalized communities’ CINs, awareness of ethnic media will not suffice. Evidence is mounting that awareness is translating into action beyond the offices of elected officials. For example, before the 2010 Census, the US Census Bureau launched a significant effort to engage ethnic media across the country as partners to

promote participation. The Census Bureau reached out to ethnic media because it recognized them as trusted, credible sources of critical information for populations that the Census has historically had the most trouble reaching; namely, immigrants and ethnic minorities.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethnic media play crucial roles in the communication ecologies of immigrant and ethnic communities across the USA, in part because they are integral to serving these populations' CINs. However, for these media to continue to play these roles—and to perform them even more effectively—policy changes should address impediments that ethnic media face at the organizational, media market, and local, state, and national policymaking levels. Looking forward, policies should be designed and implemented to achieve three interrelated goals.

First of all, *stability*. Regardless of how small or big ethnic media organizations are, most rely not only on sales of copies or subscriptions but also on advertising revenue. Basic media economics research indicates that audience size drives advertising revenue because advertisers want to expose their products to as many eyeballs as possible. This relationship between audience size and advertising is the reason that many mainstream publications, broadcast, and now online media, too, rely on audience metrics (e.g., circulation, ratings, and, unique website visitors). It is also the reason that organizations that credibly collect and report these data (e.g., Circulation Verification Council, Nielsen, and Arbitron) exist. In many cases, ethnic media cannot afford services to produce audience metrics, even if they are larger operations.

Economic and political marginalizations are frequently entwined and negatively affect the sustainability prospects of ethnic media organizations. If ethnic broadcast media cannot have their audience's size accurately measured and reported alongside those of their mainstream media competitors, they face limited prospects for attracting advertising revenue. Since ethnic media serve the CINs of populations that are often socially vulnerable, inequalities that affect ethnic media organizations at the market level have a direct, negative impact on individuals' and communities' abilities to address their CINs.

The resolution of the legal cases brought against Nielsen by Spanish-language media giant Univisión in 2004 and against Arbitron by the Attorneys General of New York State and New Jersey in 2008 have shown

a way forward, though. As a result of both cases, the two ratings agencies were forced to improve their methodology for assessing ethnic media audiences. But these cases also educated ethnic media, ethnic and immigrant communities, as well as their advocates in civil society, government, and the private sector on what must be done to address the lack of reliable audience data that disadvantages ethnic media producers. Doing so will require continued vigilance, as well as building and nurturing alliances between ethnic media organizations, the communities they serve, and advocates in government.

In addition to efforts to stabilize the ethnic media sector by recognizing them as legitimate players in media markets across the country, efforts to *directly support ethnic media operations* are necessary. At a basic level, this means granting them equal treatment to their mainstream media counterparts. The New York City case, discussed above, is an excellent example of this. The combined circulation of print ethnic media in NYC is nearly three million—over one-third of the city’s population. Yet, ethnic media receive less than one-fifth of the city’s advertising dollars. Thus, a first step toward supporting ethnic media would be to allocate them advertising revenues commensurate with the proportion of the population that they serve.

Ethnic media can also be supported through an array of local, state, and federal programs, in which they are treated as genuinely valuable partners for addressing the CINs of “hard-to-reach” immigrant and ethnic minority populations. The U.S. Census Bureau is a model for such efforts. And in order for ethnic media to play their roles effectively, policy accommodations like access to E-rate, would be helpful. As we have argued elsewhere, E-rate could boost ethnic media’s capacities to serve as “anchor institutions” to promote broadband Internet adoption and use in their communities.

Finally, a review of research to date reveals significant gaps in what we know about ethnic media in the USA today. Unresolved questions include: *What are the unintended consequences, at the local level, of national-level decisions around media ownership and concentration?* Related to these concerns, even though the net neutrality debate may be settled (for now) by the February 26, 2015, FCC decision, *what are the impacts of net neutrality on ethnic media development and sustainability?* And, *how do these and other digital equity policies impact ethnic media’s capabilities to address their audiences’ CINs?* Digital equity issues are increasingly recognized as integral to addressing the broader social inequalities that disproportionately

affect immigrant and ethnic minority communities. Supporting ethnic media as they work to address these communities' CINs, through traditional and digital outlets, is a crucial step toward ensuring that the increasingly diverse USA is increasingly equitable, as well.

NOTES

1. According to the US Census Bureau, between 2000 and 2014 alone, the number of new immigrants that arrived in the country was estimated at 14 million.
2. According to the 2010 US Census and a 2009 Urban Institute report, the proportion of children with a parent who has difficulty speaking English rises to 68 percent among children with a parent from Central America, and for children with a Mexican-born parent, to 82 percent.
3. According to Center for Community and Ethnic Media in 2013, ethnic and community publications combined secure approximately 18 percent of the advertising dollars spent by New York City. No precise figure is reported for ethnic publications alone.

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