

# Representing Ethnic Communities in the Media

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**Does ethnicity matter in the media? If so, when and what is the role of ethnic and mainstream media in promoting the good news as well as the bad news about migrants and refugees? The results of an AEN quick-survey suggest that mainstream media is a key cross-over point for inter-cultural exchange and a primary vehicle for promoting inter-cultural awareness and understanding.**

Ethnic media publications provide an alternative to an increasingly homogenised mainstream media. They are essential to the health of a civic society and make an essential contribution to promoting and sustaining social movements.

Communicating horizontally, rather than from the top down, ethnic media help to build communities, reduce social isolation and keep culture and language alive. They are able to bring about social change from within communities (Lalley & Hawkins, 2005). The news media play a major role in society around establishing and disseminating cultural references and are pivotal in representing and giving voice to community members. However, they can unintentionally strengthen racist discourses rather than fighting them (ERCOMER, 2002).

According to a California New Media study, nearly a quarter of all U.S. residents regularly get information from the ethnic media (Briggs, 2005). A national, multilingual poll of almost 1,900 Latino, African-American, Asian-American, Arab-American and American Indian respondents showed that 13% of the U.S. adult population, were 'primary consumers' who preferred ethnic media, using it frequently. A further 22 million preferred mainstream media but routinely turned to ethnic media.

Increasingly, concerns are raised that mainstream media fails to reflect the lives and concerns of minorities, whether they are people from low income backgrounds or ethnic communities. Such groups

often experience their representation in the media in terms of 'bad' news. Lalley and Hawkins (2005) suggest that, if we can see our own views expressed beside those of others, we gain a greater sense of public investment in our communities — geographical, ethnic, linguistic and otherwise. Having representation in the media is important for minority groups, providing not only a platform for the community but a bridge to that community for others. But equally important is accurate representation.

New Zealand's ethnic media, like our ethnic communities, are growing. Do journalists working within their own communities have a duty to expose issues, such as crime and corruption, to a wider audience? Or do they have a duty to play down problems and allow them to be dealt with within that community?

Some mainstream media in New Zealand seem quick to single out negative aspects of migrant communities, feeding certain politicians who circle like half-starved vultures. Fortunately, we have a strong media by international standards but we should not be complacent. New Zealand has seen a drift towards the more overtly commercial; our newspapers and many of our radio stations are now part of global media conglomerates. The focus shifts from rigorous reporting to sustaining advertising revenue and, as seen elsewhere, a tendency develops to ignore ethnic and other minority groups other than to support histrionic tabloid headlines — think migrants as 'invaders'.

So what role does the mainstream and ethnic media play in promoting wider inter-cultural awareness? We asked members of the Aotearoa Ethnic Network to complete a short survey about media attitudes to ethnicity. The survey was carried out in May 2006 and has 36 responses.

When is it appropriate for the media to mention ethnicity in a story and when isn't it? The clear response to the survey is that ethnicity should only be mentioned when it is directly relevant.

Take the story about New Zealand's latest and biggest Lotto millionaires; we were told that the Dairy owners who sold the winning ticket were Indian. It never mentioned that the Lotto millionaires were Pakeha.

Ethnicity is relevant if the story is about that person's culture or heritage. It is relevant if the issue being discussed is affected by their ethnicity. As Brian Rudman puts it, "We had it drummed into us that a person's race or ethnicity was irrelevant, unless germane to the story. It proved to be so remarkably seldom."

Many people felt that discussion of ethnicity was important to provide context or background and significance to the story or event and of interest necessary for the reader to know. Others thought that it was important if it added a positive angle:

*If the story is part of a process to get more information... Or when it is particularly relevant because of cultural practices.*

It was suggested that ethnicity:

*Is a group label – not an individual one. When the issue is limited to the individual, it is not necessary that ethnicity be mentioned.*

A European Union review found that news about ethnic, cultural, religious minorities and migrants was focused on negativity, problems, crime and conflict (ERCOMER, 2002). Respondents felt that it was important that, if ethnicity was mentioned, that it did not compound negative stereotypes or give a:

*Negative slant to the story or arouse or confirm the prejudices of the reader.*

It was important that stories do not reinforce stereotypes and that they are not used to "mark people as 'different' from the norm, which is usually assumed to be Pakeha". In such a situation ethnicity has no relevance. The journalist does not seek to inform the reader but simply "to feed biased attitudes, draw popular attention."

Any report that links one particular ethnic group to a negative situation tends to reinforce negative stereotypes held by the wider population and this carries more risk for minorities:

*We all enjoy the kudos attached to the group when someone with our ethnic label is reported in a positive situation. However, ethnic groups that are in the minority are made vulnerable by their minority status.*

Is the media more or less likely to mention the certain ethnicities than others? The strong perception is yes! Figure 1 shows that no respondents thought that it was more likely to happen if the respondent was Pakeha. On the other hand, 79% percent thought it somewhat or more likely if that person was Māori, 67% for Pacific people and 93% for Asians. Interestingly, research from the Netherlands found that the intercultural discourse positioned Dutch people as 'victims' and ethnic, cultural and religious minorities as the 'problem' (ERCOMER, 2002).

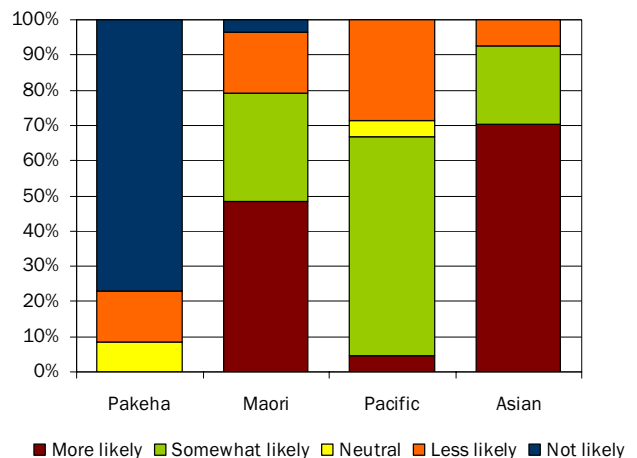


Figure 1: The perceived likelihood that a story will include ethnicity.

Eighty percent of respondents felt that when ethnicity was mentioned, the term 'Asian' was not specific enough. The term encompasses more diversity than

it does homogeneity and is therefore potentially confusing.

*If it is appropriate to identify the ethnicity of the person, then surely it beholds the media to be as accurate and specific as possible.*

When the issue under discussion is actually dependent on and varies between many different cultures, such broad labels as 'Asian' are particularly problematic. Re-enforcing any public perception that 'Asian' peoples are a single homogenous label when the needs within that group are diverse is counter productive in policy development and health service delivery:

*When ethnicity is central to the issue, it is important to get the ethnicity right and that would mean being specific about the culture being discussed.*

Lincoln Tan, Editor of Chinese newspaper iBall, has recently started contributing opinion pieces and stories on race relations and ethnic communities to the New Zealand Herald. Such a step is promising, stepping beyond catering for ones own culture, and moving to promoting the majority group's awareness about minority groups and the interactions between them. He wrote recently that, for ethnic communities,

*Putting issues on the table where they can be discussed is far more important than sweeping things under the carpet pretending they do not exist.*

Eighty-nine percent of respondents agree with this and none disagree. It was noted that the discussion needs to be balanced. It is sometimes suggested that the dominant community knows more about the negative stereotypes of ethnic communities than the positive ones. Much of this information is obtained from the media. Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed with Lincoln Tan when he suggested that helping mainstream media to rise above ignorance and tokenism is more important for ethnic journalists than protecting their community. Definitely emphasis should be on positive, productive discussion under the right conditions, ensuring that everyone who wants to can participate and have their voice heard.

*Better to have robust and open debate – it's usually more productive.*

*Only by talking about issues can they be resolved. Issues must be acknowledged as a problem first before anything can be done to fix the problem.*

*Sometimes I think there is a tendency to hide behind the front of "we are all New Zealanders". We are a country that prides itself on its race relations but I think this makes us reluctant to criticise or to examine.*

*While it is important not beat up any community, it is equally important not to be condescending and treat people as if they can't handle publicity when it is fair, accurate and balanced. It is my experience that mainstream media do not make much effort to cultivate relationships with ethnic communities, and simply exploit them for out of context sound-bites without actually representing their views.*

Ethnic journalists also have a duty to ensure that their communities are accurately reported. Given that the mainstream media is often focussed on the more negative aspects of ethnic communities, it would be naive to simply go along with this as a hard and fast rule:

*Helping mainstream media rise above ignorance and tokenism should not come above protecting communities – they should work together.*

*Influencing mainstream media means you will be able to change viewpoints of people outside the community... but also promoting your own community can help those people feel empowered.*

Husband (2005, p.7) suggests that, for media professionals working in the dominant media, their own ethnicity is "often rendered invisible and unknowable, and consequently remains implicit and potentially dangerous in their professional identity and practice."

There are signs of attempts to incorporate minority perspectives into mainstream media, this 'diversity reporting' has the potential to infuse mainstream reporting with a multicultural perspective. Yet for a minority ethnic media professional, ethnic identity

fuses with their professional media identity and this might not be as seamless or effortless as it appears, becoming a salient facet of their professional practice. In addition, they may be accused of incorporating the same ethnocentric, nationalist and 'white' values and interests that mainstream media serve and become vulnerable in terms of being called to account in terms of how they represent the ethnic communities they serve (Husband, 2005).

It is clear that ethnic journalists need to be wary of getting caught in a media 'beat-up' of their communities or risk being tarred with the same brush as mainstream media, that is xenophobic, ethnocentric and racist.

The focus needs to be on both the positive and the negative, not just crimes and festivals. Research on the representation of minorities in the media in Europe found that negative images were rarely balanced with positive images with little acknowledgement of the cultural contributions other than a focus on festivals (ERCOMER, 2002).

Ethnic media, particularly where they cross-over into the mainstream, must balance their role in preserving culture with the need to inform and educate a wider audience. Somehow these expectations of an ethnic minority media person seem a rather twin heavy burden of responsibility and communicating aspirations. Above all:

*More knowledge and more good, accurate, in-depth and truly analytical journalism and information are what strengthen society and democratic discourse.*

Such cross-over between the ethnic and mainstream media is generally seen as a good thing for our ethnic communities and for the mainstream society. It builds awareness and increases familiarity with difference. Cross-over provides a wider audience with some knowledge of the different cultures that exist around them. Whilst it seems that sensationalism is a necessary selling tool for the mainstream media this must be balanced with fair reporting and content that educates. Strategies in Europe that have been successfully employed to ensure that minority groups are not further marginalised include the development of codes of conduct and the recruitment of broadcasters or journalists from ethnic communities. However, the latter is problematic in that journalists

can be caught between the agendas of dominant media and the vulnerability of shouldering the expectations and aspirations of minority groups.

What clearly emerges from this exercise is that the mainstream media is a key cross-over point for inter-cultural exchange and a primary vehicle for promoting inter-cultural awareness and understanding. Where ethnic media are able to make in-roads and connections with mainstream media organisations, the opportunity exists to accurately promote the life and stories of ethnic communities to a wider audience. Equally mainstream need to show more than ethnic enclaves, but begin discussing complex multicultural relationships, because that is the "real" world. Brian Rudman suggests that the "race/ethnicity closet" is "such a convenient place to shelve society's problems?" It is, he suggests, as if "blaming the race of the victims somehow absolves those of us who aren't of the ethnicity mentioned of any responsibility for what goes on in our wider community." Rudman goes on to conclude that such ethnic labelling can be a way to avoid turning "the spotlight back on the community as a whole, and that's much more uncomfortable, for some, than throwing a bit of abuse over the racial back fence."

## References

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