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Reporting of Ethnic Minorities: An Australian Editorial Perspective

A socio-economic study of Asian immigration¹ into Australia prepared for the Fitzgerald Committee² by Hassan and Tan (1986) showed the following profile of Asian migrants (as quoted in MacPhee 1991):

- (a) except for the Vietnamese, Asian migrants are predominantly English-speaking, and over half are Christians;
- (b) even in the case of the Vietnamese who did not pass the skill levels of independent migrants, the proportion of university graduates is higher than of the Australian population, and this is all the more true of the other Asian groupings;
- (c) Asian migrants have significantly higher proportions in professional occupations compared with the Australian population;
- (d) Except for the Vietnamese, the unemployment rates of Asian migrants are the same as the Australian population;
- (e) Asian migrants are potentially more upwardly mobile than most other Australians and are more likely to participate effectively in the functioning of Australian political institutions than are other migrant groups;
- (f) Asian migrants contribute to our economy without our bearing the cost of educating them, and they bring in substantial capital as well as adding to the supply of goods and services in the economy.

A community profile released by the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR) in Melbourne in October 1994 reported that migrants from Singapore over the past two decades have been above average in terms

of educational qualifications and occupational status. The proportion of Singapore-born migrants who were in professional occupations (2.4 per cent) was noticeably higher than the proportion of the total Australian population (12.5 per cent). For migrants from Malaysia, the report said that in 1991, 28.3 per cent of all Malaysia-born people in the work force were professionals, compared with 12.5 per cent of the total Australian population.

Another report released by BIMPR on May 16, 1995 said Australian born children of non-English-speaking (NES) migrants are high achievers in education and work, surpassing their Anglo-Celtic counterparts. The report added that the educational and occupational performance of second generation young adults showed upward mobility was most striking for those originating from Greece, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Lebanon and eastern Europe.

Have NES migrants, Asians in particular, being portrayed as such by the newspapers? Not really, according to the latest study of race, ethnicity and the media in Australia by Jakubowicz et.al. (1994) and Bell (1993). What we read about Vietnamese and Asian migrants as reported in mainstream newspapers do not completely reflect the social reality defined by Hassan and Tan.

Familiar themes that can be traced through past studies of mainstream media coverage of ethnic minorities in Australia are: the delineation of ethnic minority issues in relation to mainstream interests; invisibility of ethnic minorities in mainstream media; journalists' over-reliance on mainstream sources; and portrayal of Australian society as monocultural.

These symptoms of media prejudice have been overemphasised while newspaper editors' professional opinions about ethnic minority representation and participation in mainstream media are overlooked. The pragmatics involved in the reporting of ethnic minorities remain unclear and at best theorised with little application to newsroom realities. This article will provide a clearer empirical framework for looking at, through the eyes of Australian editor, why ethnic minorities are being portrayed the way they are in mainstream newspapers.

Methodology

A total of 310 metropolitan newspaper editors throughout Australia were purposively selected for a 10-page self-administered questionnaire survey of mainstream newspaper coverage of ethnic minorities, defined specifically as NES immigrants. Names which carried the tag of "editor" in the November 1993 - March 1994 issue of the Australian Media Guide were selected. Examples of categories which were selected are: "news editor, finance editor, pictorial editor, associate editor, features editor", and so forth. "Chief-of-staff" and "head-of bureau", by virtue of their news executive and gatekeeping position are also classified as editors.

Out of a total of 310 questionnaires mailed in two stages, December 1993 and January 1994, a total of 88 editors (28%) responded. Only 77 questionnaires were usable. 11 were not coded as the respondents felt that they were not qualified to take part in the survey for the following reasons: their positions have been wrongly described in the media decision making process (5); their positions have been wrongly described in the Media Guide (2); they have changed editorial positions (2); and addressees not known (2). Questionnaires were coded and analysed by the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Limitations

The validity of this study is mainly limited by the low return rate of 29%. Secondly, the data are purely descriptive. One cannot read beyond the low return rate except to surmise that those who did not respond to the questionnaire could have felt that the study was an irrelevant academic exercise (Loo, 1994). However, this limited study will provide a glimpse into the newspaper editor's attitude towards the newsworthiness of ethnic minority issues (representation) and the enhancement of cultural diversity (participation) in the newsroom. Notwithstanding the low return rate, a breakdown of the editors according to the newspapers they represented showed the distribution as in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Editors Who
Responded to
the Survey

| Location | No. of Editors Who Responded |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| National | 8 |
| The Australian | 2 |
| Australian Associated Press | 2 |
| Sydney | |
| Australian Financial Review | 2 |
| Daily Telegraph Mirror | 3 |
| Sun Herald | 5 |
| Sunday Telegraph | 2 |
| Sydney Morning Herald | 5 |
| Melbourne | |
| The Age | 6 |
| The Sunday Age | 4 |
| The Herald Sun | 7 |
| The Sunday Herald Sun | 3 |
| The Truth | 3 |
| Brisbane | |
| The Courier Mail | 4 |
| Sunday Mail | 2 |
| Adelaide | |
| Adelaide Advertiser | 6 |
| Sunday Mail | 2 |
| Perth | |
| The West Australian | 7 |
| The Sunday Times | 1 |
| Canberra | |
| The Canberra Times | 4 |
| Nothern Territory | |
| The Cairns Post | 1 |
| Total: | 77 |

Median: 3.5 editors from each paper.

Demographics

The average years of industry experience of the editors were 15.5. About a third (34%) of the editors only had an education

up to Higher School Certificate level. Slightly more than half (52%) had a degree and about one-ninth (14%) a college diploma.

The majority of editors were men (88%). Slightly more than one third of the editors came from the 30-35 years age bracket (36%) followed by 36-50 years (22%), 41-45 years (21%), above 50 years (14%), and 46-50 years (5%).

55 editors (71%) were born in Australia³ with 12 (16%) born in United Kingdom and Ireland, 4 from New Zealand, and 1 from the United States of America. Two-thirds of the editors (65%) have parents who were also born in Australia. One-fifth (20%) have parents who were born in the United Kingdom and Ireland; followed by New Zealand (5%), Germany (3%), Italy (1%) and Greece (1%).

Descriptive Findings

To find out the editors' initial impressions of how well mainstream newspapers have generally portrayed ethnic minorities, they were asked to rank a series of statements on a five-point scale of frequency where five means "most frequent". The positive and negative statements which are arranged at intervals are:

- 1) Migrants with trouble assimilating into Australian life-style.
- 2) Migrants making positive contributions to Australian society.
- 3) Migrants adversely affecting the lifestyle of Anglo-Celtic Australians
- 4) Migrants enhancing Australia's cultural diversity and international image
- 5) Migrants forming ethnic enclaves
- 6) New Australians who have assimilated to Australian life-style
- 7) Alien communities with interestingly odd habits and life-style.

Most editors though ethnic minorities had been portrayed rather positively in the mainstream papers despite the occasional emphasis on crime, drugs and home breakins. About 51% of the editors ranked the positive statements 2, 4 and 6 on an average of 4 (frequently) while 31% ranked the

four negative statements on an average of 2 (infrequently). Likewise, on a five-point scale of performance where 5 means "very well", editors were asked how well they thought their papers had covered the ethnic minority communities. Slightly more than half (54%) ranked their papers as neither well nor poorly while a quarter of the editors thought that ethnic minority communities were poorly covered (25%) in the papers compared to about one-fifth who thought otherwise.

On the question of which reporting round was most instrumental in advancing a journalist's career in the newsroom, about 85% of the editors said political rounds was the most attractive among journalists followed by business and finance (51%), science and technology (47%), arts and entertainment (45%), industrial rounds (43%), crime and law (4%). Nearly half of the editors (49%) said the least attractive rounds among journalist were ethnic affairs, education and environment.

To gauge the editor's general attitude towards the issue of reflecting greater cultural diversity in the news, they were asked whether they agree or disagree with a list of statements on a five-point scale with five being "strongly agree". To the statement "I have opportunities to effectively promote tolerance of cultural diversity in my work" more than half (65%) agreed, a quarter were neutral (25%) and a small minority (6.5%) disagreed. Near to two-thirds (61%) agreed that "reflecting cultural diversity in the news pages is my professional concern".

But this positive attitude towards reflecting cultural diversity in the news was not reflected in their response to a question if they thought their paper should introduce an explicit policy of actually employing or training journalists from an ethnic minority background. More than half (48 or 62%) disagreed with a formal policy to enhance cultural diversity although they acknowledged that there was a need.

To gauge the general attitude of the editors towards the issue of race and ethnicity in reporting, they were asked to comment on two statements. The first was an excerpt taken from an interview with American editors conducted by Pease (1991). The second statement was an excerpt taken from an interview with Australian editors¹ conducted by the author in September 1992. A sample of the editors' reactions are as follows:

Statement 1:

“Any news that is race-neutral can be covered well by any good team of journalists. A fire is a fire. Where the problem begins is with interpretation of events and issues, and selection of what receives attention and what is ignored. The race of a journalist thus plays an important role in how that journalist interprets events, and in what that journalist considers important and unimportant.”

- 1) The race of journalist is almost always irrelevant and every journalist should endeavour to put aside their race when reporting. Balance and independence should be strived for. However, some journalists have intimate knowledge of the particular history and affairs of the country of their background and are therefore able to understand the subtleties of a given story. In these cases bias may be welcomed and provide general readers with a clearer understanding of issues and events. Male business editor, 30-35 years old, 11-15 years experience, Melbourne.
- 2) The race may indeed have an influence — not just in the understanding of the issues, but in an understanding of what people of the “dominant culture” are interested in knowing of those issues. It cuts both ways. However, the key is not race but knowledge and fairness. It is racist and defeatist to assume a black journalist cannot understand “white” issues, or vice versa, no matter how much research and fairness they bring to the debate. Male opinion page editor, 40-45 years old, 20-25 years experience, Melbourne.
- 3) Any news can be covered by a good reporter. The same good reporter would not deserve the description if he/she began to interpret the news. News is news; interpretation is not. That said, I agree that the race of a journalist could play a role in part of a discussion about the news value of a particular report and how it is presented. Male assistant editor, 46-50 year old, 25 years experience, Sydney.
- 4) The bottom line is satisfying the needs and requirements of the greatest number. Many ethnic groups have their own newspapers and community radio stations. Many are interested in events and affairs that pertain to their

own individual group which sometimes can be quite small. It is similar to reporting the micro politics and events in a particular suburb - most of these don't rate in a national or metropolitan newspaper. Ethnic minorities are an important area of reporting, but the stories must be of a sufficient import to make them newsworthy. Male business editor, 30-35 years old, 11-15 years experience, Melbourne.

- 5) An 'ostrich' approach to editorship. While a newspaper's readers are of paramount importance in making news evaluation, it is ridiculous to say that reporting an important issue in a minority ethnic community is unimportant to the wider community. News assessment should be made on the face value of the story. The more active the inquiry in the ethnic affairs round the more likely the newspaper is to gather important, interesting, contentious, amusing etc, stories. A good story, in short, is a good story - regardless of its community source. Male features editor, 36-40 years old, 21-25 years experience, Perth.

Discussion

One of the interesting findings of the survey was the conflict between the editors' theoretical affirmation of the need to enhance cultural diversity in the newsroom and their pragmatic dismissal of the need to initiate a diversity program where ethnic minority journalists could be trained and employed. The professional argument made by editors against the affirmative employment of ethnic minority journalists is based on the premise that such a policy would only compromise the standard of journalism. This premise is summed up by an editor from the Adelaide Advertiser:

"..... While these ideas (cultural diversity) may be well-meaning, they are self-defeating because people get jobs - and others miss out on them - for the wrong reasons. If you run a good, lively, hard-nosed newsroom there will be no shortage of people wanting to work for you. Pick the best no matter what their colour or background is and you will produce the best journalism and everyone will benefit(P)rofessionalism is more important than the colour of skin or some other consideration."⁵

Comments by the majority of the editors in the survey reflect a strict adherence to meritocracy which subtly favours native English speakers and ultimately preclude non-English speaking background persons in being equitably or fairly considered for a full-time editorial position. There is an unexpressed premise among editors that the affirmative employment of ethnic minority journalists to enhance diversity in the newsroom is equivalent to hiring less qualified, token minorities instead of better qualified native English-speaking persons. Potential non-English speaking background journalists, apart from having to deal with preconceived doubts of their journalistic ability by editors, must also work harder than an Anglo-Celtic person to prove their proficiency in the gathering and reporting of news.

Editors felt that the proportion of ethnic minorities in Australian society had not yet reached its critical mass nor are ethnic minorities a formidable section of the population compared with the United States with its distinctive enclaves of Afro-Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans. Michael Smith, former group executive editor of *The Age* in Melbourne said " ... the issue (of cultural diversity) hasn't really taken off in the same extent in Australia possibly because we don't have huge minority group that the US has in terms of the blacks and Hispanics. Our ethnic groups are more diverse and diffuse."⁶ Peter Wilson, group editorial training manager of John Fairfax group of newspapers in Sydney shared Smith's point.⁷

Professionalism should, by the editors' definition, take any reporter, whether they be Anglo-Celtic or ethnic minority, beyond the influence of ethnicity and race in their judgement of the newsworthiness of ethnic minority issues. What is not clear is the editors' differentiation between a professional and non-professional journalist; and their criteria of what makes an ethnic issue sufficiently worthy to be reported. Professionalism, as defined by the editors, has effectively legitimised the loose consensus on dominant news values which shape the daily news coverage. Editors in this study tend to subscribe to this dominant paradigm of professionalism and traditional news values which serve to reinforce a journalistic culture where professionalism is used as a glib word to rationalise the standards of news coverage of ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

A mistake in pushing to enhance cultural diversity in the newsroom is to segregate and quantify diversity within the framework of an affirmative action policy. This inevitably creates a degree of indirect tokenism in the newsroom despite the good intentions of both practitioners and academics. Employment of minority journalists are undoubtedly "conditions usually necessary but seldom sufficient" to bring "changes in the way newspapers are managed, changes in the ways news is defined, changes in the way stories are written, changes in the way people are portrayed" (Atkins & Rivers, 1987:232).

Given that newspaper readers come from diverse cultural and ethnic background, we should start to think whether the current free-market model of journalism, which operates according to traditional news values to serve the interests of mainstream readership, needs to be broadened to embrace the interests of minority groups albeit their relative lack of economic benefits. Community service journalism with its goals of contributing to the social good should be an area of further research.

Enhancing cultural diversity in the newsroom should not be seen only as diversity in numbers but diversity in the way ethnic minority issues are defined and framed. A less presumptuous and more positive attitude towards the facts, context and sources of ethnic stories would be a giant leap towards higher standards of reporting of ethnic minority issues. The correct attitude of a sensitive journalists to tell their readers that ethnic minority issues are not issues of colour or race but they are issues of the community. To quote Atkins and Rivers (1987), "reporting with understanding includes a professional imperative not only to go into the minority communities to report their news, but to go into the dominant community and reveal those structures that continue to perpetuate racism, sexism, homophobia - biases of all kinds that interfere with the struggle by different peoples for respect and acceptance."

1 The trend towards Asian immigration began with the first groups of Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s and has been increasing ever since. Most immigrants are coming from Hong Kong, Malaysia and the Philippines, making up collectively 15% of overseas arrivals between 1986-88. In 1990, the ethnic mix of Australia was: Anglo-Celtic 74.2%, Asian 4.9% and others 20.9%. By the year 2001 predictions put the ethnic mix at: Australian-born residents 64%; English-speaking countries 14%; and non-English speaking countries 22%. (The Book of Australia - Almanac 1991-92, p. 127)

2 The Fitzgerald Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policy chaired by Dr Stephen Fitzgald was appointed by the federal government in 1988 to look into the economic aspects of immigration.

3 A demographic survey of 1,068 journalists by Henningham (1993: 45) in 1993 showed that the typical Australian journalist in the 90s is a young, ambitious, leftish, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon male. Henningham noted that: "In some ways, the world of journalism belongs to an earlier Australia, untouched by changes to the cultural mix. Only 19% of journalists were born overseas, and almost all of them came from an Anglo-Celtic background. Fewer than 3% of journalists are non-Caucasian." See John Henningham's New Survey to find out who the average Australian journalist is (Panpa Bulletin, February 1993: 56-57).

4 Piers Akerman, former editor-in-chief of Herald Sun, Melbourne, August 1992.

5 Personal letter commenting on author's survey, John Brittle, Foreign Editor, The Adelaide Advertiser, 20 December 1993.

6 Interview with the author, Melbourne, August 1992.

7 Peter Wilson, group editorial training manager of John Fairfax newspapers, Sydney. Personal conversation on 15 April, 1994.

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