


## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# MULTICULTURAL MEDIA AS AN EMPOWERING FORCE: UNVEILING ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

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### ABSTRACT

In an era when digital media has significantly transformed the process of communication, it is impossible to ignore the expansive landscape it has provided for an inclusive multicultural media environment. There have always been contentions of the traditional mainstream media ignoring or neglecting the minority communities and failing to provide them focus in the national / international narratives. This paper aims to study the factors preventing the traditional media from being 'inclusive' and explores how new media platforms serve as powerful tools to amplify minority voices.

The research will employ a qualitative content analysis and case study method to investigate the ways in which multicultural media contributes to the production and dissemination of cultural materials for ethnic minorities. A central focus will be on understanding the reasons behind insufficient inclusion of cultural minorities by mainstream media as public discourse and explore how digital media serves as a counter-narrative for the under - represented voices.

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## Introduction

“Media representation matters. It shapes how we see the world and how we see ourselves in it.” - Geena Davis. (1) Ethnic minorities all over the world have always felt ‘left out’, ‘ignored’, or ‘less represented’ by mainstream media. In the United States for instance, it was not until 1965 that the ‘Blacks’ were given a fair share in the political system and the country had to travel a long distance into even how it was going to define a minority – whether it had to do with Blacks having to be called African American or the Spanish speaking immigrants as Latinos or Hispanics. But the fact remains that even some six decades after the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans still feel ‘left out’ in a system that is seen as structurally racist or unwilling to be seen as multicultural.

When exploring the reasons behind this unwillingness or simply being ignored in the mainstream media, one would come across findings such as a lack of knowledge and economic revenue in which advertisements dictate editorials. Shocking as it may be, it is an undeniable fact. “Representation matters because what we see in media doesn’t just reflect reality - it also shapes it. On the other hand, positive representation can shift public opinion for the greater understanding and appreciation between cultures and communities.”(2)

This is probably why mainstream media is often criticized for stereotyping ethnic minorities, and the lack of sensitivity while reporting. In a current setting, a furor has broken out in academic and intellectual circles on media reporting of the October 7 Hamas attack on the state of Israel and the response that followed of the Jewish state. For all those in the Western world who were aghast that the media had not fully grasped the horrors of the Hamas attack, equally so was the perception on the other side that the predominantly Western media had not fully come to terms with the catastrophic blockade of the Gaza Strip. And a common perception of media houses in the United States being controlled by ‘Jews’ runs in between. (3)

### Lack of Knowledge

In recent times, a number of mainstream media outlets have reduced the number of field reporters, and local and foreign correspondents as gathering data has become much easier, and from the management angle, a corporate style of cost-cutting has probably benefitted them. The limited resources that they sport around sadly do not have the sufficient knowledge to cover, research, and report the ongoing issues faced by the minority communities.

Let us take the case of the recent flash flood that hit the north-eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, India in October. Despite being a major disaster, given the geopolitical location, topography of the hills, and the multi-ethnic and multicultural population living there, there was somehow this perception that the traditional media had not understood the gravity of the problem and this was as a result of an inability to understand the kind of lives people who inhabited the area. The flash floods and the ensuing landslides resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives, homes being washed out by the gushing water of river Teesta, families relocated to temporary shelters, dams and bridges broken, an army truck containing explosives carried away by the fast flowing water resulting in explosions at various locations and bodies of dead found across national and international borders. It had been extremely difficult for the mainstream media to understand the magnitude of the disaster. (4)

Even if the national media had reported it, local communities were unhappy with the minimal air time/print space given. Would it have been different had the tragedy taken place elsewhere and away from the mountains and boondocks of the North East? Closely linked to this perception is also one lethargic movement of equipment that was needed to set right the damages, especially of the National Highway linking the affected areas to the capital of Sikkim and beyond. The national media, one argument went, slept at the switch even with all technology at its disposal. And the government for its part was also taken to task for being slow to rise to the occasion.

A number of instances can be quoted to show how lack of knowledge leads to poor representation. Take the Islamophobia haunting the Western world, especially after the 9/11 attack, "It is claimed that the mainstream media in the West - and especially in the US - has been disseminating false information about the Islamic world for several decades. Due to the distorted images developed and manipulated

by the media, Islam is the name of negativity in the West. It is generally believed that the Western and the US mainstream media often misrepresent and inaccurately interpret and portray Islam and the Islamic world.”(5) Lack of knowledge of the religion, and the acts of certain extremists should not push the media to generalize and create an unease and tension in society.

### **Economic Revenue**

Another reason that drives the media industry is the war between advertisements and editorials. This has created a drastic shift in prioritizing news given the space constraint of print and broadcast media. Now this “match” has been going on for quite some time in the industry. Many media houses are cowed down by the potential advertisers and the revenue they promise and compromise largely on rational decision-making in conveying a news item. This has affected the credibility of such media houses. This also is a major reason to sideline minority voices in the media – it is not glamorous or sensational enough for the TRPs, or an advertiser somewhere would be unhappy if the news is published. This might lead to questions the integrity on the one hand and issues of ethics on the other hand.

In a country like India, the media industry or media houses are torn between not just political sympathies at the center and state levels but also by caste and communities as the divides are well known. Media outlets are cajoled and threatened over news coverage with the carrot or stick of advertisements. In fact, in many instances, governments, for political reasons, are at the center, and the states have threatened to stop issuing advertisements if a media house publishes adverse news or editorially criticizes the local political dispensation. The carrot and stick framework may not be successful with major national newspapers or broadcasters but will certainly put small and medium outlets at grave financial risk, at times even closures.

### **Digital Media as an Alternative Representation of Ethnic Minority**

The advent of the internet not only impacted the print and electronic industry structurally and functionally but also made a mark on the media-society divide that hitherto seemed to be an exclusive domain of a few rich and powerful in the national and international systems. In fact, the forces of globalization spurred on by the

internet brought down the Iron Curtain in Europe and was responsible for a spurt in global movements that questioned authoritarian regimes the world over and also gave hope to the millions who were seeking to be heard. Digital Media as an alternative representation of ethnic minorities soon found itself a space, literally an unlimited one, with no constraints of length or time—a truly global phenomenon. Traditional media that bound itself over a period of time through in-built rules and regulations soon were confronted by the new media that challenged the private and public domains. Over a period of time, ethnic minorities came to voice their views with their own on digital platforms, making effective use of Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, Instagram, and so on in the process. And the force of Digital Media as an important phase in communication has found itself a permanent space.

Ethnic minority groups all over the world, especially the younger generation have been creating their own 'space' on the internet through various platforms and have been voicing out their opinions and say to a much wider audience. A number of protests and agitations that might have been sidelined by mainstream media are being brought to light through these digital forums. It could be said that digital media serves as an inclusive platform that is gaining momentum for its unique distinction of accommodating and giving space to a multicultural network of users. Let us take the Manipur, India, violence for instance that shook the entire world early this year. What started off as a clash between two tribes Kukis and Meiteis over a 'tribal status decree' snowballed into a riot, leading to a lot of tension in the border state of India. This incident was conveniently gaslighted by the mainstream media and the political leaders of the country until a fateful video of a naked parade of tribal women belonging to the Kukis went viral. The video detailed the sexual assault and humiliation undergone by the minority tribe and brought to light the social injustice that can no longer be ignored and forced the political leaders and the mainstream media to step in and take action. (6)

### **Multicultural Media as an Empowering Force**

There are many facets to multicultural media, none of which can be brushed off as inconsequential to the mediums of communications or politics. Multicultural media brings with it a force of a different audience that the traditionalists cannot ignore or brush aside. From a communications point of view, multicultural media comes with a new set of messages and signals that are hard to ignore. For instance, on the one hand, a demonstration of migrants and refugees may be a form of protest

on facilities that may be lacking in a host country; yet in many ways, it is a reminder of the larger problems of war, conflict, and internal displacement. On the other hand, the multicultural media is also a reminder for the traditional media to re-tune or fine tune the existing societal problems of the day. It is easy to generalize gang violence in the United States as a phenomenon of war between drug warlords; but difficult to read through the different voices crying out for help and a pointer to simplifications of complex issues.

Multicultural media may in many ways lack the sophistication of traditional media outlets or an entity that may not have the financial muscle of established players in the industry. But whether one talks of castes and communities in India or refugees and migrants fleeing the horrors of war and conflict in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia, it is a voice and a message that the medium cannot afford to ignore any longer.

## Conclusion

The strength of multicultural digital media is in its ability to offer a wider reach instantaneously, inclusive nature, and bridging the gap between people. Communication has never been this easy and efficient. It does face certain criticism for giving 'too much' information, of having to navigate through a maze of misinformation and disinformation. Reports of how many times a particular depiction of news has gone viral, creating chaos in the society, only to find that the dissemination was nothing but fake and imagined. But with technology advancing by the day journalism will have to come to terms with the deliberate and malicious portrayal of news that leaves a profound impact on society.

## Disclosure statement

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