

# Ethnic Media in the United States: An Essay on Their Role in Integration, Assimilation, and Social Control

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*Hundreds of thousands of immigrants have entered the United States in the last 2 decades and even more are expected to do so in the coming years. This increasing presence of members from diverse ethnic identities is leading to what some have characterized as a permanently unfinished American society. Ethnic groups have grown active and have established institutions to sustain their ethnicity and ease their transition into American society with varying degrees of success. One such institution with a significant role in assimilation and integration is the ethnic mass media. This article is a theoretical exegesis on the role of ethnic media from a functional conflict perspective. Drawing from the literature on immigration, the sociology of the community press, social conflict, and postindustrial theories, we speculate on the functions of ethnic media and how that may manifest in their news content. Finally, propositions are offered for a more systematic study of ethnic media and their roles given their importance to current debates on American identity and multiculturalism raging in the country.*

America is a nation of immigrants. Ever-increasing numbers of immigrants have been coming into the country as a result of successive reforms in the nation's immi-

gration laws in 1965, 1985, and 1990. According to Portes and Rumbaut (1990), an average of 600,000 immigrants and refugees a year were legally admitted to the United States in the 1980s, leading to what some have characterized as a permanently unfinished American society.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau (1999) suggested that about 9.3% of the current U.S. population is foreign born.

Earlier theories of immigration argued that America is a melting pot where immigrants will eventually assimilate into the mainstream (Park, 1950, 1970). Subsequent work has cast doubts on this theory and in fact has argued that ethnicity has grown stronger among both newer and older immigrant groups in the United States (Blauner, 1982; Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Hirschman, 1983). Whatever the argument, the increasing ethnic pluralism of the United States is undeniable.

The growing ethnic diversity and pluralism has led to increasing competition for resources—housing, jobs, assistance, and business. Furthermore, among certain groups and politicians, the diversity has led to an anxiety and alarm over the seeming threat to the “mainstream” of American culture and the English language. Calls have been made to restrict immigration (Lamm & Imhoff, 1985) and actions taken either at the federal or the state level to restrict welfare benefits or assistance to the immigrants and in some case, declare English as an official language.

Ethnic groups have grown active and have established institutions to sustain their ethnicity and ease their transition into American society with varying degrees of success. The ethnic media are a product of these groups' attempts to organize, communicate, and facilitate their transition into American society (Park, 1922/1970; Subervi-Velez, 1986). Given the rising levels of immigration into the United States, increasing tensions and questions about immigration, and the growing importance of media, it is worthwhile to systematically examine and explore the role of the ethnic press in the United States. Drawing from the literature on community press in the United States and the works of scholars on ethnicity and immigration, this article is a theoretical analysis on the nature and potential function of the ethnic press in the United States.<sup>2</sup> What are the functions of the ethnic press? What is the degree of similarity and differences between the mainstream community press and the ethnic press? What role does ethnic community structure play in the coverage by the ethnic news medium? We attempt to elucidate these questions drawing on our current research program on the role of Asian Indian press in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup>This figure does not include illegal immigration.

<sup>2</sup>This theoretical examination is an extension of recent work on minorities and media by such scholars as Rubin (1980), Greenberg, Michael, Burgoon, and Korzenny (1983), Wilson and Gutierrez (1985), and Miller (1987), among others. Much of this earlier work, although comprehensive in one sense, also is bereft of any work on the press of the new ethnics such as the Asian Indians, the Pakistanis, and the Filipinos.

## IMMIGRATION: THE RECENT TREND

The new immigrants to America, as a result of reforms in the immigration law in 1965, are mostly from non-European nations, unlike the earlier immigration waves. Among them, there has been a trend to preserve their ethnic heritage, in contrast to the anxiety of earlier ethnics to assimilate, expressed in the phrase *melting pot* (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Hirschman, 1983).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Glazer and Moynihan argued that among the more recent immigrants, there has been a tendency to revive their ethnicity and maintain their cultural identity.<sup>4</sup> Aided with the modern means of communication, the new immigrants are able to maintain their links to the homeland relatively more easily than the earlier waves of immigrants.

Furthermore, the range of variation along language, ethnic, class, and linguistic lines is impressive. For example, immigrants from Asia are generally likely to hold professional jobs or have small businesses (see Kitano & Daniels, 1988; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Most settle down in highly industrial areas or cities with high-tech industry, and near major academic institutions. On the other hand, migrant farm workers may or may not have legal status and may be itinerant, facing great odds in assimilation. Given the influx and diversity and the associated tensions, a number of these groups have been increasingly concerned with their rights and have become more active politically, supporting candidates of both political parties, working on campaigns, and even running for office. Immigrant media function as one of the principal vehicles of socialization and communication within immigrant communities.

## COMMUNITY PRESS IN THE UNITED STATES

The role of mass media in the community has been a recurrent question in mass communication research. Scholars examining media from a macrosocial perspective have posited that media are a critical subsystem of the total community system and product of the environment from which they emanate. Media reflect, refract, and amplify the concerns of power groupings in the social system, thus performing a central integrative function (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). Their primary function is social control, in the interest of system maintenance, which they perform by drawing attention to what is acceptable and not acceptable within the domi-

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<sup>3</sup>The term *melting pot* was used to legitimize the idea that America is a land of opportunity: A place where no religion, race, or national origin can impede social mobility (Hirschman, 1983). Assimilation theory has been criticized by scholars for (a) being untestable, as it does not specify when changes will occur (Lyman, 1968); (b) its assumption that change is nonlinear; and (c) its ideological overtones.

<sup>4</sup>Glazer and Moynihan (1970) rejected the idea of assimilation as unreal. They suggested that "historical experiences, cultures, skills, and times of arrival" (p. 14) developed unique economic, political, and cultural patterns for each group. The complete identity of the immigrants with the mainstream American culture has been inhibited by a subtle system of identification.

nant norms and values of the community (Demers, 1996; Gitlin, 1978; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Tichenor et al., 1980; Viswanath & Demers, 1999).<sup>5</sup> These include the functions of environmental surveillance, transmission of cultural heritage, correlation of different segments, mobilization, and entertainment (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1960).

Although all media perform the social control function, the way in which the function is performed is influenced by the structure of the community, otherwise termed *community pluralism* (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1984; Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1968; Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue, 1986; Tichenor et al., 1980).

### Community Pluralism: Relevance and Application to an Ethnic Press

Community pluralism or heterogeneity can be defined as the degree of differentiation in the system with potential for organized sources of power.<sup>6</sup> The study of system complexity or the lack of it has a distinguished history in social sciences, occupying the attention of a long line of scholars including Comte, Toennies, Maine, Spencer, and Durkheim, among many others. In media studies, the notion of complexity draws extensively from Durkheim's (1964) ideas on the *Division of Labor in Society*. He identified two types of social integration: mechanical and organic solidarity. Communities with mechanical solidarity are characterized by a "strong collective conscience" (p. 79), present among individuals who are relatively similar to each other. There is a greater degree of commonality in beliefs, norms, interpretations, and values among members of a community. On the other hand, a predominant feature of organic solidarity, present in a highly differentiated society, is that social integration or solidarity is based on contractual relationships (Applebaum, 1970; Giddens, 1971). Differentiation, in Durkheim's view, is correlated with size and density of the social system where greater density could lead to greater interactions (Tiryakian, 1978).

In media studies, the Minnesota Community Studies Team used pluralism as the principal contextual variable in examining news coverage by the community press

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<sup>5</sup>The arguments of Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1980) are often misconstrued to mean that they are in favor of the status quo and that power is not considered. On the contrary, their propositions suggest sensitivity to the power differentials in the system. They argued that the dominant values and norms of a system are functional to the groups interested in the status quo and dysfunctional to those groups that try to change the power relations. In general, mainstream media function as a guard dog of the power structure rather than as a watchdog (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>In this article, such terms as *pluralism*, *complexity*, *heterogeneity*, and *homogeneity* are being used interchangeably with the acknowledgment that they could be conceptually different. Furthermore, pluralism does not necessarily imply a uniform or equal distribution of power among all subgroups. We make the assumption that power is always unequally distributed even though it is somewhat more decentralized in more pluralistic systems.

(Tichenor et al., 1980). They used such indicators as population size, number of jobs in the nonagricultural sector, distance from the metropolitan areas, and number of groups and institutions. To these indicators, Viswanath, Finnegan, Hertog, Pirie, and Murray (1994) added the number of media systems as an additional indicator. Given the increasing ethnic diversity of American communities, others have incorporated differentiation along ethnic lines as yet another indicator of pluralism (Gandy, 1998; Hindman, Littlefield, Preston, & Neumann, 1999; Melwani et al., 1994).

Given the current wave of immigration and the postindustrial nature of the society, pluralism as a variable requires careful and rigorous conceptualization. Size will continue to be a critical indicator. The number of immigrants into the United States from any given part of the world will be small to begin with. As the size of the group increases because of increasing immigration, there is likely to be a shift in reliance from primary to secondary channels of communication. Increasing size is also likely to bring in increasing complexity within the ethnic community, adding to its heterogeneity.

Other indicators will have to be reevaluated closely depending on the ethnic group and their mode of entry into the country. Class, ethnicity or ethnic subdivisions, occupation, and income are predictable indicators.

There are, however, additional considerations that must be taken into account. For example, immigrants from India may all be from one geographical part of the world but may have different mother tongues. Similarly, people from mainland China may be able to speak one language but in actuality may have different mother tongues depending on the region that they come from in China.

Some indicators could be unique to certain groups. Caste may be a significant factor in India, given that it correlates highly with social class and influences occupational mobility in India.

### Pluralism: Primacy of Indicators

The previous section described the various indicators that could potentially be used to conceptualize and measure pluralism. The question is whether all indicators are equal or whether some matter more than others. For example, one reason that size matters is because of increasing interaction density and how it affects interaction among primary and secondary groups (Durkheim, 1984). However, this is based on the conceptualization of a community in spatial terms where members of the ethnic group are congregated in close proximity. In general, however, an ethnic community could be a community without propinquity (Webber, 1963). Such a condition demands a reevaluation of how conventional assumptions about the usual indicators are valid. That is, are the assumptions one makes about the reliability and validity of some indicators in certain conditions valid when applied to different conditions?

Let us discuss this further using the Asian Indian ethnic community as an exemplar. The Indian ethnic community in the United States in terms of size is about 1 million strong. It is, however, geographically widely dispersed with the largest concentrations of tens of thousands in major urban centers. Most of them speak English and enjoy high formal education, most are in professional occupations, and they have one of the highest average household incomes of any ethnic group in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Furthermore, it is conceivable that the traditional power structures such as gender (being male), class, and caste enjoy dominance and even hegemony defining the culture of the community and what it means to be an Asian Indian. These assumptions lead one to characterize the Indian ethnic community as relatively homogeneous.

On the other hand, if one were to take the linguistic dimension, the Asian Indian ethnic community could not be more diverse. In India, there are more than 14 official languages and almost 1,000 dialects. Many of these languages are represented within the Asian Indian immigrant community in varying numbers. Given the proximity of culture or subculture to language, one might imagine the diversity within the community. Also, there is considerable subcultural as well as religious variation within the Asian Indian ethnic group, where tensions among the groups are not uncommon. A good indicator of the diversity of the community is the number of Indian cultural organizations formed along linguistic lines and the number of different religious centers.

Therefore in terms of pluralism, the Asian Indian ethnic community press in the United States should share commonalities with both a small-town community press as well as the press from a heterogeneous system.<sup>7</sup> The question is, what is the impact of such an ambiguous pluralistic condition on the way the medium covers the issues?

### Community Press and Social Conflict

As suggested earlier, the central integrative role of the media means that they play an active role in covering or not covering social conflict. Much social conflict is generally over distribution of scarce resources and differential distribution in authority or power (Coleman, 1957; Dahrendorf, 1959; Wallace & Wolf, 1986) over which there are likely to be "excess claimants" (Coser, 1967). Coser (1956, 1967) suggested that conflicts establish group identities and strengthen group consciousness. External conflicts can result in the *Simmel effect*, an increase in integration and cohesion of group members (Simmel, 1955). Internal conflicts define group

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<sup>7</sup>As mentioned earlier, the concept of community is being used in a much broader sense here. One definition of community may deal with geographic and spatial limitations. However, another definition could be a group of people that shares some commonality of interest, ethnicity, or occupation. It is this latter definition that is being adopted here.

identity, norms of behavior, group cohesion, and stability. Conflicts are intense, according to Coser (1956, 1967), when they involve fundamental values and beliefs of a system. However between groups, conflicts can lead to withering away of relationships and groups that become increasingly polarized (Coleman, 1957, p. 11).

News media are disseminators of information that there is potential for conflict or even the existence of disagreement or dispute (Coleman, 1957). Media coverage of conflict, however, is a function of the complexity of the system with system maintenance as the ultimate goal. In large, complex communities, media perform the feedback function, alerting the system to problems existing in the subsystems, a function akin to that of a community sentinel. Conflict coverage in heterogeneous systems is routine as there are competing groups with organized power (Tichenor et al., 1980).

In more homogenous systems, on the other hand, conflict coverage is less emphasized. In homogeneous communities, power is relatively more centralized and decision making is seldom public and usually is run on the basis of consensus. The reason noted by some scholars is that no one really wants to stir up trouble (Vidich & Bensman, 1958). Editors are likely to be a part of the community elite and the reporting in the newspaper is more likely to be distributive rather than feedback in orientation. Ties between the political elite and the media elite are likely to be closer in smaller, less complex, or more homogeneous communities (Tichenor et al., 1980). Edelstein and Schulz (1963) reported that a majority of the community leaders proposed that controversies should be publicized only when it is unavoidable. A community newspaper is seen by the audience as a resource and as an agent of progress and not as a partisan actor (Janowitz, 1952).

This does not mean that news media do not cover conflict in small, homogeneous systems. News media do enter conflict situations based on certain conditions. Tichenor et al. (1980) identified three types of newspaper entry into a conflict situation. The first type is "presentation of a local interest based upon surveillance of the external environment" (p. 115). Newspapers take their watchdog function seriously and may act as lookouts for the community. Another type of newspaper entry is follow-up reporting in nonlocal media. The third type of entry is the reporting of an internal issue by the newspaper.

Therefore a newspaper is rarely likely to initiate conflict but will accelerate and publicize it to a wider audience. Once the controversy develops, however, newspapers may seize the initiative. Media then define, albeit within power and structural limitations, the issues, strategies, actions, and positions of groups.

### Ethnic Press and Conflict Coverage

The question then is to what extent these findings are applicable to the ethnic newspapers. Based on community press literature reviewed in the previous section, one might expect conflict news coverage to be directly related to the pluralism of the community about which and to which the media are reporting. This, in turn, is also

related to the issue of whether the reporting of conflict poses a threat to the stability of the community.

If the ethnic community is relatively small and homogenous, it is likely that the community elite are likely to be reluctant to wash their dirty laundry in the press. They may want to maintain their image as hard-working ethnics who are trying to succeed in the "new world" and may see any coverage of internal conflict as harmful to the long-term interests and stability of the community. On the other hand, if the ethnic community is pluralistic, its role may be analogous to that of news medium in a more heterogeneous system. For example, the Asian Indian ethnic press in the United States will be reporting on a polyglot society such as India with diverse castes, classes, and linguistic, religious, and subcultural groups. The press is in a unique position where it has to perform both informational and feedback functions. In addition, it must report on a pluralistic system such as India to a homogeneous Asian Indian ethnic community in the United States.

This puts the medium in an ambiguous, if not countervailing pluralistic condition. Given this dual role of social control and strengthening of ethnic identity, and the reporting on and in a pluralistic system, one might expect the ethnic newspaper to give high attention to conflict. At the same time, it might pay attention to conflicts that do not threaten the fundamental stability of the system in which it operates. Our preliminary analyses of an Indian ethnic newspaper support this proposition. Our data indicate that the Indian ethnic press appears to have adopted itself well to its ambiguous roles covering conflicts that could be of interest to the readers, but at the same time paying relatively less attention to conflict that may threaten the local community's stability (Viswanath & Arora, 1997).

Based on the foregoing review, one might offer the following propositions:

H1: As long as the community remains small, ethnic community press is less likely to cover controversial issues.

H2: Even when conflict is covered, relatively more attention is likely to be paid to issues that do not threaten the community's stability (i.e., external conflicts) rather than to issues that threaten the system.

H3: As a corollary, as the size of the community increases, the coverage of conflict is also likely to increase in the ethnic community press.

H4: Although size is an important criterion, at some point size is likely to matter relatively less than other indicators of pluralism such as language, social class, and subculture.

### Social Control and the Ethnic Community Press: A Functional Analysis

In the literature on media sociology, there appears to be a broad consensus that media are indeed agents of social control, whose operations and functions are deter-

mined by the power groupings in the society (Gitlin, 1978; Glasgow Media Group, 1976; Tichenor et al., 1980; Tuchman, 1978; Viswanath & Demers, 1999).

Social control is concerned with the internalization of norms and values by the individual, where the individual's values and behavior conform to group norms and that of the social structure (Coser, 1982; Ross, 1969). A vital resource in the exercise of social control by those in power is the control over information or knowledge. Some have attributed such power to the media, as they are one of the principal forums in which potential social problems are identified, defined, and articulated. To the extent that power is understood as an ability to influence others (Mott, 1970; Weber, 1958), news media could be said to possess *conditioning power*, power to win submission without coercion (Galbraith, 1983).

In general, social control function in the media is performed through two types of information control processes (Tichenor et al., 1980): feedback and distributive control processes. Reports of feedback control are published with the aim of drawing attention to a potential problem in the system. They may result in audience reaction in the form of protest, mobilization, or flak. Newspapers may act as forums for community groups and institutions in setting the public agenda for discussion but may also play an active role in defining the issues for the public. The consequence of a feedback control function could be an effort by some community members or groups to resolve the problem and restore system stability. On the other hand, distributive function is served when media casually report routine events.

However, as discussed earlier, the reportage is influenced by the nature of the social structure in which the newspapers operate. Newspapers are more likely to serve a feedback function in heterogeneous communities and a distributive function in relatively homogeneous societies. These functions may manifest accordingly in the ethnic community press. When the community is small and relatively homogeneous, one might expect the primary mechanism of control by ethnic press to be that of distributive control. As the community size and diversity increase, more of the content may be classified as feedback control process. Within this social control framework, there are specific functions that an ethnic press might serve.

*Cultural transmission.* A transparent way a community press might serve the distributive function is by publishing information on community events, programs, schedules, calendars, and so on, information that does not primarily question the established community institutions and powerful groups within the community. For example, reports about festivals, community celebrations, and local government and associational meetings fall under this category. These reports do not threaten the system in any way and strengthen the feeling that the system is functioning well. This is particularly true in homogeneous community newspapers, which are considered as extensions of personal communication channels.

In the Asian Indian ethnic community, for example, the news media may carry information on cultural and religious celebrations including a plethora of India reli-

gious festivals, cultural programs, and visits by cultural artists from India. Such coverage is likely to serve several manifest and latent functions:

- It has the unintended consequence of “reviving the ethnicity,” strengthening the ethnic identity of the community. Whether it will inhibit assimilation is an empirical question.
- Continued and celebratory coverage maintains and strengthens the ethnic identity among the second generation, children. A sense of cultural identity, of belonging to a different heritage, is most likely to be initiated and developed within the family and at home. Community institutions and the media are likely to reinforce that sense of identity.

*Ethnic newspaper as a community booster.* A community newspaper is also a local booster. Local newspaper coverage of most issues strives to present the community in a positive light, projecting an image of wholesomeness, success, and achievement. The community looks to the press to portray a positive image of itself to the external public as well as to the members within the community (Janowitz, 1952; Kaniss, 1991).<sup>8</sup>

For example, local newspapers usually cover local developments such as urban renewal programs in a positive light, seldom focusing on the downside of the issues. Close ties between local reporters and editors and the community elite in relatively homogeneous systems means a general reluctance by the newspapers to stir up trouble or draw attention to issues that may affect the community image.

An immigrant newspaper may focus on such themes as the following:

- human interest features and profiles,
- success stories of immigrants, and
- volunteer work being done by the immigrants either in the United States or in their native land demonstrating their contribution to society.

Furthermore, as is the case with neighborhood press, much reporting is taking place within the commercial, consumerist context. The ethnic press is likely to rely on merchants and businesses such as groceries, banks, travel agencies, and insur-

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<sup>8</sup>This does not mean that newspapers do not cover negative events. They, in fact, do. Most often, however, particularly in homogeneous communities, there is a greater degree of consensus and closer structural ties between the news media and the local elite, which generally engenders coverage that “helps” the community. In heterogeneous communities, in contrast, newspaper coverage of community “problems” is functional in that it draws attention to the problems that need resolution in the interest of stability. Most local newspapers, as Kaniss (1991) observed, are sensitive to the fact that negative coverage may affect the economic investment environment of a community, particularly the central city.

ance agencies targeting the ethnic group and may not be inclined to offer a radical voice.

At the same time, relatively less attention is likely to be paid to stories that portray the ethnic community and its members in a negative light. Such categories may include stories on crimes by members of the community or any behavior that could be considered deviant from the dominant norms and values of the host culture and country (Viswanath & Arora, 1997).

*Community newspaper as a sentinel.* Functional theorists such as Lasswell (1948) and Wright (1960), among others, argued that media often work as community sentinels, acting as both radars and early warning systems against external threats. It is a function that seems to be well suited for an ethnic community press. An ethnic group is potentially vulnerable to discrimination from other groups particularly if they are "different" from the mainstream and are perceived as a threat to the mainstream culture. Given the recent negative reactions in the United States toward immigration by certain groups, it is most likely that the role of a watchdog may become an important function for the immigrant press. To perform its role as a community sentinel against external threat, the newspaper may present stories affecting the legal rights of the ethnic community: civil rights violations, changes in immigration laws, and crime against immigrants.

The amount of attention a community and its press pays such a subject is, however, dependent on at least three factors: the social status of the group, the mode of entry of the group, and the subsequent experiences of members of the group. The first two, mode of entry and social status, influence the third, the group's experience in America subsequent to their emigration.

Blauner (1982) drew two ideal types of entry into the United States: colonization and immigration. *Colonization* refers to the process of involuntary entry into the United States, as has been the case with Blacks and Chicanos and to an extent, Puerto Ricans. On the other hand, White European entry has been more voluntary, characterized by greater freedom of movement and assimilation. As most ideal types go, experiences of immigrants from China, Japan, and Philippines, among others, fall somewhere between colonialism and voluntary immigration. In case of immigrants from South Asia, it is safe to characterize it as voluntary with a greater degree of freedom of movement.

Second, if the community, in general, enjoys a relatively higher status, as is the case with certain Asian ethnic groups, it is most likely that the press will be assertive in terms of protecting the rights of the immigrants. The question is the extent to which the ethnic community and the ethnic press identify and work with other groups in protecting their legal rights.

This is also a part of the mobilizing function of the press. This is most likely witnessed in times of disasters in the immigrants' native countries. It is not unusual to

see the media volunteering to collect donations to be sent to the homeland to aid the needy or those affected. Much depends on how the elite and press define the issues.

For example, our preliminary analyses of the Asian Indian ethnic press revealed considerable coverage of impending changes in immigration laws that were likely to directly impinge on the Asian Indians. On the other hand, little attention was paid to civil rights in general, presumably because the community and the press chose not to define the issue as important (Viswanath & Arora, 1997). Similarly, the coverage on welfare reform as it affected immigrants might have received differential coverage in various ethnic presses depending on the proportion of ethnic community members affected by the issue.

**Assimilatory function.** One unique role of an ethnic newspaper that differentiates it from a community newspaper is its role in promoting assimilation. Whatever the mode of entry, the greatest struggle of an immigrant is survival in a new country and a new culture that is alien. In an effort to fit in, immigrant groups adopt outward symbols of assimilation: language (especially the idiom), dress, food, and behavior. Their success in the country partly depends on their degree of assimilation and learning the ropes of the system. Second, the success of the group as whole and the way it is received depends on the extent to which it is perceived by the host culture and country as having been assimilated and as a part of the mainstream.

It is here that the ethnic press may play a critical role. Coverage could focus on such stories as the community's involvement in local politics, promotion of positive feelings between the ethnic groups' homelands and their adopted country, and the demonstration of patriotism by the ethnic group members.<sup>9</sup>

**Informational function.** A critical function of media is to offer information and mobilize the community. In fact, one might argue that the ethnic community press begins with the purpose of informing the community about events occurring not only within the community, but also in their native homeland. Given the limited coverage of international news in mainstream American news media, the immigrants are more likely to rely on ethnic media to fill that gap.

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<sup>9</sup>The involvement of the ethnic groups in politics is a function of at least three factors: their mode of entry, the size of the community, and the socioeconomic status (SES) of the group. Taking off on Blauner's (1982) description, if the group's entry is involuntary, then the forces that combined to forcibly bring the group into the country are also likely to keep them from acquiring power. On the other hand, a voluntary entry may coincide with fewer overt barriers. However, this depends on the size and the status of the community. A certain minimum size is necessary for the numbers to matter for political actors and political parties to pay attention to the ethnic group. Similarly, the ethnic group's SES, which may influence its ability to mobilize funds, may be an important motivator in attracting attention from the mainstream political parties and actors.

## INFORMATION SOCIETY AND ETHNIC COMMUNICATIONS

A predominant characteristic of the postindustrial society is the importance of knowledge and information in serving as community resources (Bell, 1976; Kumar, 1995). A benign variation of the information society argument suggests that the usual barriers of cost, time, geography, and social status are likely to become less important as new communication technologies make access and usage easier (Pool, 1983; for a detailed and interesting discussion on the information society, see Kumar, 1995; Hindman, 1999). On the other hand, others argued that the ability to generate and transmit information quickly and cheaply differentiates and reinforces the existing power differentials among social groups given the wide disparities in access to new information technologies among different social strata (Viswanath, 1997; Viswanath, Lavrakas, & Wei, 1998).

For the ethnic audience in particular, as a result of the new communication technologies such as the Internet and the World Wide Web, geographical and temporal barriers indeed may become less important, allowing different groups to obtain information from and about distant areas. Will that, however, mean that other barriers such as social class, ideology, and power cease to matter? Does the content and focus of the information available in cyberspace differ from the traditional media? Our theoretical analysis briefly addresses both questions.

Even a casual, exploratory analysis of the Web reveals an extensive list of newspapers and magazines available, targeting various ethnic groups and special interests.<sup>10</sup> With the emergence of the Web and other new communication technologies, immigrants now have an array of choices to gather information on their homelands. Internet news services located in the United States, in home countries, or even a third country, are increasingly offering news about developments in the home countries and the diaspora. Interestingly enough, such offerings include both established press from the homelands as well as alternative press, products of efforts by a small group of people. Furthermore, such "Webzines" are from countries in both the developing and the developed world. A question for future research is whether that part of the informational function that covers the immigrants' native countries is likely to change with competition from the newspapers from those countries.

The profile of the ethnic community is likely to play a role in the extent to which the Web emerges as an alternative communication medium. This is critical, as a

<sup>10</sup>A complete and a more extensive analysis of the role of the Internet on ethnic communications, in particular, and communication, in general, is beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, it is a brave and a foolish soul indeed who makes predictions about the information environment on the World Wide Web. The environment is changing so fast that it is hazardous to one's credibility to make any predictions. What can best be done, in the words of Bell (1976), is to identify the broad propensities that allow one to speculate on the likely trajectories the media on the Web may take.

major characteristic of the information society is the emergence and importance of a professional class, the knowledge worker, which decidedly is likely to be different in training, skills, and social status from workers engaged in other sectors. For example, some immigrant group organizations in the Asian Indian community are already using e-mail and Web sites to communicate with their members. Given the large proportion of workers from the Asian Indian community employed in the high-tech sector, it is functional and efficient for the Asian Indian ethnic organizations to use the Web. The acceptance of the Web and the use of the Internet for communications is a reciprocal process that ultimately influences press coverage.

The content on the Web at the moment reflects the hard-copy versions of the news media. This could, however, potentially change and emerge into more progressive versions in two ways. First, more progressive and controversial themes or subjects that might not otherwise garner attention could be covered. For example, progressive topics on feminism and women's issues have established a presence in the case of Indian media as exemplified in sites such as Manushi ([www.freespeech.org/manushi](http://www.freespeech.org/manushi)). Second, in the future, magazines catering exclusively to the second generation of immigrants, focusing principally on their concerns, may emerge. They could potentially focus more on civil rights, political issues, and cultural identity rather than ethnic identity.

In summary, then these remain empirical questions:

1. Will the Web indeed allow for the breach of geographical and temporal barriers?
2. Will the nature of the coverage of online media, which also have hard-copy versions, be less likely to be different from each other?
3. Will media produced exclusively online be different from conventional media with or without Web presence?
4. Is there potential for alternative press to reach a much wider audience and play a more activist role, including providing links to other activist groups?

If the Web offers news content from native country newspapers, then one might question the nature of the impact it is likely to have on the local ethnic press. Given the competition, is it likely to shift away from its informational function of covering the homeland to pay more attention to local community affairs? Will the local ethnic press pay more attention to alternative viewpoints? These are some of the issues that warrant attention in future research of the ethnic press.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two major trends occurring in American society served as a background for this article. One has to do with the increasing flow of immigrants into the United States. According to the latest estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1990 and

1998, the growth in the foreign-born population in the United States was four times that of the native population. The number of foreign-born residents is now around 25 million, constituting about 9.3% of the U.S. population (U.S. Government, 1999).

This influx is already having a profound influence on American society, culture, and politics at federal, state, and local levels. This is evident from the recent debates on such politically charged issues as welfare benefits for immigrants, quotas on the "model minority" Asians, and the boom in diversity in cultural and culinary fares that are available in U.S. cities.

As mentioned in the introduction, historically immigrants have built several institutions to facilitate their survival and to assist them in assimilating into the mainstream. As Glazer and Moynihan (1970) pointed out, increasingly, the characteristic of the new immigrants is to maintain their cultural identity even while assimilating into the American mainstream. This selective assimilation raises interesting theoretical and practical questions on the role played by the ethnic media. Historically, ethnic media have played a great role in promoting assimilation and aiding the immigrants (Park, 1922/1970). We have recast the question in more theoretical terms to ask how the ethnic media serve the triple functions of information, assimilation, and ethnic identity reinforcement. Specifically, our assumptions are that ethnic media are facing two seemingly contradictory expectations that might affect performance. One is the fact that it is reporting in a heterogeneous or pluralistic system, the United States. At the same time, most immigrant presses serve a relatively small, less diverse audience. How do they perform or behave in the face of such countervailing trends? This is the question we pose in this article.

A second trend that served as a background to our study is the changing information environment. Ethnic community groups are now served not only by print and electronic media, but also by new communication technologies such as the Web. A wide array of information sources is available from cyberspace. It is too early to assess the impact of the cyberspace media on conventional media, we raise certain preliminary questions about the Web and how it will influence ethnic groups' communication behaviors and the ethnic media themselves.

The ethnic news medium is one of the most important and vital institutions, along with religious and cultural organizations, that sustain the ethnicity of immigrants. They are even more important when it comes to ever-increasing groups of immigrants who are seeking information on issues that interest and affect them. It plays a very complex role, sharing many characteristics and features of coverage with the community press in the United States, rather than newspapers in large, heterogeneous communities.

Two developments in the United States make it necessary that we continue to observe and see if the role may change over time. First, as the size of the immigrant populations increase, heterogeneity within the immigrant community is also likely to increase. As a result, it is possible that coverage in the ethnic press may change

from that similar to a community press in a homogeneous system to coverage that is closer to the press in a more pluralistic system. Second, it is also possible that the press may become even more like a community press, leaving the informational function behind because of the changing information and communication environment, including new technologies such as the Web. That is, with the emergence of ethnic media online, the ethnic press may prefer to serve exclusively cultural transmission and assimilatory functions. Yet again, the ethnic press is facing an uncertain situation with countervailing forces.

In summary, based on our theoretical analyses, the following propositions may be offered about the role of an ethnic community newspaper in the United States:

1. An ethnic news medium is likely to perform a social control function, one manifestation of which is to report relatively more stories on conflict that do not threaten the stability of the ethnic community here.
2. An ethnic news medium is likely to perform a cultural transmission function by providing stories of a distributive nature; that is, information about meetings, festivals, celebrations, and so on. We are not, however, suggesting that the cultural transmission function is exclusive of the social control function.
3. In line with assimilatory function, the ethnic newspaper may provide more information on involvement of ethnic community members in American politics and more coverage of the relationship between ethnic groups' native homelands and their adopted country.
4. An ethnic news medium is likely to act as a community sentinel, identifying threats from the external environment.
5. The ethnic news medium will act as a community booster, providing information on community members' success in American society and their contribution to it in an effort to show the community in a positive light.

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