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WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR A NEWSPAPER TO BE LATINA/O? A PARTICIPATORY DEFINITION OF ETHNIC MEDIA

ISABEL AWAD

Introduction

While the total number of news publications targeting Latina/o readers in the United States is increasing, the percentage owned by members of the Latina/o community is not. Since the 1990s, more and more Spanish-language newspapers are owned by big media corporations.[1] According to the 2005 report on the *State of the News Media* prepared by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, "the way ownership in this market is changing—involving the entry of bigger companies with deep pockets—it's clear that major players see not just increasing growth but also potential in this audience." It is not only that the Latina/o population is the largest ethnic or racial minority in the U.S. and that it is growing faster than any other group. It is also that Latina/os have become an attractive market.

This chapter looks critically at this phenomenon. Based on a participatory politics of representation, I argue that the corporate production of Spanish-language media does not help to resolve Latinas/os' problem of under- or misrepresentation in U.S. society. A full understanding of the notion of representation reveals that special guarantees should secure minorities' equal access to practices of representation. Instead of more corporate media speaking *to* minorities, more and stronger media produced *by* minorities are needed.

After briefly discussing the rationale underlying the corporate proliferation of Spanish-language newspapers, I introduce important criticisms that have been raised against these publications. These criticisms force us to question the democratic relevance of having special media for specific social groups. I argue that, in order to understand why and which minority media are necessary in a diverse and democratic society, it is necessary to move away from mimetic notions of representation. Consequently, the second part of this chapter focuses on the need for a fair politics of representation in which minorities can

participate in their own representation. Based on such a participatory politics of representation, I conclude that while Latina/o media are required, not every medium speaking to Latinas/os is equally Latina/o.

Questioning Diversity in the Media

The number of Spanish-language newspapers in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last decade and a half, from 355 in 1990 to 768 in 2006 (Whisler, 2007).[2] An important number of new publications have been launched by big newspaper chains. However, corporations have also entered into the Latina/o news market by buying existing papers. As a result, it is difficult today to find a big newspaper company that remains 100% English. Between 2003 and 2005 alone, Cox Newspapers inaugurated Spanish weeklies in Georgia, Texas, and Florida; Tribune started Spanish dailies in Chicago and Los Angeles; Gannett placed Spanish weeklies in four of its New Jersey markets and bought another one in Phoenix; Hearst purchased the weekly *La Voz* in Houston; and, also in Texas, Freedom Communications expanded one of its Spanish dailies and created two new ones. Additionally, in 2004, two newspaper chains specializing in Spanish publishing were created: Meximerica, which launched its *Rumbo* newspapers in Texas; and Impremedia, which now owns six traditional Spanish news players, including *La Opinion* in Los Angeles, *El Diario La Prensa* in New York, and *La Raza* in Chicago.

The potential that corporations see in minority audiences and the reasons they have to target them are both economic and journalistic. Economically, newspaper corporations are following the market. Ethnic minorities in general, and Latinas/os in particular, offer a solution to what seemed to be an irreversible decline in readership. "[S]tatistics add up to opportunity," writes journalist Tim Porter (2003), after examining the number of Asian and Latina/o residents in the U.S. These groups' increased spending power is directly related to their increased attractiveness to advertisers. Therefore, for newspapers to produce ethnic products is to adapt to changing consumer trends.

Journalistically, the new products fit into the mainstream press' diversity pledge. One of the industry's tenets since the 1970s, diversity enables media "[t]o cover communities fully, to carry out their role in a democracy, and to succeed in the marketplace" (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1998). Media's main strategy in this direction is to diversify newsrooms so that they reflect the ethnic composition of the population. But the creation of specialized media for minority groups is also part of the diversity agenda. In general, these enterprises present themselves as an attempt to serve all members of diverse communities by addressing minorities' own interests in their own language. In this way, Spanish-language publications are seen as proof of recognition and attention to the growing Latina/o community, its language, and specific informational needs.

The Accusations: Social Fragmentation and Ownership

Many professionals and academics openly endorse the media industry's commitment to diversity. However, two criticisms of ethnic-specific news products fracture any consensus and pose interesting questions about the kind of media representation that minorities need.

The first criticism is that minority-targeted media serve marketing purposes but hinder social integration because they separate minorities from the rest of the population. In this view, media must incorporate minorities into the mainstream audience in order to integrate them into the U.S. civic culture. This is what Jim Sleeper (1999) has in mind when he asks, "Should American journalism make us Americans?" He answers with a categorical "yes," arguing that news media's ethnic segmentation is opportunistic, irresponsible, and above all, antidemocratic.

Sleeper's arguments align with those of other theorists of democracy who oppose special measures of minority representation in the media, as well as in public office, schools, and universities (e.g., Bloom, 1987; Rorty, 1998; Schlesinger, 1998; Huntington, 2004). From the perspective of these authors, these measures undermine national cohesion, obstructing minorities' inclusion into U.S. society. Their criticism compels us to scrutinize more carefully the democratic justification for special media for minorities. In searching for such a justification, it is also important to consider the kind of special media that minorities may need.

The second criticism comes from corporations' forerunners in the ethnic news market—minority-owned and operated media outlets. Like Sleeper, these critics accuse media corporations of privileging profits over social goals. They differ from Sleeper, however, in that they do not find media fragmentation problematic in itself but locate the problem in ownership and control. For these critics, minorities do need separate media; what matters is who is in charge of that media. Only owners who belong to the community, they argue, can serve it properly. For example, the 2002 5-year strategic plan of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) states:

> [W]e recognize there is a difference between Spanish-language media outlets that are owned by Anglo-controlled or foreign companies, and

native Latino-owned media. While we applaud the efforts of Anglo-owned companies to branch out into Spanish-language media, we also applaud the growth of independent Latino-owned media companies, for these companies play a vital role in the economic growth of the Latino community, and in the shaping of community consciousness. (2002, p. 8)

However, applauding one and the other—the efforts of Anglo-owned companies and those of independent Latina/o-owned companies— may not be so simple. As the NAHJ statement suggests, Anglo-owned companies do not have the impact that Latina/o-owned media have on the economic growth and consciousness of the Latina/o community. In fact, some Latina/o owners of newspapers contend that the corporate effort to produce Spanish-language media imperils their own. In 2004, for example, when Cox Newspapers and Meximerica Media launched their products in Austin, Texas, they joined a market until then occupied by *La Prensa*, *Arriba*, and *El Mundo*. In 2005, the publisher of *La Prensa* told journalist Belinda Acosta from *The Austin Chronicle*:

The thing that upsets me is that small, locally owned papers like *La Prensa*, *Arriba*, and *El Mundo*–which have done the best job of reaching that limited market that needs to know when the color of the green card changes—now have to compete with these newspapers with plenty of money muscle behind them.

Significantly, some of the questions raised by Latina/o publishers overlap with those of Sleeper. By distinguishing between Latina/o- and corporate-owned publications, these critics suggest that not all media targeted at minority groups play the same role in a democratic society. Moreover, not all media speaking to ethnic groups may be "ethnic." Once again, then, we are faced with two important normative questions: Why do minorities need special media and what kind of media do they need?

The Assumptions and Dangers of Representationalism

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find clear answers to these questions within either professional or academic circles. Discussions about the role of media in a diverse society are commonly constrained by a mimetic notion of representation or representationalism. From a mimetic perspective, the link between journalism and cultural difference is a matter of correspondence with reality. For the mainstream media, this implies that the distribution of positions in the newsroom must match demographics in the community and news stories should accurately reflect the reality of each social group. By attaining such correspondence, a

medium allegedly gains quality—which, in turn, secures its success in the marketplace. These assumptions are manifest, for example, in the "Newsroom Diversity Index," developed by a journalism lecturer and practitioner teamed with a professor of mass communication to measure the correspondence between the racial composition of newsrooms and their communities (Dedman & Doig, 2003).[3]

Representationalism also affects our understanding of minority media. First, it imposes the standards of professionalism of mainstream newsrooms as *the* measure of news quality. An example comes from the publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News* (the monopoly daily in San José, California). In 2001, Jay Harris explained that they had decided to instill in their Spanish- and Vietnamese-language weeklies the same "values and standards" of the *Mercury News*. According to Harris, pre-exiting papers targeting the Latina/o and Vietnamese communities had been forced to revise their "more adversarial or political form of journalism." He concluded that local minority publications had improved due to the competition with the *Mercury News's* foreign-language weeklies.[4]

Secondly, representationalism obscures important differences that exist among media that speak to ethnic minorities. To the extent that news media are expected to present reality as it is, who is in control of those media does not really matter. A medium is considered ethnic simply because it deals with ethnic-specific issues and it addresses an ethnic audience. In fact, the term "ethnic media" is commonly used as a synonym of "foreign-language media" (e.g., Shoemaker et al., 1985; Rios & Gaines 1998; Jeffres, 2000; Kim, 2001). And while some studies have classified certain English-language publications as ethnic, the ethnic character of foreign-language media is rarely questioned.

The attempt to match journalistic production with an allegedly independent reality is problematic because it implies neglecting communication's role in the construction of the social world. Instead of taking responsibility for the kind of communication that society needs, journalism ends up naturalizing a given model of society. In the specific case addressed in this chapter, sincere efforts for greater justice in news coverage—such as hiring people from different ethnic backgrounds and launching media for specific ethnic groups—may turn into limited accommodations within the given media system and end up reinforcing social inequalities.

The Power and the Politics of Representation

Given the social risks of representationalism and its limitations in helping us understand minority media, this section moves away from dualistic conceptions of representation and reality, where one is an attempt to imitate the other. Following Holquist (1981), I argue that meaning is not something that the sender of a message owns and which he or she sends to a receiver. Meaning, Holquist explains, occurs in a terrain "in-between" sender and receiver. Meaning does not operate naturally—as if it was an attribute of things—but in communication. More importantly, it is something that is contested. Representation, in this view, acquires a fundamentally political character: The way in which the in-between territory of meaning is "governed," as well as proposals for alternative forms of government, must be grounded in a "politics of representation" (Holquist, 1981, p. 170). Representation, in brief, always involves the power to represent or, as Hall (1982, p. 69) phrases it, "ideological power."

Understood as the "work of fixing meaning" (i.e., of fixing people's understanding of reality; Hall, 1985, p. 93), ideology takes the discussion about representation a step further. While the first step acknowledges that there are no natural representations, the second step examines the mechanisms through which certain representations are treated as though they were natural. The "power to signify events in a particular way" is what Hall (1982, p. 69) specifically refers to as "ideological power." Notably, the signification processes Hall has in mind are practiced in language, but do not remain at a purely linguistic or symbolic level. Ideology, Hall insists, cannot be treated as separate from the real. "[H]ow things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role" (Hall, 1988, p. 27). What is at stake in representations, then, is reality itself.

Representation: Always Symbolic, Always Political

Having acknowledged that representations are socially produced and ideologically shaped, there is still a third step to make in order to advance a fair politics of representation: to expose the bond between the symbolic meaning of representation—representation as "standing for"—and the political meaning of representation—representation as "acting for." [5] Symbolic representation is the subject matter of cultural studies, including the study of media and artistic production. Political representation is a

central concern in political theory. Questions about media and democracy are located precisely where both senses of representation intersect.

The double character of representation, symbolic and political, comes together in Said's (2001, p. 41) definition of representation as "a discursive system involving political choices and political force, authority in one form or another." To represent is always to exercise "symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1991), and to be represented by something or by someone always involves a transferal—willing or not—of the control one may have over one's own reality. In the relationship of a community to its political representatives as well as in the news through which the community is represented, it is possible to observe the "antinomy" of representation. Bourdieu uses this expression to refer to the process through which

> individuals—this is all the more true the more they are deprived—cannot constitute themselves (or be constituted) as a group, that is, as a force capable of making itself heard, unless they disposes themselves in favor of a spokesperson. One must always risk political alienation in order to escape from political alienation. (1991, p. 204)

Since minority ethnic groups (like other relatively deprived sections of society) are particularly vulnerable to political alienation, it is crucial to consider the conditions of their media representation. As in a democratic parliament, representativeness in the media may be approached in terms of authorization of the represented and accountability of the representatives. Through "moments of authorization and accountability," a well-functioning system of representation can secure a sustained connection between the represented and their representatives (Young, 2000, p. 129). When this connection is missing, a parliamentary process may become "a stage on which elites perform according to their own script" (Young, 2000, pp. 130-131). Translated into the study of media representations, this raises questions that cannot be reduced to accuracy. For instance: Who is authorized to represent a certain ethnic group? How are media accountable to those groups they represent? How should the connection between those who produce print or broadcasted representations and those that are represented be sustained? As the next section explains, the answers to these questions point to the importance of minorities' participation in representation.

Social Perspective and its Relevance for Media Production

In an essay about the "relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes" of minorities in the media, Gross (1998) makes a simple but very useful distinction: There are media representations *of* minorities, *for* minorities, and *by* minorities, he explains. While he does not dismiss the significance of any of the three, he underscores the importance of the last kind of representations. In his view, for a minority group, to be able to speak for itself is nothing trivial; it is the only possibility that the members of that group have to exist socially. Based on his own experience of "symbolic annihilation" as a homosexual adolescent, Gross writes:

> [W]e are increasingly insisting on speaking for ourselves, both behind the scenes and on the media stages. Gay advocates and our enemies agree on one thing: the media are more than "mere" entertainment. They can be a matter of life and death. (1998, p. 99)

Gross's essay sheds light on the importance of self-representation to counter a group's social invisibility. What Gross argues about homosexuals, particularities notwithstanding, is valid for other subordinated social groups, including ethnic minorities. These groups' main risk of political alienation is not that they are not addressed by the media or that their topics receive no coverage. The main problem is that these groups' social perspectives remain relatively silenced.

The notion of social perspective helps us move away from essentialist assumptions about cultural difference. More specifically, this notion collides with clear-cut characterizations of topics and people as ethnic or not. Under essentialist assumptions, Latina/o media are media that speak about Latina/o issues and/or media that speak to Latinas/os. Both definitions rely on problematic compartmentalizations. The first separates Latina/o issues from issues of general interest, establishing some kind of opposition between the two. The second definition assumes that there are media for "us" and media for "others," reifying social differences as closed categories. Overall, these two ways of defining ethnic media support allegations that minority media undermine social inclusion.

In order to grasp the democratic value of minority media, one must acknowledge that what the members of a minority group have in common is a relative social position within a society's structures of power and knowledge. This structural position shapes the group's social perspective (Young, 2000). Different social perspectives bring about partial views of the world. It is a democratic imperative to open spaces where the different social perspectives can participate in the conversation of democracy. This

imperative requires us to support special media through which these different social perspectives can be configured and voiced.

Conceptualized in this way, ethnic media are a condition for social inclusion in an ethnically diverse society. Notably, these media do not need to be in a foreign language, they do not need to be the unique source of information within an ethnic group, and they do not have to focus only on ethnic topics. They do need to be controlled and produced by members of ethnic groups in order to represent those groups' social perspectives. I therefore reserve the term "Latina/o media" to media produced and controlled by Latinas/os.

Representation Versus Participation: Undoing the Dichotomy

Until now this chapter has stressed the importance of participation. However, putting forward a participatory politics of representation also requires us to justify the need for representation. In fact, an important part of the literature about democratic participation romanticizes the possibility of a world without representation, Habermas's ideal of the public sphere is paradigmatic in this respect. For Habermas, a healthy democratic system minimizes representation and encourages participation. In his account, people historically have been either spectators of political representation or participant citizens in the public sphere (Peters, 1993). Likewise, Habermas describes the newspapers that fueled the public sphere in the late 18th century as venues for rational criticism, written by an intellectual elite. The papers' purity and clarity of style contrasted with the "accoutrements" in which the popular press "dressed up" to attract apolitical consumers a century later (Habermas, 1991, p. 170). In sum, Habermas presumes a divide between two models of communication—one where austerity animates "culture-debating" and one where ornamentation sustains "culture-consumption" (1991, p. 159). Healthy democratic communication is expected to be free not only from lies and open manipulation, but also from narrative and rhetoric, body language, art, and emotions.

This "distrust of representation" (Peters, 1993), both in the political and the symbolic senses, undermines the public sphere's capacity to host cultural differences. Politically, critics have pointed out that if there ever existed a community small enough to permit the direct participation of all citizens in all political decisions, its manageable size would be due, at least partly, to a limited definition of citizenship. Historically, while male property-owners participated, women and members of the lower classes

(either slaves in classic Greece or the proletariat in the 18th century Europe) were not even represented (Landes, 1988; Eley, 1992; Ryan, 1992; Negt & Kluge, 1993). Representation, this suggests, may actually be a means of inclusion.

With respect to symbolic representation, Habermas privileges a specific kind of speech associated with white, well-educated middle-class men (Young, 2000). He treats *argument*—the composed and disembodied articulated speech that proceeds from premises to conclusion—as culturally neutral, failing to consider how one's social position necessarily affects one's status as a communicator. As observed by Fraser,

> [i]n stratified societies, unequally empowered groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday contexts and in official public spheres. (1992, p. 120)

From this perspective, underrepresented groups are those who are culturally devalued and marginalized from the spheres of public life. Among these spheres, Fraser refers specifically to the media. Media constitute the main venue for "the circulation of views" yet "are privately owned and operated for profit. Consequently, subordinated groups usually lack equal access to the material means of equal participation" (1992, p. 120). A diverse and just society, Fraser suggests, requires a politics of representation effectively open to the participation of all citizens.

Conclusion

The different conceptualizations of representation discussed in this chapter lead to significantly different approaches to the relationship between journalism and cultural diversity in general, and to a different understanding of minority media in particular.

A mimetic conceptualization trivializes questions of who controls the media and how to define legitimate forms of representation. It answers them by relying on journalistic expertise and professionalism in a way that assures the accuracy of representations and ignores the constitutive nature of representation itself. As a result, this approach to representation provides a feeble justification for the existence of special media for cultural minorities. Characterized by the specific topics they cover and by the segments of the audience that they address, minority media may be good businesses but threaten to exclude certain topics and certain people from society at large.

According to a participatory politics of representation, in contrast, representations cannot be measured according to a reality outside representation. In this view, representation is not simply a matter of accuracy; it is a matter of power. Having power is having the authority to represent and to represent is empowering. This means that minorities have a problem of representation not because the proportion of minority news stories and of minority journalists does not match the diversity of the real world. Disempowered groups—Latinas/os among them—are under- or misrepresented in the media, and thus in society, in that they are marginalized from practices of representation. Far from resolving this problem, the proliferation of corporate Spanish-language media may further silence Latinas/os' voices by threatening Latinas/os' own media production.

Minorities' media representation should thus follow normative, not technical guidelines. It has to be assessed in relation to the demands of social justice. As Said (2001, p. 42) explains, fair representation is "participatory and collaborative, noncoercive, rather than imposed." On these grounds, media that serve as platforms for minority groups' self-representation play a crucial role in the empowerment of these groups and thus in the attainment of social justice.

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Notes

[1] There were few corporate Spanish-language papers before 1990. The most prominent of them, Knight Ridder's *El Nuevo Herald* in Miami, dates from 1976.
[2] Of the 768 newspapers listed by Whisler (2007), 38 are dailies, 384 are weeklies, and 346 have a lower frequency.
[3] The index ranges from 1 to 100; 100 signals a perfect match between the newsroom and the community.
[4] In his 2001 speech, Harris said that the *Mercury News's* Vietnamese-language paper had "made everybody raise the level of play." In an interview with the author (July 31, 2003), Harris specifically referred to the *Mercury News's* Spanish-language weekly; in his view, this weekly lead to an improvement in San José's other Latina/o-targeted papers.
[5] These two ways of representing converge in a single English word, but this is not the case in all languages. Commonly cited is the German example, where *Vertretung* refers to political representation and *Darstellung* to aesthetic representation (see Spivak & Harasym, 1990, pp. 108-110).