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Book review: Ethnic Minorities and the Media

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COTTLE, Simon (ed) (2001)
Ethnic Minorities and the Media, Open University Press, Buckingham, 242pp. *ISBN 335 20270 5 (pbk)*

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If there's any editorial strength in a collection of essays on ethnic minorities and the media written in the cultural / media studies genre, it's the uniformity of views, hypotheses and qualitative methodologies applied to explore the ways 'reality' is constituted within language, discourse and representations. Paradoxically, inherent in this editorial focus lies a weakness, which is the lack of theoretical and methodological variation.

There are 12 chapters in this collection, part of a series on "issues in cultural and media studies" published by the Open University. Each chapter is written by researchers known for their work on media representation. The book has three sections covering the changing media representations of ethnic minorities; changing contexts of production; and changing cultures of identity. Theoretical approaches, albeit its apparent lack of variety, are contextualised with reference to actual media institutions and professional practices.

If you are familiar with the work of Teun Van Dijk, Charles Husband, Clint Wilson II, John Fiske, et.al, this book offers another compendium of articles, revised and updated from the respective authors' previous work. For instance, Van Dijk in Chapter 2 alluded to much of his work in the 80s on 'discourse analysis' and mediated 'new / s' racism as reflected in the British media portrayal of immigrants.

John Fiske in Chapter 3 on the 'racialised' surveillance of 'black Americans' in the predominantly white television vis-a-vis the OJ Simpson trial; Chapter 4 describes the new media's roles (internet, CD-ROMs) in constructing the idea of 'whiteness'; Wilson in Chapter 5 revisited his (and Ted Pease's) 1991 survey of African-American journalists position in a white newsroom; Cottle in Chapter 6 extended the theme on the working environment of ethnic minority journalists; and Chapter 7 explains the implications for black television programming and representation as a result of the structural transformations in the global media industry.

Chapters 8-11 delve into the changing cultures of ethnic identity as reflected in the media, beginning with a discussion of

how black audiences view their portrayal in BBC through a series of focus group discussions and questionnaires. Chapter 10 explores how transnational media have sustained the consciousness and identity of the South Asian diaspora community through her case study and focus group interviews. In Chapter 11, Annabelle Sreberny extends the study by focusing on the Iranian community in London.

Charles Husband in the final Chapter 12 overviews the media's function in multicultural societies (Britain). He attempts to establish through a "differentiated citizenship concept" the "benchmark criteria for a multi-ethnic media environment ... defined by the complementarity of media giving voice to specific ethnic community interests and media facilitating an inter-ethnic multi-interest exchange .. "(thus) anticipating an equalitarian structural pluralism achieved through some distressing exchanges in the public sphere". Put simply, the government should implement a structure which gives ethnic minorities a fair go to voice their concerns and interests in the public sphere through a public broadcasting service (for instance, the Special Broadcasting Services SBS in Australia).

Throughout the chapters, one reads more of the same theoretical reasoning, which is, race and 'ethnicity' are a social construct, legitimised in the reportage of journalists the majority of whom come from the mainstream (dominant) 'racial' group who inevitably frame the newsworthiness and meanings of ethnic affairs, albeit from their very limited understanding of and experience with ethnic minorities. The methodologies cited in the chapters are prominently impressionistic, qualitative and anecdotal.

Apart from the repetitive slant of the sections, Chapter 9 on *"Ethnicity, national culture(s) and the interpretation of television"* by Ramaswami Harindranath stands out in his critique of Liebes and Katz's book *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of 'Dallas'*, Cambridge, Polity (1993). Harindranath argues that "there is an urgent need for a theoretical revaluation of the relationship between the socio-cultural contexts of audience and their interpretations ... without a sufficiently nuanced conceptual framework it becomes easy for instance, to correlate race or ethnic difference with cultural differences" — which journalists tend to do, and confirmed in the other chapters.

The overall lack of methodological variation in this collection may mark its weakness as a useful reference text on media research methods, just as the exclusive reliance on quantitative methods to analyse essentially qualitative data makes many of the studies published in the US journalism quarterlies limited in its explanation of the deeper relationship between production

constraints, textual representation and audience interpretation/ reception of text.

Nevertheless, for undergraduates studying the media or taking courses in cultural studies, this book is readable and provides a comprehensive introduction to qualitative textual analysis which conceptualises the rather unsurprising verdict on journalists' tendency to frame ethnic affairs from the dichotomy of "us" versus "them".

For media academics hoping to read some methodological variation on current work related to media representation, this book may not live up to its promise of delivering "a range of critical investigations into pressing questions considered to be central to current thinking and research". ■