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Seeking a Voice in the Melting Pot

SINCE THE INTRODUCTION of broadcasting in the United States in the early 1920s, immigrants and native-born minority groups have adopted radio and other electronic media for a number of functions not provided by mainstream broadcasters. Among those functions have been providing news and information from their home countries and about their present communities, transmitting their cultural heritage, orienting their audiences to the American way of life, encouraging participation in the political and economic life of their new communities, providing entertainment, and overcoming stereotypes. In some cases, the programs aired by these broadcasters have provided a service for the wider American society.

Such a program was the radio program *The Forward Hour*, aired weekly since 1932 by the Yiddish newspaper *The Forward* (itself established in New York City in the late nineteenth century). The program was still on the air in 2001 and still on WEVD,¹ New York, making it probably the longest-running ethnic radio program in the United States. Within the Jewish community in New York, *The Forward Hour* mobilized support for labor and socialist causes, helped orient new

immigrants to life in the City, and served as a resource for resolving psychological problems and domestic crises.² It also contributed to the growth of American popular culture. The dramas presented by *The Forward Hour* provided training and career opportunities for a generation of influential American actors such as Lauren Bacall and Richard Widmark. Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer adapted his novel *The Slave* into a dramatic series for the program. *The Forward Hour* has demonstrated that minority broadcasting³ in the United States serves as political channel, cultural animator, and community animator.

Immigrant and native-born minority communities in the United States now use communication technologies such as satellites and the Internet to extend their broadcasting capabilities. They can now broadcast to their parent countries and to members of their global diaspora. For example, in 2000, West Indian broadcasters, such as LINKUP Media in New York, were providing radio simulcasts that connected West Indians in New York and Miami with West Indians in London, Toronto, and Jamaica, as well as delivering these programs through the Internet to West Indians all over the world—thus helping construct a global West Indian identity. Similar global identities are being developed by other racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and lifestyle communities in the United States. These communities have become attractive audiences for the mainstream American broadcasting industry.

America's multicultural communities constitute a significant and attractive economic and cultural force. These communities also hold increasingly important political and economic significance. Immigration is continuing to expand this diversity and influence. President George W. Bush's Spanish-language radio address on May 5, 2001, is emblematic of the current importance of Hispanics in American politics.⁴ No president of the United States had ever broadcast an entire radio address in Spanish before. The increasing economic significance of immigrants and people of color is also evident in American television advertising.

The presence of racial and ethnic minority groups in American broadcasts has increased dramatically, especially on television and in

advertising, but also on the radio. These images of racial and ethnic diversity are not found exclusively in the nation's major metropolitan areas—the faces of racial and ethnic America are evident in every media market in the United States, even in rural areas. Video and audio diversity have converged in the webcasts available on the Internet.

Commercial broadcasters constantly seek to maximize market share. This requires them to seek opportunities in America's diversity. And public service broadcasters in the United States are required by law to respond to the needs of new immigrants and other disadvantaged groups. Community broadcasting makes it possible for nonprofessional broadcasters to have access to their communities. Broadcasters from immigrant and native-born minority communities also enter into relationships with commercial, public service, and community broadcasters as they seek to provide those services not provided by commercial, public service, and community broadcasters. These relationships are present in radio, television, and online and are local, national, and global in scope. It was this web of broadcasting that the Ad Council used to deliver its “I am an American—E Pluribus Unum” campaign in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when the United States mobilized for national unity, solidarity, and tolerance.⁵

But immigration not only replenishes racial and ethnic communities, it also exacerbates old tensions and creates new solidarities. These relationships affect all sectors of the American broadcasting industry—the commercial, the public service, and the community, or alternative, sectors. This book is a contribution to our understanding of this web of relationships that exists at the intersection of immigration, race, and broadcasting. Specifically, this book seeks answers to the following questions:

- How has broadcasting in the United States, especially in the last decade (1990–2001), responded to the changing racial and ethnic composition of our society? What patterns can be drawn from these responses? What functions have been and are being served? What stimulates the changing of the roles of broadcasting?
- Have these responses conformed to society's expectations of the performance of broadcasting in a democratic and multicultural society? Do these responses advance the nation's founding ambitions

of opportunity for all, responsibility for all, and community for all? How should the American broadcasting industry's responses to diversity be assessed in view of theory and historical context?

- Can these responses by the American broadcasting industry contribute to the improvement of race and ethnic relations in other multiracial societies around the world?

I have selected the last decade of the twentieth century because it marks the maturing of the new racial and ethnic communities in the United States and the emergence of diversity, or multiculturalism,⁶ as dominant discourses in legal, educational, and cultural contexts.

I will also examine contemporary race and ethnic relations in the United States. The problem of race relations has attracted the attention of many influential American thinkers, including W. E. B. DuBois, Walter Lippmann, and Robert Park. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) DuBois, an influential Harvard-educated African American scholar and Pan-African activist, introduced the concept of the color line to describe the bigotry that separated whites from persons of African descent in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. He described how access to the possibilities of America was denied to people of color, especially black people. This condition, he stressed, created a psychological tension he described as “double consciousness”—the struggle of blacks to construct identities and “the crucible in which their African and American identities could be merged into a unity of which they and the nation could be proud.”⁷ DuBois expressed despair that the possibility of building human brotherhood in America was being undermined by bigotry and inequality.⁸ He was correct. Racism and bigotry continue to be international problems—nazism, Jim Crow, apartheid, ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and the Balkans. It is now recognized that race is a social construction and that the mass media play an important role in this process.

In the 1920s, political commentator Lippmann, an astute scholar of propaganda practices, coined the phrase “pictures in our heads” to describe the process through which the mass media created and influenced public opinion and relationships in American society. He contended that gatekeeping processes in the mass media determined

what was selected from the “outside world.” A report by the Kerner Commission—appointed by President Johnson to investigate the causes of the riots in urban America and to make recommendations to prevent their recurrence—concluded that in addition to white racism, the mass media, especially broadcasting, had failed to make the nation aware of the crises that affected the lives of black people in the United States. The report stated that pictures of African Americans the mass media created in the heads of white America were distorted and biased—African Americans were depicted the way whites saw them, not as African Americans saw themselves.⁹

This was not a new situation. There is a tradition in American mainstream mass media to treat immigrant and minority communities inadequately. One response among minority communities has been to create their own media outlets. In *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (1922), University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park concluded that the foreign-language press played an important role in constructing identities and orienting new immigrants to life in the United States. Global migration from the southern regions of the world and the proliferation of broadcasting have now added new dimensions to the dynamics of race and ethnicity in major settler societies such as the United States. Simon Cottle uses the term “problematics of race” to refer to this expanded influence of broadcasting.¹⁰ Race relations—the quest for continuous improvement in the relations between and among races and ethnic groups—is a major plank in maintaining the community harmony needed for progress in American society. Broadcasting plays a role in this process. Racialization and racism are ideologies that sort humanity into socially determined categories called race and use those categories to determine access to resources—education, health care, housing, nutrition, and finance. Broadcasting influences this process of resource allocation. For example, during the welfare reform debates of the 1990s, the term *welfare mother* was a code used to brand some sectors of society, particularly black women, as undeserving beneficiaries. Advances in transportation and the new communication technologies, including broadcasting, have now made it possible for people to develop identities that are transnational and solidarities that are global. These identities

and solidarities are politically significant. The jihad called for by Osama bin Laden has assumed a global identity.

The United States has been described by Ben Wattenberg as the “first universal nation.”¹¹ Because of its popularity as a settler site, the United States has become a hub for most of the world’s diasporas. The diaspora is a social formation that will assume substantial significance in the twenty-first century. Examining broadcasting at the intersection of immigration and diversity in the United States permits observation of the nature and practices of diasporas and the role broadcasting is playing in the construction of transnational identities. For example, South Asian broadcasting in the United States reveals how that community is interfacing with American political institutions, how they are valorized in the consumer marketplace, how the broadcasters are serving their community, and how they are linked with their parent society and its diaspora. Similar insights can be gleaned from observing West Indian, Polish, Arab, or Jewish broadcasting in the United States.

The examination of the intersection of immigration, diversity, and broadcasting in the United States also encompasses an examination of the programming of mainstream broadcasters, whose programming is globally influential. American mainstream broadcasting products exert a “pull” influence on immigration to the United States; they articulate and support a lifestyle. It is not extreme to conclude that American media products, especially television programs, serve a pre-Americanization role for potential immigrants. Ultimately, this book is also a contribution to the evaluation of the performance of the American broadcasting industry. The answers to this book’s core questions will provide insights on how the American broadcasting industry has responded to the following essential evaluative criteria—freedom, equality, diversity, information quality, social order and solidarity, and cultural order during the last decade.

This study required an examination of the history of immigration to the United States and a survey of the nature and scope of the American broadcasting industry. I have drawn upon a number of midrange social scientific, critical-cultural, and normative theories. The social

scientific theories include media systems dependency theory and media dependency theory. The critical-cultural theories include theories associated with political economy, representation, and identity. The normative theories include formulations such as free-market media theory, social responsibility, and democratic-participant theories. (This theoretical framework is explicated in chapter 4.)

The evaluation of American broadcasting and its responses to the nation's changing racial and ethnic composition required triangulated research, which employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. For this study several research methods were used over an eleven-year period: surveys of ethnic organizations, in-depth interviews with broadcasting professionals (human resource professionals, producers, ethnic media owners and operators), and focus group and in-depth sessions conducted with audience members. Starting in 1991, I conducted in-depth interviews with minorities on their impressions of minority broadcasting. In the spring of 2001, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews in New York City with twenty-five participants from Barbados, China, Guyana (including African and Indian Guyanese), India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, South Korea, and Venezuela. The participants, either students at Brooklyn College or employed on Wall Street and mostly male, had been in the United States for an average of just over eleven years.¹² From these interviews it is possible to identify three types of programming at the intersection of immigration and diversity. In the commercial sector we find programming aimed at representing America's diversity. In the noncommercial (public and public access television) we find programming that is produced for America's diversity. We can also identify programming produced by America's minorities in all three sectors of the American broadcasting industry—the commercial, the public service, and the community sectors.

Corporate reports and official government documents, especially those from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) were also examined. Extensive use was made of online resources, especially

those of corporations, networks, and professional organizations. Of particular value was the collection of radio, television, and advertising materials available at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York.