

## **Ethnic media as alternative media for South Asians in Metro Vancouver, Canada: Creating knowledge, engagement, civic and political awareness<sup>1</sup>**

**Syeda Nayab Bukhari \***

Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, Canada

### **Abstract**

South Asians, making 11% of the total population of Metro Vancouver, have established a large number of ethnic media sources including exclusive 24/7 radio stations, several newspapers, magazines, and online media in different South Asian languages for their audience. This qualitative research study of ethnic media of South Asian communities living in Metro Vancouver, reveals that ethnic media, specifically radio, provided active media space for discussion and dialogue on crucial issues concerning their everyday life challenges as 'immigrant communities'. According to the participants, ethnic media triggered political activism and awareness through their content, especially due to mainstream media's failure of coverage or negative coverage of ethnic minorities. This qualitative study uses in-depth interviews with thirteen South Asian ethnic media practitioners including media owners, journalists, and anchorpersons, as well as focus group discussions with South Asian audiences in Metro Vancouver. The article discusses the role of South Asian ethnic media, as alternative media, in creating knowledge, engagement, civic and political awareness, and giving a participatory platform to raise the voices of their audiences.

### **Keywords**

South Asian immigrants, ethnic media, alternative media, political awareness, settlement and integration, Metro Vancouver

### **Introduction**

Ethnic media is becoming a significant source of information, communication, and activism for transnational migrants in their host countries (Atton, 2002; Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach, 2011). Today, Western countries and cities with larger concentrations of immigrants have the presence of larger numbers of ethnic media sources (Lay & Thomas, 2012). In Canada, for example, Toronto hosts the largest number of immigrants along with 50% of the country's ethnic media (Fernando, 2006: 46). With the overall growth of visible minority immigrants in Canada, specifically from South Asian countries, the ethnic media of these populations have also grown (Ahadi and Yu, 2010; Matsaganis, Katz and Ball-Rokeach, 2011). Murray, Yu and Ahadi (2007) report that Vancouver is 'a major hub for ethnic media', with roughly 144 ethnic media outlets. South Asian ethnic media ranks number one among these, with 33 outlets in Metro Vancouver (Murray, Yu & Ahadi, 2007: 100). South Asians have 24/7 exclusive radio stations offering services in different South Asian languages in Metro Vancouver. Several newspapers, magazines, and online media sources are also available in Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu languages for Indo-Canadian<sup>2</sup> and Pakistani-Canadian communities. These media are mostly financed by advertisements and sponsorship money. Most of these newspapers are distributed free of cost through ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, and religious institutions. Although there is no dedicated full-time television (TV) channel in Canada offering programmes for South Asian communities, there are several locally produced TV programmes broadcasted on multicultural channels. Interestingly, satellite

media broadcasting live TV and radio services from South Asian countries (e.g. India and Pakistan) does not preclude the need for locally produced ethnic media.

The sheer number of ethnic media outlets in Canada demonstrates their social relevance and they are growing at an exponential rate, offering alternative means of communication for South Asian communities in the country. Ethnic media plays a central role in the everyday life of South Asian communities in Metro Vancouver and elsewhere. There has been a considerable amount of research conducted on media of various ethnic minorities (Karim, 2003; Lay & Thomas, 2012; Ojo, 2006; Viswanath and Arora, 2000) but there is a need for more qualitative research on South Asian ethnic media in Canada evaluating the role of ethnic media in creating civic and political awareness among their audience. This article will analyse the role and contribution of South Asian ethnic media in empowering their audience by imparting knowledge and engaging civic and political awareness in Metro Vancouver, Canada. The article will deal with two main questions:

- 1 What is the contribution of ethnic media in creating knowledge, awareness and civic engagement, as well as providing a platform for political activism among their users?
- 2 How is ethnic media bridging the gap between their communities and mainstream society?

### **Defining Alternative Media**

Many scholars have written extensively about different forms of 'non-mainstream media,' commonly known as alternative media, addressing the objectives, motivations, and principles related to its creation (Atton, 2002; Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier, 2007; Coyer, Dowmunt, and Fountain, 2007; Downing, 2001). Coyer, Dowmunt, and Fountain (2007) argue that mainstream media is generally defined as the for-profit, usually taking the form of private or group-owned business corporations available to the mass audience through their (massive) presence in the form of print and electronic media like TV, radio, websites, etc. Conversely, alternative media are defined as not-for-profit, principle-based, often targeting a specific population, and existing on a smaller scale as compared to mainstream media (Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach, 2011). Downing (2001: ix) suggests radicalism as a defining factor for alternative media, based on the premise that 'everything, at some point, is alternative to something else,' and that 'to some extent, the extra radical helps firm up the definition of alternative media'; this media challenges the popular culture and agenda-setting of the mainstream media.

Coining the term 'citizens' media' as a form of alternative media, Rodríguez (2001) asserts the need for democratisation of communication to trigger social change. Citizens' media, according to Rodríguez (2001), provides an opportunity to create active citizens who portray and represent themselves, their communities, and their cultures, in their languages, breaking away from the legal definitions of citizens and citizenship as (merely) a political identity and invoking instead the concept of citizenship as socially and culturally empowering. Atton (2012) views alternative media as not limited to conventional forms, but rather as encompassing all forms of creative production, using modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) deployed by non-professional but active audiences. Atton links alternative media with civic and social responsibility.

Ethnic media, which could be considered a form of alternative media, is at least in part a response to the mainstream media's systemic neglect and/or misrepresentation of ethnic immigrant communities (Karim, 2003; Ojo, 2006). The term 'ethnic' is a difficult one to define, however. Within sociology, scholars like Cornell and Hartmann (2007) and Yang (2000) define it as a set of common racial, cultural, historical, and religious characteristics. Riggins's analysis of the term 'ethnic minority media' is useful in the context of Canada. He explains that every group is an 'ethnic group' but that adding the word 'minority' helps identify immigrants as the 'ethnic groups' in question. He adds ethnic media is offering much more to its audience as compared to the mainstream media in Canada (Riggins, 1992).

Although various terminologies exist to define alternative media, for the purpose of my research I use 'ethnic media' as an elaboration of the media of immigrant communities in the Canadian context. A primary reason for using the term is that 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' are currently being used in Canadian immigration and citizenship discourse to explicate transnational

immigration processes. For Riggins (1992: 1), ethnicity 'refers to [ways of] people who perceive themselves as constituting a community because of common culture, ancestry, language, history, religion, or customs'. Ethnic media, while serving to bridge the gap between ethnic communities and mainstream society, also plays a crucial role in identifying and challenging the mis/underrepresentation of ethnic communities in the mainstream media (Lay & Thomas, 2012). Ethnic media outlets form a corresponding system of representation within mainstream society, which generates dialogue around issues faced by marginalised communities. Because of the corresponding representation provided through ethnic media, marginalised communities gain power and space to bargain and negotiate regarding these issues with governments and policymakers (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2009: 18).

Alternative media research mainly deals with the media forms originating against or in response to the hegemony of the mainstream media by providing generalised conditions suitable for the growth of alternative forms of media. With the growth of transnational migration, specifically, migration based on economic motives, the community organisation of immigrants is changing at a fast pace and becoming much more complex. Ethnic media could hold a significant, at times, central role in community organisation and development, and therefore dedicated and focused research projects are required to study the origin, role, growth, challenges, and advantages of ethnic media of different immigrant communities living in Canada.

## **Methodology**

Consistent with the antiracist and feminist research frameworks, which require understanding and challenging power structures, oppressive practices, and conflicting ideologies in the particular field of study (Merriam, 2009), this research was focused on analysing the lived experiences of the South Asian immigrants vis-à-vis their ethnic media. Using the qualitative methods, interviews, focus groups and a research workshop were conducted with ethnic media practitioners and audiences of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin living in Metro Vancouver. Thirteen ethnic media practitioners from print, radio and TV – three women and nine men – were interviewed.<sup>3</sup> In addition, to include the perspectives of the audiences of South Asian media, four focus groups (with women and men<sup>4</sup>), and one research workshop were conducted. The media practitioners immigrated to Canada between 1969 and 2012. Among them, eight did graduate studies, three with undergrad degrees, while two completed high school and some courses. In order to create gender balance, two exclusive focus groups were conducted with women, one with men and one with a mixed group. Five of the participants in this research had previous experience of journalism before migrating while others started fresh in the field once in Canada. Twenty-seven participants altogether attended the focus groups while 25 participants attended the research workshop. Altogether, 64 participants participated in the research. The data were collected between 2013 and 2014.

Most of the recruitment for this study was done using a snowball technique. Media practitioners were contacted through emails available in the public domain; those who agreed referred other participants. Potential participants for focus groups were contacted through local ethnic and settlement organisations and were invited to take part in the study. Majority of these media practitioners represented Punjabi and Urdu media due to their predominance in the ethnic media. Although I could not interview media practitioners representing minority South Asian language media (e.g. Sindhi, Telugu, Tamil, etc.) due to their lack of prominence in ethnic media, media practitioners of these minority languages were involved in the focus groups and workshop in an effort to include all voices. A gender-balanced sample for interview participants would have been ideal, but interviews with three female journalists/owners and nine male journalists/owners were made possible due to several reasons – mainly their backgrounds, media experience, popularity, and most importantly, their willingness and availability for interviews.

The project went through ethics approval, and pseudonyms are used for all participants. Because of a small media industry, names of their organisations could not be mentioned in order to secure their identity. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and all interviews were audio-recorded, varying in length from one to two hours. The interviews were informal and open-ended and carried out in a conversational style. A qualitative coding approach was used to analyse the interviews and focus group discussion in order to create themes and categories of the

data, with the assistance of the qualitative software package NVivo as an organisational and analytical tool. Focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed and coded in three stages. First, all data were read and coded in light of the research questions and interview guides. The process took on a fluid nature throughout the analysis, of moving back and forth between data, categories, themes and findings, along with a continuing engagement with the existing literature, resulting in the shaping of initial findings. In the second stage, analytical coding facilitated understanding, interpretation, and analysis of different themes emerging from the data. Finally, triangulation of data sources allowed validation of the findings for deeper and comprehensive understanding of the role of ethnic media in the lived experiences of their audiences.

### **South Asians in Canada**

South Asians, often presented as a homogenised group in Canadian political and public discourse (Ashutosh, 2014), include immigrants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – practicing all major religions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism – speaking several languages and following diverse cultures (Zaman & Bukhari, 2013). In 2006, approximately 1.3 million self-identified South Asians made up 4% of the total Canadian population, surpassing Chinese-Canadians as the country's largest visible minority (Jin & Kim, 2011). Historically, after their first arrival on an official trip with Queen Victoria around 1902, followed by subsequent immigration of labourers in 1906–1907, the immigration flow of South Asians was noticeably low until 1967 (Rahim, 2014). Unlike immigrants from European countries, South Asians were not encouraged to enter and stay in Canada as immigrants. Racially designed immigration policies and practices prevailed until 1967. These racialised policies and practices were predicated on the assumption that South Asians (and other third world immigrants) did not fit into the nation-building project of Canada, which sought to make Canada a 'white man's country' (Dua, 2000: 109). Hence, to restrict the entry of unwanted immigrants, including South Asians, discriminatory laws such as the Continuous Journey Regulation<sup>5</sup> and the Head Tax<sup>6</sup> were imposed (Rahim, 2014).

With the introduction of a point-based immigration system in 1967, immigration possibilities for skilled and qualified immigrants from third world countries, including South Asian countries, opened up (Zaman, 2006). Consequently, in the last two decades, the numbers of South Asian immigrants coming to Canada have increased tremendously. For example, *The Globe and Mail* reported that 'more than 140,000 [South Asians] arrived between 1986 and 1995, and nearly double that – 266,000 – between 1996 and 2006 [in Toronto alone]' (Gee, 2011). In Metro Vancouver, South Asians were the second largest visible minority (11.1%), after East and South-East Asians (29.7%) as compared to people of Caucasian origins (52.5%) (Statistics Canada, 2013). It is anticipated that 'by 2031, roughly 30% of the Canadian population will likely be a visible minority, with 36% of those under 15 years of age' and that 'among these, Canadians of Chinese and South Asian origins will predominate' (Biles et al., 2010: 5). The increasing number of South Asian immigrants has also transformed these communities' settlement and integration needs, family and gender dynamics, community issues, and socio-political/economic realities, as well as their media use and consumption patterns. Ethnic media also has a role in the everyday life of many of these communities.

### **Creating knowledge and civic awareness: Giving voice to the communities**

Ethnic media, in 'facilitating a sense of community cohesion' (Lay & Thomas, 2012: 376), provided a space for South Asian audiences to raise issues that mattered to them. Jabarjang Sing, a renowned ethnic radio and TV journalist, emphasised the importance of conveying information about immigrants' new country and its systems; according to him, dissemination of knowledge was crucial for everyday life in Canada:

In my three hours of daily [Monday to Friday] talk show, one hour is dedicated to giving maximum information to the new immigrants to understand the systems of Canada. We inform listeners about education, [politics], social life, and even [mannerisms] in ... Canadian society; whatever we tell new immigrants for their settlement, we then do online discussion. We discuss how to maintain our cultural values while understanding the

structure of Canada, so every day we discuss this for one hour. We also get into hot discussions, religious issues, Canadian systems of education, business, and social values; we also talk about taxation system of Canada, whether it is helpful for the working class or not (Zaman and Bukhari, 2013).

Harjot, a focus group participant who was struggling to find appropriate employment was angry about governmental policies and considered ethnic radio the right platform to ask tough questions. She demanded that the immigration minister should come on a radio talk show to explain why skilled immigrants were suffering and failing to find work when they come to Canada based on their skills. Sujata having limited English language skills was living a retired life; she considered ethnic media as a major source of knowledge and connection with the community she lived in. Many senior participants seemed to consume ethnic media more than other age groups and surprisingly brought up current and relevant socio-political issues affecting their lives. It is important to note that most senior immigrants from South Asia lack literacy and/or English language skills, making their everyday lives challenging in some ways (Koehn, 2009). The ethnic language seemed to be one of the major reasons for seniors to consume ethnic media more than mainstream media. The majority of ethnic media practitioners interviewed also proudly claimed their roles as representatives of their communities. Paramjeet, one of the participants in this research, said that ethnic media keeps her family and community informed about taxation, travelling, and other news and information related to daily life:

We listen to the radio and we get leads and phone numbers to find work and to find jobs. Like, if you want to get an Indian visa, the radio gives you information about how to get a visa. Same with tax information, they tell you when to file your taxes and who can help you.

Almost all participants of this study agreed that mainstream media did not give importance and space to the issues confronted by South Asian communities. A majority of the participants complained about the lack of representation in mainstream media spaces. They blamed mainstream media for either stereotyping or negatively portraying news about their communities and their homeland countries. Similarly, mainstream media failed to give voices to their genuine and positive news stories in Canada (Mahtani and Dunn, 2001). In some cases, the mainstream media initially ignored important news items, but when they were brought forward by ethnic media, specifically ethnic radio, the mainstream media then picked up the same stories. Saleem, a settlement worker at a settlement organisation shared the following example:

A skilled Pakistani guy came to Canada in 2007 and brought traveller's cheques with him. He went to a bank and they misread his information and called the police [instead]. The police kept him under arrest for a few hours then released him. He came to us and we sent his information to all the media. The very next morning he was on the live morning show of one of the leading ethnic radio [stations]. From there on, mainstream media also picked up the story and the bank had to apologise to him.

The example reflects the influence of ethnic media on the bank officials to apologise for their treatment given to a new immigrant. The settlement worker was of the view that if ethnic media would not take up the story, the bank would not care to realise their mistake and mistreatment. In this case, it seemed that the mainstream media's picking up the story influenced the bank to respond appropriately, nonetheless, ethnic media played a significant and a lead role by breaking the story. Along with daily news, ethnic media were featuring prominent issues relevant to immigrant communities living in Canada (e.g. 9/11 and natural catastrophes in India and Pakistan). Other than breaking news, media practitioners reported on various issues relevant to their communities, such as settlement, drug issues, seniors' challenges, health-related news, local politics, job advertisements and social issues. News from countries of origin formed a significant part of all ethnic media content. In print media, news from countries of origin took a larger share of the overall news coverage, as compared to radio and TV; nonetheless, radio and TV also utilised content about and/or produced in immigrants' countries of origin, such as music, news items, and video clips. Along with raising everyday issues of South Asians, ethnic radio stations remained active as compared to all other media in terms of providing quick and useful access to public communication space (Downing, 2001). In my personal experience as a listener and observer, talk shows focusing on issues relevant to South Asian communities received a large number of

phone calls from the audience. In addition, the format of some talk shows allowed hosts to bring in guests – for example, people in power such as policymakers and politicians – and ask them direct questions raised by the audience. In such cases, the hosts of the shows worked as translators as well, providing all audiences with access to the information, irrespective of their language skills or complexities about the issue. The host would then summarise the answers of the guests and the audience could take part in the discussion that followed. This generated considerable interest and excitement among audiences who felt connected, represented, and empowered through their ethnic media offering services and information in their languages.

Overall, participants agreed that ethnic media was making a difference in their daily lives by helping them to understand the Canadian way of life and integrate into Canadian society. Ethnic media, specifically radio, thus provided a public sphere for otherwise unheard voices to be raised, speaking in their own languages, and where community members could generate a dialogue, eventually creating connections based on shared knowledge. Nonetheless, small ethnic minorities such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Gujarati communities did not feel the same way about their representation in ethnic media. Amin Rahman shared:

Ethnic broadcast media focus on one particular language [i.e. Punjabi]. They have seven days of programming; there should be some pockets for people of other languages like Bengali or other languages of South-Asian communities. When they submit their application [to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC)], they tell them that they have these communities to represent. But when they get their license, they only focus on the Punjabi language.

This criticism was rooted in the fact that almost all ethnic broadcast media obtained their licenses by claiming to represent the 'South Asian population living in Metro Vancouver', as per the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) requirements but they did not give equal representation to the smaller communities. The smaller communities were offered time slots on broadcast media with limited options, largely for entertainment programmes, more specifically music programmes. Most of their radio shows did not have a live call-in option and they were not allowed to talk about political or social issues pertaining to their communities. The lack of representation of smaller ethnic minorities took multiple interrelated forms. The language was one important factor, with some participants feeling that there did not seem to be enough media space for the other languages of minority South Asian groups such as Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Sindhi, and so on. Participants of Pakistani-Canadian descent complained about the negative portrayal of Pakistan by some media sources siding with the Indian political agenda due to historical and political tensions in the South Asian region – mainly between India and Pakistan. They argued that in the absence of ethnic broadcast media owned by the Pakistani-Canadian community, they were vulnerable to this negative portrayal.

### **Political activism and awareness through ethnic media**

South Asians make up about 11% of the total population of Metro Vancouver, and Punjabi is ranked as the largest non-official spoken language in British Columbia (BC) (Statistics Canada, 2013). The majority of the South Asians live in two cities of Metro Vancouver, namely Surrey and Abbotsford. The growth of South Asian communities and ethnic enclaves in some parts of Metro Vancouver has had two important effects: firstly, it has resulted in more demographic power being held by South Asians as a critical mass in specific locations. Secondly, a small number of second and third generation South Asians have begun to assume a presence in public and private sectors, occupying low to medium level positions. These facts have had a significant impact on the socio-economic and political realities of these communities. Sher Singh, an ethnic media-group owner explained:

In BC, Punjabis [Sikh] are about 80% of the South Asian population; initially, we used to vote in a bloc, [but] now we have created so much awareness through [radio] talk shows that people know about their rights. We have now about one hundred years of history in this country and we have made a major contribution to the economy and development here. Previously, they used to call us Indo-Canadian or Pakistani-Canadian or Bangladeshi-Canadian, but now our new generation doesn't like this identity; they make a point that they are Canadian Sikh or Canadian Muslim.

Ethnic media practitioners claimed the credit of increased political activism among their communities whose political participation reflected in the outcomes of the elections at all levels. The *South Asian Post* (2011) reported that 23 Indo-Canadian candidates participated in the election in 2011, and eight of them made their way to Parliament. This count does not reflect Members of Parliament (MPs) of other ethnic groups of South Asian ancestry, such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, etc. However, in 2015's federal elections, 22 South Asians were elected as Members of Parliament, thrice the number of the previous election in 2011 (*South Asian Daily*, 2015). Black (2013: 21) notes that in the federal elections of Canada in 2011, 9.1% (roughly 28) visible minority Members of Parliament were elected, as compared to 6.8% (roughly 21) in 2008; yet 'it would have taken the election of 59 visible minority MPs to completely eliminate the [political] representation deficit.' Ethnic media claimed that their political content has created enough political awareness resulting in expanding political space for South Asian communities. Jabarjant Singh, ethnic radio and TV journalist, said:

We tell people in Punjabi and Hindi what English media is saying about us. The politicians would say something [different in] our media [versus] in the mainstream media – their statement would be different [in each place]. With the development of our ethnic media, the situation is changing now. With our greater understanding of languages and [mainstream organisations and their] systems, English media now need us because we are the newsmakers now. As a result, we have eight to nine representatives in ... Parliament now; our people do vote in elections because we give them awareness about the power of voting (Zaman and Bukhari, 2013).

Ethnic media, especially radio, provided structural and communicative space for South Asians to discuss and reflect on issues that could politically affect their communities. Many radio stations were hosting morning and evening prime-time call-in talk shows discussing socio-political and economic issues. Live radio shows of Radio RedFM, Spice radio, Radio India, Radio Punjab, and Sher-e-Punjab were highly popular and provided direct access to the government officials and policymakers. Radio talk shows, translating the information concerning their communities in the mainstream media, developed a better understanding of the political issues and their consequences for these communities. Manjeet, who could not speak English, revealed her knowledge about the historic election of the first-ever African-American President in the United States: 'Ethnic media gives you information about... your city, Canada, USA, Pakistan, and India... it gives you information about everywhere. Like it's all about the US election and US President nowadays.' Another participant expressed her concern about how the Canadian Prime Minister was spending citizens' tax money on expenses incurred during international trips – something she had learned about through ethnic media. In addition to offering standard political media content, media practitioners, especially owners of ethnic media organisations, spoke about organising open public forums during election time. Satnam Singh, an ethnic media owner claimed that his ethnic media organisation connected communities with politicians through interactive sessions. He said:

We organise political debates during ... election times and we rent space outside [the office building] to invite all the candidates of political parties for the debate and get ... feedback. We have open line talk shows so a person from anywhere in the world can call in and express their views [because the radio programming is broadcasted online as well].

Despite overall agreement among media representatives and audiences about the vibrant role ethnic media played in creating political awareness, ethnic media was criticised for increased politicisation. Print media was specifically criticised for copy and pasting a huge amount of news from the countries of origin. The criticism took several forms. First, media practitioners and some audience blamed ethnic media groups for taking sides with political parties and thus not embodying the ethical journalistic principle of impartiality. Another media practitioner, Anterpreet, highlighted the role of class in hampering the equal participation of all groups. Working as a TV show host, she shared how 'experts' for ethnic TV and radio shows are often selected based on their language skills:

With special emphasis on gang-related or violence-related news, we engage English-speaking experts intentionally. The problem is all of our people are not educated enough

so we are not always ... able to find experts in [our ethnic] community, so then we are helpless to engage English-speaking experts.

It is significant to note that Anterpreet worked for a multicultural media wing of a mainstream media group. The policy to engage 'English-speaking experts' alludes to the criteria for qualifying as an 'expert', disregards all other merits for the task. Despite regarded as a 'multicultural media' Anterpreet's organisation demonstrated systemic barriers for the inclusion of minority voices based on lack of English language skill. Nonetheless, ethnic language media was also criticised for the lack of professionalism. Some radio hosts were blamed for sensationalising their shows to an extent of getting into heated debates with their guests and callers. Sandeep Singh, a seasoned journalist said:

It all depends what directions management has given [to journalists]; it also depends on the inflow of sponsorship money. Very few journalists will dare to ask tough questions to politicians; only the media siding with one party will ask tough questions from [representatives of the] opponent party ... Independent journalism is not there, I am sorry to say.

My study revealed that print media was facing the most difficult situation in terms of sustaining financial viability and maintaining circulation. Surprisingly, I still find many forms of print media available for South Asian audiences, including weekly/bi-weekly newspapers and magazines such as the Asian Journal, the Indo-Canadian Voice, the Link, Chardikala, the Miracle, the South Asian Post, the Urdu Journal, and Darpan Magazine. The 'sponsorship money' from the business community in the forms of advertisement was considered as one of the reasons for ethnic media's partiality. Ethnic media, due to its small to medium level of organisation, depended on advertisement to generate revenues. A big chunk of these advertisements came through the ethnic business community, while government and mainstream corporate companies had a smaller share. Media practitioners urged the latter group to increase their advertising budget for their organisations. They were cognisant of the fact that with increased revenues from the public and mainstream corporate sectors, their dependency on the ethnic business community would decrease, giving them more freedom and financial sustainability, which would improve their quality and effectiveness.

There are different ways to measure the impact of ethnic media in creating civic and political awareness among different communities. While some media practitioners were adamant regarding the active and successful role of ethnic media in creating political change, others did not agree. For Sandeep Singh, real political change should have been reflected in the life of South Asian communities, and not by how many of them were elected every term. He said:

As far as ... political impact is concerned, we find a lot of lip service and we are not fully integrated so media has been mostly used as a mouthpiece of the politicians, rather than creating awareness among the people to make up their own minds ... As I told you ... most listenership is from a rural background and [middle-aged] population; youth don't listen to [ethnic] radio as much, they might listen to some music programmes but talk shows, not at all, I doubt it.

While Sandeep Singh contested the notion of ethnic media's political impact, various media practitioners informed that different public service departments were using ethnic media forums to connect with South Asian communities. For example, Anterpreet spoke about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) connection to her media: 'Now, for example, if the police department wants to start any programme to create awareness among youth, they will contact us, not the mainstream media, because they want to reach out to our community, to parents, and children.' It seemed that the public sector was realising the importance of ethnic media as an effective source of communication, giving them direct access to their communities. Ethnic media, especially radio and TV seemed to be creating meaningful success for South Asian journalists and audience with varying effects.

### **Changing trends in mainstream media: Influence of ethnic media**

The majority of participants experienced racialisation at different points of their life in Canada. These experiences had a bearing on their perceptions about mainstream society and media, and on their expectations of ethnic media. Ethnic media practitioners claimed responsibility for creating a change in the mainstream media's portrayal of South Asian communities. They argued that they kept a close eye on the content published or aired about South Asian communities and challenged negative reporting whenever required. Elvis Lal, a seasoned ethnic journalist considered the change taking place faster than he would have expected:

It's been a great change and that's what I was fighting for, and that's what I predicted too ... It's happening faster than I thought it would ... and it has changed so much ... People [i.e. politicians] who wouldn't enter Gurduwaras now enter Gurduwaras, Mosques, and Temples; this was below their dignity [before].

Participants generally agreed that South Asian ethnic media in Metro Vancouver created constant pressure on mainstream media and played a powerful role in engaging different social actors in mainstream society (e.g. mainstream media, politicians, and policymakers). Due to this constant watchdog role played by ethnic media (Ojo, 2006; Viswanath & Arora, 2000), in some cases, people who made racially biased remarks against South Asians on air had to apologise. Mukhtar Singh, an ethnic media practitioner presented an example of such a case:

This is where ethnic media's role kicks in, and I don't think ethnic media has been non-responsive to this issue of racism. Ethnic media fights [on behalf of] minorities with ... full force to the extent that people [in the mainstream media] have apologised due to pressure. One of the guys who sat on the [Winter 2010] Olympics committee made a racist comment and then due to ethnic media's pressure, he had to step down from his role.

Leela, a renowned journalist, and media owner also shared the trajectory of change in the mainstream media over 40 years. According to her, the mainstream media would name South Asian crime suspects without even waiting for the final verdict but due to ethnic media's protest and stand on this unethical journalistic policy of the mainstream media, the situation has changed. She said:

We have noticed over the 40 years of time that in the past if there would be any bad incident ... they would associate it with Indo-Canadian, Sikh or Indian but in the past 10 years, this trend has stopped ... Now [mainstream media] won't share the names until they [accused] are charged. Nowadays [even after the charges] they even don't report as 'they belong to the South Asian community', earlier they would start their news with this association so this is a result of the lobby of our print media, broadcast media.

Increased purchasing power (i.e. positive economic growth) was also mentioned as a significant factor in granting a new image to South Asian communities. Sher Singh, a media owner considered the rapidly growing educated class within South Asian communities in Metro Vancouver instrumental in creating change in the way mainstream media views these communities. Due to the hiring of professional journalists, he claimed that changes in the landscape of ethnic broadcast media have been evident in the last ten years. Singh said: 'The mainstream media now contact us to get news about South Asian communities; they confirm and verify news from us; now they quote our channels in their news reporting.' Arun Verma, a TV and radio host added that the corporate sector was also noticing the change in potential clientele and hence, it was slowly investing in South Asian communities through advertisements directed at them. Elvis Lal encouraged the community to become assertive in highlighting any discriminatory experiences. Citing the example of an argument he had with an editor of an English language newspaper, he explained his strategy for fighting back against racism through his journalism:

Just expose their names; when they write something wrong, write their names and mention the stuff [they said]. I had a fight with an editor in chief [of a mainstream newspaper regarding] this issue where [they reported] two Sikhs arrested. I said, 'What do you mean by 'two Sikhs'? Would you write, "two Christians arrested"?' And she said, 'Oh, you see racism but there is no racism'. Then we had a big fight and then I published all her stuff and when she couldn't argue anymore, she said, 'Oh, you are trying to get a job [with us].' She said, 'You talk about racism because you weren't able to get a job with us.'

and I said, 'When did I ask you for a job? Did I ever ask you for a job?' So she made fool out of herself because when I published the whole conversation, what she said and what I said, she really felt stupid; she must have regretted that she did that.

The above exchange was only one of several others in which Lal demonstrated his resilience and his commitment to fight against the racial bias displayed by some mainstream media sources. In most cases, according to him, he won the battle. Due to the influential role of ethnic media at a regional level (i.e. in Metro Vancouver), politicians have also started taking ethnic media seriously. Almost all media representatives I interviewed confirmed that the connection and collaboration between political parties and governmental authorities and ethnic media outlets increases during election time – whether the election is municipal, provincial, or federal. It is significant to note that ethnic media practitioners claiming success in creating change in mainstream society and its media had years of journalistic experience in Canada. Additionally, they had contacts and networks in the halls of power, which enabled them to stay abreast of insider news and raise objections accordingly. Last but not least, some of them had associations with bigger and more established media groups, mostly radio stations and/or print media. Small level ethnic media organisations did not seem to have access to and influence on policymakers. For instance, Zameer Ahmad, managing editor of a newspaper, complained about the lack of interest displayed by mainstream journalists who, according to him, would never attend the media forums organised by his (small) media organisation. A desire to connect and collaborate with mainstream media was evident in the narratives of these smaller level media practitioners, something in line with the narratives of participants in Lay and Thomas's (2012: 380) research (i.e. black and minority ethnic media producers), who also showed a desire to 'get closer to the mainstream.'

## **Conclusion**

This study's main goal was to analyse ethnic media's role and contributions in the lived experiences of South Asian communities living in Metro Vancouver. The findings showed that media audiences used ethnic media for getting information and knowledge about daily life practices in Canada. To summarise, while there were arguments both for and against ethnic media's impact on the political landscape, in general, there was a consensus that: a) ethnic media has been effective and successful in attracting and engaging political and public decision-makers and policymakers, and b) it has also engaged audiences of various backgrounds, irrespective of gender, age, educational profile, etc. Ethnic media sources provided active forums for South Asians to learn about political developments and issues affecting their lives, as well as to raise their voices about these issues. Media practitioners, especially broadcast media presenters and senior reporters played a watchdog role, bridging the language barrier and simplifying the information in the ethnic languages for their audience. Inviting over politicians and policymakers and making them responsible and answerable to the community and their vote bank increased the credibility of ethnic media.

The study also found some challenges faced by the ethnic media in terms of operations, revenue generation, quality, and professionalism. Media representatives of smaller ethnic communities reported a lack of representation of their communities in ethnic media, more specifically in broadcast media such as radio and TV. Unlike typical alternative media, a majority of these ethnic media organisations operated like commercial media and depended on revenues earned through public and private advertisers. The findings suggested that business advertisers of bigger communities influenced the ethnic media to some extent for agenda setting as well as content making. Along with great advantages of creating political awareness and dialogue, the political discussions in the ethnic media resulted in some nuisance as well. Ethnic media, especially radio, consumed as the most popular medium, was blamed for taking political sides with the status quo parties. This was blamed on the lack of professionalism and personal alignment with different political parties. Nonetheless, bigger media organisations, especially broadcast media showed their commitment to improve their services by hiring and training staff with professional standards.

Going back to the debate of what makes alternative media, South Asian ethnic media captured a unique space on the Canadian mediascape. It was revealed that the distinction created by the ethnic media lay in the demographics and ethnic concentration of South Asian

communities in some cities of Metro Vancouver. The media captured this concentration as an opportunity by engaging their audience and creating a political dialogue to make them equal stakeholders in the process. It covered the grounds for creating awareness, raising voices for the socio-political and economic integration of their communities, and connecting them with the mainstream media and society. The efforts earned credibility and significance for ethnic media among its audience and mainstream society. Nonetheless, the influence of political ideologies, business advertisers, and bigger ethnic communities dominated the ethnic media resonating with the mainstream media. Yet, commercial in nature, these ethnic media organisations seemed to be establishing their role as alternative media for South Asian communities in Canada. With increasing influence and popularity, ethnic media needs to be inclusive for smaller ethnic minorities, improve the professional and ethical standards, and practice impartiality by representing and safeguarding the rights of all community groups.

In terms of policy and practices, the findings suggest that government and nongovernmental organisations should utilise the ethnic media for reaching out to these communities, which will also bridge the gap between mainstream and the ethnic communities. In order to ensure professionalism and quality in the ethnic media, public and private sectors have to invest in it. With lesser dependency on their own ethnic business communities for revenue generation, content and quality will improve, enhancing impartially and fair access for all ethnic groups irrespective of their size and demographics. With all the limitations and shortcomings, it could be concluded that ethnic media are helping to reconstruct the socio-political realities of their communities through proactive discourse and discussions affecting their lives in Canada.

## References

- Ashutosh I (2014) From the census to the city: Representing South Asians in Canada and Toronto. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 17(2):130-148.
- Atton C (2002) *Alternative Media*. London: Sage Publication.
- Atton C (2012) Alternative and activist new media. A review of *Alternative and Activist New Media*, by Leah A. Lievrouw. *Prometheus* 1(31): 77-79.
- Bailey OG, Cammaerts B & Carpentier N (2007) *Understanding Alternative Media*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Biles J, Drover G, Henley M, Ibrahim H, Lundy C & Yan MC (2010) Introduction. In: Special Edition on Settlement of Newcomers to Canada, *Canadian Social Work* 12(1): 5-15.
- Black JH (2013) Racial diversity in the 2011 federal election: Visible minority candidates and MPs. *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 36(3):21-26.
- Cornell SE & Hartmann D (2007) *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Coyer K, Dowmunt T, & Fountain A (2007) *The Alternative Media Handbook*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Downing J (2001) *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dua E (2000) The Hindu woman's question. *Canadian Woman Studies* 20(2):108-116.
- Fernando S (2006) *Race and the City: Chinese Canadian and Chinese American Political Mobilization*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Forde S, Foxwell K & Meadows M (2009) *Developing Dialogues: Indigenous and Ethnic Community Broadcasting In Australia*. Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press.
- Gee M (2011) South Asian immigrants are transforming Toronto. *The Globe and Mail*. Sunday July 3. Updated April 29, 2018. Retrieved on December 2018. Available at:

- <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/south-asian-immigrants-are-transforming-toronto/article625650/>
- Jin DY & Kim S (2011) Sociocultural analysis of the commodification of ethnic media and Asian consumers in Canada. *International Journal of Communication* 5: 552-569.
- Karim KH (2003) *The Media of Diaspora*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Koehn S (2009) Negotiating candidacy: Ethnic minority seniors' access to care. *Ageing and Society* 29(4):585-608.
- Lay S & Thomas L (2012) Ethnic minority media in London: Transition and transformation. *Media, Culture & Society* 34(3):369-380.
- Mahtani M & Dunn K (2001) *Adjusting the Colour Bars: Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities under Australian and Canadian Multiculturalisms*. Burnaby, B.C Vancouver Centre of Excellence.
- Matsaganis MD, Katz VS & Ball-Rokeach S (2011) *Understanding Ethnic Media: Producers, Consumers, and Societies*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Merriam SB (2009) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.
- Murray C, Yu S & Ahadi D (2007) *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Media in BC*. Vancouver, BC: Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Media in BC Vancouver.
- Ojo T (2006) Ethnic print media in the multicultural nation of Canada: A case study of the Black newspaper in Montreal. *Journalism* 7(3): 343-361.
- Rahim A (2014) *Canadian Immigration and South Asian Immigrants*. Bloomington, IN: Author House.
- Riggins SH (1992) The media imperative: Ethnic minority survival in the age of mass communication. In: Stephen HR (ed), *Ethnic Minority Media: An International Perspective*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1-22.
- Rodríguez C (2001) *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- South Asian Daily* (2015) New parliament has 22 South Asian members. Last modified October 20, 2015. Accessed March 15, 2017. Available at: <http://southasiandaily.com/canada/new-parliament-has-22-south-asian-members/>.
- South Asian Post* (2011) Veteran Indo-Canadian MPs turfed in elections. Last modified March 5, 2011. Accessed Feb 21, 2014. Available at: <http://www.southasianpost.com/article/4323-veteran-indo-canadian-mps-turfed-elections.html>.
- Statistics Canada (2013) Vancouver, CMA, British Columbia (Code 933) (table). National Household Survey (NHS) Profile. 2011 National Household Survey. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa. Released September 11, 2013. Available at: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed April 1, 2018).
- Viswanath K & Arora P (2000) Ethnic media in the United States: An essay on their role in integration, assimilation, and social control. *Mass Communication and Society* 3(1): 39-56.
- Yang P Q (2000) *Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Yu S & Ahadi D (2010) Promoting civic engagement through ethnic media.' *Platform: Journal of Media and Communication* 2(2): 54-71.
- Zaman H (2006) *Breaking the Iron Wall. Decommodification and Immigrant Women's Labour in Canada*. Toronto: Lexington Books.

Zaman H & Bukhari SN (2013) *South Asian Skilled Immigrants in Greater Vancouver: Formal and Informal Sources of Support for Settlement*. Vancouver, BC: Metropolis British Columbia: Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity. Available at: <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2013/WP13-09.pdf>.

## NOTES

---

- 1 This article is based on my doctoral thesis defended in 2017.
- 2 Indo-Canadians in Metro Vancouver are mainly drawn from the Punjabi-speaking Sikh community. Nonetheless, there are many other Indo-Canadian ethnic groups from different parts of India settled in Metro Vancouver.
- 3 Jabarjang Singh's interview was conducted for Metropolis Research Project (Zaman and Bukhari 2013) and is used with the permission of Prof. Habiba Zaman.
- 4 As they identified their gender.
- 5 The regulation required immigrants from South Asia to come to Canada via ship without making any stops. There was no direct steamship service from India to Canada, making it impossible for South Asians to immigrate to Canada.
- 6 This was a type of landing fee, comparatively higher for people coming from Asia and other third world countries.