

Media Diversity or simply Pluralism?

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2015-7-17

This is an article by student Farah Hesdin following a talk given by Samantha Asumadu at the Polis Summer School

Media Diversified, founded by Samantha Asumadu, is a media initiative launched in 2013 to tackle ‘the lack of diversity in UK media and the ubiquity of whiteness.’ MD ‘seeks to cultivate and promote skilled writers of colour by providing advice and contacts and by promoting content online through its own platform. [...] [T]he initiative is already diversifying the UK’s media landscape, providing important, challenging and new content which contributes to global as well as domestic discussion on issues of social justice and equality.’



Its politics section, for example, includes a project called All Black Everything, described as a ‘space where people of colour can express their experiences and perspectives without fear or favour from the Eurocentric media establishment.’

This example of MD’s various projects shows how the platform seeks to defy the ‘white-dominated’ version of mainstream news by writing the news from a BAME point of view.

A very interesting project, but a highly controversial one too.

Yes, mainstream media in the UK is virtually ‘owned’, and hence ‘framed’, at least to some extent, by the white man’s vision of the world (see the [MD website](#) for data). But what I’d like to ask is this: isn’t MD reproducing what it is condemning in the first place? Isn’t it recreating, even adopting, the same pattern that it wants to shy away from?

‘Helping’ mainstream news organisations integrate more BAME writers (which MD also does) is taking a step closer to achieving news diversification. But creating an entirely different publishing arm for writers of colour to write their own versions of reality is contributing to less diversity and more plurality – two concepts that are very different.

Let me illustrate with another example by travelling to the Middle-East, and more specifically to Lebanon. Perhaps you know of Lebanese food. Perhaps you’ve heard of Beirut’s vibrant nightlife. What you may not know is that Lebanon is also a parliamentary democracy where media diversification is overwhelmingly extensive – there’s basically a news outlet for every ethno-religious group that exists within the 4,036 square miles of this little but much divided country. (Note: because religious, ethnic and political identities are so intertwined in Lebanon, I will simply refer to Lebanon’s communities as different ethnic groups, solely for the purposes of the discussion).



So to take the example of news broadcasting in Lebanon; Future TV is owned by the Hariri family (and associates) and represents the Sunni community; LBCI is owned by the El-Daher family (and shareholders) and represents the Maronite Christian community; MTV is owned by El-Murr family and represents the Greek Orthodox community, and Al-Manar is owned by the Lebanese Communication Group and represents the Shia community. This is not an exhaustive list of course, but it gives an idea as to how news broadcasting is fragmented along 'ethnic' lines.

Is there media pluralism? Absolutely! Lebanon has such a wide range of ethno-centered news outlets that a single event can be told in a dozen different ways, and I mean completely different ways. But is there media diversity? Not really. Because each news outlet ends up attracting readers from the same ethnic background – which is what they were originally designed for – hence those producing the news and those consuming it are usually members of the same ethnic group. To clarify: Christians will turn to LBCI or MTV for their version of reality, Shias to Al-Manar and Sunnis to Future TV.

And that is pretty much how news is told in Lebanon; through the lens of ethno-centered news outlets that seek to promote their own views of the world. 'Media diversification', in the Lebanese case, encourages citizens to find their own little 'media comfort zone', where they can easily relate to the news being told, and to the person telling it. Exposure to diversified news is even more reduced and limited, and everyone ends up exposed to their own ethnic groups' points of view, reinforcing their own views of the world rather than opening up to others'.

I am not saying that everyone in Lebanon falls within that pattern of course, but rarely do we find members of particular ethnic groups trusting news told by members of a different group. And just to clarify further; I am talking about news content and not entertainment offerings.

The problem? Little media loops pop up whereby reading into one's own ethnic community creates even more distance between different communities, widening gaps and decreasing the understanding of 'the other'. And this, as you probably know from numerous headlines and breaking news, has not helped promote democratic dialogue in Lebanon, but rather contributed to increased inter-communal tension and strife.

So one thing is clear; the 'diversification' of news does not necessarily mean that readers are consuming more diversified news. It might simply mean that they are finding their own little comfort zone within the morass of media choices. Although the question of whether media publishers' role is to close, widen, or simply not care about those inter-communal gaps is another issue entirely, my question is this – is it really?

The Lebanese case illustrates how media can become an obstacle, perhaps even a danger, to democracy. Should journalists tell the news from a BAME, white, Christian or Muslim perspective? Where does the responsibility of journalism lie in creating and maintaining rational, democratic dialogue between different ethnic groups? Does it have any responsibility at all in this regard?

This article is by Farah Hesdin

Samantha Asumadu @ Polis Summer School 2015 from Polis Video on Vimeo.

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