

2011 AAISA Provincial Conference

Settlement and Integration: Connecting Local Leadership to the Global Perspective

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for honoring Omni Television and Rogers Broadcasting Ltd., by inviting me to address you at this prestigious and important gathering of Settlement Agencies across the Province of Alberta.

My aim today is to briefly trace the history and development of Ethnic Media in Canada and take a look at the role that Omni Television has played in the past. I will also look at what Omni's mandate is and how we are facing the challenges posed by a rapidly changing media landscape.

A brief history of Ethnic Media

Like most immigrants around the world, those who came to Canada and continue to arrive in sizeable numbers, do to retain their languages and culture after they arrive in this new country. Many are also not proficient in English or French and in the early years this was the case in many parts of the country. For example in the 1800s in Saskatchewan most people spoke Ukrainian and in parts of Ontario German was the widest spoken tongue.

There are varying records of which newspaper was the first "Ethnic" organ in Canada. But most agree that the first paper was published in the German language. The first ethnic paper is believed to be *Die Welt Und die Neuschottlandische Corrspondenz* published in Nova Scotia around 1787 by a German immigrant named Anton Heinrich. There are also records of the Nova Scotian almanac published by Heinrich in German in 1788. By 1905 there were eighteen foreign language publications in Canada. In the next decade newspapers in Polish and Ukrainian were published and by 1916, some records say more foreign-language newspapers were published in the Canadian West than anywhere else in the world.

But if you broaden the scope of what ethnic media means to the definition given in the multiculturalism Act, ethnic media's origins go back even further. In the 1850s there was a newspaper in English called the Provincial Freeman published in Ontario by Mary Ann Shadd-Carey. She was the daughter of freed Black slaves and was the first female African American publisher on the continent. The editor was Samuel B Ward, a man who was born a slave.

By 1965, there were publications in Greek, Italian, and Portuguese, as members of those linguistic groups grew. Later in the 1960s and 1970s new waves of immigrants arrived from Asia and Africa and media grew to serve those groups.

Ethnic Media Today

Today there is a proliferation of ethnic media in Canada.

In all there are more than 14 full-service radio stations catering to various ethnic groups. Rogers Broadcasting owns World FM here in Edmonton which does programming in both European and Asian languages ranging from Ukrainian, Greek and Polish to Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Hindi. Toronto's CHIN broadcasts in some 30 languages.

All of us who go to our own ethnic stores in the major cities in Canada can testify to the large number of newspapers that aim at the different ethno-cultural communities. Sometimes I wonder how so many papers can exist and make money. There are at least 250 such newspapers, although the number does go up and down a bit often. Seven of them are daily newspapers with some like Ming Pao daily and Sing Tao are distributed in several major cities of Canada. The fact that some of the Chinese newspapers are part owned by big time publishers in Hongkong is further testament to their commercial and editorial success.

Ethnic television is proliferating as well. On cable there are literally hundreds of channels that cater to the specific communities, bringing sports, movies and specialty shows. Locally run channels are also doing well. CJNT in Montreal broadcasts in 22 languages. Fairchild group broadcasts mainly in Chinese languages but does air programs in a number of other tongues in Ontario, BC and Calgary. The other major Television operation which is free to air and on basic cable is Omni. Omni began in 1979 as CFMT or Canada's First Multicultural Television. It has now grown substantially to become a national system. Omni in Ontario has two channels, Omni 1 and Omni 2 broadcasting in 40 languages. We are also broadcasting here in Alberta covering the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. We have also acquired Channel M in Vancouver which is now Omni BC and also has programming in 20 languages. Omni stations in Toronto do five nightly newscasts, here in Alberta we have newscasts in Mandarin, Cantonese and in English for a South Asian audience and in November we will add a national Punjabi language newscast. In BC we do Mandarin, Cantonese and Punjabi language nightly newscasts.

We also produce weekly shows in Ukrainian, Polish, Greek, Italian and Portuguese for which reporters in Alberta contribute stories.

Omni also produces an acclaimed documentary series called the Signature Series. Some of these are produced in what we call the Third language – a language other than English or French.

Challenges

Media as you know have to operate in an ever-changing very challenging mode. New technologies, new delivery platforms and rapid change are part of life. When I began my career more than 30 years ago a TV camera weighed 18 kilos and the sound and recording equipment which was meant to be portable weighed 24. Now you can do all that from your Smartphone.

A few months ago Omni carried a series of special reports on ethnic media that went nationwide in three languages. This was a build-up to a symposium we held on the subject in Calgary. I would now like to play the final part in that series.

Madeline Ziniak whom you saw in that clip – who is also National Vice president of Omni says that “the impact of ethnic television crystallizes on two planes.

- 1) For 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants it is often a reaffirmation of ethnic identity reinforced by multilingualism towards cultural self-actualization
- 2) For recent and new immigrants it is a desired lifeline that not only is a conduit to life shaping information but also a perception of standards and quality of Canadian life”

In the old days people bought a newspaper with news from “home” because that was often the only way they got their information. Today like many new immigrants I read the Sri Lankan newspapers and watch the nightly news shows on-line every day. If you have satellite you can be up to date on everything – sports entertainment and all.

So what can Omni offer that compels our Canadian audience to watch us?

Our mandate is to give voice to the newcomer communities, inform them and help them learn about their new country.

What we are trying to do is to offer a unique product – a Canadian media product that is exclusively targeting a particular immigrant community.

So if you watch an Omni newscast you will see what we call the generic news – all the crime, the traffic accidents, the storms the weather, the stock market news and the controversy surrounding the Keystone XL pipeline. Because we think that our audiences need to know about the environment they live in, whether it is the politics, the social situation or the economy.

The fact that we deliver this information in a language such as Mandarin is a major selling point for us because new Canadians prefer to receive this information in their language and idiom. In a recent study entitled “Settlement Programming through Media” Professor Karim H Karim of the Carleton university’s

School of Journalism found that multi-lingual audiences prefer to have information in ethnic media even though at times this information is available elsewhere as these are considered friendly sources.

But in carrying these stories Omni has to approach issues somewhat differently. Political stories for a Mandarin speaking audience are a case in point. Most of our Mandarin speaking viewers are unfamiliar with the Canadian political system, so reporters have to explain matters a bit, and not expect the audience to be familiar with standard practices. Concepts such as restorative justice, for instance, need to be explained in greater detail to newcomer audiences – and that is why we hope they will turn to us. Newcomers who come to Canada from other British Commonwealth countries such as Hongkong, India or the Caribbean are more familiar with our political system, although there are many differences that need familiarization.

Then there are the stories that mainstream media would most probably not cover. These are the various community events, such as the Mooncake festival for the Chinese or the Eid celebrations for the Muslims, Nagar Kirtan for the Sikhs and Diwali celebrations for Hindus. There are many such events built around Churches, Mosques and Temples which are often focal points for immigrant groups. We had a colleague who joined us from the CBC and she would ask me why are we doing this event this year as well? This is not news. But for Omni it is news and that is the way the communities feel close to us.

Omni also considers itself an organization that reflects Canadian values and standards in media. We are guided by the Radio Television News Directors Association Code of Ethics which promotes fearless but fair reporting. In doing so while we consider the sensitivities of the community we are reporting on we also do not shy away from controversy, or exposing wrongdoing. For instance in Alberta we have been at the forefront of the debate on the exploitation of temporary foreign workers. We have time and again exposed fraudsters in the communities, as well as problems such as how books donated to the Chinese library in Edmonton went astray.

We are also in a position to cover some stories that other media may not have access to. For instance as stories from the dissidents in the Diaspora One example is Sri Lanka where there was a civil war for three decades and repressive measures continue against certain groups. Omni has been able to present fair and open reporting on these issues which Canadians of Sri Lankan origin have complimented us on. This was reporting that was not available to consumers from any other source. It is the same way with many issues concerning the Chinese communities. Omni is often in touch with exiled and dissident groups so that when a political development occurs we are in a position to present a balanced story. Initially I remember the Chinese consulate in Calgary being reluctant to speak to us. But now they come to us with their point of view.

Here's an interesting story...soon after we launched in Alberta there was a demonstration by a pro-Tibetan group in Edmonton against the Chinese government. Across the street was a pro-Chinese government group which began a demonstration against the Tibetans. One of our Producers who was in the office and tracking web traffic noticed that a community site called Edmonton China was watching our reporters at the demonstration and actually commenting on what our team was doing. They were actually posting pictures of the reporters and eventually approved of our reporting because they saw us

talking to both sides of the protest. When we are able to present a TV report balanced with all sides of the issue, in Chinese, and then we do have a unique product.

Still we do have huge challenges. Omni gets no subsidy from either Federal or Provincial governments – and we need to earn our way. We are also not happy at the way our audiences are being measured, because the traditional method of ratings and audience numbers on which advertising dollars are spent do not account for the unique characteristics of Ethnic Media. This is a major disadvantage for us. To quote Madeline Ziniak here: “The present measurement tools used by Canadian audience measurement services such as Nielsen ignores and severely under-represent millions of people resulting in a waste and misdirection of advertising dollars.

That said, we are convinced that going forward ethnic media will remain a powerful part of the media landscape in this country. Some advertising agencies may not know it but politicians do. Prime Minister Harper maintains a separate department to deal with Ethnic media in his publicity unit and his newest spokesman Angelo Persichilli was the Anchor of the Italian language newscast on Omni.

Going forward Omni is now embarking on National Programming which strives to strongly impact the ethno-cultural communities across Canada. We believe that the time is right both socially and politically to do this. The focus will be on stronger opinion journalism with more analysis, greater interpretive journalism that connects the diversity of thought amongst ethno-cultural communities across the country.

Thank you