



Should American Journalism Make Us Americans?

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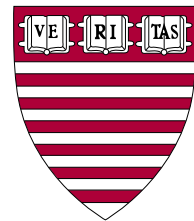
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**SHOULD AMERICAN
JOURNALISM MAKE
US AMERICANS?**

**by
Jim Sleeper**

**Discussion Paper D-38
September 1999**

**The Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS POLITICS**



PUBLIC POLICY

**Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government**

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INTRODUCTION

Howard Ziff, former journalism professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and former city editor of the *Chicago Sun Times*, last year addressed a retirement party with the words that journalism in this country “is in a time of change.” He chided himself for the phrase, remembering a long career of classes and speeches, during which he too often made the point that journalism was in “a time of change.”

But now, he said, replacing irony with desperation, “It really is in a time of change, profound change.”

There is indeed a culture of American newspaper journalism. It has been shaped by the literature and structure of the English language. Its legal boundaries have been set by hundreds of major legal decisions from the trial of John Peter Zenger to the Pentagon Papers. Its standards and ethics have been constructed story by story by generations of reporters, editors and publishers of newspapers and magazines. It has been colored by such forces of history as wars, presidential personalities, and movements for racial and gender equity. And it has been shaped by technology, from cold type to the internet. Through these forces, a simple, common, guiding principle in the trade has grown and still stands: to report the daily news accurately, fairly and, as is carved into the granite of the *New York Times* building, “without fear or favor.” For reporters and editors in the post-World War II era, that principle has had a religious force to it. So common is that culture among the press that one can generalize about “the media,” confident that they pretty much behave (or are supposed to) within a fuzzy but real set of norms.

For those who toil in American journalism, the freedom, culture, and ethics of the American system seem to comprise the best situation for writer and reader in the world. Newspapers elsewhere seem either to be more rowdy, loud and partisan, or officious and bland than their mainstream American counterparts. It is not unlike the comfort zone any American feels stepping back into the familiar deliberative process of the American government from visits to countries that either have too much order from too much government or chaos from too little.

But these are times of change in technology, politics, and government. Howard Ziff is right on many fronts: “It really is a time of change, profound change.” And change requires innovation.

One such innovation is illustrated in the recent history of the *Miami Herald* and its parent company, Knight-Ridder. They have reshaped the paper to reach millions of residents of the city for whom the language, the political culture, and the common guiding principles of local journalism and politics are to some degree foreign and uncomfortable—at least too uncomfortable for many of them to have bought the paper and supported its advertisers when it was in English. For the growing population of former Cubans and Latin Americans in the city, now the news from the *Herald* comes in Spanish, and often with a partisanship and effusiveness that American reporters get wrung out of them within two months of their first job. For Knight Ridder, it seemed to be a reasonable step toward getting the paper back in the black while serving the diversity of its potential readership.

But for Jim Sleeper, it signifies a profound and, one surmises, terrible change (even though the mitosis of the *Miami Herald* has achieved neither financial nor editorial success by most measures). *El Nuevo Herald* in this essay seems to stand as the first block of an American Tower of Babel, an innovation that will result in a polyglot chaos brought on by worship to the false idol of consumer marketing.

This essay, in fact, belongs not to a field of media criticism but to the growing body of work on the anemic state of civic participation in the U.S. Here at the Kennedy School, Robert Putnam and his colleagues have been making long lists of the factors contributing to a decline in civic involvement, from the decline of social organizations to the dominance of television. To this list, Jim Sleeper adds bilingual newspaper businesses. What’s on and off these lists can, of course, be quite controversial.

Jim Sleeper has long been a student of the boomerangs of liberal intent. He is author of *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (1990) and *Liberal Racism* (Viking, 1997). He has strenuously argued his points from inside the tent at *Harper’s*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Monthly*, *The Nation*, *The New Democrat*, *In These Times*, and *The New Leader*. And he is capable of being formidable; he graduated Yale, holds a doctorate in education from Harvard, taught urban studies and writing at Harvard and the Cooper Union. He was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center.

He is an integrationist who believes that American citizenship and civic culture should transcend issues like race and language and cultural peculiarities that don't conform to the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution. He believes in a common narrative of the American national story. He believes that anything that reinforces racial and ethnic divisions is bad. Sleeper is in a league that, by the conventions of liberalism and conservatism, leaves one distrusted by one's friends and embraced by one's enemies. It takes some guts to play here.

That, one guesses, is how readers will react to this essay. The temptation is to focus on the racial and ethnic issues—to place one's beliefs about the country on some scale of desired

homogeneity near or far from where Jim Sleeper places his stake. Another question worth considering, however, is just how significant such changes are. Can a newspaper's actions in adjusting to a city that speaks two languages truly be the harbinger of profound negative change for society as a whole? There is ample evidence in this paper for both sides of that debate.

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Should American Journalism Make Us Americans?

by Jim Sleeper

I. The News Media and New Citizens

“At the *Miami Herald*, a Strategic U-Turn,” read a *Wall Street Journal* headline on November 3, 1998, signaling a new direction—really an unprecedented convergence—in media marketing and news judgment.¹ “The Miami Herald Implodes!” cried *The New Yorker* in a headline on the outside “wrap” of its June 7, 1999 edition. Under *Herald* publisher Alberto Ibarguen, a mass-circulation Spanish-language daily, *El Nuevo Herald*, has been separated from its English-language parent, *The Miami Herald*, which has also shed “Miami” from its masthead in heavily “Anglo” Broward County, a prime circulation area just north of the predominantly Hispanic center city. The name “Miami” now survives on only one *Herald* masthead, circulating to the English-language minority inside the city limits.

Such seismic shifts may be good “niche” marketing for the parent corporation, Knight-Ridder, which has told its newspapers around the country to increase profitability; the *Herald’s* goal is a 22 percent profit margin by the year 2000.² More problematic for newspaper reporting itself and, indeed, for democratic politics, may be decisions like Ibarguen’s to maintain two newspaper staffs that make separate news judgments to produce ethnically distinct journalism for separate readerships in the same metropolitan area. (While many articles are simply translated from one paper to the other, on some days the English and Spanish papers seem to be covering different worlds.)³

“Broward County and Miami are like night and day,” explained an advertising executive to the *Journal*. But should they be? Must they be? Can a liberal, democratic polity thrive or even survive if its daily storytellers abandon efforts to enrich a common civic language and culture with compelling images and editorial exhortations for people who live cheek-by-jowl in met-

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ropolitan-area economies and political jurisdictions? For that matter, isn’t the maintenance of a national civic culture—and, indeed, of a vital national identity—critically important to poor immigrants, who can rely only on nation-states to vindicate and enforce their human and civil rights, and some economic protections and supports? While I look briefly at Spanish-language news marketing and other efforts by “mainstream” newspapers to adapt to multiculturalism, this discussion paper is an effort to think more clearly about journalists’ role in shaping national identity. Since journalists play that role whether we want to or not, we cannot escape responsibility for choices like those Ibarguen and other publishers are making.

Certainly many residents of the 85 percent “Anglo” Broward County have sounded or heeded alarms like “A Miami Vision of our Future?”, a long, lurid, portrait of Hispanic-dominated corruption, crime and ethnic hostility in “the nation’s capital of multiculturalism” that ran in a magazine published by the conservative *Washington Times*.⁴ In a retaliatory response, some of Miami’s 1.2 million Hispanics (the once-dominant Cuban community is losing some ground in the Census to faster-growing immigrant groups from elsewhere in Latin America) have little faith in political, cultural, or linguistic assimilation to the “Anglo” mainstream.⁵

The *Herald* can claim that it’s trying to tell a tale of two cities, but really it’s telling two tales to what it has decided are two different cities—a fateful decision, indeed. “You can’t treat [Broward and Miami] as one market,” explains the ad executive cited above,⁶ and, for many newspapers, markets are precisely what ethnic enclaves in large cities have become. Ibarguen views “technology and economic forces as defining forces of community identity,” as he wrote me from a plane on his way home from Uruguay. He added that “Miami is the central communication point for all of the Caribbean and much of South America. . . . Television, ad agencies, banks, music recording companies all have their Latin American headquarters here.”⁷

It may indeed be good consumer marketing to treat Miami as the Latin American analogue to Asia’s entrepot in Hong Kong. Miami is

unique among American cities, “the northernmost city of Latin America,” as many observers put it, some more ruefully than proudly. Miami is also unique for its high concentration of fanatically anti-Castro, anti-Communist Cubans, whose political and economic preferences aren’t what most liberal advocates of “multiculturalism” want to cheer. But it would be simplistic to attribute the *Herald’s* linguistic and cultural bifurcation mainly to Miami’s unusually bitter, well-funded ethnocentric conflicts. For elsewhere in the United States, Spanish speakers of radically different (often much quieter, much less affluent) cultures are also becoming new “markets” to mainstream papers. The *Chicago Tribune* has invested in *Exito*, a Spanish-language companion to the *Tribune*, since 1993, in a city 79 percent of whose newcomers since 1996 are Mexican Americans. Not only has the *Los Angeles Times* bought *L’Opinion*; a large Spanish-language paper, reacting as well to criticism of its own coverage of California referenda on affirmative action, immigration, and bilingual education, the *Times* considered publishing its own special “Latino” section in English but shelved that idea in favor of a unit of reporters who will “vet” stories of special interest to Latinos.

The *Arizona Republic* has established a Spanish-language website and internet link with a Mexican paper in Sonora. On New York’s Long Island, *Newsday* is about to publish a separate Spanish-language newspaper for New York City’s borough of Queens and eastern suburbs. Reportedly, the *New York Times* is eyeing *El Diario/La Prensa* for possible purchase. The *Boston Globe* has raised eyebrows by occasionally running stories in Spanish right alongside the English originals in its main news pages; in December, the *Globe* front-paged a story on a national survey indicating that Spanish has outpaced French and German as the language of choice among college students who study foreign languages.

Such shifts certainly do pose new challenges to civic development and good journalism: Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures may seem “like night and day,” but, nights and days are comprehended by the same principles of astronomy and meteorology. Similarly, essentially the same political and economic principles drive the organization of metropolitan regions, where political and business leaders and ordinary citizens need more than ever before to engage both “darkness” and “light.” Newspapers don’t have to be social missionaries to believe that people rely on them to

stimulate and assist that engagement.

By that standard, doesn’t the *Herald’s* fragmentation accelerate only the balkanization of a region already dangerously divided? Won’t two or three separate papers only deepen the linguistic, ethnic and racial divisions? Shouldn’t a strong metropolitan newspaper be helping readers of many backgrounds to find common reference points, story lines, and political principles?

If news and editorial judgments are evidence, the answer is apparently not—even, increasingly, in regions where English remains the uncontested language of mainstream newspaper publication. In July, 1998, for example, the *New York Times* ran a series of news stories by reporters Deborah Sontag and Celia Dugger on recent immigration patterns that showed how new technologies and market structures cycle newcomers in and out of the country with an ease unimaginable in the 1920s.⁸ The series reported no efforts to induct even the more settled of these transients into the obligations and rewards of citizenship.

A *Times* editorial on the series abdicated judgment: “This is the first immigrant generation that can connect back home instantaneously by cell phone, videotape, and the Internet,” it observed simply. “Cheap airfares and relaxed rules on dual citizenship also help many people maintain lifelong relationships with their ancestral lands.” The editorial reprised two of the series’ vignettes: A Pakistani immigrant to Brooklyn sees and talks with his family back home via commercial videophone; immigrants from the Mexican village of Chinantla return annually for festivals while supporting much of the town by working as waiters, garment workers, and mechanics in New York. Some plan to retire to Chinantla, counting on their American-born children to keep working in the United States to support them.

With apparent equanimity, the editorial went on to note that while, earlier in the century, “war or persecution often barred [new immigrants’] door back home,” a recent immigrant named “Jesus Galvis can serve on the Hackensack, New Jersey, City Council while running for a Senate seat in Colombia.” Galvis, a travel agent, lost his Senate race. But had he won, Sontag and Dugger reported, “he would have considered holding office simultaneously in Bogota and Hackensack.” What does the *Times* think of that? Readers expecting an opinion had to settle for this: “New possibilities of global commuting are emerging, and New York, appropriately enough, stands at the center of a

new transitional immigrant culture.”⁹ Neither in the news story nor the editorial did the *Times* even air the venerable Progressive hope that immigrants who live and work here—and, like Jesus Galvis, govern here—should be energetically inducted into a distinctive American civic culture or ethos.

It’s a revolutionary, if quiet, shift. In the early 1900s, when racist nativists pronounced most immigrants unworthy to become Americans, Progressive advocates of Americanization retorted that, with intelligent assimilation, newcomers could become as worthy as the natives themselves. And the champions of assimilation prevailed. The idea caught on so well that, as the political scientist Lawrence Fuchs recounts, in 1921 even the Daughters of the American Revolution published a manual for immigrants in English and seventeen other languages, saying:

To the men and women who come from far-off lands to seek a new home in America and become its loyal supporters and citizens, the DAR extend a cordial welcome. We ask you to make yourselves worthy to become a citizen of our country, to study its history, to become acquainted with its literature, its traditions, and its laws. . . . It is a proud honor to have American citizenship conferred upon you. It is more honorable to deserve such citizenship. . . . [T]his is a land of opportunity for all. We offer you these opportunities.¹⁰

That declamation may prompt skepticism today (to whom, really, was the DAR promising equal opportunity?), but it became a standard to which people struggling to prove themselves “worthy” of full citizenship could appeal. Citizenship was understood not as an exclusive ethnic or economic club, but as noble participation in a great democratic project to integrate diverse identities into valuable endeavors, to enable Americans to know a good in common which we could not know alone. By comparison the recent *Times* editorial leaves uncontested the assumption, fashionable in some quarters, that assimilation into an American identity is unworthy of immigrants’ attention. It is almost as if the *Times*, the *Herald*, and other mainstream media have discarded, without so much as a fare-thee-well, any notion that Americans ought to nourish a trans-ethnic national civic culture, open to those who are truly willing to give themselves to its unending creation.

And it is almost as if journalists are abdicating a responsibility—and passing up a wonderful opportunity—to tell true and inspiring

stories of Americans’ sacrifices to build a *common* culture. Not only the Daughters of the American Revolution have reason to be aggrieved at this loss; as the political scientist Noah M. J. Pickus notes, when the late Barbara Jordan chaired the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform in 1995, “she called for a revival of new programs to Americanize new immigrants, noting that Americanization ‘earned a bad reputation when it was stolen by racists and xenophobes in the 1920s. . . . But it is our word and we are taking it back.’” Surely she would feel aggrieved now, too.

But it is important to be clear about how and why it has come to this. Jordan’s declaration is all-but-forgotten not because publishers and editors are captives to some leftist ideology or post-modern philosophical relativism. Nor, I think, has her mission been abandoned because journalists fear demagogic charges of “insensitivity” like those which Cuban exiles have rained down upon the *Herald* and which some black and other ethnic leaders have ballyhooed in other big cities. Few immigrants and members of disadvantaged minorities share the certainties of a few self-proclaimed spokespersons that using English and propounding some common political principles and civic virtues amounts to Eurocentrism or racism. No, the news media have shed Jordan’s mission mainly because new economic and technological currents are driving them almost unthinkingly to divide the world into ethnic markets and to sensationalize racial and ethnic conflicts, even when the latter are staged by opportunists, not “the people.”

Earlier in this century, technological breakthroughs (telegraphs, railroads) and new economic practices and entities (tariffs, continent-spanning trusts, expanding corporate prerogatives, and imperialism) strengthened American national identity, not necessarily in ways we like to remember. In turn, a strong national state and “culture” facilitated those breakthroughs and prerogatives. No wonder that mass-circulation newspapers told variants of a common national story line; after all, they themselves embodied and stood to profit from the latest technologies and corporate interests. And news media had another incentive to be nationalistic, this one based in their unique capacity to update and reinforce national narratives quickly, for millions of people, at critical historical moments.

Many journalists gloried in that capacity, even as social reformers protested that media

barons were abusing it by promoting imperialism. But the economic and technological transformations that were attracting unprecedented immigration convinced Progressive social reformers and capitalist elites alike of the need for national narratives and national unity: Reformers sought a powerful state to direct economic and technological change toward worthy social ends; captains of industry saw in it a protector and a carrier of their investments. The media were central in these reckonings; not for nothing did Lincoln Steffens' muckraking boost Progressive reform and did William Randolph Hearst virtually create the Spanish-American War.

Today, in contrast, national identity is weakened by new technologies (as the Internet, videophones, and airline travel facilitate a rapidity of contacts across barriers of time and space and even language). Arguably, too, national identity is weakened by the reigning economic entities and policies (multinational corporations, "free" trade, new transnational entities and currencies such as the Euro). News conglomerates such as CNN and national newspaper companies such as the *New York Times* and *Knight-Ridder* reflect and accelerate that weakening. They do so not ideologically, but functionally; not fervently but dispassionately, like the *Times* editorial cited above and like linguistically bifurcated urban dailies that are courting ethnic constituencies they otherwise don't expect to absorb, as they might be able to do were the larger society making greater linguistic, cultural or political conformity a price of admission. Today's powerful economic and technological forces drive news media to cater to sometimes-fabricated ethnic markets and to sensationalize conflicts—boosting demand through titillation, not socialization.

The consequences imperil journalism and this unusual country: A more coherent American national identity needn't be racist or otherwise oppressive or rapidly "white bread," as some claim in trying to rationalize our abdications. On the contrary, in a world of failed leftist ideologies and empty relativisms, a strong American civic culture may offer a unique well-spring of energies to advance human rights and the dignity that comes with meeting moral responsibilities to strangers across lines of color, creed, and sometimes even class. That argument about American identity is beyond the scope of this paper, but I suggest that the civic culture upon which it depends is being newly and more deeply drained and distorted by publicly traded

media that are hostage to relentless consumer marketing, which panders or titillates rather than educates. Many Americans who struggle to build or revive a common culture, in local communities and nationally, often at some economic cost or risk, are simply turning away from mainstream journalism, which poses the wrong challenges and dodges the real ones they face. The nationalist media of the past also posed challenges wrongly and dodged others greatly. But we are erring fatally in the other direction. A comparison with the past might prove instructive.

II. The Media and Assimilation, 1920

America is not primarily a piece of land nor a language, nor a church, nor a race, but rather a high level of human attainment.

—*Des Moines Register* editorial, June 1, 1918, rebuking Iowans who sought to ban the German language in public schools and to limit it in parochial schools and church sermons.¹¹

Early in this century, as a deluge of more than 20 million immigrants from southern and eastern Europe brought unprecedented cultural diversity to Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, newspaper editors trying to send clear signals about what the country should become struggled to balance two irreconcilable demands. The first was made by working-class whites and elite writers such as Madison Grant, who feared that inferior immigrant "races" (a term they applied not only to nonwhites but also, and with great vigor, to whites from outside northwestern Europe) would corrupt their communities and take their jobs. They wanted the undesirables barred from the country or deported or consigned to hard, subordinate labor, as Chinese, Mexican, and countless white-ethnic immigrant workers were.¹²

Against such nativism, a second demand came with heart-tugging eloquence from some immigrant leaders and American champions of ethnic pluralism, such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne. Deploring not only nativist bigotry but much that they considered degrading in the dominant business culture, the pluralists defended an often-retaliatory ethnocentrism that prefigured militant strains in today's multiculturalism. In their view, newcomers were prey to the demeaning coercions and seductions of an industrial capitalism legitimated by the pretensions of an Anglo-conformist elite. Instead of straining to prove themselves worthy of such a culture, they argued, newcomers should defend

ethnic identities they'd brought from abroad, often in flight from oppression.

This pluralist argument and vision were suppressed by the patriotic fervors of World War I and for more than a decade afterward. Ethnic holdouts were disdained as “hyphenated Americans” by nativist champions of a “100-percent Americanism.” Yet a richer, more welcoming appreciation of national identity animated part of the Americanization movement, which the journalist William McGowan describes as a “conscious drive to heat and stir the melting pot” and “a government-assisted civic crusade to teach American civic values and the English language.”¹³

From the 1880s until the early 1970s, champions of this enlightened Americanization tried to reconcile ethnic pluralism with a common national culture. Without that, they feared, pluralism would become as divisive as nativism itself. So movement leaders such as the journalist and Progressive activist Frances Kellor preached an enlightened assimilation as the alternative both to nativist bigotry and to a retaliatory, equally narrow ethnocentrism. They added that assimilation isn't wholly a one-way street; in smart assimilation, newcomers struggling to claim an American destiny pour their own cultural gifts into a dominant, democratic ethos.

A two-tiered society is the result, in this Progressive pluralist view: On one tier, many Americans would be raised in religious or ethnic subcultures, the best of which nurture universal aspirations. On a higher level, many would graduate into a national civic culture whose own disciplines, arts, and affections were drawn from the varied subcultures, yet transcendent of them. Our national civic culture would be a rolling synthesis of demographic, technological, and economic forces which the country itself was doing so much to unleash. At best, the result would be what the *Des Moines Register* called “a high level of human attainment” that, like jazz, transcends its racial and ethnic wellsprings to ride and ennobles strong currents of feeling and change it can't wholly control. A full citizen would take pride in entering a jury room, for example, not as the delegate of a racial or ethnic group, but as an American, committed to judge the evidence and the defendant by standards shared with jurors of other backgrounds. Along with politics, pedagogy, and cultural performances, the news media, in this view, would play a vital role in driving “smart” assimilation's production of a common American identity.

Progressive journalists seldom doted on newcomers' distinctive cultural roots; they demanded simply that immigrants be given economic opportunity. A *New York Times* editorial of April 24, 1888 opposed the importation (often, the smuggling) of Chinese labor gangs into New York not because the paper was nativist but because it believed that civic virtue depended on economic decency: “It is as important that American citizenship should not be so downgraded by immigration as that the economic needs of the country should be answered by it.”¹⁴ But with economic opportunity came an obligation to assimilate, because Progressives believed that economic and political health—and workers' health—depended on the latter's internalizing some variant of the Protestant ethic that had figured in capitalism's own rise.

Precisely because the country was becoming more diverse, in this view, it could prosper only by inculcating values transcending those of insular, tradition-bound minorities. In 1902 the *Times* warned that without more stringent naturalization, “the assimilative powers of the great Republic shall not be equal to the task of weaving all these threads of diverse races into a homogeneous whole.”

Revealingly, the *Times* cautioned not only against racist nativism but also against a victim-status multiculturalism that bases cultural “identity” on grievance: The nativist cry, “‘America for Americans’ is on the one hand as short-sighted . . . as ‘America, the refuge of the oppressed of all nations’ [the multicultural cry] is on the other.” Illiterate peasants who expected to prosper as factory workers (and union members) needed intensive socialization—guided by clear signals (from both captains of industry and social reformers) that a common American national culture was the best guarantor of prosperity and justice.

Sending such signals wasn't going to be easy. By 1920 there were more than a thousand daily and weekly foreign-language papers in the United States, reaching four or five million readers. More than a few were edited by ethnocentric activists, refugees who hoped to return to their homelands and were ambivalent about America, even as they relied on its freedoms. But most of these journalists' readers were more assimilation-minded. Capitalist elites, seeking productive workers, and Progressives, seeking a national movement to curb corporate rapacity, wanted to draw them to different but sometimes compatible models of citizenship. From immigrant-neighborhood settlement houses and

churches to corporate boardrooms and factory managers' offices, the consensus spread that newcomers needed rigorous American instruction and uplift.

The industrialist Coleman I. Du Pont, who chaired the Inter-Racial Council, a successor to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Americanization Committee, remarked in 1919,

There's a lot of good industrial light hidden under a bushel that would tend to dispel this Bolshevism cloud and answer specifically and practically the attacks on capital, if the people knew about it. . . . The businessmen of America are not afraid of the truth being told, but they want it to be the truth. So we said, is the [foreign-language] press which reaches these people telling both sides of the story? Is America getting a square deal, or are the home countries and customs and traditions and institutions holding the fort? Is the American government getting a show or is it being knocked eternally?¹⁵

A more productive synthesis of capitalism and social reform was articulated by Frances Kellor, who headed the Progressive Party's research and publicity department and, later Americanization programs at the federal Bureau of Education. Combining what William McGowan calls "a reformer's passion for social improvement with a nationalist's insistence on assimilation," Kellor developed a powerful platform "to make all these people one nation." One way she intended to Americanize the immigrant, the sociologist Robert Park noted in 1922, was

to invite his co-operation and use his own institutions in the process. The immigrant press was useful to the United States in winning the World War. It should be quite as valuable, it would seem, in time of peace....The foreign-language press, if it preserves old memories, is at the same time the gateway to new experiences. For this reason foreign-language papers are frequently agencies of Americanization in spite of themselves. They are always Americanizing influences when they print the news or even, as Miss Frances Kellor contends, when they advertise American goods.¹⁶

The idea wasn't to pander but to co-opt, and to do it for civic as well as commercial gain. And if Americanizers like DuPont were willing to pay to reach immigrant readers, foreign-language publishers were more than willing to be paid for running their ads.

Enter the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers, an interesting "advertising agency" created by the elusive entrepreneur Louis Hammerling in 1908 to exploit those publishers.¹⁷ Advertising had already surpassed subscriptions as the chief revenue source for mainstream American newspapers, but foreign-language papers struggled along with ads from local ethnic doctors and other service-providers who spoke readers' languages. These papers were also refuges for fraudulent ads, rejected by English-language papers, for useless "patent medicines," miracle cures, and quack doctors; in the 1920s, 45 percent of advertising in the San Francisco Chinese daily *Chung Sai Yat Po*, was for patent medicines.¹⁸

Hammerling's genius was to make these papers attractive to respectable national advertisers by organizing the publishers to offer attractive rates for multiple placements in several papers at once. As immigrant newspapers became dependent on his association for ad revenue (from which he took a commission), Hammerling induced some to print articles sympathetic to their readers' employers—who, thanks to him, were now advertisers in their own workers' newspapers. That helped capitalists like Coleman DuPont "dispel the Bolshevik cloud" darkening workers' minds. Hammerling personally mediated some labor conflicts between his association's readers and advertisers, sometimes as an honest broker who helped fulfill DuPont's noblest expectations of dialogue.

But Hammerling also induced some papers to run Republican and other political endorsements, a strategy that foundered when, shortly before American entry into World War I, he coerced papers to publish "An Appeal to the American People" not to manufacture and sell munitions to France, Britain, and other enemies of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Assumed to have been paid by Austrian agents to design and circulate the ad, he was forced to testify before Senators investigating the industry. The charge was not proved, but he was induced to retire, whereupon Frances Kellor took over the association "to carry on Hammerling's business in a legitimate manner," as the sociologist Park put it drily.

Promoting assimilation not with the stick of nativist rage but with the carrot of civic and capitalist incentives to greater opportunity, Kellor recruited national advertisers—Mazola Oil, Washington Crisps cereal—for the Italian *Il Progresso*, the Greek *Atlantis*, the Yiddish newspapers, and others. "One million dollars . . . spent in selling American goods to the foreign born in

America will do more good than all the investigations [of foreign subversion] ever set on foot, simply because the [foreign-language] publishers will feel that America cares and is their friend, and wants them to make good, and they will return it," she wrote.

Kellor underscored an important truth: Even if exiles who wrote ethnocentric manifestos thought the United States just a staging ground for projects back home, most of their readers were busy becoming Americans, and among their bridges to this land of opportunity were ads for American products offered in languages they could read. Whether through operators like Hammerling or stateswomen like Kellor, the United States at the start of the century assimilated immigrants less through outright repression—and even less through pandering—than through cooptation and seduction.

To be sure, mainstream papers often indulged a nativist hostility that found its way into government programs during the war and into the 1920s. I could fill the rest of this paper with citations such as the following from a *New York Times* editorial of 1880:

We know how stubbornly conservative of his dirt and ignorance is the average immigrant who settles in New York, particularly if he is of a clannish race like the Italians. Born in squalor, raised in filth and misery and kept at work almost from infancy, these wretched beings change their abode, but not their habits, in coming to New York. . . . A bad Irish-American boy is about as unwholesome a product as was ever reared in any body politic . . .¹⁹

But to dwell on such views would be to miss their evolution into subtler, more enlightened calls for assimilation as an antidote not just to balkanization but also to caste oppression that violated the Progressive vision. More important, to dwell on past nativist excesses would be to miss a more pressing challenge today—the media's abdication of its capacity to sustain smart assimilation.

III. The Media and Assimilation, 1999

Return now, for comparison, to the ambiguities of today's bilingual marketing. The *Herald's* Ibarguen doesn't see any conflict between ethnic-market segmentation and a stronger civic culture. "It's as simple as this," he told me. "[If you're a new immigrant here,] I can't help you assimilate—or even help you manage your

life here—if I can't get my newspaper into your hands. And I am far less likely to get it into your hands if I insist on making you buy a pound of English when all you can use is a quarter pound of Spanish." (Ibarguen is referring to the fact that when the *Herald* produced a limited Spanish-language edition, tucked inside the English one, he watched Hispanic news dealers pull out and sell the Spanish section but return the English-language husk for refunds.)²⁰

Actually, Ibarguen's argument for a Spanish-language paper isn't "as simple" as that. He also believes that advertising in Spanish is a great assimilator, at least when national advertisers are shepherded into print by news corporations that guarantee professional and broad distribution: "Try to remember the last time you saw a full-page ad for Bloomingdale's, American Airlines or even Macy's in *El Diario/La Prensa* or in the short-lived *El Daily News*," he brags, contrasting his *El Nuevo Herald* with two of New York's Spanish-language papers, the first a moribund local sheet with a circulation of 50,000, the latter a failed *Daily News* Spanish "insert" like the old *Miami Herald's*.)

Ibarguen's faith in top-of-the-line advertising recalls the Progressive Kellor's endorsement of national advertising as a medium of smart assimilation. Indeed, today's foreign-language publishers want such ads just as much as their predecessors of the 1920s did. But they resent incursions by big "Anglo" publishers like Knight-Ridder, especially when the latter are led by Hispanics such as Ibarguen, who some ethnocentrists accuse of siphoning profits from Hispanic media that are "independently owned" and presumptively less assimilationist. Recently, *Editor and Publisher* reported that

In an apparent jab at the increasing number of mainstream newspapers and magazines fielding Spanish-language editions, . . . the National Association of Hispanic Publications is taking special action to prominently identify Hispanic publications that are actually owned by Hispanics. . . . In explaining the move, NAHP president Eddie Escobido said, "Hispanics are sick of being ignored and negatively portrayed by the mainstream media for decades and are now being discovered solely because of our rising purchasing power." . . . NAHP claims 115 member publications with a combined audited circulation of 7 million . . . The total number of Hispanic and bilingual publications in the U.S. is estimated at 300 and 400.²¹

The NAHP hopes to hold off *People en Español* and *El Nuevo Herald* politically and culturally, as well as economically. It has a website to help advertisers reach several of its Spanish-language outlets at the same time; the plan is to offer advertisers enough combined circulation to win some ad revenues without the editors having to “mainstream” their editorial content. But this protest, or pose of it, is partly a reaction to a civic impoverishment that would have been unthinkable to Kellor, who expected foreign-language ads to draw immigrants into a full, English-language citizenship that transcended consumption. Even if Spanish advertising in Ibarguen’s hands today is a canny first step in a dance of immigrant seduction and absorption, it is not accompanied by efforts like the Progressives’ to couple economic lures with English-language instruction and civic inspiration. Today’s media managers seek to “assimilate” newcomers only to markets. Politically, and in the deepest sense culturally, they pander to consumers; they don’t summon them as new citizens upon whose contributions and sacrifices the republic depends.

Recently the *New York Times* reported that U.S.-based corporations have achieved “jaw dropping success” by marketing Spanish versions of *Readers Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Glamour*, and *People* not only in Latin America but in the United States. On the bright side, such publications make few concessions to narrow ethniccentrism; they may draw Spanish-speaking readers closer to mainstream American celebrities and styles. Even those offering articles written expressly for Hispanic readers reinforce the mainstream consumer aspirations that draw upscale advertisers to their pages. “Our spending [on advertising to Hispanics] is running ahead of our general-market budget,” a spokesman for Ford’s Lincoln-Mercury division told *Mediaweek*, “because we realize there are some top-quality magazines. There’s been a maturing of the medium”—the kind of maturing that angers the NAHP but would have disappointed Progressive Americanizers, too.

“Mature” Spanish-language publications in the United States seem to have been predicated on the assumption that Spanish-language readers are here to stay, not because new immigrants keep coming but because a critical mass of their upwardly mobile children are staying out of the linguistic mainstream—even as they become model consumers. A growing number of major dailies publishing Spanish-language edi-

tions seem to be counting on this. “Somewhere between editorial nativism [that is, white “Anglo” supremacy] and cultural mosaic-speak, American newspapers see that if they play it right, the country’s newest arrivals could give them a solid readership and base,” reports *Brandweek*.²² Hispanic buying power has risen at three times the rate of inflation, reaching \$348 billion a year, up 65 percent since 1990, according to the University of Georgia’s Selig Center for Economic Growth.²³

The question is why such purchasing power should remain segmented as “Hispanic” at all, especially by editors who exercise news judgment, not just marketing judgment. Segmenting may add ethnic diversity to the shopping mall, but it adds little to the “public square” of political life. Civic virtue doesn’t just take care of itself, and here, I think, the media have responsibilities which public schools can’t shoulder alone.

When I posed this challenge to Ibarguen, he did not really respond. He noted only that *El Nuevo Herald* runs “a daily section called ‘Opening Paths’ that deals with basic, 101 stuff: how to dress for an interview, how to do a parent/teacher conference.” Otherwise, he keeps referring to the Miami area as a market: As we have seen, Knight-Ridder saddled him with a 22 percent profit goal by the year 2000. He was widely criticized for shutting down the *Herald’s* Sunday magazine, “Tropic,” which was justly popular with Sunday readers but expensive to produce and was losing the *Herald* \$2 million annually. Apparently there is more ad revenue to be had from shifting the paper’s resources to cater to Spanish speakers. But is there better, more creative journalism for everyone—or anyone?

Not according to Pete Hamill, who, as editor of New York’s *Daily News* in 1997, began a different approach to immigrants. A newspaper writing for both newcomers and older Americans in English has two roles, he has insisted. “One is to explain the city to newcomers; the other is to explain newcomers to the rest of the city. Let’s say there are a large number of people who don’t speak English and get their news coverage from Spanish-language TV or Korean newspapers. But their kids are going to use these [English-language] papers as guides to the U.S., and, on that level, it’s very important to get their attention.”²⁴ By reaching out to such youngsters in terms of their interests, not their parents’ tongues, a newspaper helps the whole family build a bridge to the larger culture.

Hamill left the *Daily News* before this passion for bridge-building could be grounded in a new format. And it is not clear that any other national newspapers have enough civic passion left to sustain such a project. Economically, explains Delbert Sperlock, a *Daily News* executive, newspapers can move from targeting ads for language-specific markets such as Latinos to promoting “crossover” sports heroes and celebrities such as Ricardo Montalban, who advertise Chrysler to a general market even while holding a special appeal for Hispanics.²⁵ That, more than Lincoln-Mercury’s advertising in Spanish, represents Frances Kellor’s dream of assimilation through advertising. If what Sperlock sees is the wave of the future, then outreach such as Ibarguen’s may indeed be a first step on a journey not toward balkanization, as conservatives fear, but toward absorption.

That may be so even in politics, as seemed likely in November, 1998, when the *Herald* broke its tradition of endorsing Democrats and backed Jeb Bush, the Republican candidate for Governor, who won. The endorsement editorial praised Bush’s opponent, Lieutenant Governor Buddy McKay, and acknowledged that the *Herald’s* positions on major issues were closer to McKay’s. But Bush speaks Spanish, spent several years in Venezuela, and is married to a Mexican-American; the *Herald* praised him as “bi-lingual and bi-cultural.” Counterintuitive though it may seem, the *Herald’s* choice in this case may strengthen a bridge toward assimilation: Bush is no ethnocentric politician, after all, but a grandson of Connecticut Yankees and the son of an American President; his children are no more Mexican-Americans than they are WASP. To many Hispanics, the Bush family can be an emblem of proud assimilation, not defiant ethnocentrism.

Still, if one sets aside Bush’s ethnic experience and examines his politics against the *Herald’s* traditional liberalism—and if one thinks of the Miami-Dade area less as a U.S. city and more as a quasi-international entrepot like Hong Kong—then the *Herald’s* endorsement seems more a bid for an ethnic market beyond the United States than a push for assimilation to American civic culture. If so, the editorial policy subordinates civic coherence to transnational profit, and a major American news organization abdicates its power to shape national identity through the kind of storytelling we need to appreciate now more than before.

IV. How the News Media Mediate National Identity

The news media’s importance comes from the fact that, as the scholar of nationalism Benedict Anderson has argued, only the invention of mass printing made nations possible.²⁶ A great nation may be defended (and projected) by powerful armies and it may encompass vast territories and dazzling cities, but ultimately it is little more than what Anderson calls an “imagined community,” united by a story line which most of its people have agreed to treasure and share. “Contracts between us are not enforced by laws or economic incentives,” explains the sociologist Alan Wolfe; “people adhere to social contracts when they feel that behind them lies a credible story of who they are and why their fates are linked to those of others.”²⁷ Without such a story, no nation has been sustained.

Yet not before mass printing could any story besides mythical and religious narratives be told more or less simultaneously to multitudes, through the medium of church sermons and liturgy. Only thanks to printing could narratives be disseminated widely enough, and re-told often enough, to bind hearts and minds in a secular, historical destiny to create a nation. For the first time, thanks to print, millions who spoke such languages could learn and treasure non-religious stories that bound them to others they didn’t know personally.

By the sixteenth century, Anderson reports, millions felt driven to share the vivid literary and political imagery which only books could deliver to multitudes at once. That was so because capitalism not only transformed manuscript production but also uprooted the feudal and religious “status” hierarchies that had fixed the moral coordinates of individual lives. The replacement of “vertical” (divinely sanctioned) identities by “horizontal” contractual agreements among independent individuals deepened a hunger for new explanations of people’s social roles, worth, and aspirations.

Since newspapers are more instantaneous, ubiquitous, and ephemeral than books, they can focus a vast population’s attention on roughly the same thing at the same time, making it possible to imagine a national identity and community moving through history. Think of the effect of Tom Paine’s American revolutionary pamphlet “Common Sense” on the hundreds of thousands of British colonists who read it, knowing that others were doing so at virtually

the same time. Paine awakened an “imagined community” to a destiny its members could try to fulfill. Newspapers can provide such awakenings. Anderson explains how:

The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing . . . creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption (“imagining”) of the newspaper-as-fiction. We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that. . . . The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy. . . . Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others. . . . What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?²⁸

What more vivid figure, indeed, unless it be television evening news programs in the 1960s, when huge audiences with few viewing options could be shepherded into three networks’ electronic pews to watch anchors and correspondents officiate at what the veteran foreign correspondent and Shorenstein Center Fellow Jonathan Randal dubs the “high mass” of American public journalism.

Anderson’s explication of “the newspaper-as-fiction” takes us to the heart of the media’s fateful role in generating national story lines:

If we were to look at a sample front page of, say, the *New York Times*, we might find there stories about Soviet dissidents, famine in Mali, a gruesome murder . . . the discovery of a rare fossil in Zimbabwe, and a speech by Mitterand. . . . What connects them to each other? Not sheer caprice. Yet obviously most of them happen independently, without the actors being aware of each other. . . . The arbitrariness of their inclusion and juxtaposition (a later edition will substitute a baseball triumph for Mitterand) shows that the linkage between them is imagined.

This imagined linkage derives from two obliquely related sources. The first is simply calendrical coincidence. The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential connection. . . . The sign for this: if Mali disappears from the pages of the *New York Times* after two days of famine reportage, for months on end, readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared. . . . The novelistic

format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere out there the ‘character’ Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance in the plot.

The second source of imagined linkage lies in the relationship between the newspaper . . . and the market. . . . [T]he newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life . . . [F]iction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community-in-anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.²⁹

This is not the place to reprise great news-mediated triumphs of nationalism that have substantiated Anderson’s analysis. In print, one thinks of the virtual foreign-policy making of Walter Lippman or, in a darker vein, of the immense, paranoid power wielded by Walter Winchell and McCarthyism. There was also the muckraking of Lincoln Steffens (who, incidentally, discovered that immigrant political “machine” bosses were more trustworthy and statesmanlike than reformers). In radio, one need only mention Roosevelt’s fireside chats and Winston Churchill’s voice in laying down national story lines so engaging that people gave their lives for them. It goes without saying that Hitler and Mussolini had that power, too. And it is no less true for being too-often repeated that television news interrupted triumphalist, Cold War American story lines with narratives of reform and rebellion when it showed Southern sheriffs fire-hosing black workers and brought the Vietnam War and its opponents into American living rooms. These story lines could exist at all only thanks to the processes Anderson describes.

V. Rethinking the Media’s Civic Role

Anderson’s phrase “community in anonymity” has a more troubling resonance today, when, “as a result of . . . the weakening of traditional social structures like the extended family and the local community, the mass media have become increasingly important shapers of political orientations,” according to Prof. Diana Owen of Georgetown University.³⁰ Families don’t sit around the hearth absorbing their cultural history and values from grandparents; their members sit individually before a television or computer screen, absorbing what one variant or another of the media shows and tells them about the society beyond their front doors.

On the one hand, as Owen notes, media penetrate our lives more incessantly and intimately than when their only presence at home was a newspaper thrown on the front doorstep. On the other hand, as Marvin Kalb notes, the “news” itself is more distorted than ever by the “fictions” and marketing imperatives of commercial entertainment—a radical departure from the less-fictional storytelling Anderson finds in a responsible newspaper’s daily selection of stories.

And the news media are indeed more fragmented. In 1977, it was common to find dozens of passengers reading the city’s two or three newspapers in a subway car. The market was segmented then, too, of course, as it has been since not long after Paine wrote “Common Sense”: If you rode a New York City IRT line toward Wall Street at 6:30 A.M., most passengers were blue-collar workers, many reading the *Daily News*; if you rode at 8:45, more were white-collar professionals, reading the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

But recently even such predictable divisions have undergone not just more fragmentation (more people reading varied “lifestyle” publications, new immigrants reading foreign-language ethnic papers), but also a shift that has rattled the print market itself and even Anderson’s other source of news coherence, time: At 6:30 A.M. in 1998, one sees fewer newspaper readers of any kind than in 1977 and more “walkman” wearers listening to favorite music or tapes of instruction, not to the day’s news as editors have “imagined” it for daily communal instruction.

In effect, the shared national story line and even the sense of a public timeline have been loosened by the more individualized triumphs of consumer marketing. This amid a deluge of immigrants bearing languages and story lines that lack a shared American locus. If they’re here just to make money and return home, they’re unlikely to learn how to talk with others of different backgrounds except to facilitate the all-important commercial transactions that are rearranging their lives, the lives of their home countries, and the life of the host country—“our country,” as newcomers of all kinds used to want to call it, a community of citizens who’d sacrificed to make it their own.

The same forces that uproot families, neighborhood institutions, and stable work situations are uprooting the media’s own organization. They are dispersing the “high mass” into profit hunts in “niche” markets under pressures and incentives unprecedented since the rise of

capitalist print production itself. In consequence, news media are losing their capacity and authority to frame culturally authoritative accounts of our national life.

Early Progressive reformers such as Lincoln Steffens condemned immigrant political machines for corrupting cities’ politics and economic development with “crony capitalism.” Steffens would be dismayed by the vast Cuban-American political corruption in Miami and by Marion Barry’s plundering of the District of Columbia’s government. Yet his would-be successors in the press often must overcome their own editors’ resistance to expose among blacks and Hispanics what Steffens found among white ethnics. In neither period can racism explain such necessary investigative reporting and civic crusading. Nor can fear of racism justify the recent entrenchment of racial caucuses of reporters who, at some papers, are virtually empowered by market-sensitive editors to “vet” stories about people of the same color. The root of such caucuses is the weakening of a common culture strong enough to sustain real crusades for justice, racial or otherwise. The loss of such a culture revives racial consciousness on its own anti-assimilationist terms.

As Louis DeSipio and James Richard Henson explain the origins of the problem, once the civil rights movement had induced public officials to “allocate some resources based on ethnic and racial group membership,” government “sought simplified [racial] classification systems” to facilitate those allocations and other forms of racial redress. “We call this process—which has roots both within ethnic communities and in the society as a whole—“racialization,” they write. In response to clear racial signals from the state, ethnic elites have stepped forward, designating themselves through a complex dance to “play an incalculable role in helping [minorities] . . . make demands on the state based on these newfound or reinvigorated identities.”

Similar racial signals are sent by private managements, including those at newspapers, pursuing ethnic markets and workforce “diversity” that eases access to those markets. Some of these newfound “identities” seem concocted to respond to those signals and to racially distributed rewards—as when, for example, the label “Asian” is adopted by a caucus of American journalists descended from Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian, Indian, Pakistani, and other nationalities. If the Asian American Journalists Association represents an “imagined community,” and if Pacific Bell

underwrites the group's "Asian-American Media Handbook," which instructs editors and journalists how to portray members of this "community," harm is done a civic culture that thrives on enlightened assimilation.

Not surprisingly, though, our creepingly post-nationalist media support and cover such groups as bearers of deep cultures, elevating as spokesmen those advocates who promoted the dubious racial classifications and color-coding in the first place. But DeSipio and Henson find that most members of the groups for and about whom ethnic-advocacy journalists claim to speak do not use the "approved" same ethnic labels to describe themselves, nor do they hold the predictable political opinions. For example, elites' preference for a census-and-media driven "Hispanic" pan-ethnic identity conflicts with most ordinary Hispanics' preference to be designated by their nation of origin—Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, etc.

The United States will never be a strong and truly noble nation, Kellor warned eighty years ago, "until the people entrenched in position, power, and prosperity assume the burden and responsibility of the wedding of that nation, until the Americans define what they want that

nation to be and then set in motion every resource and agency to achieve this result intelligently." Immigrant readers want papers that orient them to what is most challenging and rewarding in their new society by telling them stories about it. They want to be shown the principles and rules of engagement. They want to know what they can contribute that others will value enough to moot their grievances.

It's a daunting challenge, and the news media's reluctance to meet it is a tragedy in the making. The United States never was rooted convincingly in pre-capitalist, pre-Enlightenment myths of "blood and soil." Its national identity and the civic commitments that flow from it rely unusually on sound news judgment—sound "fictions" of the factual sort Anderson describes. American citizenship is grounded in countless, conscious individual decisions, mediated by news stories at any moment in time—decisions to participate or not in a great "imagined community." Many more Americans than the Daughters of the American Revolution think of the country this way. Do editors and publishers?

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