

Point of entry

New England Ethnic News unites the region's immigrant and ethnic communities **BY DAN KENNEDY**

WE LIVE IN a time of demographic upheaval. We are becoming foreign-born, non-English-speaking, black, brown, yellow, and white.

That's as true in Massachusetts as it is nationally. In 2004, a MassINC study found that one in every seven state residents was from another country. Earlier this year, according to *The Boston Globe*, the state Department of Public Health reported that one in every four babies born here is the child of an immigrant mother.

Who speaks for these immigrants? Themselves, to an extent not appreciated by those of us who get most of our news and information from the mainstream media. About 100 ethnic media outlets—weekly newspapers, radio stations, websites, and more—serve the state's large and growing communities of immigrants from such places as Brazil, Spanish-speaking Latin America, Asia, Haiti, Ireland, and Poland. African-Americans, too, are part of this media mix, though they are mainly English-speaking and born in the United States.

Until recently, however, there was no point of entry for folks who wanted to know what was going on across the broad spectrum of local ethnic media.

Meeting that need is the goal of New England Ethnic News. Launched in 2004, the organization—a project of UMass–Boston's Center for Media and Society—unveiled a website, the New England Ethnic Newswire (www.ethnicnewz.org), in 2006. It features the best of the region's ethnic-media journalism along with its own content. Now the Newz (or NEWz, as it is called on its website) is ramping up.

If you were perusing the site in early June, you would have found a wide range of stories to which the mainstream media either gave scant attention or didn't cover at all: A story from the *Boston Haitian Reporter* on Jean Claude Sanon, a community organizer who's running for City Council. An article in the *Bay State Banner* on an unusual connection between Boston and the Nubia Museum of Aswan, Egypt. A report from the *Korean American Press* on Ji Young-sun, who was wrapping up

her two-year term as South Korea's consul general in Boston. And a Newz exclusive on how Latino families in Greater Boston are living with diabetes.

"We're not living in walled communities. We're living around and next to each other. There are so many issues that don't have ethnic boundaries," says Ellen Hume, a former *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times* reporter who founded the site when she was director of the Center for Media and Society. She has since moved to MIT, where she is now research director of the Center for Future Civic Media, but she continues to serve as publisher of the Newz.

Richard Chacón, director of the state's Office for Refugees and Immigrants, says he sees the Newz as a resource for both policymakers and service providers.

"The Boston market—unlike other major US markets with larger immigrant and foreign-born populations—doesn't yet have as robust an ethnic media structure," said Chacón, reached by e-mail while traveling in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, home to many Massachusetts immigrants. "A project like Ethnic News is a great way to help circulate information about our diverse ethnic communities much more quickly."

Among those advising the project is Robert Turner, former deputy editorial-page editor for the *Globe* and now the *Boston Globe* Fellow at UMass–Boston's McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies, home base for the Center for Media and Society.

"The thing that I think is really intriguing about it is this idea of connecting different communities," says Turner, who's also director of the Commonwealth Compact, an initiative aimed at making Greater Boston a destination for people of color, women, and immigrants.

"You see over and over again various communities building their own strength as their numbers increase," Turner says. "But how much of an effort around town is there to make cross-connections among them?"

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EDUARDO DE OLIVEIRA is sitting in a Cambridge Starbucks, thinking about his next assignment. The following morning he is scheduled to observe a patient undergo robotically assisted open-heart surgery at Boston Medical Center.

“I don’t think I have a problem with blood,” says Oliveira, 34, who studied clinical pathology when he was attending high school in Rio de Janeiro. “But live and with an open body, I’m not sure.”

Oliveira represents the Newz’s most significant step forward. After volunteering and working part-time for several months, this summer he became the website’s first full-time staff reporter, covering health issues as they relate to immigrant communities. As it turned out, his visit to the operating room was postponed. But he’s got plenty of other story ideas. Already he’s covered such stories as a campaign against cigarette billboards aimed at minority teenagers, racial and ethnic disparities in HIV/AIDS rates, and social and medical challenges facing Burundian refugees in Nashua, New Hampshire, where Oliveira lives.

The child of a middle-class family who wrote advertising copy in Brazil, he moved to the United States in 2000 in order to become a journalist, working as a janitor, a gas-station attendant, and, until recently, a security guard at Harvard University’s museums. “I wanted to write about people, not products,” he explains.

Oliveira is ambitious, and when he sees an opportunity he takes it. While working at a Texaco station in Nashua, a customer handed him a Harvard University credit card. Oliveira engaged him in conversation, and that led to the museum job and a slot at Harvard Extension School, where he earned a graduate certificate in publishing and communications.

One of his journalism instructors at Harvard was David Beard, then the regional editor for the *Globe*, now editor of the paper’s Boston.com site. That connection, in turn, led to a position as a part-time correspondent for the *Globe*, where Oliveira helped break a major story: the death of a liposuction patient at an illegal clinic run by Brazilian immigrants in Framingham.

“With his hustle, openness to broad topics, and reporting abilities, I think Eduardo will be in the next generation of great Boston journalists, if he stays here,” says Beard.

Oliveira, who worked as the editor of one Brazilian newspaper and helped launch another, continues to write an every-other-week column on immigration issues for the Nashua *Telegraph*. It was Oliveira’s question to US Sen. Hillary Clinton at a *Telegraph* editorial-board interview that led NBC’s Tim Russert to ask Clinton about driver’s licenses for illegal immigrants at a Democratic debate last fall. Her fumbling answer is widely seen as the first major setback of her campaign.

“I really believe if you work hard you can find what you’re

Eduardo de Oliveira, center, a health reporter with *New England Ethnic News*, learns about robotically assisted coronary bypass surgery at Boston Medical Center from nurse Lance Maggiacomo.



looking for in this country,” says Oliveira of his success.

The health beat represents a considerable broadening of the *Newz*’s mission. Rather than simply gathering stories that have already appeared in the ethnic media, Oliveira’s job is to develop original stories that can be published in member newspapers.

“It’s through the *Newswire* that we’re going to reach readers whose first language isn’t English with information on health and health care. That is our mission,” says Jarrett Barrios, president of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, one of several organizations

The *Newz* is broadening its mission with health issues.

funding the health beat. (The others are the Boston Foundation, Partners HealthCare, and the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation.)

Author Larry Tye, a former *Globe* medical journalist, runs an annual fellowship program on health reporting that Oliveira attended this past spring. The state’s uninsured population was cut in half during the first two years of health care reform, Tye notes, but he adds that reaching those who still lack insurance will be considerably more difficult—and more likely to be reached through ethnic media than through the mainstream.

“I think a lot of the people who have no health insurance are people who conventional media don’t reach well because they’re in various immigrant communities,” says Tye.

Marcela García, managing editor of the Spanish-language weekly *El Planeta*, wants to run one of Oliveira’s stories, she often has to translate it herself—a task that can take her as much as half a day, though she says the effort is worth it.

“I do invest the extra time or the extra resources because I find the value in his stories,” says García, who was a classmate of Oliveira’s at Harvard Extension. “His particular beat, minorities and health, is a beat that we, for lack of resources, haven’t covered as much or as good as Eduardo has been doing.”

Taking a rather different view is Melvin Miller, editor and publisher of the *Bay State Banner*, which serves the African-American community. Material from the *Banner* is in heavy rotation on the *Newz*. Yet Miller himself takes a somewhat skeptical view of the site’s value.

For one thing, he says, the *Banner* devotes considerable resources of its own to health coverage, including the publication of a monthly supplement called *Be Healthy*. For another, he perceives the *Newz* as being oriented toward immigrants who speak a foreign language, whereas the African-American community—which he describes as “still the largest ethnic group in Boston”—fits neither of those categories.

“We participate with them because we think it’s important to have an awareness of ethnic diversity in the Boston area,” Miller says. But as for whether he plans to run *Newz* content in the *Banner*, he adds, it’s too soon to say.

To be sure, there are some bugs to be worked out. One of those bugs involves language. The *Newz*’s original content—mainly Oliveira’s stories and Q&As with local newsmakers by part-time editor Mary Thang—is in English, which is an obstacle for the editors of foreign-language papers who may want to reprint them. UMass–Boston’s Frank Herron, editor-in-chief of the *Newz* and a former editor and reporter for *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse, New York, says he hopes to offer *Newz* content in Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, and Haitian Creole. For now, though, the resources aren’t there.

Which means that when

IF THERE IS a family that embodies Boston's increasing diversity, it is surely the Forrys of Dorchester. Bill Forry, an Irish-American, is managing editor of four family-owned newspapers—two weeklies, the *Dorchester Reporter* and the *Mattapan Reporter*, and two monthlies, the *Boston Irish Reporter* and the *Boston Haitian Reporter*. His wife, Linda Dorcena Forry, the daughter of Haitian immigrants, is a Democratic state representative.

Bill Forry has been involved in the *Newz* from the start, and he often runs Oliveira's reports in his Haitian paper. (Since it's an English-language publication, translation isn't an issue.) He sees the website as a way to reduce the "siloiing" that takes place among the different ethnic publishers in Massachusetts, providing a place where everyone can see each other's work.

"Overall, the verdict's still out on the usefulness," he says. "I think the concept is strong. If it can work as a sustainable model, I don't know yet. But I find it useful to see what other folks are doing."

And at a time when the mainstream media are struggling, the ethnic media are becoming increasingly important players.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, in Washington, has, since 2004, been tracking the rise of the ethnic media


through its annual *State of the News Media* report. "They fulfill a function that is often not done by the mainstream media," says Mark Jurkowitz, the project's associate director. He offers the illegal-immigration debate as an example. Whereas the mainstream media covered it mainly as a struggle between competing political forces, Jurkowitz says the ethnic media did a better job of "humanizing" it.

"For these folks to see their lives much more directly reflected in their own press is a very important thing," Jurkowitz says.

According to New America Media, a San Francisco-based organization that serves as both an umbrella group and a model for the New England project, some 51 million adults use ethnic media of one sort or another. Yet Sandy Close, New America Media's executive editor and director, says such news outlets have "largely been ignored as kind of a stepchild of American journalism."

It's through projects like New America Media—and the *Newz*—that ethnic media may finally shed that status.

IN A SECOND-FLOOR conference room at MIT, the New England Ethnic Newswire staff has gathered for its weekly meeting. Frank Herron brings up an ongoing problem:



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photos on the site are tiny, and no one seems to know what to do about it.

“Is this a Drupal problem?” asks Ellen Hume, referring to the software platform on which the Newz runs. “This has been bedeviling us for five months.”

At the far end of the table is Mary Thang, who selects the stories that will be uploaded every week. Herron praises Thang for selecting an editorial from the *Jewish Advocate* on the language of terrorism, noting that *The New York Times* had run a similar commentary that day.

Next up is Eduardo de Oliveira’s story on Latinos and diabetes. Hume is concerned that there’s a reference to a Newz funder high up in the piece (with a disclosure). Oliveira assures her it was a coincidence.

“They’ve been pretty good about not pressuring me,” Oliveira says.

“They’d better not pressure you,” Hume responds.

Such is the day-to-day chatter at a news organization that’s very much a work in progress. It’s doing some interesting things, but it’s not where it needs to be. Not yet. The design, by Herron’s own admission, has “some rough edges.” There’s plenty of text, but sections promising photos and videos yield little.

As this article went to press, the Newz was attracting about 100 visitors a day. In an interview, Hume said she wasn’t troubled by that as long as the site was reaching the right people—policymakers, service providers, people who live in Brookline or work on Beacon Hill and who never see how people live in Mattapan, Roxbury, or Framingham. “We’re not in the process of creating eyeballs for advertisers,” she said. Indeed, the Newz runs no ads at all, as Hume doesn’t want to compete with the media outlets that are providing the site with their content.

Within journalism circles, Hume is considered something of an idealist and a visionary, a frequent panelist and speaker on the future of media. She sees the Newz as part of that future—a way of combining professional and citizen journalism, of raising standards, of encouraging the small mom-and-pop operations that comprise much of the ethnic media to take part in a larger conversation.

“I see a remarkable lack of political power in these [New England] ethnic communities compared to California and New York,” she says. “This is literally about how do we invent the next generation of positive leadership in our region. It’s not going to come from the same old places and the same old families.” **CW**

*For links associated with this article, see the online version at www.massinc.org. Dan Kennedy is an assistant professor of journalism at Northeastern University. His blog, *Media Nation*, is at medianation.blogspot.com, and he can be reached at da.kennedy@neu.edu.*

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