

## Comment on Yoav Hammer's "Multiculturalism and the Mass Media"

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### 1. Introduction

Drawing on familiar and general insights about a liberally-justified right to culture, Yoav focuses attention on the mass media. The roles the mass media plays – in shaping the public sphere and in influencing what can be considered a viable option for me – are of tremendous importance, of course, and so if – as many think these days – members of minority cultures have a right against the state that their culture be preserved, Yoav is certainly right that attention should be paid to the role of the mass media in preserving and eliminating minority cultures.

Surveying the relevant theoretical and practical issues, Yoav concludes with practical recommendations regarding the appropriate role for state intervention in regulating the mass media, a role that is shaped partly by the duty the state has to preserve minority cultures and partly by traditional worries about state intervention in anything speech-related.

I should note – and this may be counterproductive given my current job as a commentator – that I agree with most of Yoav's analysis and recommendations. In what follows, then, I am going to offer a critical comment regarding the last section (section 5) of Yoav's paper, and then make a suggestion for another role the mass media may play in a multicultural society, a fact that may have interesting and relevant normative implications (though I am not sure what implications exactly).

## 2. Intra-Minority Exclusion

Assume for a second a very nice, liberal-friendly minority culture. Then given a general right to culture, Yoav's conclusions seem to me almost uncontroversial (perhaps depending on some of the more practical questions). Clearly, then, the more problematic cases are cases of *illiberal* minorities, such as, for instance, minorities that do not allow women access to the mass media. What shall we say about them? Will we fund their own group-channel, in which they are going to silence women? What is a liberal to do?

Yoav is well aware of this instance of a familiar problem for liberalism, but I am not sure he appreciates its force. Yoav suggests that we positively encourage group-channels to allow access to excluded minorities (or majorities, as with women) within the minority. But either such incentives are going to be powerful enough to make a difference, or they are not. If they are not, they don't solve the problem of those sub-minorities. If they are, on the other hand, the (majority within) the minority culture can rightly complain that we do not in fact encourage genuine access to the mass media for authentic voices in that culture, but only for a softened, liberal-friendly and so perhaps castrated version of that minority culture.

To assume that such a complaint is unjustified is to assume that all cultures can survive the "mild" modifications that are needed in order to see to it that the rights of members are not too seriously violated. I know that many make such assumptions – and they do make political philosophy much easier, right? – But the assumption still seems obviously false to me.

What is a liberal to do, then? It seems to me the liberal should intervene in something like Yoav's suggested ways, but not for Yoav's suggested reasons.

For it seems to me that Yoav is wrong when he says “The right to culture of the individuals who form the majority of the group does not include a right to prevent other group members from trying to promote changes.” This proviso will very often completely trivialize the so-called right to culture, thus undermining its justification. The thing to say, I think, is either that people don’t have a right to too seriously unjust cultures, or that they do, and that these rights can include the right to exclude sub-minorities, except those sub-minorities too have a right not to be excluded, and at times this latter right trumps the former one.

3. Mass Media and Exit

It is already clear, then, that my comment doesn’t focus on the minority culture, but rather on the individual within that minority. I now want to note how such an emphasis can highlight another role the mass media can – and perhaps also should – play in a multicultural society.

When discussing the fate of the individual whose rights are violated within and by the protected minority culture, liberals often emphasize exit rights. A real – not merely nominal – option to leave the minority culture and way of life is supposed to vindicate to an extent rights-violations within it. Of course, nothing is trivial here: It’s not clear what it takes for an exit right to amount to a real option, and it’s not clear that even when it does it can vindicate the relevant rights violations. But the following seems fairly safe: The more real an exit option is, the more leeway it is justifiable – on liberal grounds – to allow to the minority culture in its treatment of non-exiting members.

One of the features that can serve to make exit into a real option is an appreciation of possible alternative ways of life. For the exit to be a real option, it is not sufficient to know – in a perfectly general and abstract way – that there are other people out there, living differently. It must be possible for one to imagine oneself living such a life, it must be possible for one to see at least some alternatives in a realistically attractive light, and so on.

Enter the mass media: Perhaps, if we were sure that the members of some illiberal minority culture were exposed to positive portrayals of the *majority* culture, or of other, *liberal* minority cultures, we would be willing to believe that for them exit is a real option, and so if they do not choose it perhaps the violation of their rights within their roughly-chosen culture and community is vindicated. It is very hard, for instance, to think that an ultra-orthodox teenaged girl has a real option of rejecting the ultra-orthodox way of life together with its gender-hierarchy. And perhaps it would have been more of an option for her had she been exposed to positive descriptions of a more gender-egalitarian way of life.

And this hints at another possible conclusion here: That the state should not just help in securing access for minority cultures to the *broadcasting* side of the mass media, but that it should also do what it can to secure access to the *receiving* end of the mass media for members of illiberal minority groups. Without such access, it is very hard to take the exit option seriously. And without a serious exit option, liberals cannot possibly justify (on non-instrumental grounds) tolerating the rights-violation of (some) minority cultures.