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MEDIA, POWER AND STRATEGIES

Shaping Attitudes towards Roma through the European Mass Media

„Like fictions, stereotypes are created to serve as substitutions standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretence.(...) Stereotypes abound when there is a distance. They are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make *real knowing* possible cannot be taken or are not allowed.”

Bell Hooks (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End, Boston, p.170.

1. The Mass Media: a Growing Influence on our Lives

We live in a society dominated by the media. They influence attitudes, prejudices and people's capacity to act. The information and images brought into our homes each and every day go a long way towards shaping our understanding of the world and life surrounded by cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. As a result, our societies are called upon more and more to examine the influence of the media and to shape its effects in a positive and constructive way, especially in terms of how we deal with cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, particularly when confronting racism, xenophobia and right-wing extremism. We are all affected by the media and its ability to influence us is underpinned by mass communications experts who, ever since the 1960s and Professor George Gerbner's cultivation theory, which asserts that heavy viewers' attitudes are cultivated primarily by what they watch on television, have been exploring the ways in which such power has been used.

Today, despite an increase in entertainment choices, watching television remains as popular as ever, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's "Communications Outlook 2007". In 15 of the 18 OECD member states for which data were collected, broadcast-TV viewing increased from 1997 to 2005. In the European countries studied, only in Spain did people watch less television. Turkey's population, with the highest number in Europe, manages an average of five hours a day spent in front of the television set. Central and Eastern Europeans, according to the European Journalism Centre, are also heavy viewers. In Romania, for instance, television is the most popular means of entertainment, the urban population aged 18 to 49 watching television on average 5 hours a day. In Hungary, 98 percent of households have television and, according to a 2006 poll, three out of ten Hungarians claim their lives would not be complete without television.

2. Attitudes and the Mass Media in Social Psychology and Mass Communications

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Given the statistics concerning the time spent by European television viewers in front of their television sets, Europeans can undoubtedly be considered as „heavy viewers”. Professor George Gerbner’s cultivation theory can therefore be used here to examine whether and how watching television may influence European viewers’ ideas of what the everyday world is like and how, in particular, stereotypes concerning ethnic minorities are shaped and strengthened by television watching. Cultivation theory is an approach developed by Professor George Gerbner from the 1960s onward. Cultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant. Gerbner argues that the mass media cultivate attitudes and values which are already present in a culture: the media maintain and propagate these values amongst members of a culture, thus binding it together. He considered that 'television is a cultural arm of the established industrial order and as such serves primarily to maintain, stabilize and reinforce rather than to alter, threaten or weaken conventional beliefs and behaviors'.

The cultivation of the cultural and political status quo by television programs is therefore seen as a stabilizing force for society that underlies the important part stereotypes play in our social life. Stereotyping is a psychological process that helps us identify with our own social and cultural groups by implying usually simple and overgeneralized assertions about members of other social categories, thus providing a sense of belonging. Although stereotypes are usually negative and incorrect feelings, they are an essential part of our social life since they save our cognitive energy when making judgments of others. In other words, negation, cognitive convenience, ego-defense, and maintenance of the status quo are all defining features of stereotyping.

According to Lippman, our stereotypes will not change unless different information about the concerned other group appears so much so that we have to reconsider our earlier judgements. This is where the maintenance of the cultural and political status quo by television programs as described by Gerbner becomes not only a stabilizing force for society but also, and importantly in societies as diverse as the ones in Europe, a destabilizing force endangering social cohesion. Since negative stereotypes are at the core of prejudice and are reflected in discriminated behaviour towards other groups of people, the propagation of stereotypes concerning ethnic minorities by the mass media have a direct effect on people’s perception on these minorities and consequently result in widespread discriminative behaviour towards these minorities. On the other hand, as today’s media have become more consolidated and reach out to a larger audience, and many of the hitherto reviled or simply distrusted others have become valued customers, readers, listeners and viewers, the market has proved to be an effective instrument for

eliminating some forms of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, though new forms of discriminatory practices and racism have developed.

As a consequence, in the work promoting racial equality to promote social equality and combat racism and xenophobia, the media seem to be both friend and foe.

3. Stereotypes, Attitude Change and the Power of the Mass Media

Prejudice leads to stereotypes. Research has found that direct inter-group contact is a helpful approach to reducing prejudice, but practical problems arise when optimal contact between majority and minority is our aim. Instead of the direct contact approach, mass media are expected to play an important role in changing prejudice by exposing audiences to different portrayals of minorities. Zhang, in her 2005 study on media exposure's effects on racial/ethnic prejudice, has found that subjects exposed to positive portrayals of the target group (Arabs in her study) stereotype them in ways different from those exposed to negative and neutral portrayals of the target group. In the same line of thought, a study on the effects of an American television show's positive effects on viewers' stereotypes on homosexuals proposes an interesting linkage of two theories to explore the potential influence of television, the Intergroup Contact Theory from psychology and the theory of Parasocial Interaction from mass communication. As mentioned above, Gordon W. Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, one of the most significant and enduring contributions of social psychology in the past 50 years, states that, under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. At about the same time Allport's book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, was published, Horton and Wohl set forward the case for studying what they dubbed "Parasocial Interaction": "One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer". Parasocial interaction thus simply refers to the phenomenon that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people. Communication researchers have described parasocial interaction as the mass mediated equivalent of interpersonal interaction.

Linking these two theories, the "Parasocial Contact Hypothesis" asserts that if we can learn from televised characters representing social groups with whom we have minimal "real world" contact, then it is possible that parasocial interaction could influence attitudes about such groups in a manner consistent with the influence of live intergroup contact. Such a possibility is acknowledged explicitly by Rothbart and John's inclusion of the media as sources of images that can induce belief changes concerning stereotypes. According to the hypothesis and implied by Zhang's study, one can therefore learn about a minority group from mediated messages and representations, and if one has an experience one perceives as positive, one's behavior is altered in that one normally will seek out additional (parasocial) contact rather than avoid it.

Thus, the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis suggests that exposure to positive portrayals of minority group members that produce parasocial interaction will be associated with a decrease in prejudicial attitudes.

Given the importance, therefore, that positive representations of ethnic/racial minorities, as groups or as individual members of such groups, could have on prejudicial attitudes and discriminative practices against minorities, and the positive effect these kinds of portrayals could thus have on strengthening social cohesion in Europe, the fact that media coverage and media policy often contribute to a racist vision of social reality by suppressing positive information about groups targeted by racists is most worrying.

4. Roma Representations and Racism in the Mass Media

While the mass media could be one of the most useful tools for the promotion of understanding between majority and minority and information-based debate in society, it seems that they are still in fact, as Gerbner described about 50 years ago, reproducing prejudices via a static conception of culture, the content of reporting, the roles distributed to ethnic minority spokespeople, and the culturalisation of minority issues. A comprehensive report by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia on “Racism and Cultural Diversity in the Mass Media in the EU” (1995-2000) shows the extent of the problem. Very often there is an over-emphasis on ethnic and immigrant crime and especially in headlines, links are established between the ethnicity, origin of groups or skin colour, on the one hand, and their deviant or criminal behaviour (and even character) on the other. This is the basis for generalisations that associate minority groups with crime. Crime reports related to migrants and asylum seekers also tend to be more dramatic, sensational and described in a more brutal and violent way than the general crime reports about domestic crime. Crime is also typically associated with particular minority groups which naturally vary from region to region.

One group that is invariably depicted in a bad light by the mass media across Europe is the Roma community. Polls show without any doubt, that a very large majority of the European population has strong anti-Romani feelings. The news, as for other ethnic minorities, focuses in general on problem areas and has a clear tendency to reinforce stereotypes about Roma, which are many and widespread. There is, however, a fundamental difference that makes the Roma case much worse than that of any other minority group in Europe. Indeed, the issue is not simply that the Roma in Europe’s mass media are either invisible, referred to as a social problem or, at best, tokens for entertainment and decoration, it is also and crucially that public hate speech on any level goes without criticism or punishment. Declarations suggesting burning the Roma, presenting Roma as animals or dangerous for the health of the majority, and linking them with the most heinous crimes are not espoused by lunatics only, but also by public personalities. Such declarations, relayed by the mass media, make blatant human rights violations of Roma acceptable in the eyes of the mainstream public and result in complete

tolerance for outright expressions of racism in the media.

Another, more subtle but important endemic problem is the association of Roma with crime in the news whereas they are underrepresented in reports about politics and government. This confirms earlier research findings showing that ethnic minorities more often appear as targets or recipients of policies, and rarely or never as actively involved in political processes, thus confirming the “scrounger” and “foreigner” stereotype in the eyes of majority television viewers. As Karin Waringo explains, Roma, as some other ethnic minorities, do not appear as actors of society with specific interests and concerns which have the same validity as the interests and concerns of the majority. In describing minorities and minority concerns from the perspective of the majority, media tend to reproduce racist stereotypes and bias which go with it.

Against this bleak background, it has to be mentioned that some national initiatives have resulted in improvements in the representation of Roma in the mass media, at least concerning the topics they are associated with. In Hungary, for instance, thanks partially to the Hungarian Roma Press Center (HRPC), an NGO created in 1995, while in 1996 Roma were almost invariably associated with three main topics (poverty, crime and culture), the most prevalent topic related to Roma in the national media today is discrimination. According to HRPC’s director, however, fundamentally changing the face of Roma on television could only be achieved if there were enough Romani professionals in the media who could influence decisions about the selection and broadcasting of programs.

5. Opportunities and Strategies for Inducing Attitude Change towards the Roma through the Mass Media

Taking a look at today’s European media, from the most popular newspapers, the electronic media, leading television companies to the editors-in-chief or star television presenters, one cannot find any Roma at all. If a humane and likeable representation of a nearly 12 million strong population, shown by researchers to be the most negatively portrayed minority in Europe, cannot take shape, then integration goals, societal change and the image of a more open society will remain illusions.

Although shaping changes in societal behaviour takes time, decades at least, extensive research summed up above point to the fact that planned visual leverage can influence television viewers’ opinions. Why would it be unthinkable for Europeans to have a more humane impression of the minority groups they live together with, including the Roma? An impression of the Roma freed of centuries-old stereotypes that portray them as mysteriously romantic nomads. Partial and often misleading information imparted by film and television professionals concerning grievances about the Roma that only feed commonly held prejudice against them should not remain so widespread and pervading.

The lesson drawn from the possibility to shape media reality is that a concrete positive initiative can start up a process of change even inside a stereotypical system. By presenting the work of Roma intellectuals, common people, average men and women busy with their average duties and tasks, we could for instance challenge those inaccurate and stigmatizing allegations that portray the Roma as a homogeneously dawdling group.

While lack of information leads the human brain to turn to low-level processing that fits in already present simple and overgeneralized assertions, new and different information about an issue, an ethnic or religious group can lead it to reconsideration of those simple assertions. Media products about the Roma should therefore systematically be fleshed out to present a balanced range of representations, to reach the widest audience possible, to impart accurate information free of stereotypical viewpoints. Similarly to what has been done in the UK, European media professionals could agree to the possibility of starting objective discussions about the issue.

Roma journalists have and will always have a preeminent role to play in this struggle amidst our information society since there could possibly be no better example to set than their individual work and often excellent scholarly and artistic standards regarding visual representation. The success of these programs depends on our ability to foster our own promotion in and cooperation with the majority media, to target an ever enlarging market and reach wide audiences and to shape conceptions about the Roma.

Romani audiences must be able not only to recognise themselves in the mainstream media, but also be presented with information about the diversity and at the same time unity of Romani people. The demonstration of various manifestations of cultural survival as well as the accompanying phenomena of acculturation is essential in forging, re-establishing and reinforcing modern-day Roma identity. Further, the presentation of successful role models, such as artists, cultural leaders, activists making their mark across Europe and the world can be a driving force underpinning social action and community responsibility, self-organistaion being a basic means for improving the social status of a marginalized group, in addition to breaking down social dependency and the inability to take action.

6. Mundi Romani and the Mainstreaming and Targeting Dual Approach: an Extensive Impact on Society through the Mass Media

To balance the current style of reportage of the Romani community, what is needed is not desperately positive images of Roma but a range of representations; a confirmation that the Roma, while we have our own distinctive cultures, are also people as complex, varied and human as all people portrayed by the media. The incorporation of sufficient

information about the social, political or historical developments of issues concerning the Roma is essential to promote understanding and to encourage information-based debate in society.

In order to make Popper's vision of an open society a reality, the modern media provides an essential tool in the struggle against racism, xenophobia and anti-gypsyism. Given the growing difficulties Roma journalists face in their everyday work, struggling for financial resources is to us a constant struggle for survival. In accordance with the integration objectives of the Roma Decade of Inclusion 2005-2015, it is impossible to ignore the prominent role of the media, which in a society that is growing short of real values, are all too often the only providers of information. Support for conceptualized and sustainable Roma media initiatives is therefore cardinal. The issue is not limited to promoting and engendering attitude shifts in the average European viewer but extends to the proportionate and dignified representation of approximately 10-12 million European Roma citizens who are subject to the worst stigma in Europe.

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