Eötvös Loránd University  
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THESES OF THE Ph.D. DISSERTATION

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„Colorblind” or „Honest”?  
Racial and Ethnic Affiliation as Sensitive Data in the News Media

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The author firmly believes that the fair representation of minorities and the objective and detailed representation of minority-related issues in the media serves a crucial, long term social goal, which on the national level is relevant for all communities, as the media may play an important role in fostering the social integration of minorities, the coexistence of ethnically diverse communities, and the achievement of social stability. It needs to be pointed out that racism does not only take the classic form of hatred or despise, but since the last decades of the 20th century (in the Western world), its “modern” version also surfaced. As Robert M. Entman¹ argues, this may take the form a reserved, but persistent questioning of the legitimacy of claims set forth by minority communities. Certain political formations will question explicit claims for a (more) positive media representation as part of recognition and respect, which, as pointed out by Christopher McCrudden,² is a form of conceptualizing social justice.

We should also bear in mind that, as Teun Van Dijk³ argues in his analysis of “new racism” and news media, a substantive proportion of the “White” audience feels disincentivized in the improvement of the media image of minorities.

The dissertation focuses on how and why media reports portray (or fail to portray) ethnicity and the ethnic background of participants. Also, as a separate issue, the question of whether minority-related news can reach the threshold of newsworthiness is raised. As for example Stuart Hall points out, journalist and editors make automatic decisions on which stories are newsworthy, which make headlines and which are insignificant; which should be elaborated, and which should be dropped.⁴

While making an effort to contextualize individual phenomena in an international context, the dissertation focuses on recent and contemporary Hungarian media and its social environment. The research focuses on news media: due to spatial and conceptual constraints of the project, entertainment programs, documentaries, and

feature films, which may be relevant for the contextualization, fall outside the scope of analysis, and will only be mentioned in passing: similarly to quasi-media, blogs, community sites, or comments on news portals, which undisputedly play an important role in extremism and spreading prejudice against minorities, but trespass the borders of “actual” media.

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The first chapter, entitled “The Hungarian context” outlines the context of the media representation of ethnicity and minorities, which, in Hungary, first of all refers to the representation of the Roma. Here the legal context is analyzed, to be followed by an assessment of the activity relevant institutions and self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as showing how social scapegoating is instrumentalized.

Given the specificities of the Hungarian social context, the research focuses primarily on the Roma minority and anti-Roma social prejudice, and special attention is given to the assessment of the quasi-concept of “Gypsy criminality.” An overview of the most important cases fuelling extremist discourses since 2006 (the Olaszliszka-murder) is also provided. The chapter also provides an overview of social science research initiatives aimed at the media representation of Roma in Hungary. The research projects are grouped into three clusters: the first focusing on media content (content analysis, discourse analysis), the second on the audience (media consumption surveys and impact assessment) and the third on research focusing how media content is produced by journalists and editors. The fourth dimension of analysis focusing on legal issues (media regulation and case law) is included in the aforementioned earlier part of the chapter.

The second chapter, bearing the title “Violating bylaws, suspects, victims and heroes: representing ethnicity from journalists’ point of view” is based on two empirical research projects carried out by the author in 2013 and 2014. Here decisions made by Hungarian journalists and editors on providing information on the participants’ ethnicity was tested, focusing which constructions they found acceptable and which explicit or implicit justifications were behind their preferences. Due to both the fluidity of ethno-racial categories, and the diversity of cases and situations, presumably, no
universal, automatically applicable rules are applicable. The hypothesis also includes
the presupposition that editorial decisions are often based on informal, unspoken, and
often even not fully conceptualized principles. Thus, focus groups discussions were
identified as the optimal research methodology to uncover and identify these principles
and adjacent justifications and reasoning. Here participants can inspire each other,
their reflections may foster the crystallization of viewpoints and raise further relevant
questions. Participants in these focus group discussions heard and debated four stories:
the first of an incident involving a “cultural conflict”, the second about a crime where
the victim was a “white”, middle class woman and the suspected perpetrator was
Roma, the third involved a socially marginalized (and potentially Roma) victim, and in
the fourth a Roma man acted as the positive character, the hero of the story.

As expected, opinions on how ethnicity can be represented were complex and diverse.
All participants agreed on that journalists should take into consideration the role of the
media in shaping stereotypes and the social atmosphere, in particular, the prevalence
of prejudice. The latter is manifested through comments by identifiable (as in the case
of community sites) or unidentifiable readers (published under usernames). It was
mentioned that sites like Facebook reach a broader audience than any of the actual
traditional media outlets, thus professional and ethical commitments for the latter may
prove to be futile and irrelevant in combating social stereotypes.

As for conclusions, there was no consensus concerning the potential and mandate for
the media to change attitudes in (the majority) society, but its role in pressuring
decision makers for social integration was mentioned. The question of capacities and
the lack of financial and subsequent human resources was raised in the context
covering complex social phenomena.

The third chapter, entitled “Kins or relatives? A presumably veiled representation of
ethnicity in police news” provides a case study on how information on Roma ethnicity is
conveyed in Hungarian news media, and, thereby, how covered messages on ethnicity
are transmitted.

The case study targets language used in the inline news portal of the Hungarian police, a
quasi-medium, which is supposed to conform to the rules of objective and neutral
reporting and refrain from discrimination. The content analysis builds on a 2012 research carried out by Bernáth and Messing, which points out that (irrespective of whether or not it used intentionally) the term “kin”, in the Hungarian media serves as a signifier the Roma ethnicity. The research focused on whether identifying participants in the reported news by including references to heir “kins” is present in the police news portal. The project is relevant because numerous media outlets use this portal as a source of information, often copying the content without alteration or editing. Another reason to choose the police news portal lies in the fact that it provides a high concentration of crime reports, which can be presumed to serve a source and fuel for the prevalent public discourse of “Gypsy criminality”, a concept, in the focal point of the research, that links Roma ethnicity with potential criminality.

The hypothesis consists of two parts. First, it may happen that the news reports ill make a reference to “kinship” ties among the participants even it is irrelevant for understanding the story, and the only reason for choosing this term is to convey a hidden message suggesting the Roma ethnicity of the people in the story. And this also suggests that this feature is relevant as there is a connection between ethnicity and criminal involvement. Another resumption concerns the practice when family ties among participants is relevant for the story, but the author would use a different term if the people involved were not Roma.

The analysis did not rebut either presumption. In fact, it showed that the practice followed by the police news portal carries the potential for conveying hidden messages about the participants’ ethnic background and suggestions concerning the relationship between ethnicity and criminality. Several news items supported the hypothesis that “kinship” among Roma participants is mentioned even when it is irrelevant for understanding the story. Here an emphasis is added on the “kinship ties” among the multiple suspects, if other details of the case, such as the location or the type of the offence suggest that the perpetrators are Roma. Thus, mentioning “kinship” helps the reader to decode the message and underline that the perpetrators are Roma. Here, however, intrinsic limitations of content analysis surfaced: everything that falls outside the pre-established search categories gets lost for the analysis, even if may otherwise have been relevant.
In regards of the second part of the hypothesis, which concerned a presumed correlation between a particular choice of synonym in the case of Roma, it turned out that the correlation exists, but it also involves social status, and “kinship” will be used in connection to both Roma and lower socio-economic status, and in other way “deviant” participants, and others for middle class, and non-Roma. The correlation proved to be persistent not only for suspected perpetrators, but other participants, such as victims. It also needs to be added, that the more scandalous the story was, the more likely it was to use “kin” instead of “family member” or “relative”. On the other hand, for large-scale and more serious offences the more neutral term of “relative” was likely to be used, especially in cases where the perpetrator’s action is morally undoubtedly unacceptable and the victim cannot be blamed. Thus, this term is used in serious and objective reporting only – even though these standards would be universally required in the case of police communication.

Research findings concerning the term “head of family” were also curious: it seems to convey value judgments on behalf of the police, as it is mostly used in the context of negative characters, who abuse their position and powers or are otherwise dysfunctional. In cases where the victims are Roma or low status, however, this archaic term carries a somewhat positive message by emphasizing family and community ties and is aimed at increasing empathy.

The research identified other ways to signal ethnicity, lower social status and suggestions on how these are connected to criminality: headlines will be more sensational and tabloid like. This, in the case of a public service police news portal, is particularly alarming and suggests a seriously misguided attitude and approach, as instead of objective reporting, journalists and editors let loose their tabloid inclinations.

Research findings. The aforementioned research findings and the review of earlier research projects are in line with the conclusions of a 2012 European survey, according to which “journalists are objective, but the media is not.” This remarkable discrepancy seems to be valid in Hungary as well: while all content analysis and media monitoring

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projects reveal that the media representation of the marginalized Roma minority in the majority and mainstream media is stereotypical and their image is negative, nothing confirms that the majority of journalists and editor as individuals would do this intentionally and or would display prejudice against any minority community.

In terms of commitments to improve the situation, a cost-focused assessment seems the most useful. Initiatives aimed at diversifying the themes where minorities appear in, and portraying them in higher status positions is practically for free. In the Hungarian context this would mean that experts, who happen to be Roma would also appear in the media in non-Roma related issues and not only as „cutaways”. Awareness and sensitivity trainings are relatively low-cost, and usually only burden media organs with the costs of their employees’ lost working hours, as these trainings are typically provided by other organizations (who also often involve volunteers). These initiatives are useful because journalist in most cases do not have the time or the means to access information an objective reporting of issues involving minorities would require. The improvement of communication by the police, through trainings and professional guidelines could also be achieved by the involvement of only insubstantial public expenses.

Designing educational and training programs for future journalist coming from a minority background involves more substantive, medium-range resources, as the success of these initiatives involves infrastructural investments besides the openness and long term cooperation and commitment of media organs. Given the new forms of racism, international experience shows that the integration of a few experts and even highly visible personalities with a minority background is not sufficient to combat deeply rooted social prejudices.

As the findings of this research project showed, it would require substantive resources, or a reallocation existing ones to enable a complex covering and reporting of social issues that involves minorities. This cannot burden individual journalists or the editors in charge of the daily operations, who cannot control or influence broader editorial strategies and policies. Reconfiguring priorities and resource allocation, as well as
strategic mainstreaming needs to involve managerial and ownership-level decisions and commitments.

No matter how much resources were poured into the media, it would not be capable of ending social prejudice, and nor is it solely responsible for its existence. The question is, how much impact an ethical and rule-abiding media can have in forming public sentiments and debates in a world where high-impact quasi-media, blogs, community sites and other alternative information and information-interpretation sources are not bound by the legal, ethical and self-regulatory norms applicable for traditional media. Especially, since these information regimes also serve as more and more important sources for the journalists themselves. In the Hungarian context, the agenda setting role of xenophobic and anti-Roma politics, which ethnicizes social problems is also crucial. And even if some of the actors make firm commitments, it is unrealistic to expect the media to actually silence or neutralize public discourses and sentiments that overarch political programs and agendas. Especially, if in this context, given the specificities of certain segments of the audience, there is a commercial interest in framing certain social phenomena in an ethnicized manner and to silence certain issues or arguments.
The doctoral candidate’s relevant publications for the subject matter:


