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Tracing Treacherous Terrain

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Perception, Fortune-Tellers and Truth

Images of Roma in the Media in Between Majority Society and Self-Organization

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9/11, the day the Twin Towers in New York came tumbling down: everyone can remember where they were, what they were doing, and what communication channel or device they had been using (TV, radio, Internet, cell phone) when the inconceivable happened, or when they heard about it. For everyone, even for those far away from the catastrophe and without any relatives in the city, this memory is linked to an emotion. This emotion crystalized into a collective perspective of this day, a collective pact, regarding this dreadful moment's place in history. To a great extent, this is an effect of the mass media.

In the 21st century, the mass media shapes the perception of significant developments and phenomena. Our perception depends on how – and through which channels – we receive information. Of course, 9/11 is a drastic example. It is, however, an excellent illustration of the media's reach, as well as its capacity to influence our views in everyday life.

In a nutshell: the media shapes our perception of reality. Aside from its function as a tool for interpersonal communication, it is the primary filter through which we perceive an event. Therefore, the media also shoulders a great responsibility. The proverbial “mirror” that the media holds up to society is meant to present images that are as “objective” as possible, while also factoring in demographic and social developments.

However, the truth is more complicated: the media responds to environmental stimuli in very different ways; from a vast array of events and themes, only a few are selected and become focal points, while others are downplayed; it decides what aspects are important and casts events in a certain light; it interprets and forms contexts. There are actors who do all of this (consciously or unconsciously) for their own interests, like strengthening or weakening a specific political position. On top of this, there is a strong tendency to spread negative rather than positive reports (or: *Bad News is Good News*).

The (Media’s) Warped Image

Already in 2010, OSCE established that in Hungary “Jobbik¹ officials and representatives have been particularly effective in using mass media to disseminate anti-Roma rhetoric as a central element in the party’s political platform.” This is not an isolated case, as scholarly research has shown: in a study conducted from 2005-2006 in Italy, Sigona (2006) observed that the extreme right had taken advantage of the local media’s focus on “nomad camps”, rendering the Roma merely an instrument in their power play. Strauß (2005) also

showed the detrimental impact of “negative images in the media based on press releases issued by the police, despite a ban explicitly mentioning a certain ethnicity.”

While migration, and those who belong to this category (“migrants”), is one of the big themes of our time, only very very few people belonging to minority work in editorial offices in this country. The result is a rift between their lived reality and the majority society’s representations of this in the media. The result is what we call “clichés”. This already distorted image of a minority, combined with a specific political agenda can incite pure hatred against a minority – as in the example of Hungary.

Roma in the Media & Roma Media

All of the above-mentioned phenomena clearly apply to representations of Roma and Sinti. This group has no political lobby, no media clout, and in addition have borne bearing the brunt of conceptions based on pseudo-romanticism and their Holocaust history. The predominant themes featured in the media in connection with Roma are deportation, panhandling crisis, and criminality. The media also continues to convey images of the “wandering Gypsy”, despite the fact that over 95 per cent of Roma in Europe are sedentary. These circumstances are tragic considering the media’s role as a sounding board for public discourse.

An increasing number of Roma have recognized this imbalance between what one sees/hears about Roma and what is really true. Fortunately, this has led quite a few people in Europe to create their “own” media, which is closer to reality.

¹ Right-wing extremist party in Hungary (editor’s note)

The “Traditionalists”

The oldest print media publications by the Roma community in Austria (with four to five issues annually), are Romano Centro’s (bilingual) magazine, and the magazine of the Cultural Association of Austrian Roma, *Romano Kipo* (German). Both associations have been in existence for over twenty years. Another magazine worth mentioning here is *Romani Patrín* (Roma wheel), published by the Roma association in Oberwart. It announces events and discusses current themes; the proximity of the editors and writers to the Hungarian border is also noticeable, in a positive way. It’s a good mix of the motto “act local, think global”. All of these print media pioneers have also managed the transition to Web media extremely well, and each association has its own website.

The “Digitalists”

dROMa (a play on the words “Roma” and “Droma”, which means paths) is a media portal of the association “Roma-Service” based in Burgenland. Their quarterly print magazine *dROMa* can be downloaded, and their online blog offers worldwide news coverage (on themes relevant for Roma). Since 2011, the quarterly *dROMa* TV in Burgenland-Romani provided Roma in Europe with an online source of information. In terms of content, the program approaches highly charged political issues in a serious and sensitive manner. On the cover of the print version, one finds pictures of community role models rather than images of slums. There is, of course, also a lot of news on Facebook and Twitter. As a small service, they also provide a long list of links to pages on Roma, media and politics. So much for the idea that Roma are not into new media . . .

The “Public Media”

It would be a disservice not to mention the airtime the ORF [Austrian broadcasting corporation] sets aside for Roma. Radio Burgenland dedicates a ten minute-slot every Monday to the program *Roma Sam*, hosted by Burgenland-Romni Susanne Horvath. Ö1 Campus hosts a twenty-five minute long weekly online format called *Radio Kaktus*. They report on a great variety of topics: from deportations in France to the annual Roma Ball in Vienna or Burgenland. All of the programs are partly in German and partly in Romani.

There is no Roma television program on ORF. The (bimonthly) Burgenland region TV journal *Servus, Szia, Zdravo, Del Tuha* does however cover issues relevant to the Roma community. The same can be said of the national weekly TV program *Heimat fremde Heimat* on ORF 2.

The “Migrants”

Over half of the Roma living in Austria are migrants. Many are from Serbia. So, it’s no coincidence that the show *Ex-Yu in Wien* (Ex-Yugoslav in Vienna) on the Community TV channel OKTO has such high ratings. Weddings, fun evenings with live music and portraits of restaurants encourage the Serbian (Roma) community to tune in. People who appear on the show are seen. The concept is simple – and it works.

Gipsy Radio/Gipsy TV also offer live streams, music programs, and a chat function to a mixed range of users from all across Europe. They organized a singing contest, *The Gipsy Voice*, that was streamed on the Internet, where viewers could call in to vote for their favorite candidate.

The “Watchdogs”

What is still missing in Austria is the next logical step in the evolution of media: not only producing one’s “own” media, but also documenting and evaluating the representation of one’s own minority group within majority media. What’s more, it also means going public and pointing out cases where the media presents images with no regard for human dignity or incite hatred towards a certain minority through biased representations. “Watchdogs” is the new media term for those who monitor the mirror that is held up to us, and check if its angle is not tilted so that it becomes impossible to get an objective view.

On the European level, there are a few institutions that, at times, have taken on the task of the “watchdog”. For instance, in Hungary, Romedia makes films about the situation of Roma in many different countries, which stand out thanks to the facts they include, rather than sentimentality. Nobody knows for certain how much their work has been impacted by the recent developments in Hungary. MECSEM, an online news portal for Roma in Slovakia, also regularly points out misconduct within the majority media.

Why Do We Need “Watchdogs”?

Philipp Gut (assistant to the editor-in-chief of *Weltwoche*) did a piece on “bands of robbers”, “roving criminals”, “bands of panhandlers” and “criminal clans” in April 2012, and the controversy around it led to the newspaper being reprimanded by the Swiss Press Council. The author was recently invited to take part in a roundtable discussion on TV. One of the most devious things he had done was to illustrate the article with a

manipulated photograph that showed a little boy holding a toy gun. The author defended his piece at the discussion, claiming that it was “well-researched” and “based on facts”. Not even in precedent cases, such as this one, does the majority media ask Roma – even symbolically – to give their opinion.

We should put an end to this. We should finally have an opinion of ourselves that we create – an opinion about the media’s opinion of us.

Literature

Sigona, Nando (ed.) (2006): *Political Participation and Media Representation of Roma and Sinti in Italy*. OSCE/ODIHR/CPRSI. Florence.

Strauß, Daniel (2005): „Ziele – Zeichen – Wirklichkeit“. In: Matter, Max (ed.): *Die Situation der Roma und Sinti nach der EU-Osterweiterung*. Göttingen, pp. 113-125.

Roman Osmose ^{satellites}

Notes from the project blog

In addition to the history of development of the dominant position there is the position of the oppressed, which exists despite the attempts to cover up discrimination and society's refusal to accept its perception, the perpetuation of which emanates from socio-political and cultural developments. It is a question of how those who are withheld a certain position react. How do they act and react in the face of the fact that they are discriminated? Different behaviour patterns may be observed: first of all that of taking on an inferiority complex due to discrimination. Secondly, pragmatism that implies: "society is this way, and therefore we must conform to it." And thirdly, offensively going against it.