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Challenging Perspectives – The Role of Media Representation in Knowledge Production about Roma

In 2013 the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights declared that “demonising a group of people through the media can lead to nefarious political and societal consequences. It is necessary that the media use their power of forging public opinion more responsibly when it comes to portraying minorities in general and the Roma in particular.”¹ This article focuses on the relations between media representation and knowledge production about the Roma in Hungary and is based on my doctoral research. It seeks to provide insights into the role of the media in constructing or strengthening prejudices and racism against Roma and also seeks to posit means by which the power of the media can be challenged and transformed into a tool of emancipation.

Media representation and society

There are many theories about how the media works and all agree on one common idea – that the media has a profound effect on society. According to Stuart Hall and the media representation theory, the media influences the formation of values and identities through a process called representation. Representation is a way of giving meaning to things which are depicted (coding) through images, or words. It is important to see that there are no fixed meanings, but meanings which depend on what people (the audience) make of the image (through decoding) and this depends on how it is represented.²

Above all, if we want to understand representation it is always essential to regard it as a power game – since communication (what is communicated and how it is communicated) is always decided by interest groups. So in this respect we can understand the constitutive nature of representation – when through representation something starts to exist, it starts to have a meaning. So the purpose of examining media representation is to reveal this concept, to show the gap between the object as it is seen in a certain environment and the way it is represented.

Through examining media representation we can show how a social group exists in a society, and what the different concepts according to which it is regarded and treated are. Gaining such an overview can help us understand the discriminative situation of a social group, in this instance the predicament of the Roma. By understanding this we can find the means to eradicate and dispel the stereotypes and prejudices against them.

In order to understand the importance of the image – the visual representation in this question - there is another dimension of this problem that needs to be discussed. Richard Dyer emphasises the role of visual representation in respect of the problem of different social groups' visibility. He approaches this topic from the aspect of whiteness and claims that whiteness must be problematised in order to change the position of the other/subaltern/marginalised people who are racialised and thus can never get into positions in society in the way that white people do. “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and

¹ Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: “Irresponsible media reporting on Roma propagates negative myths”, *Council of Europe*, 24 October 2013, available at: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/irresponsible-media-reporting-on-roma-propagates-negative-myths?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fcommissioner%2Fnews-2013> (accessed: 26 October 2015).

² Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

named they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity."³

Dyer considers visual representation as a reflection of society since "[t]he study of representation is more limited than the study of reality and yet it is also the study of one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality."⁴ In other words, knowledge production can be regarded as concepts and meanings constructed by media representation.

Media representation of the Roma – The stranger

There have been only a few comprehensive research studies carried out on how the media represents Roma in Hungary. According to the results of recent research, it can be stated that a true and accurate reflection of the Roma is basically missing from the Hungarian media, since depictions reflect mainly negative stereotypes that society has in connection with this group. This means that news related to the Roma is mainly about crimes and conflicts.⁵ Although there has been a proliferation in the number and type of television and radio stations and journals since the 1990s in Hungary and the tabloid media covers the Roma topic on a frequent basis, the message that we get about the Roma still hasn't changed much. In this respect the picture is homogenous. Roma always constitute a negative discourse even if the image tries to be positive – it can never be told without any negative meaning (shameful, unfortunate, unreliable etc.). Roma are always talked about or depicted but they almost never appear as independent or individual experts – if they are asked to participate then it is usually related to one of the stereotypical Roma topics. This means of representation creates the concept of the stranger/outsider about the Roma in society. The discourse of the stranger in society becomes the discourse of the Roma. The position of the stranger is a type of relationship – the one in the position of the stranger is regarded as someone who doesn't *speak* the language of the group he tries to relate to - therefore he can never be part of the group, but remains always a stranger.⁶ The group is closed, and remains closed and doesn't give him the means to speak. According to Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*: "I have but one language - yet that language is not mine."⁷

The picture we have of society is often deficient because of the marginalisation of Roma communities and their demonization in media depictions of the world in which we live. The lack of diversity in the representation of Roma shows the lack of diversity in the way of thinking in Hungarian society and this phenomenon proves the presence of modern racism in the media as well as in wider society.

³ Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 17-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing, "*Vágóképként, csak némában*" – *Romák a magyarországi médiában / "Roma mute and in the background"* - *Roma in the Hungarian Media* (Budapest: Nemzeti és Etnikai Kisebbségi Hivatal, 1998); Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing, "Szélre tolva./ Pushed to the edge" - Research Report on the Representation of Roma Communities in the Hungarian Majority Media in 2011", *Médiakutató*, Number 1 (2012): 71-84.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Az idegen kérdése: az idegentől jött" in *Az idegen*, ed. Biczó Gábor (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 2004), 11-29. See also Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1997), 11-69.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Modern racism and the media

In my discussion, the term modern racism refers to biases - stereotyping, prejudices, and discrimination⁸ - being presented in a symbolic, subtle way. Biases cannot disappear from societies. They are a constant part of it because most of the time they act as a quick mental prompt in situations not experienced previously, when an immediate reaction is needed. In such a situation we react automatically and such reactions have their roots in the biases we are brought up with. But the situation is different if it is about a certain social group and draws upon issues such as how that group is regarded and treated in society and what reactions this group faces from society in general.

Since the second half of the 20th century – due to influential historical changes like the Second World War, the end of the colonial era, and the Civil Rights Movement in the USA – belief in equality has become one of the main organising concepts, emphasising the idea of creating open societies where diversity is regarded as a basic phenomenon of society, or in theoretical terms where binary opposition is no longer a fundamental organiser of human culture and language.

In spite of this concept, biases towards different social groups have survived in subtle forms. Subtle biases have an ambivalent, indirect and ambiguous nature. People who maintain this way of thinking most of the time blame a certain group (the outgroup) - in other words, a marginalised group experiences scapegoating. They emphasise cultural differences and regard the outgroup as a homogenous one, in which all the members have the same features. They might also think that this particular group has different sexual or religious habits than their own and they often only emphasise problems when thinking about how to help this group.⁹

An example of subtle bias is a social phenomenon called '*colourism*', which seems to have gained more attention recently as a field researched by social scientists in the USA. Colourism is a visible response to the hidden values of society which have emerged as a form of modern racism. It is a social term describing the phenomenon whereby being black or white is no longer the issue but the emphasis is rather on the importance of the shades of skin colour as a (believed) indicator and key to better life (social) conditions, or power. Indeed recent research in this field proves that people with lighter skin colours are shown to have economic advantages. In 2007 research was undertaken in the USA measuring the wages of African-Americans and whites. The result showed that among African-Americans wages differ according to their skin colour. The lighter they were, the higher wage they got and the closer this wage was to the wages of people with a white skin colour. The research focused on people with the same age, grades and occupation.¹⁰

Regarding the situation of Roma something similar to colourism exists – arising from the constant question of how to define the Roma people (who is Roma?) which has emerged since democratic changes took place in Hungary. In this case the question is about making judgments according to appearance – and appearance means the body, and the values related to it in our society. It can be stated that modern racism is a *way of thinking* which can characterise people in a society or even the attitude of a whole society. In addition, in the case of racism we are talking about not only society itself but also about how democracy could develop in that society. Being a way of thinking, it is hard to examine modern racism, but its abstractness can be caught and indicated by the way communication (media representation) exists in connection with a certain social group. This is why the media is a field where modern racism can be examined in an effective way.

⁸ Susan T Fiske, *Social Beings. A Core Motives Approach to Social Psychology* (New Jersey: Wiley Inc., 2004).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Arthur H. Goldsmith, Darrick Hamilton, and William Darity Jr., "From Dark to Light: Skin color and wages among African-Americans", *The Journal of Human Resources*, Volume 62, Number 4 (2007).

How media representation is connected to knowledge production

It is also important to understand knowledge production about Roma as concepts and meanings constructed through the media. As we can see, images constantly construct us, they produce identification and knowledge (stereotypes), and thus the media defines our values and shapes our identity. But media regulation is also a constant issue mainly with regard to hate speech and freedom of speech. Hungarian media law mostly claims that a certain kind of ethics needs to be respected in the case of public media – its regulation is detailed in that law.

Public media has education and information-dissemination as some of its manifest functions. But in order to understand the social status of Roma in society it is necessary to regard the subtle but pervasive functions of the media, such as collective remembrance. The media has an effect on collective remembrance, since its reports and documentaries form an archive of the reality of the society in which we live in. It creates documents of the era we live in and this act gives the media a normative nature. The reflected images, the spoken discourses, shape the values of generations and thus public media in theory has a great role in shaping societies. This is why it is constantly examined and criticised, especially during recent years when the media law changed negatively in Hungary in terms of freedom of speech and censorship. This has allowed public media to become influenced to an unprecedented degree by the governing party and consequently sometimes violate the basic journalistic code of ethics.

To illustrate this point I will briefly refer to a documentary film titled *A cigány-magyar együttélés* in translation: *The Gypsy-Hungarian Coexistence*, made by a well-known Hungarian documentary film director László Pesty.¹¹ In summary this film makes racist statements about Roma in an explicit way – its main message is that Roma are basically, and by nature, criminals, and therefore they are a threat to the Hungarian people. The way of questioning Roma people in the film is accusatory and asks for explanations from Roma people living in rural areas in Hungary, without questioning the veracity of any of the racist statements made in the documentary. For instance biased and leading questions are posed such as why in the opinion of the interviewer Gypsies have a lot of children, are prone to crime and have different sexual habits. By the end of the film these statements and their power to stereotype are strengthened. A huge debate followed the film among civil society and intellectuals, blaming the director for making such a prejudiced film. However, I think that the main responsibility did not lie with the director and producer of the film but with Hungarian Public Television which broadcasted it without any consideration of the fact that it contained explicit hate speech against Roma in Hungary. Because it is racist, this film cannot be rightly regarded as a documentary.

Deconstructing images – shaping knowledge production

On the other hand, there are examples from online media which illustrate how media representation, and thus all of society, can be criticised and shaped in a fruitful way with reference to the Roma. This way of media representation reflects the solution that Stuart Hall suggests when talking about the politics of the image. Hall refers to deconstruction as a strategy to change stereotypical or racist representations and thus change the knowledge production of a social group, which may result in a positive change for the whole of society. This means going inside the image (the stereotypical image) and exposing it from inside, instead of creating positive representations. Although there is never a fixed meaning in representation, this strategy may result in opening up stereotypes and making them uninhabitable. This also challenges the position of whiteness, since this might offer white people the possibility to define themselves as they are and not against a stereotypical image

¹¹ László Pesty, *A cigány-magyar együttélés/The Gypsy-Hungarian Coexistence*, first broadcasted on Hungarian Public Television (Channel M1) on 7 March 2012. The documentary is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdSk0pAaIDU&index=1&list=PLeA6ffj7YUPxAdIMdqLf50VyyiPAIp3KR> (accessed: 15 September 2015).

(Roma) – and also gives the chances to Roma people to step outside stereotypes and construct their own identity. A good example of this is the short films of the Hungarian Roma News Production group. They are young Roma university students who with humour and irony subvert the view of the defining gazes and simultaneously present alternative viewpoints which in general tend to be sidelined (in subaltern positions). The films are available on YouTube on such topics as the Hungarian public labour programme (which affects mostly Roma people in Hungary), Roma politicians, the Hungarian Roma education policy, and prejudices against Roma.

Changing perspectives – The key to understanding the message

It is the task of the new generation of Roma academics to challenge continuously the meanings and perceptions nurtured by the media in our society, in order to understand and make others understand the way the media functions. With the spread of online media and community pages the media and knowledge production scenes have expanded. Social media seems to be a strong forum mainly because it responds directly to the interests of users and the ideals and moral values they espouse. There are no countries and borders in the biggest social media pages and it is interesting to see how offline concepts appear online. Social media offers us a chance to challenge our perspectives and to be open to changing meanings. With this we give ourselves the freedom to know things in our world, where hopefully the Roma as the concept of the stranger will soon cease to exist.