

ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING THE IDENTITY IMAGE AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE. THE CASE OF NATIONAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The study focuses on one of the most important marks of the 21st century communication that is the intercultural dialogue, especially that part of it which deals with the online visibility. Nowadays, promoting image by means of an aesthetically pleasing, professional-looking, in a word, a well-built up website is the guarantee of recognition as a particular form of an organization, in this case the ethnic or national organization. The websites are built up to sustain a sense of identity and each ethnic organization in Romania strives to gain recognition as a well defined entity in the society as a whole, by defining, promoting and defending those traits which make up the identity of a particular community. The empirical research on numerous websites of ethnic organizations leads to the conclusion that online intercultural dialogue is an expression of promoting data related to those minorities' social and cultural profile, as part of the complex process of defining identity. The theoretical background, based on the latest studies in the field, takes into consideration concepts related to identity, image promotion, intercultural communication.

Keywords: webpage, national minorities, intercultural communication.

Introduction

Online visibility, materialized in promoting image on a website, has a major role in constructing a more socially rewarded identity. In doing so, the ethnic minorities whose organizations are nonprofit also hope to attract the interest of those who can offer them financial support (donations, sponsorship). The main purpose of the intercultural dialogue promoted online is *to bring together*, to create means for sharing ideas, attitudes, ways of dealing with others seen as co-participants in a complex struggle to understand and accept differences. Online intercultural communication, promoting ethnic image on websites with getting feedback means collaborative aid and support, balanced chances to take part in the public sphere debates, insights and explorations of mutual interests, enabling people to get knowledge about different ethnic groups in order to reframe the unified sense of the nation as a whole for the better.

Identity related theoretical perspectives. Basic assumptions

In the past years, the Romanian academic world has been more and more concerned with in-depth searching of cross-cutting communication sciences field. We must take account of the striking changes in the Romanian political and cultural landscape after 1989, changes which have drawn new attention towards ethnic and national identities. Terms such as identity, culture, society and communication are studied from the perspective of a conceptual interdependence, shaping the following research lines: cyber-culture, digital cultural communication involved in influencing any kind of identity features, network society. Starting from the almost ordinary idea that it is impossible to exist in society without communication, theoreticians are also interested in the way in which efficient intercultural communication may guarantee the integration, cooperation, acceptance of differences. It is

especially the case of small nations in contact with larger ones or minority groups in any given nation.

In a study called “New Media Impact on Redefining Otherness Through Similarity”, Madalina Vatamescu brings about the issue of social influence, focusing on the idea that we are witnessing “a complete reconfiguration of the relation between the self and the otherness”, with a radical change of the “participation architecture”, in the virtual space, a space of the “communicating identities” (2009: 11). As a psycho-social phenomenon, group identity is a construct becoming meaningful in the collective mind through what is recognized as being common culture so as to achieve a feeling of belonging and integration. The author follows the path of the French researcher Paillart who, in a study from 2002, argued the need to harmonize micro-cultures in an ideal framework of mutual understanding (idem, p.15) and highlights the role of virtual communities as catalysts for the similarity in social actors.

In a paper on implemented methodology regarding the cultural development of ethnic communities – *ethno-cultural communities*, following the line of classic Eriksonian studies on ethnic belonging as being at the root of the collective identity, along the line of Anthony Smith’s theories from 1991 on the ethno-symbolist system in researching national identity, Antonio Sandu reaches the conclusion that the best syntagm in the multi-cultural context is that of “intercultural identity” because ethnic identity, as a simple social construct, can no longer be separated from other types of identity, identity being a “socio-cultural construct, depending on the cultural meta-text of society” (2009: 10).

In a book mostly for students in the Faculty for Communication and Public Relations, Ion Chiciudean and Bogdan Alexandru Halic describe the issue of interethnic communication from an imagological perspective, treating issues such as standardized schemes, cultural patterns involved in building the group consciousness, stressing the idea that the principles of an efficient interethnic communication rely on sharing common values, “matching behaviours”, the mutual knowledge of ethnic groups by means of “ethnoorganizations” being essential (2001: 100). The same authors believe that cultural diversity must be appreciated by the members of the ethnic communities in the sense that it gives them the possibility to earn their mutual respect and to overcome the cultural ethnocentrism.

Zamfir Bălan also believes that ethnic communication may be analyzed as intercultural communication, focusing on the concern of multi-cultural societies to preserve and develop specific identities in a framework of cultural diversity (2006: 38).

Dan Jurcan analyzes the close relation between the “perpetuation of the social” and building an identity seen as an essential process in a society in which organizations are crucial to shaping social identity (2005: 14).

Any minority community is a social organization with specific social and cultural identity, gathering values generated by symbolic means, standard behaviour, norms. One can easily notice that the current minority associations try to redefine their image as promoters of the interests of their own members using online communication, broadening the framework of what specialized literature called *open communication*, a type of social interaction which *favours relations between the institutional, private and public sphere, with the key objective to bring together the organization’s interest and the aspirations of the community.* (Haineş, 2009: 175). Promoting the image through technological resources that provide online

visibility is an imperative component of external communication in the current society and of what specialized literature called *advertising*, seen as *an intellectual technology of strategically managing the social component* (Haineş, 2008: 11).

In a book from 2005, Gabriel Andreescu, on reviewing the data in the 2002 census with the following ethnic groups presented in decreasing numerical order – Romanians, Hungarians, Roms, Germans (no visible site), Ukrainians-Rutens (www.uur-timis.ro), Lipovan Russian Community of Romania (no visible site), Turks, Tatars (www.uniuneatatar.ro), Serbians (has got facebook), Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks (www.uniuneaelena.ro), Jews (no visible site), Czechs, Poles (www.dompolski.ro), Italians, Armenians, and others, draws the conclusion that the minorities tend to have a peripheral place in the majority population (2005: 35).

Studies in cultural imagology approach identity in relation to the public image in a broad perspective on intercultural communication, specific to societies characterized by geographical openness. Online communication is one of the most efficient ways to promote group image and interests, focusing – as far as minorities go - on consolidating inter-ethnic relations by virtual inter-mediation and afterwards, if possible, within actual, face-to-face relations.

All of the above regarding the need for mutual understanding in ethnic communities are put in practice by presenting in the virtual environment the specific identity features which convey stability and coherence to one's own socio-cultural profile.

Some foreign authors speak about “the very interrelated but conflicting processes of nationalist regression and emancipatory, supranational humanitarianism” (De Cillia *et alii*, 1999: 151), stating that nation is perceived as “a community of congenial similars and regarded as sovereign” (idem, 154). The case of Romania makes no difference. Taking into consideration such statements we have to outline a new interpretation frame of the close relation between the ethnic identity and the national identity. It is far more effective to see the two forms of identity working together in a kind of mutual benefic agreement, since the ethnic organizations display both national, and ethnic elements on their sites.

Collective forms of identity are closely tied to the idea of nation. Most of information in bilingual, and the ethnic organizations declare publicly on their websites that their aim of preserving their own cultural patrimony and ethnic identity is in strict conformity with the rules of Romanian Constitution (i.e. the website of The Union of the Croats displays such information). It is worth noticing that there are normative-ethnic requirements of identity promotion which concern the legality of the online communication. There is also the case of the two symbols represented by the flags, shown together on the front page of the sites. People feel themselves to be part of both their ethnic group and the Romanian cultural spaces, and try to inform the others about this situation. Dealing with both spaces is easier by means of online communication. Likewise, promoting image on websites means gaining a sense of stability, of fitting better, of recognition as others but in positive ways.

Scrutinizing the websites one may discern a dominant characteristic: national symbols go together with the ethnic ones, stressing two main issues: unity by diversity, and difference in unity. In a book on *Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, Chris Weedon enumerates the elements which promote such narratives of identity and belonging – flags, anthems,

monuments and rituals, demonstrating that identity “is never singular but plural, fractured and reconfigured by gender, ethnic and class relations” (2004: 20).

Ethnic identity of minorities, a key concept at the centre of research in various domains like social, communication, and humanity sciences, linked with the general realm of culture at the most, was dealt with in terms of disadvantaged others in comparison with the majority, Giddens pointing out that “the members of the minorities tend to think of themselves as being particular compared to the majority” (2001: 233). It is interesting to see that ethnic identity was considered a vital factor related to well-being, the fulfilled feeling of belongingness to a certain group meaning some evidence for a better psychological health (Grant, 2009). We are entitled to say that the components of ethnic identity such as “self-identification, belongingness, attitudes towards ethnic group, knowledge of and interest in ethnic group, commitment to ethnic group, and involvement in ethnic practices” in accordance with the *assimilation vs. integration theory* (idem, p.25) are to some extent present in the textual and symbolic image form on websites. Having as a starting point for their research the Erikson’s identity development theory and Tajfel’s social identity theory, Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama speak about the fourth and the last stage in the case of a minority’s identity development which is the so called *integration*, “the achieved identity” characterized by a “strong sense of their own group identity and an appreciation for other cultural groups” (2010: 174).

The researcher Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz points out that intercultural communication refers to those situations in which “individuals using different cultural symbols and meanings interact” the result being “a mismatch of codes” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2010: 22).

Starting from the dichotomy established by John J. Gumperz in the 90’s, *old ethnicity vs. new ethnicity*, the last one being mediated through networked communication, Hubert Knoblauch talks about the “structural changes of ethnicity” which allow the new ethnicity “to be contextualized as a community of mind” (2001:27).

Peter Kivisto, in the line of studies developed between 1969 and 1998 which related ethnicity to social boundaries constructed on mutual cultural features, defines the ethnic group as a community with specific „cultural markers such as shared history, language, religion, sense of tradition, systems of values, folklore” (2002:15).

Online visibility – Image Management Strategy

Issues related to ethnic identity link up at various points with other aspects concerning intercultural communication in the virtual medium namely the online visibility. Maintaining visibility through online platforms demonstrates as well Romania’s vast array of ethnic minorities who are interdependent with the majority community.

The images on websites draw on both emotional and rational forms of identification. Different ethnic minority associations are visible online precisely because they have a website with such a content that stands out through colour, font, letter size, attractive graphics. Most websites (accessed over a period of three months, February-April, 2014) have a logical structure in their pages, accessed through easily visible links/tabs. The texts that promote activities are clear, usually presented on 2-3 columns, the main page having a utilities column as well. Most organizations have Facebook accounts, blogs and keep in constant contact by

means of newsletters or RSS, feeds, they have social media accounts, including LinkedIn - the professional network.

Research studies shape the essential role that an efficient external communication strategy has in portraying a well-perceived image by others: *When this is well managed, identity (...) can provide the necessary visual cohesion to make sure that all actions are connected and thus generate an image compatible with the definition of the organization's ethos and character.* (Cizmaru, 2008: 83)

Online promotion of the image allows for autonomy, independence, it is a means of exploring the majority perception, it is an attempt to *self-regulation*. In a competitive environment with financial stakes, online promotion of the proper set of values for a cultural identity matches image promotion so as to attract financial support in the form of donations.

Online visibility may be discussed in its two major aspects: it has a major role in promoting a well-defined image according to the ethnic minority's interests, and it is responsible for the ongoing approach on promoting friendship relations with the majority people and other ethnic groups. It is worth mentioning that intercultural communication in the virtual environment means cooperation, sharing specific experiences, rapid access to information strictly related to activities involving the specific ethnic group. The online visibility makes a contribution to producing rapid bounds both in case of the members or other ethnic people.

The websites are rubricated almost in the same way providing various links to data related to personal profile as a distinctive ethnic community: home, contact, historical background, documents, archive for the online periodicals, photo gallery, calendars for important meetings, anniversary activities and so on, the board, legislation, data with respect to other ethnic minorities, job notices within the organization. Some of these organizations have only blogs, such as "The Bulgarian Union from Banat". Most of them do not display information on the traffic ranking. Whether static or dynamic web pages a special link is sometimes dedicated to the request for adhesions available to people who are targeted as future members. Stationary webpages are less aesthetically attractive than the dynamic ones characterized by sound, flashy animations (images from cultural events), changing text.

A research on the expression of ethnic identities takes into account a few definitory examples of the ways in which online visibility is put in practice. Several websites have been observed. The Albanian League Association has a stationary webpage (www.alar.ro) displaying the same information in HTML documents, the logo is *Alongside the Romanian people*, the sigle is a circle with the ALAR abbreviation in the middle, designed in a triangle. The main purpose of the organization is clearly displayed stating that it was established with a view to public representation, to promoting and protecting the interests of the Albans ethnicity, and to detecting those with Alban roots.

There are also organizations established on age, profession or political criteria such as *The Association of the Young Russian- Lipova people, The Association of the Turkish Businessmen, The Democratic Union of the Turkish-Muslim Tatars, The Democratic Union of the Hungarians, The Democratic Union of the Slovaks and Czechs, The Democratic Turkish Union.*

The Community of the Russian-Lipova People has its own printing works.

Most of the organizations display information on their attendance to various events which promote the involvement in the global cultural context such as the scientific symposium “The Culture of the Russian-Lipova People in National and International Context” held by The Community of the Russian-Lipova People.

The symbolic image of a tower (the sign for Carasova citadel) in the case of The Union of the Croats (www.zhr-ucr.ro), of an eagle in the case of The Union of the Armenians (www.uniuneaarmenilor.ro), or of a circle in a triangle for The Association Albanian League (www.alar.ro) has powerful visual impact and have distinctive ethnic connotations.

Ethnic Identity and Promoting Intercultural Dialogue

Ethnic minority associations, self-proclaimed non-profit legal entities, post on their websites information that strengthens their identity features in an attempt to adapt their organizational culture to the demands of a multicultural society. The clear purpose of every association is to maintain and promote the group identity from an integrative perspective. Minorities want this integration process to be harmonious, safe and honest – (*fair and harmonious social integration* targeted by the Bulgarian Union in Banat on its website) in a Romanian society that proves to be open for intercultural dialogue due to the following:

- Meeting the EU accession requirements regarding the right to ethnic identity
- Existence of Government departments responsible for interethnic relations
- Existence of resource centres for cultural diversity, a Council of National Minorities in Romania
- Existence of education in minority languages
- Existence of institutions in minority languages
- Increasing the interest of the academic research in aspects such as multiculturalism and interethnic relations
- Access granted to ethnic minorities to be represented in the Parliament of Romania
- Broadcast programs on ethnic cultures
- Existence of The Institute for the Research on National Minorities Related Issues which has got its own publishing house that is responsible with the releasing of books on issues related to ethnicity.

A major role in achieving intercultural dialogue also pertains to disseminating the data that define the essential identity features for shaping own cultural benchmarks. It is quite clear that image promotion is two-fold: at the organization level and at the level of the minority group. Minority associations, unions, federations are institutional bodies with a specific culture, with duties that fall precisely under this online identity promotion with several goals:

- Mutual support for members to strengthen the feeling of belonging to a community that has to overcome possible preconceived ideas and negative stereotypes on the part of the majority community
- Setting up cultural benchmarks that shape the position, the place that the minority community has in society from the perspective of participation to the public life and of involvement in activities that are not specific to the respective minority group
- Establishing actual contacts with members of the community and getting feedback via social media

- Reaching better cohesion in the minority and majority community, given that all activities proposed on associations' websites encourage access for non-members as well.

In trying to improve matters about intercultural communication and mutual knowledge and to disseminate values that define specific identity features for better understanding the We/Others dichotomy, minority websites provide information about:

- events such as round tables, exhibitions, book launches, symposiums focused on identity
- specific ethnic and national fairs with own groups that promote traditional dances, presenting the specific gastronomy, national traditional clothing
- their own magazines and newspapers (the Albanese League Association has the *Privirea (The Look)* publishing house, the Union of Armenians in Romania has an online edition of the periodical *Ararat*. These are printed outcomes specialized in covering important events for strengthening the links between the minorities and the Romanian majority. The websites display the online editions, including the archive with previous issues.
- participating to Radio and TV programs promoting interethnic dialogue
- organizing cultural-sports camps and language classes to study the language of the minority in question
- organizing periodical cultural actions, celebrations, homage activities, commemorations of important figures/dates in the life of the Romanian people or in the life of the minority in question
- promoting actions to identify the ones of non-Romanian origin in order to influence individuals to acknowledge their own origins by providing cultural benchmarks.

Websites provide well-structured links to old documents (The Draft Organic Regulation of the Union of Armenians in Romania, pages from old newspapers).

The home page has graphic elements promoting the image as good citizens for their country, the national icon being used quite often – the flag (The Albanese League Association, the Bulgarian Union in Banat). Very often *mottos* highlight the idea of a close relation with the adoptive country - *Alongside the Romanian People* (The Albanese League Association).

Conclusions

Online visibility ensures promotion of the ethnic image, closely related to promoting all identity features that must act freely in the framework set by the majority culture. What defines a certain minority community is made visible by the representatives of the respective associations by online communication, focusing on social cohesion and interethnic dialogue and promoting understanding and reciprocity. In the virtual environment, out of the numerous ethnic minorities in Romania such as the Hungarian, Roma, Ukrainian, German, Russian-Lipova people, Turk, Tatar, Serbian, Slovak, Bulgarian, Croatian, Greek, Jewish, Czech, Polish, Italian, Chinese, Armenian, Csango people, Circassian (in Dobrogea), Hutsul, Karashovani, Gagauz communities some promote their specific cultural, religious traditions within an ethnic plurality that thus acquires the features of democracy and absolute freedom of individual expression.

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