

## THE ROLE OF ETHNIC MEDIA IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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*Abstract: The proposed article analysis to the role of ethnic media with focus on Romani media from Romania. The role of ethnic media in a multicultural society, especially when it comes to Romani media, is a serious challenge.*

*First, because of the complex diversity of the targeted ethnic audience – researchers usually agree that Roma communities are very divers, even multicultural (Tarnovschi 2002).*

*In Romania, for example, there are approximately fifteen different Roma communities that speak a language strongly influenced by the dominant neighbour language. As for education, religion or traditions, Roma ethnics are again differentiating one community from another. Then, there is the problem of education, illiteracy, labour market and, therefore financial resources.*

*When it comes to media, all these social aspects lead to some possible questions:*

*In a multicultural general background, which are the main functions that Romani media should perform in relation with Roma communities and in relation with the general audience?;*

*What type of news stories could be indeed relevant and useful for the Roma audience?;*

*How could the development of Romani media be supported?*

*Keywords: ethnic media, Romani media, media management, ethnic diversity, Roma communities*

### **Ethnic Media and Diversity**

Regarding diversity we may begin by mentioning Lippmann's theory from his work "Public Opinion" that explains that stereotypes are formed out of ignorance and convenience ("the economy of effort"). Each individual sees, feels, through direct and personal experience only fragments of reality, but inevitably every one formulates opinions about many more things or situations (based on a set of existing typologies). Lippmann explains that the world is being described to us before we can directly discover and understand it; therefore, first we define and only then we see, we study and we understand, and not vice versa. There is comfort and safety that we build ourselves, and any act or event which contradicts them is considered as an attack upon our own universe. This is how Lippmann explains the very slowly process of changing mentalities (Lippmann, 2002).

To some extent, the lack of an in-depth knowledge determines some journalists to generalize and even stereotype when describing reality.

Technological changes in the organization and functioning of media constitutes a suitable framework for the development of ethnic media (Cottle, 2000).

But it should be kept in mind that not all ethnic groups have the financial or the technical possibilities to have access to media even if nowadays it is more and more available in the online format. This is the case of the Roma communities – many can not afford the purchase a TV set or a personal computer, given the fact that some are still living in houses without electricity sources. Therefore, as indicated in the book titled "Ethnic Minorities and the Media" (2000), in many cases ethnic media can not ensure the necessary financial support based on consumer purchasing, and one of the possible solutions could be State.

The role of ethnic media is complex because it addresses two type of audiences – the ethnic group and the majority. In relation to the general consumers, ethnic media has the main role to represent a certain ethnic community and in relation with its primary segment of audience (the ethnic group), the main media functions are to inform, to educate and to preserve the cultural heritage, traditions and customs of that community (Beuran, 2011).

When it comes to Roma communities, the situation is quite problematic in this regard because, often, access to non-Roma journalists in traditional Roma communities is very difficult, sometimes even not allowed.

Traditional Roma reluctance can be explained by the distrust in "Gadjo intruders" (people from any other ethnic group ) who do not speak the language and who are different. An example is the case of the Pata Rat community near Cluj-Napoca about which many journalists have written and commented in the press, but very few journalists have indeed had direct contact with this group. In these circumstances, journalists are describing the events based on existing prejudices, therefore some press articles may contain involuntary errors.

### **Roma Communities from Romania – Social Aspects**

Historian Viorel Achim states that the Roma migration from India to Europe was a process that lasted between the IXth and the XIVth centuries. The large number of Roma that are present in Romania (compared to other states in the region) is explained by Achim through the fact that when Roma migrated to Europe, Romanian countries were attractive to these people because they were less developed in comparison with other European states, therefore the Roma crafting skills and manual work was more-needed in this region (Achim, 2010).

In western regions of Europe, the economic life and crafts in general were well already well structured, this is why Roma people that ended up on these developed states were almost always marginalized (since they could not fit into organized collective work, together with the majority who had a better education and professional training. Therefore, the Roma have inherited many prejudices about them, and the fate of the past is reflected in their present and in their future, Roma people having a very complicated historical inheritance, with centuries of humiliation (Bokor, Horváth, 2008).

After the Revolution from December 1989, the situation of the Roma in Romania was seen from other perspectives. Sociologists have identified five such trends (Zamfir, Zamfir, 1993) political and ethnic affirmation of the Roma; the emergence of a class of Roma who practice economic activities that are less legal but very profitable (eg "bișnițarii" that sell products in Turkey etc); a process of impoverishment for most Roma (problem more pronounced compared to the majority); increase of delinquency and the emergence of conflicts between certain groups of Roma and the majority population, some even proportions of ethnic conflicts, such as the Hădăreni case (that included violence and discrimination against the Roma communities; the situation came to the attention of international institutions and was considered a serious case of interethnic incident).

In 2005 the World Bank has made *a map of community poverty in Romania* (www.anr.gov.ro, 2011) which showed that about 50% of the Roma population was poor.

As a general feature, the research indicated that the Roma from Romania had a low educational level and also they had a pronounced orientation towards traditions.

The document also states that poverty is caused not only by material deprivation or lack of infrastructure, but also in terms of human capital resources given that access to education is very low. Finally, very low income and the few available jobs were considered to be the main problems of the Roma (www.anr.gov.ro, 2011).

Of course, all these facts form a vicious circle where one factor is causing the next one – the low level of education, the low job market integration, insecure and temporary material gains, and problems regarding the housing and the access to medical services and many others.

In the European Commission's 2020 Strategy, according to the official document (<http://ec.europa.eu/>, 2011), the following general objectives regarding the integration of Roma were established.

The first one refers to *education* - ensuring that all Roma children complete at least primary school; another object is to address the issue of *employment* – reducing the gap between Roma citizens and other citizens regarding the employment; also the European strategy includes objectives related to *health and housing* – reducing the gap in terms of access to housing and public utilities such as water and electricity. According to the European Commission, media play an important role in developing the vision that Europeans have on the world.

The way different cultural backgrounds can be described or explained by media influences the individual expression, thus confirming or destroying stereotypes. Media can also provide many opportunities for expression for those who are marginalized or excluded from society (www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu, 2011).

When mainstream media cover events or persons belonging to different ethnic minority groups international regulations should be considered, along with codes of professional ethics. Such a document is the *European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance Act* (ECRI) which is based on the following general principles: the implementation and development of training programs for the promotion of cultural values and awareness on the issue of prejudice; supporting the development of a framework for dialogue between local and ethnic communities; encouraging media not to disseminate prejudices through media productions and not to mention the ethnic origin of subjects ([www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int), ECRI, 2011).

### **The Management of Ethnic Media – The Case of Roma Communities from Romania**

There is a specific management of media projects for Roma communities, given the specific characteristics of this ethnic communities. First, there is the challenge of developing a media product that could be interesting for the target audience that is very diverse. In Romania there are about 15 different Roma communities according to traditions, structures of social organization, customs and so on (Report „Traditional social structure of the Roma community”, 2004).

The Roma public is formed, in fact, from a sum of many different groups who speak Romani language with strong influences of the language of the majority of the geographical region in which they live in; they have different crafts, traditions and financial income. Also

there is a relevant difference between Roma living in urban and rural environments when it comes to education.

Another important aspect is related to traditional Roma communities where life is conducted differently from modern communities - for example, the issue of arranged marriages (by their families) among Roma children is a old tradition that is widely media covered in Romania and abroad. In most cases, however, newspaper articles do not provide additional details about the general background and the historical roots of this issue.

There are at least two other difficulties faced by Roma media – the low level of education among the Roma population (research indicates illiteracy levels several times higher compared to that of the majority population) and the low standard of living (poverty is also much higher among the Roma in comparison with non-Roma).

So actually there could be several segments of Roma audiences with different interests and curiosities when it comes to media. This is why we consider it a challenge – to find the proper journalistic form and content interesting to a large number of persons. Further, we believe that there is a problem on the level of education - media consumption among ethnic Roma is also limited because of this cause.

An interesting aspect regarding the Roma media is the language used which in most cases is Romanian since Roma communities speak very different dialects. For geographical reasons, the Gabor Roma from Mureş county have a dialect which contains many words and expressions from Hungarian language, while the Muslims-Roma (xoraxane) from Dobrogea region use a language with many borrowings from Turkish etc.

In a project coordinated by the author of this article some years ago, an event was organized with the participation of Roma coming from ten different communities from all geographic areas in Romania (Cluj, Maramureş, Constanţa, Olt, Mureş, Vâlcea etc). Once the meeting started, the organizers were surprised to notice that all guests were speaking Romanian because, as they explained themselves, using Romani language as spoken in each community they would have failed to communicate. Therefore, we believe that this is a very good reason why journalistic programs addressing Roma are made in Romanian. However, there are exceptions, such as the case of the regional public radio studio in Timișoara (radio show conducted by Roma journalist Carmen Marcu) or the Radio Târgu Mureş (radio program conducted by Roma artist Rudolf Moca).

Of course, we believe that there could be equally advantages and disadvantages regarding the language that media use when targeting Roma audiences. On the one hand, because of language non-Roma population may also have access to the broadcasts or to the publications, and this can help to reduce the existing ethnic prejudices. On the other hand, we believe that it may be disadvantageous for ethnic Roma, because media does not contribute to developing or preserving Romani language.

Going back to the financial matters related to the development of media for the Roma, for the reasons explained above, we believe that these programs must be produced by the public institutions (television and radio), as it is however stipulated in their statute.

According to its own statute, national public television TVR's mission is *to objectively present the socio-political and economic domestic and international events, to provide citizens correct information regarding the public affairs and to promote the values of the*

Romanian language, ..., of national minorities, as well as the democratic, civic, moral and sports values (<http://www.tvr.ro>).

So far, the national public television station produced a series of programs addressing the Roma communities (such as *First step, Cohabitation, European Roma*), some of these programs were financially supported with funding from different projects. An articulated subsidy policy for ethnic media would help to form a multi-ethnic public sphere that could contribute to optimize the relations between the majority and minority.

### **Experts' Opinion on Ethnic Media in Romania**

Further, the paper mentions the most relevant responses on the issue of ethnic diversity in the media resulting from in-depth interviews conducted with experts from Romania and abroad (interviews were conducted in an extensive research conducted by the author of the study, in the period 2010-2012, on the topic of diversity and Roma communities in Romania).

The President of The National Council for Combating Discrimination, Csaba Ferenc Asztalos, considers that media in Romania has not yet implemented in its own organizational culture, consciously and at a functional level, elements related to diversity.

Sebesi Karen Attila who was a member of the Board of the national public television TVR and who is a TV producer of programs for ethnic minorities, believes that in terms of print media the situation is very clear since ethnic minorities have direct funding from the Council of National Minorities and Interethnic Relations Department, while in radio and TV there are only a few programs dedicated to Roma.

Some of the experts that were interviewed consider that Romania has a very diverse media landscape since the beginning of the EU accession process, EU rules and practices being found in the Romanian press.

Roma experts (like Rudi Moca, Ciprian Necula, George Lăcătuș, Iulius Rostaș) are more skeptical. They talk about *conjectural diversity* and subservient to political interests of media managers; they also mention the *fashionable diversity* (it is trendy to have a black presenter or to make soap operas about Gypsies) and the *exotic diversity* (rather than a feature of daily life day, reflected in the media). And the situation is due to the education system in Romania and to the ignorance in relation to “the others” - *if you are not like us, we do not care*.

Szasz Attila, a former member of the National Council of Audio-Visual, and Mircea Toma, President of Active-Watch Media Monitoring Agency explain that in Romania, diversity exists only in the public service of radio and television, where there is an institutional culture and there are rules that regulate how the journalist must relate to the phenomenon of diversity.

Reynald Blion, Media and Diversity Manager and Programme Manager at Council of Europe, believes that information about ethnic minority groups should be covered as any other topic by media, and news should reach a wide audience, not just the Roma.

Ciprian Necula who is a Roma journalist from the Media Monitoring Agency, believes that information campaigns should continue, because prejudices about Roma were formed in five hundred years.

He also mentioned an interesting example – there was a project where non-Roma journalists were invited to be Roma... for one day and the experiences of non-Roma women journalists (women that dressed in Roma clothes) were dramatic, he says.

International advisor and expert on Roma issue, Iulius Rostaş, from Budapest, believes that throughout the period of the Revolution, Roma communities from Romania were not able to develop their own media system; this is why they continue to appear in the mainstream media as “an exotic topic” covered with many prejudices.

Educating the media consume and educating journalists in terms of assuming specific professional codes as part of the employment contract are the most important challenges related to ethnic diversity in Romania, according to Szasz Attila, while Mircea Toma believes that the stereotype is the main problem.

### Conclusions

Ethnic media play a complex role within a multicultural society. These media organizations must address both the ethnic groups and the general audience.

In relation to its own community, ethnic media mainly assures the function to inform, to educate and to explain. Also, they play a significant role in promoting and preserving the cultural heritage which is an important aspect when it comes to Roma communities that only have an oral culture.

Identifying solutions for enforcing the development of Roma media requires a comprehensive approach that involves a partnership between media and the civil society. According to all the policies on multiculturalism of the European Union, ethnic media could function as a bridge among different cultures within a multicultural society.

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