

BEST PRACTICES IN REPORTING DIVERSITY

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Abstract: Over the time, there have been numerous professional debates and roundtables on how media should cover diversity. Many reports done by media associations and institutions focus on techniques how to improve diversity reporting.

The paper refers to professional approaches in reporting ethnic diversity and to the main recommendations for journalists according to different studies on media.

The case study of this the article includes an analysis of the situation of reporting diversity in Romanian media through interviews conducted with experts.

Keywords: media, diversity, ethnic minorities, media newsrooms, reporting techniques.

Reporting Ethnic Diversity

The ethnic diversity of Europe is an ever-present issue on the agenda of the European institutions. We may refer to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), an EU program aimed at attracting the attention of citizens on the diversity of its cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious as an example of European initiatives (Beuran, 2010). Among the issues addressed through projects and events organized in 2008 we mention culture and media, education, migration, minorities and multilingualism. According to European policies, media play an important role in developing the image that Europeans have on the world. Media can also provide opportunities for expression for those who are marginalized or excluded from society, as mentioned in the program of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

Among the numerous projects and studies on reporting ethnic diversity in Europe, we mention the "Diversity Toolkit for Factual Programmes in public service television" developed by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (<http://fra.europa.eu>, accessed 2014). The program was conducted under the supervision of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the participants were journalists from public televisions.

According to the study, the main challenges when reporting diversity are related to „a balanced representation, to verifying the information, and to objective narrative.” The Guide developed by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights proposes a checklist (a diversity checklist) for reporting on ethnic diversity which refers “to understanding and anticipating the impact of images, words, sounds and background sounds used within the stories; the awareness of stereotypes on the subject and people in the press material; mentioning or avoiding ethnicity when this is not at all relevant in the story; checking the facts and making sure that all the terms are being used correctly; establishing if the minority subjects are in the story for authentic reasons; finding new sources, new angles and questioning the dominant discourse; reflecting on the stereotypes within the story; the level of interest in different cultures” (<http://fra.europa.eu> accessed 2014).

In a study on media and diversity in European Union that is titled “Media 4 Diversity. Taking the Pulse of Diversity in the Media”, that was conducted by the European Commission in 2009, the main media conclusions related to diversity were that “media

organizations often see the ‘promotion’ of diversity and fight against discrimination as ‘imposed agendas; the issues of diversity are seen as ‘too sensitive’ and there is no will to put them onto the public agenda from the fear of losing voters or audience shares; there is a lack of involvement of the academic community; and there is also a lack of training on both anti-discrimination legislation and on diversity management” (<http://ec.europa.eu> accessed 2014).

In terms of news production, the main recommendations are the following: “bring diversity into the mainstream; use all platforms and formats; respond to a growing demand for higher quality journalism standards and programming with ethical values that foster social cohesion and inclusion; use new media and technologies to reach out to and include audio & visually impaired as well as ethnic and cultural minorities” (<http://ec.europa.eu> accessed 2014).

According to a very complex study on media coverage of ethnicity and religion that is titled “Reporting Ethnicity and Religion”, conducted in nine EU countries and produced by the Media Diversity Institute in partnership with ARTICLE 19 and the International Federation of Journalists, the main obstacles to good reporting are “the poor financial state of the media, overloading of reporters, lack of time, lack of knowledge, and lack of in-house training” (www.media-diversity.org accessed 2014).

The results of the mentioned study also indicate that “the educational background of journalists covering religion and ethnicity appears higher than the educational background of the general body of journalists”. “The Reporting Ethnicity and Religion” study on media coverage of ethnicity and religion explain that the good examples of media coverage of ethnicity and religion are based on journalism practice that includes: “in-depth reporting, providing background information, explaining legal contexts, considering the impact, giving a voice to the voiceless, showing respect, raising awareness about diversity, avoiding stereotypes, taking a stand on discrimination, moving beyond the event, and minimizing harm”.

At the other end, as showed by the cited study, the poor examples of media coverage of ethnicity and religion usually entail: “labeling, selected use of data, generalizing incidents, negative stereotyping, giving one side of a story, using derogatory words, mixing facts and views, absence of fact checking, and miss-matching of the content of the text and headlines, images, and sound” (www.media-diversity.org accessed 2014).

Reporting Diversity in Romanian Media with Focus on Roma Communities

In Romania, mentioning the ethnic origin in the stories continues to be a problem that needs to be resolved, in spite of all the information campaigns that are explaining that this detail is not relevant.

Radio and television programs about the Roma often cover their specific traditions or customs. Some authors state that Romania's ethnic groups use media to express their own forms of culture (Abrudan; Tarța, 2009), indicating some successful soap opera as examples (“Gypsy Heart”, for example).

Of course, these programs describing Roma communities usually include a series of clichés, like the exotic aspects. The historian Viorel Achim indicates that the exotic approach has been used to characterize these communities for a long time (Achim, 1998).

Generally, the regional studios of the national public television express a greater openness towards different ethnic groups – TVR Cluj, the regional public television channel from Transylvania and TVR Timișoara were the first territorial studios that have introduced programs for Roma communities, since these media organizations function in multicultural and multiethnic regions. Also, Radio Târgu Mureș and Radio Timișoara were the first to introduce programs produced in Romany language.

How Should Media Report Diversity according to Experts

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).

For the beginning, experts draw attention about the difference in defining “diversity” – in US it refers to minority ethnic groups, while in Europe diversity covers cultural, religious, ethnic, sexual and other type of differences.

Also, interviewed experts explained that Romania has a very diverse media landscape since the beginning of the EU accession process, because EU rules and practices were adopted by Romanian press.

Negative media coverage and reporting of ethnic diversity is due to the ignorance in this field.

The President of The National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD), Csaba Ferenc Asztalos, believes that diversity occurs indirectly as a result of the events of the story on the current public agenda, consciously or less consciously.

Also the President of NCCD draws attention to the idea of “political correctness” that is another phenomenon promoted by media. Therefore, although we use the appellation of *Roma* instead of *Gypsy*, yet most Roma still live in ghetto conditions without access to basic infrastructure and the majority has the same detestation and the same prejudices against Roma.

The President of the National Agency for Roma, Ilie Dincă, says that Roma are presented in a negative manner, as a criminal minority and considers that media should stop linking an individual fault to the entire community. Dincă also believes that the negative media coverage of Roma is caused by the discrimination faced by the Roma minority.

Reynald Blion, Program Manager Media & Diversity, Council of Europe Strasbourg, believes that information about ethnic minority groups should be included as any other topic in the media, and that it should not be treated in a special way so that this news could reach a general and wide audience, not just minority groups.

Dezideriu Gergely (Executive Director of The European Roma Rights Centre from Budapest) drew attention to the difference between the media coverage and public opinion trends on Hungarians or Germans, compared to the Roma. Further, he considers that the negative media coverage of Roma is often justified by their negative behavior.

Mihaela Danga, Deputy Director of the Center for Independent Journalism from Romania, believes that generally press has still not found the right way to approach the

problems of this community – media reflects either the extreme stories or insignificant aspects.

Mircea Toma, President of Active Watch, considers that Romanian press must have the courage to get over a racist public that requires the media to act according with their claims.

Iulius Rostaş, international expert from Budapest, considers that negative media coverage is due to the lack of professionalism of journalists; it is not allowed to produce a story based on unchecked information.

Finally, the President of The National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD), Csaba Ferenc Asztalos, offers a relevant example in order to explain the differential approach: well-known football player Bănel Nicoliţă when he plays well he is always considered a “fine Romanian”, but when he scored an own goal in the match against Real Madrid, all of a sudden he became “the Gypsy drowning at the shore”. He explains that negative attributes are linked with ethnicity; while the positive ones are accounted for Romanians (“One is considered to be a good Romanian in case of positive results”).

John Stuart Mill’s quote on freedom is mentioned by the President of the National Agency for Roma, Ilie Dincă – “one man's freedom ends where another's begins”. He also considers that media should be independent, but in the same time certain professional codes are necessary.

Iulius Rostaş, international expert from Budapest, has an interesting idea about sanctioning those who publish racist and discriminatory stories – the abuse of freedom of expression should be punished but not necessarily with imprisonment or with a fine, but by sending someone who abuses freedom of expression to study or to get in contact with that specific situation. This would be a more relevant punishment in relation with promoting the idea of tolerance.

When asked about the stories that media should produce, experts mentioned:

- “Mentioning Roma subjects in general news media as well, not only in the news that are covering this ethnic community;
- Covering “ordinary” topics in relation with Roma minority, since most of the time they are facing the same problems like the majority;
- Media should promote successful stories and examples of best practices in relation with this ethnic group;
- Media could also cover topics on the Roma history, culture and traditions.”

Interviewed experts consider that the main challenges in reporting ethnic diversity, mainly Roma communities, are the following ones:

- “Reporters’ contact list does not include people from the Roma communities;
- Lack of a proper knowledge regarding the topic and the lack of an in-depth research, together with the absence of communicators from the minority group willing to speak to the press;
- Reporters are facing their own mentality and prejudices when covering a story;
- Access in the Roma communities is difficult – reporters usually consider them aggressive and dangerous;

- The public pressure and public's expectations;
- The main challenge is considered to be reporters' subjectivism;
- The absence of a professional media communication system that characterizes Roma communities; the lack of knowledge related to specific tools of communication.”

Conclusions

Reporting ethnic diversity may be both challenging and rewarding for journalists.

Ignorance, together with the lack of knowledge, prejudices, subjectivism and the greed for sensationalism, could be indeed serious limits when reporting ethnicity. And, on a long term, all these could lead to a failure of the intercultural dialogue.

But, on the contrary, in-depth research, direct contact with the ethnic groups and objective media coverage may produce accurate news stories in the benefit of all parts involved (the press, ethnic communities and media consumers).

Finally, we consider that besides general professional codes that media organizations may adopt, the personal determination of journalists is also needed – reporters themselves must try to escape the existing stereotyped structures of reporting ethnic diversity, especially the Roma, and understand the long-term benefits of the intercultural dialogue.

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