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**RACISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY  
IN EUROPEAN MEDIA:  
A REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to thank the EKR for the opportunity to take part in this meeting, and I apologise for presenting my paper in English. I would like to start by linking up to the discussion before the coffee break. What emerges from this discussion, as well as from the research in this area, is that the forms of racism we are talking about are most of the time of a subtle and implicit nature. Scholars have in this respect also spoken of the ‘new racism’ (van Dijk, 2000). It seems to me important to say something – by way of introduction – about the characteristics of this subtle, new racism.

One aspect is that the Other is generally not marked out as explicitly inferior; this would breach generally accepted anti-racist norms. Instead, the ethnic, cultural, religious differences of groups and group members continue to be – often implicitly – essentialised. Essentialisation means that actions or attitudes of for example a (group of) Muslim(s) in the news are not only generalised to the whole Muslim community, but also that their features are represented as unchangeable innate features, which inextricably belong to and have and will always belong that group. This is also the reason why judging whether or not to mention the ethnic origin or nationality of a crime suspect is so important, when it may reinforce the belief or perception that negative behaviour is inextricably linked to the ethnic identity features of the individual’s group belonging.

A second aspect of the ‘subtle’ racism is a process of ‘negative other’ versus ‘positive self’ presentation. This implies that, for example in the context of the media, descriptions of the majority group members are often accompanied by words that qualify them as positive, even when their actions are negative. For example, in a report about someone suspected of racial harassment it is specified that he comes ‘from a good and decent family background’, while the victim is not met with such positive qualities. The consequence may be that the implications of such negative acts are minimised. Instead, when ethnic groups are found to have acted negatively, this will often be emphasised by adding other – even irrelevant – details about for example their appearance. Thus in a report about a foreign rape suspect descriptions of dress and appearance indicating poverty, negligence and other negative features may be used. Or for example in a headline about negative police actions against migrants, the wording is such that the responsibility of the police is not given salience, by using passive sentences, for example ‘2000 migrants evicted from illegal settlement’, instead of ‘police uses force to evict migrants’. Journalists may then object that – referring to their objectivity – they are just registering facts but what these examples show and I will try to show further is that the presentation of news is by its

very nature selective. These and other mechanisms may contribute to reinforcing an image of a positive self and a negative other, which research finds is widespread in media reporting on ethnic relations.

While these are only a few examples, the reason why I am here today is to present the results of a systematic review of the existing research done on racism and cultural diversity in the mass media in the EU Member States. This study was carried out on commission of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna, and was published by the Centre in 2002 (Ter Wal, 2002; available on-line at [www.eumc.eu.int](http://www.eumc.eu.int) > Publications > Media Report). The book consists of reports from fifteen experts in the Member States who have reviewed the existing research published between 1995 and 2000; this includes results from extensive quantitative content analyses of press and TV news coverage, qualitative discourse analyses, and case studies of different media using different methodologies. The experts followed a checklist of questions to describe the results of media research in their countries, this checklist allowed to make a comparison of the results across the different nations. I was responsible for the coordination of this group, for defining the approach and checklist, doing the comparison and conclusions and writing the report for Italy. In the coming thirty minutes I will present the main results of this international comparison, focusing on overall trends. I can only give a limited number of examples of course, and I can only talk about the research that has been done, therefore one must take into account that the specific picture (for specific media, countries, groups) is more diverse than I can sketch in this summary.

## 2. THE STUDY

The study is centred upon three main questions. **First**, how do existing studies report on the way in which general media practices and the organisation of the media in the different MS affect reporting on ethnic issues? **Second**, what are the available findings about the representation of ethnic and cultural diversity in the media, and the reproduction of and opposition against racism through the media? And **third**, what actions have been launched in the different member States to promote cultural diversity and combat racism in the media (examples of positive action, and recommendations resulting from this report).

In the following I will focus on news-making mechanisms, issues of portrayal and the treatment of racism. I will conclude by giving some positive examples and recommendations.

### **3. NEWS MAKING MECHANISMS**

To some extent media reinforce negative images and stereotypes without knowing, or having the intention to do so, simply by routines of news gathering or reporting or other implicit professional values. Insights from earlier American and British research – about functioning of media organisations, news gathering and presentation mechanisms – were used in this report to organise and contextualize the main research results about media contents. I will now mention some of the four most important features of news contents related to news-making mechanisms: source use, choice of news genre/lack of background reporting, emphasis on negativity, and the relation between media and politics.

#### **3.1 SOURCE USE**

The report finds that in many instances migrants were not quoted or less frequently quoted in the news. Even in coverage about issues that concern them directly, we then see a discussion about migrants, but not with them, the title of this meeting refers to this. This means that migrants were less frequently approached by journalists. Instead, others, such as experts, help organisations or majority officials, were often asked to speak on their behalf. This happened for example in the coverage about the ‘head scarf issue’ in France and Denmark in the 1990s. Research also found that when migrants were quoted, this was often in less prominent positions in the news (e.g. not front page, not headline, not the first actor in the talk-show to speak i.e. not setting the agenda for discussion). In other words, less importance was attributed to them, when the position of migrants was heard. Not only were minorities’ voices given lesser prominence, they were also attributed lesser credibility. Minorities were often quoted selectively in combination with negative themes, or quoted in stereotypical roles, for example in defensive or aggressive positions.

Another common phenomenon is that a limited number of representatives are interviewed over and over again. In this way, it can happen that the diversity of opinions within the community is not heard. Or when journalists do register different ‘voices’ sometimes this has been done to stress division and conflict within the community rather than to show a normal diversity of opinions similar to that within the majority group.

Moreover, it is found that migrants do not participate as news actors in all genres and in news on all possible themes. Silencing led to the impression that ethnic minority populations were passive

and acted upon by key actors in majority society (e.g. as the object of policy making). An exception was found in the British press in the period around the 1996 national elections: here long established ethnic minorities were found to have considerable space also in positive news contexts.

### **3.2 LACK OF BACKGROUND REPORTING**

Events and political opinions are favoured. Background reporting is scarce. As a consequence, less attention is paid to everyday common aspects of migrants' lives, and there is a lack of analyses into the causes and circumstances of e.g. their living conditions. For example, in describing the often difficult housing conditions of migrants, it is not investigated (enough) why migrants live in such conditions, who is responsible for this (this is part of the mechanism of negative other and positive self-presentation mentioned earlier). Instead, many details are provided about how negative and deplorable these conditions are, and reports may even suggest a link between these living conditions and the 'nature' of the group involved. More attribution to individuals (e.g. reports about the nuisance produced by 'concentrations' of migrants in a station hall) than to circumstances (e.g. why do migrants meet in stations, because they have not other places to meet, etc.) affects reasoning on the problems facing migrant communities. It may lead to 'blaming the victim' strategies, e.g. suggesting migrants live in poor conditions because they choose to do so. On the other hand, also when background reporting is done, this sometimes favours stereotypical reasoning, e.g. in documentaries on countries of origin that emphasise cultural difference, or backwardness (e.g. illiteracy) or the exotic character of indigenous populations.

### **3.3 EMPHASIS ON NEGATIVITY**

In coverage about migrants and ethnic relations, themes related to emergency situations, conflicts, crises, problems etc. have higher news value. However, themes that are negative in migrants' lives such as discrimination do not receive the same attention. The news value of negativity (i.e. "news 'sells' when it is negative") is used selectively (or combined with the perspective "news 'sells' when it reports situations affecting the majority group). The focus on emergencies makes that there is no constant media attention, it is determined mostly by political agendas and extraordinary events (conflicts, protests, violence, etc.), esp. in countries of more

recent immigration. Migrants tend to be under-represented in general news genres but over-represented in negative news genres such as crime news. Although we do see reports in which anti-immigrant positions are criticised or contended, in almost all MS migrants were more frequently portrayed as criminals, people tried in criminal court, or culprits and less often as defendants and victims of crimes.

### **3.4 RELATION MEDIA-POLITICS**

The existing studies register a strong interaction between political and media agendas. So much so that for example changes in the position towards migrant groups taken by the media are influenced by political agendas. It thus happened that for example in Spanish press coverage of immigration, Austrian press coverage on Rumanian refugees, and Italian press coverage on arrivals from Albania, positions towards these groups shifted from humanitarianism and commiseration, initially, towards fear and suspicion combined with negative stereotypes, when these groups were rejected officially. By highlighting negative public or official attitudes, by building so-called ‘moral panics’, e.g. about the arrival or presence of asylum seekers, restrictive measures or the refusal of such a group could be justified. The strong influence of politicians also implied, in some countries, such as Denmark, that the views of leading politicians, about the host country as assumed-to-be mono-cultural and the need to preserve this culture, are given relevance in the media. Similarly, definitions of racism favoured by the authorities tend to have higher credibility. For example, officials (e.g. the police) may tend to minimise or deny racism (in case of incidents of racial harassment) or reduce racism to the extreme right and racial violence only.

## **4. PORTRAYAL**

What do these mechanisms imply in terms of the image and portrayal of migrants, ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, that is dominant in the media in Europe? Here we can look at thematic distributions, firstly, and the stereotypical beliefs expressed about and the characteristics attributed to these groups in the predominant reasoning found in the media coverage on these groups, secondly.

#### **4.1 Themes and issues associated with migrants**

As already mentioned, negative themes of crime and abuse are commonplace. Immigrant groups tend to be associated with particular forms of crime and/or occupations in the media, for example in the Italian media reports about Nigerian women always have to do with prostitution. Over the years this became so systematic, also for other groups and occupations, that it leads to the ethnicisation or racialisation of crime and the creation of ethnic hierarchies, which are based on generalisations and the essentialisation of differences. Roma and Sinti are the lowest in these ethnic hierarchies in most countries.

The report on Germany also noticed a difference in press reporting about crime among the majority population, on the one hand, and among minorities, on the other. In the latter, there was more dramatisation and sensationalism, the descriptions of culprits were more negative, they were more often associated with organised crime or with abuse of welfare system, or forms of illegal entry by ‘deception’ such as arranged marriages. Instead motives of crime and other details were not mentioned for suspect of foreign origin. In the Danish media it was found that crime among migrant youth was treated as a generalised phenomenon, the focus was on group identity and not on the individual and personal characteristics. Causes for the existence of crime or violence among minority youth were seldom investigated. The Danish example also showed that negative events became more newsworthy when suspects had a different ethnic or social-cultural background.

In coverage on the arrival of new migrants or asylum seekers, media across Europe tended to use metaphors (of armies or floods of refugees) which represent them as a faceless, uncountable mass. These images contribute to the construction of ‘threat scenarios’ and the justification of solutions to ‘keep them out’. It (re)produces the belief and perception of migrants as threatening (a mass) and reasoning about immigrants in terms of numbers and ‘tolerance thresholds’.

#### **4.2 Stereotypes and argumentation**

Typical of the subtle racism found in media discourse is the use of rational arguments to justify the rejection of migrant groups. They tend to be depicted as a threat to the cultural norms and values of the majority population (using arguments of ‘cultural incompatibility’), to its national identity or to the life sphere (argument of ‘too many’ immigrants), or to the resources of the majority group (argument of competition over resources, such as employment, but also symbolic

resources such as political attention). This rationalisation of anti-immigrant positions, which is widespread, is influenced by official actors, who tend to emphasise possibly 'objective' reasons, rather than the undesirability of the group, to motivate their policies: security problems or economic imperatives are often mentioned.

We see that throughout Europe some groups are systematically portrayed more negatively than others. Muslims, Roma, and asylum seekers are the most negatively portrayed. What is observed in particular in terms of gender, is a double discrimination through stereotypical portrayal of e.g. Muslim women.

Migrants and minorities in general tend to be associated in particular with illegality and being a victim (e.g. Muslim women portrayed as a victim of their own culture in Swedish press), or problems in general. Moreover, problems of migrants tend to be described from the perspective of majority group: 'they' are creating problems to 'us'. The 'us-them' reasoning is very widespread. In addition, the role of language is very important, for example in categorisation and labelling of migrants, which may underline the exclusionary character of labels, and the boundary marking of identities that is involved. However, here we also find positive examples, for example in France the label of 'clandestins' for illegal immigrants was replaced by the more neutral 'sans papiers'.

On the other hand, the Netherlands and the UK press tended to present asylum issues only in relation to stereotypical themes such as 'bogus' refugees, fraud with asylum regulations, and reducing numbers. Indeed, whereas in the UK long established minorities have become more visible in the media, and are given more voice, more recent groups such as asylum seekers still meet with hostile media treatment. The Swedish press likewise highlighted technical concerns of police in reports about deportation of illegal migrants. Interviews with deportees had a commiserating/humanitarian tone, but such a tone was absent in reports to migrants staying in Sweden.

## **5. TREATMENT OF (ANTI-)RACISM BY MEDIA**

Firstly, a positive tendency in the 1990s compared to the preceding period was that themes of violence by extreme right-wing and neo-Nazis and in sports (soccer hooligans) was covered more meticulously and continuously, with more backgrounds on measures to ban the violence,



than before. However, everyday or institutional racism were not thematised and seldom recognised as such in the mainstream media.

In German media at the beginning of the 1990s, a minimisation of extreme right-wing racial violence was followed by a dramatisation, whereby media played an important role in mobilising counter- (anti-racist) demonstrations, but only for extreme cases. At the same time however, the German media gave salience to the asylum issue. Heightened media coverage on the asylum issue did not increase violence per se, but did produce a shift in choice of targets of violence by these groups (violence was strong before as well). Another study found that support for the extreme right party in Germany could be attributed mostly to a failure to report (a lack of attention) about immigration issues by the mainstream media (at a moment when the issue was de-politicised). Overall, the findings about the effects of media coverage on support for racist parties are contradictory.

Also in Sweden, (anti-) racism was reported upon only as extreme right violence and demonstrations against this, instead banal racism was not recognised as such. Moreover, in the coverage of a case of racist looting and harassment, the Swedish press attributed blame to the victims of these attacks. The perpetrators were described as placed outside the main body of society, thus avoiding to link up such more extreme forms of hostility with other forms of everyday and subtle racism, which however may also generate and silently support the extreme forms. The Swedish report refers to research indicating that with increased negative coverage in recent years the support for restrictive measures against migrants has increased as well.

Not only in Sweden, but also in other countries, such as Italy, the racist nature of incidents has been questioned in the media, by presenting attacks as an 'accident', more specifically by quoting the authorities. And how do media treat anti-immigrant opinions from among the majority population, i.e. forms of more common hostility? In Italian media these were sometimes quoted with distance by using inverted commas, and cynicism, however overt criticism or questioning such positions was rarely found in the Italian mainstream media in the early 1990s. In Southern European countries in general, more attention has been paid to incidents of everyday racist harassment but the treatment of such events has focused on attitudes of pity, alarm, and sometimes paternalism, an approach that is based on emphasising difference rather than reducing it.

To close on a positive note, the French report noted that media attention to the discrimination theme had increased in recent years (second half 1990s) as a result of specific government programmes in this area. This again stresses the importance of political agendas for media orientations. At the same time, it was found that support for the extreme right Front National in the early 1990s had increased not so much because of the media coverage about this party (media's denouncement of Le Pen's anti-Semitism instead decreased support), but rather as a result of the issues raised by the mainstream media about immigration, and the 'head scarf affair' in France. Again however, findings on such influences cannot lead to generalisations since they need to be contextualised and in different contexts opposite findings can be presented. The historical background, the political agenda and political culture, the media landscape and the way in and extent to which anti-racist norms are influencing public debate, also play an important role here.

## **6. POSITIVE EXAMPLES**

The conclusions of this report are that, despite the findings listed until now, minorities tend to be better integrated in the media than in the past. In most media and countries, multi-cultural society is now presented in a more varied and realistic way than in the past. There are of course differences for different types of media and countries. Television programming, special programming and fiction in particular, give more visibility to minorities, and there are also newspapers (or sections within the newspaper) that show awareness and critical sense in reporting about multicultural issues. Positive examples are more easily found in European states with post-colonial minorities and those with a special policy and institutions promoting racial equality. In the more recent countries of immigration, such as Italy, research finds patterns of press reporting similar to those that were found in the UK in the 1970s and early 1980s. This does not mean that the countries with more positive examples are entirely free from unfair portrayal; for example in the UK the proportion of minority journalists, editors and programme makers is still very low.

Across Europe, the crucial question thus remains: how to improve the representation and participation of minorities in the media? There are many positive examples of non-governmental and lobby organisations that are promoting access to media and organising training for minority and majority journalists. These initiatives also support a dialogue between minorities their

organisations on the one hand and the media and journalists on the other. A recent survey by On-Line More Colour in the Media, a European network of NGOs working in this area, shows the importance of training for minority organisations in contacts with the media ([www.eumc.eu.int](http://www.eumc.eu.int) > Equal Voices > Issue April 2002).

Besides, guidelines and codes of ethics have been formulated in most EU Member States, both by NGOs and media professionals (journalists' trade unions are actively involved). Such guidelines are an important tool to raise/increase awareness among journalists, but they only have value as recommendations in most countries, no legal value. In Belgium and Luxembourg, codes and constitutional articles have been applied by official bodies to prosecute those using racist language or inciting to racial hatred, e.g. on radio. Such applications are mainly working against extreme forms and not the more subtle ones. Also, it is not enough to have codes of practice in order to influence the daily practices and beliefs of media editors and owners.

Some examples of elements from guidelines formulated by NGOs. From Belgium: "in reporting on extreme right parties emphasise that these parties are not normal, democratic parties like the other parties"; "avoid us-them polarisations"; "avoid unnecessary dramatisation, present minorities also in normal situations"; "give backgrounds in reporting on the far rights and racism: not just who and what but also why and how"; "attention to headlines, pictures: avoid news illustrated by images that do not correspond to the facts being explained". From Spain: "avoid reference to the ethnic origin, religious identity etc. of the people concerned as long as this is not essential for understanding the news, since ethnic identity of people does not determine their behaviour". "When reporting news on ethnic minorities try to give sufficient elements to facilitate understanding in a more general wider context".

## **7. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

To conclude, a selection of some of the more general recommendations mentioned in this report, which reflect the problems/points I have presented here today (for a full discussion see the publication on the EUMC web-site):

- give migrants more visibility, more voice, better access to media as source and as participant in media production esp. in mainstream media and routine reporting, in all news genres (not spec. in news about ethnic minorities)

- more space for background reporting and investigation
- introduce more positive frames, instead of problem frames
- check official sources more thoroughly
- involve migrant perspective also in productions not spec. dealing with minorities or multicultural issues, but all social issues
- support training and empowerment initiatives
- improve representation through hiring and training of minority journalists producers etc.
- improve information exchange between migrant organisations and media, support networks, make organisations more visible and accessible for media as sources, train them in communication with media to improve
- adapt curricula in schools of journalism to multicultural society
- diversity training for managers in the media
- programming in better time slots, avoid segregation of migrant and minority groups in special programming, integrate minorities also in general programming and provide active participation of minorities in the programme
- convince journalists with audience considerations, minority and migrant population are or will be in the future a consistent part of the media's users and audiences.

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