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## **Where others fear to tread: the role of journalists in the creation and spreading of negative stereotypes about Roma people**

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the representation of ethnic minorities in the media, focusing mainly on the role of the journalist. It approaches news stories through the prism of the media construction of reality and the cultural concept of representation. Using critical discourse analysis, the study describes the nature of the social reality constructed by the TV news series “Where Others Fear to Tread.” The paper reflects the general attributes of the representation of the Roma minority in the news, pointing out methods and signs used for emphasizing the stereotypes shared by the majority. The analysis shows that the media discourse of news stories could potentially confirm prejudices towards the Roma minority, forming the image of Roma people as essentially maladjusted, dangerous and suspicious individuals.

**Key words:** discourse analysis, framing, media construction of reality, Roma people

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### **Introduction**

According to Homoláč (Homoláč, 2009), the relations of the Czech majority with the Roma people is probably the most debated part of interethnic relations in the country. The Center for Public Opinion Research (CPOR) annually prepares a survey titled “The Roma people and coexistence with them through the eyes of the Czech public.” Recent research demonstrated that the coexistence of the Roma and non-Roma population in the Czech Republic was identified as poor by the vast majority of the society (83 per cent) (CPOR, 2015). Compared to the highest figure of 87 per cent from 2013, which was a year that was characterized by public unrest against Roma people, the evaluation of their cohabitation has improved only slightly. Studies also highlight that public perceptions of minorities (not just ethnic), are highly affected by the mass media. It has also been observed that the media are the main sources of knowl-

edge about ethnic minorities (van Dijk, 2000). As media analyses have concluded, a stereotypical portrayal of Roma people is widespread in the Czech Republic (Sedláková, 2007).

In 2014, the primetime news session of the private channel TV Prima broadcast a series of news stories named “Where Others Fear to Tread.” The series was unique, since it focused on the socially excluded Roma localities in the Czech Republic. My aim is to analyze the representation of Roma people in the TV news series “Where Others Fear to Tread.”

The theoretical background of the study lies in media constructions of reality (Schulz, 2000; Tuchman, 1987), the cultural concept of representation (Hall, 2003), theories of stereotyping, semiotics and ideology (van Dijk, 1998; Thompson 1990).

A newscast is generally perceived as actual, authentic, reliable and objective in describing the most important events. But an event and the media coverage of the event are not identical. A newscast is an integral part of the cultural environment it comes from. According to Hartley (Hartley, 1982), it is a social institution with a highly ethnocentric nature, oriented on elites and focused on negative events. Its function is to ensure the continuity of society, the formation of public consensus and a common identity. The structure and the manner of the representation of reality in news reports reinforce the social order: who is important, what is normatively correct from the social system’s point of view, and what behavior represents a violation of social norms. The media presentation of the news contributes to the formation, distribution, strengthening and reestablishing of norms.

The media tend to represent certain topics or individuals in a stable way. Together with information, they present other ideas, attitudes or values to their recipients. The ideologies presented are usually held by the dominant social group in a given society. As van Dijk notes, ideologies are one of the sources of reproduction of ethnic and racial inequality, which in turn contributes to the discrimination of minorities (van Dijk, 1998).

The more often a certain representation is repeated, the more a fixed meaning is created and the more credible it is for the receiver. Repetitive representations are viewed as conventional by the receivers, while a different representation might be assessed as unconventional. Even though people decode news through their personal attitudes and individually, they also tend to take the constructed and repetitive representations into account, include them in their interpretations, and subsequently behave on their basis. These representations often change into stereotypes. Ac-

ording to Hall (Hall, 2003), stereotyping is a form of social control and the (re)production of dominant norms, of the presentation of the system and authority that prevail in a given society.

In his seminal work, van Dijk discusses the patterns of media representation of ethnic minorities as one of the social factors which maintain discrimination and racism in societies (van Dijk, 2000). Teun van Dijk (ibid.) has identified several elements of the image of ethnic minorities in the contemporary media. First and foremost, the ethnic minorities are minorities also in the media, and the news about them is often limited. Most of that news is directly associated with problems and difficulties for the majority, or about the threat to dominant values and interests (e.g., illegal immigration, social problems, deviant behavior, violence, crime). Even news about potentially neutral topics, such as housing and employment, tend to also operate with negative connotations. Little attention is paid to the issues of discrimination and racism, and they are very often limited to individual incidents, or credited to extremists. According to van Dijk (ibid.), the positive presentation of 'us' (majority) and negative presentation of 'them' (minority) is a general strategy that is prevalent in the majority of dominant discourse. The stereotypical tendencies are comprehended as a new racism by van Dijk. This new racism differs from the 'old one' in the sense that it avoids explicitly racist labeling, using different, special words for the description of properties and activities of minorities that the receivers can decode according to the commonly shared code (Veselková, 2013).

Empirical analyses of European countries, including the Czech Republic resonate highly with the observations of van Dijk (Erjavec, 2000; Sedláková, 2007; Homoláč et al., 2003; Homoláč, 1998). It is safe to say that media coverage contributes to the fairly one-sided and stereotyped image of the Roma minority. A characteristic feature of information about Roma people is the use of generalizations and viewing them as a homogenous group. The ethnic background of the people involved is mentioned even in cases where ethnicity has no direct connection to the nature of the story itself (Homoláč, 2003; Sedláková, 2007).

## **Methodology**

The main goal of the analysis was to find an answer to the following question concerning the TV new series "Where others fear to tread:" *What social reality is constructed in the reports?* To answer this main

research question we also determined specific research questions, based on the research mentioned above: (1) How are Roma people presented in the series? (2) How are the reports thematically framed? As methodological tools, I opted for critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993, 2000) and frame analysis (Entman, 1991, 1993).

## Findings

The series “Where Others Fear to Tread” consists of news reports that brought information about socially excluded localities. The common denominator of the reports was its reporter Bohumil Roub, who always visited the chosen location to cover the local situation, or to focus on some topic associated with the place.

The series was broadcast during 2014, and in total 107 programs were broadcast. The subject of this analysis covers half of them, and so 54 reports which were broadcast in the first six months of 2014. The analyzed reports were broadcast irregularly in the given period, with the highest frequency between April and June 2014.

### *Who are the inhabitants of socially excluded locations?*

The representation of socially excluded areas was carried out mainly by representation of their inhabitants. The analysis identifies that the inhabitants of socially excluded locations were labeled by the interchangeable terms such as “maladjusted”, “asocial”, “socially vulnerable,” “troubled”, “cheat” and “Roma”. Countless examples of the free substitution of these terms, even in the same program have been recognized. (e.g. “Two hundred so-called maladjusted people moved into a village of 600 inhabitants. ... It is not possible to live with gypsies,”<sup>1</sup> “According to estimates, almost half of the two thousand five hundred inhabitants in Obrnice belong to the Roma ethnicity. More and more other socially vulnerable people moved here because of the cheap housing”<sup>2</sup>).

The free substitution of the above mentioned terms can be seen as a common practice of the so-called new racism, according to van Dijk. The connection of “maladjusted”, “asocial”, “cheat” or “socially vulner-

<sup>1</sup> Prima, April 11, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Prima, May 2, 2014.

able” on the level of denotation does not say anything about ethnicity. The term “maladjusted” or “asocial” in Czech language, however, implicitly attributes some fault to the person marked for his/her social situation, moreover, it makes this fault essential. The phrase “socially vulnerable people” points to individuals or groups who have problems succeeding in the job market and whose economic situation is worse in comparison to economically active individuals. In the Czech media these phrases have been settled as politically correct terms for Roma people. In situations where reporters cannot, or do not want to refer to the ethnicity of Roma individuals, they use these phrases. The terms “maladjusted” or “socially vulnerable people” have thus become mere forms. The concepts which fill these forms refer to the so-called “nature of all Roma people”: they are seen as weak not (only) economically, which is the reason why they receive or misuse social benefits and live off taxpayers’ money, but also socially. Socially weak individuals live on the edge of this society because of their different characteristics and values to the majority of people, and they do not want to “adapt” to this majority (cf. Veselková, 2013).

There are some consequences of this. Certain Roma individuals are labeled with the attributes “maladjusted”, “socially weak” or “troubled”, and thereby acquire specific negative characteristics. As a result of the labeling, these attributes were applied to the Roma ethnic group in general. A lot of unsubstantiated generalizations and homogenization of the whole group take place. This group is viewed *a priori* negatively. Their assumed characteristics and actions, which were generalized, could be described as clearly negative, stigmatizing, and arousing fear.

*Framing of the reports*

As Table 1 summarizes, three key frames that have been identified. These are the frame of fear and danger, the frame of problems with housing and the frame of problems with inhabitants.

Table 1

**Framing of the reports**

Frame	Total reports	Constructed social reality as ...
1	2	3
Fear and danger	100	Roma people as a <b>danger to society</b>
	43	

1	2	3
Problems with housing	41	Roma people as <b>victims</b>
	26	Roma people as <b>debtors</b> Roma people as <b>receivers / misusers</b> of social benefits
Problems with inhabitants	67	Roma people as <b>criminals</b>
	56	Roma people as <b>individuals living in disorder</b> Roma people as people with <b>deviant behavior</b>

*Frame: fear and danger*

The frame of fear and danger was found in all the reports. The frame was already present in the name of the series, and even in the intro to all of the reports.<sup>3</sup> This intro is the most significant feature of the whole series.<sup>4</sup> Its visual presentation consisted of stylized shot of a devastated house with silhouettes of people in its foreground. At its end there appeared the title “Where Others Fear to Tread.” The soundtrack of the intro featured dramatic instrumental music.

Who should be afraid of whom or what? Two interpretations are observed. The first is communicated by the reporter of the series, who mentions that the title refers to the fact that Prima is “the first TV channel which has decided to do such a long project,” because the other media “are afraid of this topic.” He obviously alludes to the fact that the topic is highly controversial, and therefore the media are afraid to cover it because of the possible accusation of, for example, racism. Another interpretation of the title suggests that the fear is triggered by the socially excluded areas themselves, or by their inhabitants, and these are labeled as Roma people. The latter meaning is the most likely, considering solely the visual arrangement of the intro.

The ruined house, grim lighting, and dark silhouettes of people with hidden faces give the impression of depersonalization and nervousness. Here, if we merge both interpretations, it could imply the meaning that only the reporters of TV Prima are brave enough to enter such dangerous

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the intro element before a report is not usual in news programs. Using a unified intro before a report series indicates the intention of its creators to demarcate the reports and particularly emphasize them compared to other messages in the program.

<sup>4</sup> Two reports were not preceded by the intro, but we included them in the analysis because of their thematic similarity.

places and provide information on what the public would rather not talk about.

The frame of fear was presented not only in the name or the intro, but even in 43 per cent of the content in the reports. The analysis clearly showed that it was the producers who constructed the theme of fear. These reports constructed a social reality where Roma people were represented as a danger to society.

### *Frame: problems with housing*

The first group was the reports that presented the issue of socially excluded locations as problems with housing; the second group was the reports which presented it as problems with the inhabitants of these places. Very often the frames were used almost exclusively, but several reports included both of the frames. The frame “problems with housing” was identified in 41 per cent of all reports. However, it was only presented as the main frame in 26 per cent of all reports.

The reports which were framed as problems with housing focused mainly on the issue of overpriced and substandard social housing. In these reports the Roma people often appeared as victims of circumstances, of owners of social housing and of a poorly set up social system, while their difficult life situation or problems with unemployment was primarily thematized. It also used features evoking compassion. In some cases, the topic was conceived as a wider social problem requiring a structural solution, not as a manifestation of essentially negative characteristics of the socially excluded inhabitants.

The problem of Roma people regarding rent payment was also thematized in connection with this frame. However, the linking of socially excluded locations with inability to pay rent properly is one of the most frequent media representations of socially excluded areas. This representation, though, has the potential to strengthen the stereotype that every member of socially excluded locations is in debt. The term “defaulter”, then, as a result can contain the reason and justification of why these people live in those areas.

Another topic often included in reports about “problems with housing” was the topic of receiving or misusing high social benefits. In such news stories Roma people were repeatedly presented as inhabitants who do not give much to society but rather take from it. The reason for such

a representation was mostly the aforementioned mechanism of generalization (e.g. “People living in social housing have to pay high rent from social benefits... and yet after payday they take a taxi and go shopping”<sup>5</sup>). It should be noted that the topic of payment/receiving of social benefits emerged throughout all news stories. This topic was most often emphasized through the statements of representatives of the “ordinary majority of society” who criticized the payments of social benefits (e.g. “I don’t know how it is possible, but they receive those social benefits ... I’m glad that I receive at least child benefits”<sup>6</sup>). However, neither the moderators nor the editor avoided the explicit evaluation (e.g. “...unemployed Roma people were supposedly violating the public order because all they did was receive social benefits and bother the other inhabitants of Rotava”<sup>7</sup>).

In the category of “problems with housing,” several reports which informed about positive cases of the cohabitation of the majority social group with the “maladjusted” inhabitants have emerged. As an example of such coverage from Vysoké Mýto, reporters informed that “socially weak and hopelessly indebted people live [here] in dignified or normal conditions.”<sup>8</sup> The reason for this was the systematic dealing with the situation of Roma people in which “Roma people, who owed on services and rents, were allowed by the city to pay their debts according to payment schedule.”<sup>9</sup> The effect of this solution was described by an employee of a housing company as follows: “We do not see it as an excluded location. Here, with respect to the, let’s say, majority we do not record any problems or increased criminality.” At the end of the report, the editor assessed the situation by saying that “cohabitation with Roma people works here.” Furthermore, the last sentence of the reporter about functional cohabitation with Roma people again implies that Roma people are problematic.

A topic which is worth mentioning and to which not too much attention within this type of report was paid, even though in connection to the frame of “problems with housing” it could have been expected, is the topic of help given to inhabitants of socially excluded locations, especially in connection with the behavior of social housing owners. The topic of help was mentioned in all news stories. However, it was rather in news stories which were framed as “problems with inhabitants.” An example of this is

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<sup>5</sup> Prima, April 12, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Prima, April 24, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Prima, June 18, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Prima, April 16, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Prima, April 16, 2014.



the direct addressing of the audience by the editor at the end of one of the reports (“Do you have a problem with maladjusted inhabitants, too? Are you afraid in your own house, or apartment? Feel free to call or write”<sup>10</sup>), which was addressed to people who have problems with “maladjusted” inhabitants.

*Frame: problems with inhabitants*

It should be noted that this frame occurred more often in the analyzed period. The analyses identified this frame in 67 per cent of all reports. In more than half, it was the main frame (56 per cent). Roma people were presented as persons who negatively influence the life of other (non-Roma) inhabitants. Those reports included signs of homogenization, stigmatization, and the construction of collective fault, but also a legitimization of repression or further exclusion. Either explicitly or implicitly the collectivity constructed here was not characterized only by its social conditions (“socially excluded”) but also by its ethnicity (Roma people). Those practices correspond to the theses of van Dijk (van Dijk, 1993) about the role which media can play when creating and reproducing ethnic stereotypes.

The dominant topic of this frame was, on one side, the topic of the criminality of Roma people, and on the other side the topic of the devastation, disorder and poor hygiene of those areas. The topic of criminality was constructed through danger and fear. However, reports exclusively dealt with the fear of inhabitants neighboring the excluded locations. Statements emphasizing the fear factor emerged in news stories either explicitly (e.g. “There is an atmosphere of fear here because of one supposedly problematic family”<sup>11</sup>), or implicitly (e.g. “Some places in Ostrava are really problematic and dangerous. Local people do not even go there...”<sup>12</sup>). Of course, it can be argued that given news stories only describe the situation. However, the name of the series “Where Others Fear to Tread” is a signal that linking the social housing issue and social exclusion with danger to “socially non-excluded” inhabitants is visibly highlighted, while the construction of danger is one of the typical signs of media discourse about people in arrears with their rent, which is potentially prejudicial by its nature (Radostný, Růžička, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Prima, April 11, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Prima, March 30, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Prima, April 9, 2014.

Fear was present even in the aforementioned appeal with which the editor at the end of one report addressed the audience (“Do you have problem with maladjusted inhabitants, too? Are you afraid in your own house or apartment? Feel free to call or write. Maybe next time we will be filming with you”<sup>13</sup>). The statement not only accents the topic of fear, but in the given report it reaffirms on which side the authors of the report are, and also defines the subject which the television program addresses.

The analysis has unequivocally shown that fear was created by the authors of the report themselves. An example of this is the TV news from 12 April 2014. The reporter claims: “In the social housing in Předvoj, which was built in the 1950s as accommodation for miners, an estimated amount of around 400 Roma people live. *The locals are afraid to pass by this place even during the day.*” This, therefore, leads to the identification of Roma ethnicity, as the statement is in one sentence connected to supposed fear of locals, so the presence of Roma people itself is supposed to create the reason for fear. The fear is furthermore presented as relatively strong (they are afraid to pass by this place “even during the day”). Then the comment of a local passerby follows: “Well, there are a lot of strange people.” The reporter reacts: “*So are you afraid?*” And the respondent answers: “Sometimes I am. Mainly in the evening, when it gets dark.” The respondent therefore does not speak about fear of her own volition; the reporter had to ask her explicitly about it. Furthermore, the answer from the woman to his question was that she is afraid mainly “in the evening” and not “during the day.”

The danger of given areas, eventually of the individuals living there, was escalated even on the level of language, by using phrases like “tenant of a House of Horror,”<sup>14</sup> “ghost village,”<sup>15</sup> “dangerous areas,”<sup>16</sup> and “Budišov nad Budišovkou lives in fear.”<sup>17</sup>

The topic of criminality itself was then the cause of the fact that Roma people were repeatedly presented in news stories as the perpetrators of offences, which supported the topic of fear (e.g. “Local people were bothered by never-ending conflicts with Roma people, both verbal and physical attacks, thefts”<sup>18</sup>). The stereotype of Roma people as criminals could

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<sup>13</sup> Prima, April 11, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Prima, May 9, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Prima, April 15, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Prima, April 9, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Prima, June 6, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Prima, June 18, 2014.

have been strengthened as a result by raising the topics of criminality, danger and fear in news stories. A lot of research has shown that it is the topic of criminality in connection to which the Roma people are presented in Czech media most often (Sedláková, 2007).

Apart from the topic of criminality, the next important topic of news stories in the category of problems with inhabitants was the topic drawing attention to the devastated environment of socially excluded areas or social housing.

The space to describe the condition of areas (e.g. social housing) was given primarily to local inhabitants not living in those areas, and thus representatives of the majority, eventually to politicians (most often to the mayors of municipalities). The desperate housing conditions, then, were not presented as a result of social exclusion, but as a result of the nature of its inhabitants (Roma people) which includes “not to care about and not appreciate my accommodation” (e.g. “The gypsies, of course, took down the roof, as they take down everything, they burned it, and this is the way they left it and nobody cares”<sup>19</sup>). The terrible condition of the social housing was often connected with statements like “the inhabitants of the social housing *plunder* the facility themselves,”<sup>20</sup> “Well, they spent their free time by *demolishing the equipment of the social housing*, or they went into the city and came back with bags full of *stolen things*,”<sup>21</sup> hereby again strengthening the stereotype of Roma people as criminals.

### **Polarization of groups ‘us’ and ‘them’**

These cases clearly demonstrate the negative representation of Roma people. A significant instrument which was used in reports to construct the image of socially excluded people, and thus the image of Roma people, and in turn Roma ethnicity, was the polarization of the groups ‘us’ (the majority) and ‘them’ (Roma people). Reports from the category “problems with inhabitants” were repeatedly constructed on the principle of the negativity of the group ‘them’, or eventually the negative effects which the group ‘them’ has on the group ‘us’, was highlighted. The group ‘them’ (Roma people) was presented as dysfunctional and prone to pathological behavior and lifestyle, which is beyond socially applicable norms.

<sup>19</sup> Prima, April 15, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Prima, April 12, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Prima, April 30, 2014.

This enabled the majority of situations to be presented through a prism of the conflict of “local inhabitants” (locals, representatives of the majority) and “maladjusted” (Roma people), while the reports often took over the perspective of the first group (e.g. “The town hall of Obrnice in North Bohemia actively defends itself against problematic newcomers”<sup>22</sup>).

The stereotype about all Roma people as individuals living on the edge of society was strengthened by constructing the reports through polarization, negativism, altogether with generalization and homogenization of the whole ethnic group, and it was due to the fact that they have attributes and values different from the majority of individuals and they do not want to adapt to them. That is the reason why they do not work, do not want to work, prefer to receive or misuse social benefits and live off taxpayers' money.

### Conclusion

The subject of this paper was the representation of Roma people in the TV news series “Where Others Fear to Tread.” The main aim of the analysis was to answer the question “What social reality was constructed in the news stories?” It should be noted that this paper is focused on those social realities which reflect the relationship of the majority of society to Roma people. It is without doubt that the list of social realities which have been described here cannot be considered complete.

The analysis has shown that the series contributed to the strengthening of stereotypes primarily by presenting the inhabitants of socially excluded locations as a homogenized group of people of Roma ethnicity, which was presented as essentially ‘different’ and unequivocally distinct from the ethnicity of other inhabitants (and so ‘us’, the audience which the television addresses). At the same time the group was, by various mechanisms and argumentative processes, attributed negative qualities, and eventually collective fault for potential offences committed.

The issue of socially excluded areas was mostly presented as a “problem with inhabitants”, or a conflict between inhabitants of socially excluded areas, maladjusted people, Roma people and local people, the representatives of the majority. Within those news stories, Roma people were represented in connection to criminality, danger or poor housing. The dis-

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<sup>22</sup> Prima, May 2, 2014.

course of media then contributed to the creation of the social reality of Roma people as criminals, people dangerous to society, people displaying deviant behavior, or as individuals living in disorder. The media discourse of the series, therefore, contributed to the extension of the stereotypical representation of Roma people, and at the same time contributed to the reproduction of power relations and ethnic inequalities in society.

It is necessary to think about the role of the journalists, who are to a certain degree responsible for the media content which they disseminate. Journalists have a stable idea about what the receiver of a message will be interested in. This subsequently manifests itself in both the selection and processing of information. It cannot be unequivocally said that the producers of the news informed about the Roma people stereotypically on purpose, because they are part of the ideological discourse of the majority, which is hard to overcome. However, on the level of individual news stories it was possible to see certain manipulative procedures when processing the reports. The information in the news was given to the audience in a way which led to interpretations resulting in a simplified and negative view of people living in socially excluded locations, and thus of people of Roma ethnicity.

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