RACISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE MASS MEDIA

An overview of research and examples of good practice in the EU Member States, 1995-2000

on behalf of the

European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, Vienna (EUMC)

by
European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations (ERCOMER)

Edited by Jessika ter Wal

Vienna, February 2002

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PREFACE

The research interest in analysing the way mass media report on ethnic issues has increased in the Member States over the last decades. And for this reason the EUMC decided to bring together the major research reports and their findings over the last five years in this report "RACISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE MASS MEDIA - an overview of research and examples of good practice in the EU Member States, 1995-2000".

The project has been carried out by Dr Jessika ter Wal, at Ercomer, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to her for her excellent work. The report underlines the importance of media research in the area of racism and diversity.

The mass media, and especially the news media, have an unequivocal position in society when it comes to establishing and disseminating common cultural references. The mass media have an influence on people's attitudes as well as our common knowledge, but not always in the expected and desired ways.

The active democratic role of the mass media in society can be influenced by a number of factors. The way the mass media represent, focus and give voice to different actors and incidents in society could have the unintentional result of strengthening a racist discourse instead of fighting against it. Mass media reporting is especially sensitive when it comes to ethnic, cultural and religious relations in our society.

The mass media organisations in the Member States take different initiatives to promote cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, such as developing codes of conduct, recruiting broadcasters from the migrant and minority communities and training the personnel from multiethnic societies.

The report has already attracted a lot of interest from researchers, from journalists as well as from media organisations. I hope that the report will be of practical use to all those interested in the fight against racism and especially those working in the media.

Beate Winkler

Director of the EUMC

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4.1 BELGIUM (BE)

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4.1.1 INTRODUCTION

The specific structure of the Belgian State implies research on racism and cultural diversity in the media on different policy levels. Since media and equal opportunities are competencies of the linguistic-cultural communities in Belgium (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking or German-speaking), reports tend to concentrate on the situation in one of those regions. The Dutch-speaking region of Flanders seems to generate the major part of empirical data on this issue. Much of the Flemish research projects on racism and cultural diversity in the media are inspired by the strong presence and electoral success of the *Vlaams Blok*, a right-wing populist party in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. A surge of research about racism and media followed, the electoral breakthrough of the Vlaams Blok in 1991. In more recent years a smaller number of research has been conducted on this issue, although racism and cultural diversity remain major topics in a few research institutions.

The other linguistic-cultural communities do not have significant racist parties and therefore the topic of racism seems less researched, certainly when it comes to the role of the media. French-speaking scholars, mainly from the *Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve*, often discuss journalistic deontology, including legal issues and the question of how the media should deal with far-right parties (Strowel and Tulkens, 1998; Lits, 1995; Dumont, Mandoux, Strowel and Tulkens, 2000). But empirical data are rare and most research in the French-speaking community consequently falls out of the scope of this project.

Justice - and therefore the laws on racism - is still a federal issue resulting in some national publications, often co-ordinated by national institutions such as the King *Baudouin Foundation*, the f*ederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism and the Association of Belgian Professional Journalists.*

4.1.2 REPRESENTATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE MEDIA

Recent empirical data on how ethnic minorities, or topics related to racism and cultural diversity, are presented in the media were only found for the Flemish Community. We will report about two major projects carried out at Ghent University. The first project (1993-1996) focused on how certain topics are reported in the media, and resulted in recommendations for a journalistic code of practice. The second project, which started in 1998 and continues up through 2000, deals with the people who appear in the news.

4.1.2.1 MULTICULTURALISM IN FLEMISH MEDIA

A large-scale research project (starting in 1993) on multiculturalism in Flemish media was carried out for the *Association of Belgian Professional Journalists*, and funded by the King Baudouin Foundation and the *Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism*. This study has led to several publications: d'Haenens and Saeys (1996a, 1996b, 1998); d'Haenens (1996); d'Haenens and Soens (1996); and Staes (1996). The aim was to find out how multiculturalism and related topics were normally reported in Flemish news media, both in 'routine reporting' and 'crisis reporting'.
'Routine' news was selected if certain keywords were present in the article/item:

- keywords referring to people: immigrants, asylum seeker, refugee, ethnic minority,...;
- keywords referring to themes: racism, anti-racism, discrimination, integration, multiculturalism, xenophobia,...;
- mention of nationality, country of origin, religion, ethnicity, culture or 'race' when connected to one of the aforementioned people or themes.

This method generated 187 'routine' newspaper articles in one week (15-23 May 1993, i.e. in a period in which no special event related the topic occurred). The articles came from the national Flemish newspapers, both the popular and quality press, conservative and progressive (*Het Laatste Nieuws, De Nieuwe Gazet, De*

Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, De Morgen, Financieel-Economische Tijd, Het Belang van Limburg, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Volk).

The main results, generated by a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, were (Staes, 1996; d'Haenens and Saeys, 1996b):

- Themes: one third of the selected articles were about crime; one in four about politics (often asylum policy). Ethnic minorities were often linked to negative themes and rarely portrayed in a more 'positive' light. Associating ethnic minorities with negative issues such as crime might create, or indeed strengthen, the view that the presence of ethnic minorities causes problems.
- People: most common terms used to define persons who are part of an ethnic minority were 'migrant', 'stranger' or 'refugee'; 'race', ethnicity and religion were seldom mentioned, in contrast to nationality or country of origin which were often identified even if this had no relevance to the story. Ethnic minorities were often referred to as one homogenic group. This makes it easier to create the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy that Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) have found in their study, discussed further on in this report.
- Several examples were found in which the actors were connected to very negative terms (e.g. the headline 'Chileans and especially Romanians: great specialists in pickpocketing'), but explicit racist messages were not found. This is again confirmed by Blommaert and Verschueren (1998).
- No noticeable differences between the newspapers were reported.

Analysis of 'routine' television news (77 news items from both the public broadcaster VRT and the private broadcaster VTM, in the week between 6 and 12 December 1993) led to the following conclusions (d'Haenens, 1996; d'Haenens and Saeys, 1996b):

- many items were about politics and crime, confirming the results from the newspaper analysis.

- there were noticeable differences between the public and private Flemish broadcasters. The public broadcaster devoted more time to persons belonging to an ethnic minority, focused more often on the theme of multiculturalism, and portrayed ethnic minorities more frequently as victims.

A racial attack in Solingen, Germany (May 1993), was chosen as the ideal subject to analyse crisis reporting in the Flemish national newspapers, using the same newspaper sample as mentioned above (92 articles found, same newspapers as before) (Staes, 1996; d'Haenens and Saeys, 1996b). The researchers found that:

- the violent protests following this attack received much attention and although many German anti-racists were involved in these protests, the focus was almost entirely on Turkish protesters.
- background articles on the Turkish community in Germany were often very positive; articles about the Turkish (violent) protesters were negative.

Regarding crisis reporting produced by television news, researchers examined the May 1991 riots in Vorst (Brussels) involving ethnic minorities, 22 items in total. The results were (d'Haenens, 1996; d'Haenens and Saeys, 1996b):

- non-natives were seldom interviewed, and were usually shown in groups during the riots and the arrests, while Belgians (e.g. the police) were often shown individually.
- natives where often presented as positive or neutral, non-natives as neutral or negative.

The results of this study led to six recommendations for journalists about how to deal with these issues (d'Haenens and Saeys, 1996a, 1996b):

1. Only mention nationality, country of origin, ethnicity, 'race', religion or culture when relevant;

2. Avoid irresponsible generalisations and polarisation ('us' against 'them');
3. Avoid unnecessary dramatisation: ethnic minorities should also be represented in 'normal' situations;
4. Be meticulous in reporting about ethnic minorities;
5. Give background about the far-right and racism: not just who and what, but also why and how;
6. The story is not finished when it's written; also pay attention to pictures, headlines, etcetera.

In 1995, a smaller, explorative study was carried out to see if these recommendations had been followed. It showed that although some individual reporters seemed to respect the guidelines, no overall, substantial improvement could be recorded. Similar, smaller projects suggested the same. A larger study to establish the effect of the recommendations will most likely take place at Ghent University in the near future.

In 1999, other guidelines for journalists were published. The NGO *Extreem Rechts, Nee Bedankt* (Extreme Right, No Thanks), which is a network for nearly 300 organisations, published directions about how to report on the far Right. The most important recommendation was to emphasise that far Right parties are not normal, democratic, parties like the other political parties. The Aanbevelingen voor de berichtgeving over extreem-rechts (Recommendations for reporting on the extreme Right) (1999) contain many concrete suggestions:

- always indicate that views expressed by far Right parties or officials are extreme- right;
- analyse the programme of extreme-right parties in a very critical way;
- pay attention to sources who are critical towards the far Right;
- be vigilant when handed data by far Right parties, check their facts and figures;
- report on convictions of extreme right-wing politicians, i.e. when they are convicted for criminal offences;
- do not publish extreme Right(ist) comments sent in by readers;

- avoid making the extreme Right one of the headlines in the news;
- avoid using pictures of extreme right-wing politicians.

4.1.2.2 THE MEDIAWATCH PROJECT

In an ongoing project, the Department of Communication Sciences (Ghent University) monitors the representation of ethnic minorities in the (Flemish) news media through a longitudinal research called MediaWatch. It uses a content analysis developed by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in order to measure women's representations in the news (newspapers, radio and television)[7]. Ghent University has adapted and expanded this model to include ethnic minorities, disabled persons and the elderly. All items in the selected radio and television news broadcasts were coded; for the newspaper sample, only the most important articles (i.e. those on the front page) were coded. After an experimental phase, this design was used in 1998 and 2000 to gather data on gender, age, and ethnicity of people in the news. The data is now being processed and full results are expected some time soon. Preliminary results, however, show a marginal presence of ethnic minorities as people in the (Dutch-speaking) news, see Table 1. These results are based on the coding of a sample of 12 television newscasts from both the public broadcasting company VRT and the private channel VTM, which generated a total of 689 coded persons (coding categories were based on appearance). It is striking that Turks and Moroccans, who represent two main groups of non-EU immigrants in Belgium[8], appear only in 1.5 and 1.7 per cent of the national and local news items respectively.

7 A worldwide analysis was used for the UN's Women Conference in Beijing in 1995.
8 In Flandres, the latest census of 1991 showed that there were 42,681 Turks and 42,728 Moroccans on a population of about 6 million Flemish.

Table 1. Representation of ethnic minorities in Belgian television news in 1998

Type of news	International	National	Local
White	79.0	95.1	96.7
'Black'	10.7	2.3	0.8
Turkish or Moroccan		1.5	1.7
Other ('Asians', etc.)		1.2	

Source: Mediawatch preliminary findings

- Operationalising the notion about ethnicity is a difficult issue in any case, but in a content analysis of television news, one only has the picture of the person (or the subtitles, when available) to determine his or hers ethnicity. Ethnicity is therefore closely linked to 'race',which is, in this analysis, an important determinant of the person's ethnicity. However, in many cases ethnicity was explicitly mentioned making the coding of this variable somewhat easier.
- In the *MediaWatch* programme, variables concerning ethnic minorities are used on two different levels: that of the story and the person. On the story level, the question is asked whether ethnicity is the central focus in the story (or one of many other themes). The researcher then classifies the news story according to its central themes (see appendix II). As stated earlier, full results are not yet available but will be available some time soon. It is furthermore the intention of Ghent University to keep monitoring the representation of ethnic minorities (and other groups) in the news.

4.1.2.3 CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

Another ongoing research project studies how children perceive audio-visual material about ethnic minorities and multiculturalism. The influence of watching photographs, an animated movie, an information film, a juvenile film and a documentary on children's perceptions of ethnic minorities and the multicultural society is being undertaken by Els Schelfhout of the Free University of Brussels who is currently finishing her doctoral thesis on this sub-

ject. Schelfhout also aims to develop a media-educational method that may contribute to inter-ethnical relations among children.

4.1.3 MEDIA DISCOURSE ANALYSIS - 'DEBATING DIVERSITY'

Another aspect of media content that has been documented, besides the representation of ethnic minorities, is the discourse on racism and cultural diversity spread by the media. Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) have analysed this discourse and reported some interesting conclusions. Their study does not focus on the media per se but on the discourse produced by government institutions, politicians and social scientists and the discourse of official government publications, political documents, research reports and the mass media.

Blommaert and Verschueren started their analysis in the late 1980s. Data gathering peaked in 1992-1993 and continues today. Most of the data reproduced by the media comes from seven newspapers, three weekly magazines as well as public radio and television broadcasts - all mainstream sources and all Flemish. Extremist publications were ignored. The authors follow a linguistic-pragmatic analysis, which is based on the notion that all forms of communication are accompanied by more or less hidden meaning systems that help to determine the interpretation of what is said. This analysis typically revealed certain word choices and strategies (e.g. the use of 'demonstration' as opposed to 'riot'), constructions of implicit information, global meaning and interaction patterns.

Regarding word choice, the term most often used to classify ethnic minorities is 'migrant' which usually refers to people's geographical origin, mostly Turks and Moroccans. The discourse refers to the category of 'asylum seekers' as another large segment of ethnic minorities. Both political and economic refugees are labelled this way. Meanwhile, no clear definitions of any of these terms are given in the media.

Blommaert and Verschueren's work gives examples of explicit or implicit, positive or negative statements about ethnic minorities. Implicit positive and explicit negative statements are rare in main-

stream Belgian media. Explicit positive statements do occur, mainly in official sources where 'migrants' are often represented as bringing economic benefits or enriching 'our' culture. The bulk of statements about ethnic minorities are implicitly negative, however. One example is a newspaper article entitled: 'Older migrants don't cause trouble'. At first glance this seems like a positive message, but the article itself focuses on the contrast between the 'older'migrants referred to in the title and young migrant groups, called 'gangs'.

It is interesting how the term 'racism' is constructed in political discourse, where it refers to 'those expressions of xenophobia, which go hand in hand with extreme, fascist points of view' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998: 72). In discourse, 'racism' is constructed as 'hostility towards ethnic minorities', whereas 'xenophobia' is seen as 'aversion towards ethnic minorities'. One disturbing conclusion is that 'xenophobia' in political discourse is often seen as 'rather normal' which leads to the normalisation of anti-foreigner feelings. 'Racism' is seen as very negative, although even racism can be seen as normal if the number of foreigners should exceed a certain 'threshold of tolerance'. In other words, xenophobia is not presented as a very negative feeling, and even racism can be acceptable if the number of foreigners is high enough. This discourse clearly sees cultural diversity as essentially problematic.

This is further proven by analysis on the discourse about homogeneity (the monocultural society). Discourse analysis on this issue shows that a uniform and homogenous society is presented as an ideal, which is still talked about in the mainstream media. Even well intentioned official documents by anti-racist organisations reveal a similar discourse. The example given by the authors is that of a flier distributed by an anti-racist organisation, which starts with the sentence: 'No one can deny that the presence of migrants in our country created problems' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998:163). This is a striking example of how diversity is immediately seen as abnormal, not only in mainstream media but even in anti-racist publications.

The conclusion is that 'the Belgian migrant debate is essentially based on a distancing and confrontational view of "us" versus the "other", captured in (often implicit) terms of "normality" versus "abnormality"' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998: 21).

4.1.4 ACTIONS TO COMBAT RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE MEDIA

4.1.4.1 LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

The notion of non-discrimination is present in every media law that binds Belgian media, whether it is on a European, Belgian, or regional level:

- The Belgian anti-racism law of 30 July 1981 (modified on 12 April 1994) forbids the media to participate or to incite forms of racial discrimination or xenophobia.[9]
- Flemish regulation states that broadcasting corporations (or advertisers) cannot incite to hatred on the basis of 'race', ethnicity, sex, religion, or nationality. Similar provisions are made in Decrees on broadcasting and advertising by the French Community.
- Last, but by no means least, Belgian television channels are bound by the European Directive *Television without Frontiers* that also contains provisions about racial discrimination.

Although the anti-racism law dates back to 1981, it is only in recent years that the law is enforced. One of the main reasons for a more pro-active anti-racist policy was a change in the Belgian Constitution (7 May 1999) making racist or xenophobic messages easier to prosecute. Since then, many lawsuits have been filed against alleged racist messages, persons and institutions, most of which are still working their way through the courts. The first case tried under the new legislation was against a Vlaams Blok official

9 A good review of this law can be found in Voorhoof (1995)

who, following a complaint by the *Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism*, was convicted for spreading racist messages on the Internet (Voorhoof, 2000). The most notable case, however, is that of a lawsuit filed in October 2000 by the aforementioned anti-racism Centre and by the Flemish NGO *Liga voor de Mensenrechten* (Human Rights League). In this case, different organisations affiliated with the Vlaams Blok are being sued for spreading discriminatory messages and inciting hatred against ethnic minorities. A conviction could have serious consequences for the Vlaams Blok. Like every other political party, the Government funds it. A conviction may lead to the end of public funding for the party.

4.1.4.2 AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

In its 1999 annual report, the *Interdepartmental Commission for Ethnic-Cultural Minorities* (ICEM) of the Flemish Community reported about an affirmative action plan drawn up by the Flemish public broadcaster VRT. This action plan focuses on two main subjects: increasing recruitment and establishing a balanced representation of ethnic minorities. The first goal should be obtained by screening the VRT's recruitment procedures to detect possible discriminatory thresholds and by advertising vacancies via minorities' interest groups or networks. Although ethnicity is not registered in the personnel database, the number of minority employees at VRT is estimated at 30 out of a total of over 2,000 employees. The public broadcaster hopes to obtain the second goal - of representation - by creating a database of professionals and experts from minority groups as a ready reference tool for journalists and programme makers. This should increase the visibility of ethnic minorities in VRT programmes.

A workshop meeting concerning this plan, called **Meer kleur in de media** (More colour in the media), showed that few young people from minorities choose courses that prepare them for a career in the media. Also, the explicit mention that the VRT encourages minority groups to apply for a vacancy, appears to have little effect (ICEM, 2000). However, the public broadcasting service of the French-speaking community, RTBF, has no concrete plans to

improve the neither recruitment nor representation of ethnic minorities, despite legal obligations to do so.

As far as government campaigns are concerned, there is only one that was recently conducted by the federal government and the Belgian Football Union. During the European Football Championships in June 2000, a small information film was aired on television portraying the Belgian national team (several players are members of ethnic minorities) and calling upon viewers to fight racism.

4.1.5 CONCLUSIONS

The research done on the topic of racism and cultural diversity in the media reveals some interesting facts. One large study showed, among other things, that ethnic issues are frequently related to the policy areas of justice, criminality and asylum. It has also been established that ethnic minorities are often portrayed as one homogeneous group (mostly called 'migrants'). Individual examples of bad practices in reporting about ethnic minorities have been found. Explicit negative statements about ethnic minorities are rare, however, at least as far as the mainstream media are concerned. Both d'Haenens and Saeys (1996b) and Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) have concluded that. Implicit negative statements, were more common and mainly led to an 'us' versus 'them' mindset. The research done by d'Haenens and Saeys (1996b) led to recommendations aimed at journalists concerning how they should deal with news stories concerning ethnic minorities. Whether these guidelines are followed remains to be seen, however. Other recommendations (from a local NGO) advise journalists about how they should handle reports about the far Right.

Two important research projects on media and minorities will soon be finished and present useful data on this issue. The MediaWatch project (Ghent University) will provide more details about the representation of ethnic minorities in the news (newspapers, radio and television) and the doctoral thesis of Els Schelfhout (Free University of Brussels) will give us an idea of how media material can influence children's images on multiculturalism.

Although several laws and decrees contain provisions about non-discrimination, active policies to strengthen cultural diversity are rare. So far, only the Flemish public broadcaster VRT has made an attempt in pursuing a recruitment policy in favour of ethnic minorities. However, this may be changing.

A very interesting development is provided by a recent change in the Belgian Constitution making racism in the media easier to prosecute. Early cases suggest a crackdown on racist messages, although the big test is the one against the Vlaams Blok, which could take years to conclude.

Racism and xenophobia, therefore, do exist in Belgian media, implicitly in mainstream media and explicitly (and prosecuted) in extreme right media. It is also clear, however, that more research is needed in order to get a more complete picture on the treatment of racism and immigration issues and the promotion of cultural diversity in the media.

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