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Media, Racism and Monitoring

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INTRODUCTION

Media monitoring requires media theory. Whether they do good or bad, we need to know how, why, and with what consequences the media do so. This is especially true for the role of the media in the reproduction or the challenge of racism worldwide, especially in Europe and North America. We need to know how exactly news or advertising, talk shows, or other programs are involved in the increasingly ethnocentric if not racist societies of the Northwest.

The informal remarks presented here about media monitoring should be understood in this scholarly and academic framework, namely, that of increasing racism and the need to study news text and talk and their cognitive and sociopolitical contexts, in a systematic and explicit way. Monitoring presupposes insight into possible functions and effects of the mass media, phenomena that are notoriously difficult to study. In my earlier work on news (e.g., van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b), I emphasized that before we are able to study such societal functions and effects, we need to know much more about the core property of media messages, namely, that they are forms of discourse.

In other earlier work, especially with Walter Kintsch (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), we examined the details of the cognitive processes involved in understanding and memorizing media texts, that is, one crucial condition of any possible effects. More than 10 years later, we know much more about such processes of text comprehension, and these will also be brought to bear both in media research as well as in practical monitoring.

Furthermore, monitoring takes place and makes sense only in the context of serious social problems such as racism. This not only requires insight into media discourse structures and processing, but especially warrants focus on the social problem itself. That is, one cannot study racism or antiracism of the media without knowing anything about racism in the first place, hence my earlier work about the relations between discourse and racism in general (van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1993) and between the press and racism in particular (van Dijk, 1991, 1997).

One of the main findings of more of a decade of research on discourse and racism was that the "elites" play a special role in the (re)production of racism (van Dijk 1993). They control access to most valuable social resources, including the symbolic research of public discourse in general and that of the media in particular. This means, first, that they make most crucial decisions (beginning those on immigration and employment) that affect the lives of immigrants and minorities. Second, they regulate access to the news, including the portrayal of minorities. If such portrayals are negative, this is not merely a passive reflection of widespread prejudices of the population at large, but the result of explicit discursive practices of the media elites, usually in collusion with the political, corporate, and social elites.

Within these complex theoretical frameworks it was also found that specific text structures, for example, those of news, are systematically related to the structures of so-called "mental models" readers or viewers construct of events in general and of "ethnic" events in particular. It is in this way that the "bias" of a text is translated (very indirectly) into a possible mental bias of the public at large. Because these "preferred" individual models are again the basis of socially shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, we now know more or less how discourse actually affects social beliefs of a group, including prejudices and racist ideologies. The latter are the basis of the actions of groups and their members, including acts of discrimination or biased discourse (e.g., in the media). Thus the theoretical circle is closed, and we now have an instrument to study how racism is (re)produced by the media. More importantly, for this chapter, we have a theoretical basis for monitoring the media, especially in the field of fundamental social problems such as racism and sexism.

THE MEDIA

As may be expected from mainstream institutions, and as argued previously, the media are an inherent part of the problem of racism (of the large literature documenting this conclusion for different countries, see, e.g., Bonnafous, 1991; Campbell, 1995; Hartmann & Husband, 1974;

Research has repeatedly shown that the conservative and popular press especially (although not exclusively) indulges in sometimes blatant "foreigner bashing" and the reproduction and affirmation of racist prejudices. Popular resentment against refugees and other immigrants and minorities is thus both legitimated and at the same time exacerbated. Politicians in turn respond to the popular resentment they have helped create through the media in the first place by ever tougher legislation against immigration, first in Western Europe and then also in North America. Indeed, the recent civil war in Bosnia was an ethnic war that was partly initiated by media-enhanced Serbian nationalism, and the same is true for the role of the radio in the ethnic slaughter in Rwanda. As we can see, words do sometimes kill.

Even the more liberal and quality press does not systematically and critically oppose the rising tide of racism. On the contrary, they have taken part in the well-known elite denial of racism, especially also by ignoring their own role in the elite management of "race relations." In line with the prevalent no-nonsense policies that are leading to the gradual destruction of the welfare state, these race relations policies have also become harsher, and such policies are generally supported, or at least hardly criticized, by the elite press.

The forms this popular and elite press response to immigration and increasing multiculturalism has taken are among the following:

- Immigration is generally defined as a serious problem, as a threat or an invasion, and never as a welcome contribution to ethnic and cultural diversity, the economy, and the demography of Western Europe.
- Refugees and other new immigrants are increasingly defined, also in the press, as impostors, scroungers, or otherwise represented as negative, and increasing limitations of their rights are welcomed or hardly criticized.
- Similarly, in all societal domains, the presence of new immigrants or resident minorities continues to be portrayed in similarly negative terms, that is, as a problem (for us) if not as a threat to the nation.
- In the news, negative other presentation combined with self-serving positive self-presentation is as routine as in other

types of elite discourse. Thus, crime reporting still associates minorities (and especially young minority males) with specific forms of "ethnic" crime, such as aggression, mugging, rioting, theft, prostitution, and especially drugs.

- In the same perspective, prevalent everyday racism is ignored or denied and seldom defined as our problem. Only racist violence and aggression (as were the skinhead attacks on minorities in Germany) or blatant forms of discrimination are criticized. Everyday discrimination in many domains of society is hardly newsworthy.
- The prevailing discrimination by employers, which is among the main causes of high minority employment, is seldom critically analyzed. Programs of affirmative action, if any, are generally rejected both by employers and politicians, as well as by the media and other elite institutions and are often presented as "unfair competition" or as "favoring foreigners"; they may exacerbate popular resentment—again, a form of resentment they have helped define and create in the first place. Once in place, as was the case in the United States, measures of equal opportunity may be discredited and gradually undermined or abolished with popular slogans against "quota."
- Topics that are especially relevant for minorities are virtually excluded, so that the top five topics associated with minorities is in fact a standard list of stereotypes rather than an account of the multiple newsworthy events, domains, and actions in which minorities are involved.
- Minority organizations, leaders, and spokespersons have less access to the media than their "White" mainstream counterparts, even in news that directly concerns them and about which they may be seen as experts. They are less quoted, and less credibly quoted, than mainstream news actors and organizations.
- The increasing number of competent minority journalists face systematic forms of discrimination in hiring—if they are hired at all—and in promotion. Virtually no European newspaper has minority editors or minorities in prominent positions.
- Journalists generally resent even voluntary codes for adequate reporting on "race" and see such codes as a limitation of the freedom of the press.
- There is as yet very little special training for young journalists in the balanced coverage of multi cultural society.

In sum, the role of the media in the increasingly multicultural and multiethnic societies of Europe and North-America is crucial. Whereas many, if not most, native citizens in most countries have little or no daily interaction with immigrants, information about immigration as well as about ethnic groups, events, and relations is largely based on information from the mass media (or from informal everyday conversations that are in turn based on information from the media).

Research in several countries thus concludes that although in general the major media, and especially television and the quality press, are not explicitly and blatantly racist, few media play a positive role in the active promotion of a just and peaceful multicultural society. Minority journalists are as discriminated against as workers in any other social domain. Reporting is not seldom stereotypical and rather exclusively focuses on negative events and situations (financial troubles, illegal immigration, crime, drugs, cultural deviance, etc.) associated with, if not explicitly blamed, on ethnic minorities, immigrants, or refugees. On the contrary, similarly detailed negative and critical accounts of everyday discrimination and racism by members of the majority, and especially among the elites, are lacking. News gathering, story assignment, topics, quotation, and style are thus systematically stacked against the others. It is not surprising, in light of this incontrovertible scholarly evidence, that—exacerbated by social and economic problems—widespread resentment against immigrants and minorities are stimulated and confirmed by such media practices.

MONITORING

Therefore, as is the case for all domains, sectors, and institutions of all countries where Europeans are dominant, it is imperative that such media practices be monitored on a regular basis and various measures be taken to improve them within the overall goal of shaping a viable, humane, and peaceful multicultural Europe and North America.

Given the essential freedom of the press, such an aim can obviously only be realized if journalists themselves identify with such multicultural aims and become both personally and institutionally involved in the creation of truly multicultural media. However, other institutions and organizations also need to cooperate in such an endeavor. Thus, universities or professional schools are involved in the education of journalists as well as in research on the coverage of ethnic affairs in the media. Politicians are still the main source of the news, and their biased representation of the "social problems" of immigration may similarly influence the compliant media. Yet, the main responsibility lies with the

media themselves, and a media monitoring project can be successful and effective only when it is able to persuade journalists to change their practices.

By "media monitoring" we understand here a series of observational, analytical, evaluative, and critical activities by independent (non-media) organizations focusing on the practices and the products of mass media and media workers. Such a critical evaluation of media performance presupposes a set of criteria and values and aims at an improvement of media practices and products in light of fairly generally accepted social, cultural, and political conceptions about the role of the media in society.

Hence, media monitoring is not a form of control, let alone a limitation of the freedom of the press. Its aim is not to impose or advocate prohibitions, but to persuade media workers to adopt or enact recognized professional standards of quality, balance, fairness and social responsibility. In the context described earlier of growing intolerance, xenophobia, and racism in Europe and North America, such standards have become especially important if the media are to play a positive role in the development of egalitarian multicultural societies in which the human rights of immigrants and minorities are respected.

Media monitoring should be carried out by people or groups who understand media practices, products, and organization, or who are specialized in a relevant dimension of media performance or its role in society. That is, media monitoring may variously focus on the following aspects of the media:

- schooling of journalists and other media workers
- hiring and promotion of media workers, also from minority groups
- training on the job
- the general "management of diversity" in the media organization
- the development and evaluation of nonracist and multicultural policies
- new and refresher courses on multicultural reporting
- relations with other organizations and institutions, for example, those of politics
- relations with minority organizations and their leaders
- news-gathering routines (the "bear")
- the use of, or interaction with, sources
- the use of press releases or other documents
- participation in press conferences
- interviews of news sources and guests at programs

- news, editorials, and background articles
- interaction with readers
- the various products (texts and programs) of media workers: news, articles, documentaries, film, advertisements, shows, and so on.

Despite this variety of dimensions of the media involved in media monitoring, many of the monitoring activities focus on the evaluation of the actual "products" of the media: news and background articles in the press and various programs on television. However, if critical analysis of such products concludes that such products are not up to standards, several other dimensions of the organization of media institutions may be considered, namely, as a mode of explanation or in view of recommending improvements. Thus, unbalanced or biased topic choice in reporting about ethnic affairs may be attributed to inadequate education, uncritical use of sources, the absence of a code or policy for such reporting, failing editorial control, and/or a lack of minority reporters or editors in the newsroom.

Critical analysis and evaluation is merely one side of media monitoring. Even more important are the establishment of good relationships with the media; the constructive and persuasive formulation of alternatives and improvements involving management, editors, as well as reporters and other, media workers; and in general all activities that aim at an effective improvement of media performance according to the criteria set by generally accepted and respected social and media values. At this point, strategies need to be worked out, and links with other organizations may need to be made (e.g., with universities who educate journalists, with organizations of journalists, with organizations of minorities, or with NGOs [non-governmental organizations] who monitor the media). Further activities may include documentation, training and lectures, and in some (usually extreme) cases litigation.

Thorough expert and responsible media monitoring is a very difficult and time-consuming job. The range of media products and activities, summarized earlier is very large and the complexity of their analysis and evaluation tremendous. For each country (or each language) a large institution would be needed to carry out such monitoring reliably and responsibly. Within each country the number and frequency of the various media is beyond any form of daily monitoring. At the moment, financial restrictions of most member states are such that, even if sufficient political goodwill and academic expertise were there, such institutions are not likely to be founded in the near future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Several countries now have institutions that engage in some form of media monitoring. In Europe the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in Brussels has taken the initiative to set up a commission of experts for the monitoring of ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia in the media (IMRAX) and awards an annual prize to journalists who have distinguished themselves by outstanding multicultural practices in reporting or program making. The EU Commission has taken the initiative to set up a European Observatory against Racism, which will also be involved in media monitoring.

Despite these positive developments, most work remains to be done. Funds are necessary to set up media monitoring organizations. Fortunately, electronic publishing of most newspapers increasingly allows more automated collection of data, in which traditional methods were extremely time-consuming and hence boring and expensive. Many more media scholars should get involved in the study of the role of the media in multicultural societies and especially focus on the ways the media contribute to racism or its challenge. To wit, in order to be able to carry out most elements of the monitoring program sketched here, we need thorough theoretical and empirical research about the relations between media discourse, social cognition, and society.

In sum, journalists are slowly becoming aware of the need to provide balanced portrayal of ethnic minorities and of the multicultural society, without the need to be afraid of imposed codes. Now, as scholars we also need to get (more) involved and provide the theoretical basis of professional education as well as for the practice of media monitoring.

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