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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Even though the media wants to mirror, should mirror and mirror the social reality they work within, the media reality is always a virtual reality created by their own recreation and interpretation.

(Birgir Guðmundsson, 2007a, p. 11, our translation)

Media plays an important and special role in society – they convey the reality and at the same time influence it. Sociological and ethical responsibilities among journalists have gained increased attention in the past decades. Societies have become more multicultural and conflicts have arisen because of different values, cultures and religions. According to the International Federation of Journalists (2007) fulfilling the goal of the media, that is, reflecting the opinions of all and providing the raw material of information for societies with many languages, religions and cultures – has never been more difficult, or dangerous. Even though the media is more aware of their crucial role in the public representation of unequal social relations, they all too often produce shocking examples of xenophobic reporting and racist portrayal (Cottle, 2000). In this article we will reflect on the role of the media in portraying migrants, seen from the perspective of migrants, more specifically Poles in Iceland.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether a better understanding of Icelandic and a subsequent better understanding of the Icelandic mass media among Polish immigrants in Iceland correlates with their perception of discrimination in the media. The hypothesis that there can be a correlation between the perception of discrimination and other factors, such as language skills, the length of stay in Iceland and the frequency of using the Icelandic media, came from an interview, where one of us asked a young Polish woman working in a kindergarten, whether she had experienced any discrimination. She answered:

Not directly, not me. But... you know what, I just started to feel worse here, when I understood more. You know, when I started to read newspapers. I'm not saying I read all of them and that I'm perfectly able to do that, but I understand the main point of the article, right? And sometimes it's just too much; I would sometimes rather not read them at all. Because I think that what is really not good, is that they write all these bad things.

New Iceland - new reality

From the middle of the 20th century to the mid-1990s, the proportion of foreign nationals in Iceland remained under 2% of the population. Over the past decade, their proportion has tripled and was, in December 2006, approximately 6% of the population, and in 2008 rose to 7,4% (Hagstofa Íslands, 2009). Even for the rapid increase of migrants the Icelandic government didn't approve an integration policy

until 2007. At that time it was estimated that about 10% of the workforce were foreign nationals (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). The policy is based on the general ideas of multiculturalism. It involves recommendations about how to encourage immigrants to be active participants in Icelandic society but limited about the strategies for participation (Eva Heiða Önnudóttir, 2009). Interestingly, according to Eva Heiða Önnudóttir (2009), even though the policy values integration, a definition of what is meant with integration is not included. But integration as a concept has been understood in different and contested ways (see e.g. Loftsdóttir, 2009). The national language is an important element of national identity (see e.g. Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2004) and media has a vital role in constructing the shared ideas and values of the society. Special emphasis is to protect the Icelandic language and knowledge of the language as the key to Icelandic society, and a deciding factor in the successful integration of immigrants (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). But integration involves more than learning the language – it involves their participation in the society, their self-image, their relation to their home country and relationship between the home country and the new one, plus legal rights in the new country (Eva Heiða Önnudóttir, 2009). A parliamentary resolution about immigration policies recommended in 2008 that the media should realistically represent immigrants as a part of society (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security, 2008). Whether the national media facilitates or delays integration depends on the chosen media policies and the contents of media. According to a research from 2005 (Hlöðversdóttir, 2005) TV executives in Iceland agreed that their reason for not having a policy, was due to the small population of migrants.

The same year as the integration policy was approved in Iceland it was stated in a report from ECRI, The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2007), that the private broadcast television was guilty of stereotypical remarks and negative discussion about immigrants. ECRI recommended that the Icelandic government should participate in a debate and discussion with the national media. Icelandic research has also confirmed that media discourse has created a stereotype of foreigners as threatening, usually Eastern European men, connected to organized crimes, rapes and fighting (Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, 2008). “News about foreigners can easily look like it’s only bad things that they do. It is because the nature of news is negative, or as a wise man said: Dogs that bark during the night are newsworthy, but not the silent ones,” wrote Jón Kaldal, the editor of *Fréttablaðið* (Jón Kaldal, 2007, p. 22). According to Jessica ter Wal (2003) the value of negativity is used selectively; themes that are negative in migrants' lives, such as discrimination or unemployment, do not receive the same attention as themes related to violence, conflicts and crises. This is especially relevant in countries of more recent immigration, where some groups are systematically portrayed more negatively than others, and problems of migrants tend to be described from the perspective of the majority group. And even though journalists state that they are just registering facts, their presentation of news is by its very nature selective (ter Wal, 2003).

Research on media and migration is scarce in Iceland. ECRI (2007) commented about the lack of research about discrimination and the status among minority groups in Iceland, including immigrants, in aforementioned report from 2007. The *Media Watch* has monitored media coverage about immigrants and according to the report from 2007, one third of the coverage in Iceland was in relation to crime and police matters (Creditinfo, 2007). It is not uncommon in most European countries that the discussions about immigrants are too often in regard to crimes and prejudice, which results in deprecation towards them. Consequently, immigrants avoid national media and seek instead news from transnational media (see e.g. Alghasi, 2009; Christiansen, 2004). According to the International Federation of Journalism (2007), some media even encourage prejudice and subjectivity rather than fight against it.

Methods

The research we have done was both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative study is a part of Małgorzata Zielńska's doctoral research project about adult education of Polish migrants in Iceland in the light of the critical pedagogy of place. The research was supervised by Prof. Maria Mendel (University of Gdansk) and Dr. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (University of Iceland).¹ The data collection took place in Reykjavík in the academic year 2009-2010. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews have been taken with 34 adult Poles who had been living in Iceland for at least 1 year. They had different educational backgrounds – almost 50% with higher education, others had less formal education.

The quantitative study is a part of Helga Ólafs' doctoral research project about immigrants' representation in the media. The data collection was done in 2008, a part of her MA thesis in Journalism and Communication², supervised by Prof. Thorbjörn Broddason and Rannveig Thorisdóttir, adjunct in Sociology. The survey was based on a convenience sample and conducted with migrants of Polish origin³ in various companies in Iceland with a remarkable amount of Polish workers. In addition, the survey was also carried forward through the internet by email lists and through the Polish consulate. In total, 649 Poles answered the questionnaire about their media usage and their perception of discrimination. The sample reflects age and duration of residence in Iceland. The questionnaire was translated into Polish.

Results

We should notice here that it was difficult for us to assess the real level of our respondents' language skills, so we need to trust their self-assessment. When it comes to foreign language skills – some Poles, usually the older ones, did not speak English before coming to Iceland, but Russian or German instead (English was introduced as the first foreign language in Polish schools only after the 1989). Poles who spoke English could more easily communicate after arrival, but sometimes had less motivation to learn Icelandic. Still, some people didn't speak Icelandic after many years of their stay in Iceland, while some others learned it rather quickly. The majority of Poles in the survey (roughly 70%) wanted to learn more Icelandic. The length of stay plays an important role in how Poles assess their language skills. Among those living in Iceland for three years or longer, more than 80% assessed their Icelandic language skills as good, compared to 15% living in Iceland for 2-3 years. However, people learned Icelandic in various ways and many have learned it at work - from their boss or colleagues. Therefore, they were sometimes good at communicating with others, but not able to read newspapers.

There is significant relation between newspaper reading and self-assessment in Icelandic. Among those who read them daily or almost daily, 64% assessed their Icelandic as good, 46% as reasonable and a third claimed they didn't know Icelandic. Even though their Icelandic was not always good, almost 70% of respondents

1 It was supported by Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway, with a grant received from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism, through the Scholarship and Training Fund.

2 It was supported by the Intercultural Centre and the Development Fund for Immigration.

3 Polish migrants were 11.000 or 45% of the population of migrants 2008. A migrant is defined as a foreign national who has settled long term in Iceland but is born overseas, or both of whose parents are born overseas or have held foreign citizenship at some time (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007).

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monitored newspapers, especially *Fréttablaðið*. Most often they read currency exchange rates, weather forecasts, advertisements, and skimmed through pictures and headlines. In the interviews some people explained that if they found the topic of an article interesting, they asked their Icelandic colleagues to tell them more about it, or checked the information online.

When we take into consideration the group who doesn't speak Icelandic at all and is not able to understand articles in this language, it seems logical that they would have less knowledge about the media and, therefore, they would not have access to the discourse about immigrants. However, most of the people we talked to were still able to follow the news in Iceland, either from the English or Polish language media, or from other people. About 60% had access to Polish satellite television and there was significant positive relationship between watching Polish TV and the length of stay in Iceland. Eight of every ten used Polish websites daily or almost daily, compared to about 20% who used Icelandic websites, while 96% had access to the Internet. Most of the respondents in interviews mentioned also that they were getting to know what was going on in Iceland also from other people, who were able to understand Icelandic. Therefore, even the people who were not able to follow the news themselves, could still know what was going on and could have an opinion about it. It is important to notice, however, that in such cases the information mediated through other people may not have been exact. Firstly, there may have been misunderstandings either in the way the mediator had read the information, or in the way it was mediated to the respondent. Secondly, Icelandic workmates may have silenced some information, if it was discriminatory or offending for the immigrant in their view.

Still, the people who told us they felt discriminated against by the media discourse, generally understood some Icelandic and were able to read newspapers. According to our data, the better Poles assessed their Icelandic skills, the more negative they thought the coverage was about Polish people in Icelandic media. Roughly 43% of those who assessed their Icelandic as good thought the discourse about Poles was negative and 23% thought it positive as can be seen in figure 1.

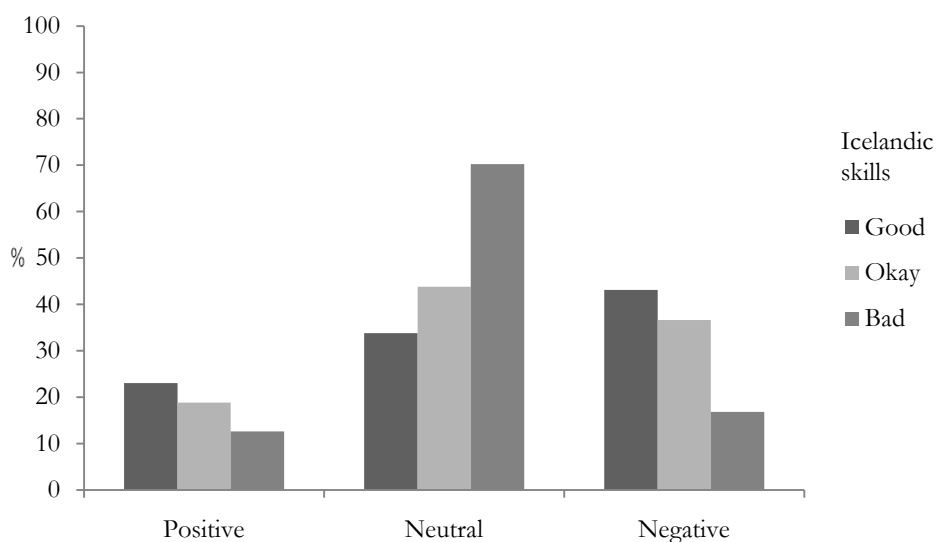


Figure 1. Opinion about the coverage about Poles in Icelandic media analyzed by the participants own assessment in Icelandic language

The number is higher when asked about the discourse about foreigners in general. Asked whether they agree or not with the statement that coverage about foreigners is often unfair nearly 56% agreed with the statement, about 28% are neutral and 16% didn't agree among those assessing their Icelandic good (it is interesting that Poles thought the discourse about other foreigners was worse than about themselves – we will come back to this issue) as can be seen in figure 2.

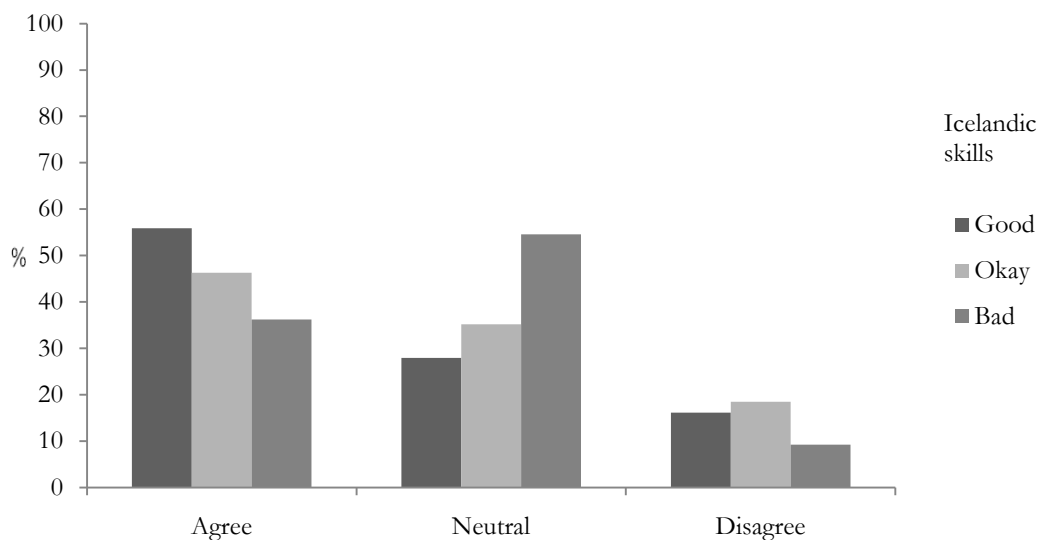


Figure 2. Opinion about the statement: Coverage about foreigners in Icelandic media is often unfair. Analyzed by the participants own assessment in Icelandic language

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Likewise, the better Poles assessed their Icelandic skills, the more often they said they had been discriminated because of their nationality (45% of those who said their Icelandic was good, compared to 37% of those who said it was bad).

The coverage and the image of migrants

The longer Poles lived in Iceland, the more negative opinion they had about the media discourse related to Poles. Roughly 30% of the people who had lived in Iceland for three years or more thought the discourse was negative, compared to a little less than 13% of those who had lived there for a year or less. The number was higher when asked if they agree with the statement that the coverage of foreigners is often unfair – roughly 43% living in Iceland for three years or more agreed with the statement, comparing to one third who had lived there for a year or less. In both these questions the correlation was significant.

In the interviews there was nobody who said that the image of Poles in the media was good. According to the survey, only 2,2% of respondents regarded the coverage about Poles as positive. When asked about the image of foreigners in Icelandic media, almost 40% agreed with the statement that it was often unfair; almost half were neutral and 11,5% disagreed. Sometimes, however, the people we talked to were either justifying the discourse or having strategies of coping with it. Often the respondents offered explanations of why the media discourse was bad:

Respondent (R): [about the recent change in the immigration policy]... a lot of people came at that time, various people, also criminals, one murderer came about 2 years ago and the whole police in Europe was looking for him. People started to steal...

Interviewer (I): But did it have an impact on how others were being treated?

R: I feel bad, for example. Because you get up in the morning, go to your mail box, you open a newspaper and you see something about Poles, you know, on the first page. Something about a murderer, or that they steal or somebody has raped somebody else... And of course it's Poles, very often it's Poles. When I came to work later, I felt very bad about it. Here Icelanders tell me – "Don't worry, it's not your fault. Icelanders do bad things too!". But still! There are so many of us here...

Many other people shared the view that opening the borders for everyone without having to show a clean criminal record started the negative discourse and, consequently, made life more difficult for them. One construction worker said:

When they opened the border, there was a big influx of Poles who... who had to come here, who were escaping Poland. And they started making a mess, robbing, stealing, etc. And here everything gets in the media – the TV, newspapers. And I noticed that people started to see us differently.

Some people were saying that their situation was still much better than the Lithuanians', who have an even worse portrayal in the media and because of that, they often can't find work.⁴ None of the Polish respondents pointed to having troubles with finding work because of the discourse, but only about their own feelings and the changing relations with Icelanders. Apart from people who were saying that the discourse was a natural response to the crime that had actually happened, others were blaming newspapers for showing a biased view of Poles and making the atmosphere worse. One person noted that Polanski had always been cited in the Icelandic media as a French director, until he started having problems with the law – and then he was

4 As a matter of fact, also Lithuanians feel especially badly shown in the media and they even formed an association to counter that.

suddenly Polish. One young woman was so bothered by the discriminatory articles that she called the newspaper and talked to a journalist who wrote one such article:

I just wanted to say what I think, just to feel better, (...) that I agree with some things, but I totally don't agree with other things. (...) I told him there were only bad things and he said „But how can I get to know about the good ones? You never talk to us.” You – that is – Poles, because his objections were directed to the nation, and I thought it was as if he wanted to stab us with a knife. It wasn't even connected to me personally, though actually it was, right? I was awfully annoyed by this article, but he was saying – „You don't call us. How can I know that you're doing something good? I'm not a clairvoyant.” And I told him: „It seems to me that up till now there are only bad things.” (...) And you know, I started to try to look at it from their perspective, how they all see it – the elderly, the youth, who only hear these things about us, then it all looks so different, right? (...) I think many young people have a negative attitude to us. To Poles, Lithuanians, it doesn't really matter, they put us all into one bag..

Both this woman and another one were showing the discourse in the media as being an effect of a lack of effort from the newspapers to show a more just image of immigrants. They were saying that it is not difficult to write about crimes, while it takes more effort to search for other information. The other woman, who had been living in Iceland for almost 20 years and used the Icelandic media all the time, said:

It's easy to criticize and talk about bad things. (...) But about other things, there are different questions: If it's not an Icelander, why should we talk about other nations? (...) they don't want to promote non-Icelanders, that's why they don't come to our events. They are invited, but if there are no Icelanders, they won't come, it's envy. (...) And I know I'll always be just a foreigner here.

Those who understand the language more and who use the Icelandic media, feel more discriminated than those who don't. Some even say it is better not to speak Icelandic, so that one doesn't feel so bad. It does not happen only when talking about the media – one woman who was describing the discrimination at work lamented, “Often it's better not to understand it, because if you don't understand, at least you don't know about all this.” Another man said that he had felt safer before learning Icelandic and using the local media:

It made my life easier in the beginning, that I didn't know what was happening in this country. I thought I was living in a very peaceful place, that nothing was happening there. (...) But then when I started to analyse it, then they were writing that somebody got beaten on Laugavegur, that somebody stole something, right? (...) suddenly I got to know that there was a brothel close to my apartment, (...) somebody was selling marijuana close to my place (...). So finally I realized that some things happen here just as they do everywhere.

Conclusions and recommendations

To summarise, the media discourse about immigrants in Iceland is generally considered to be negative by Poles. The more our respondents understood Icelandic, the longer they stayed in Iceland and the more frequently they read newspapers – the more they considered media discourse to be discriminatory against Poles. However, they often considered the discourse to be worse about foreigners in general than about Poles in particular, and in interviews they were especially pointing to the unfavourable portrayal of Lithuanians. This reaffirms aforementioned research results about the creation of stereotypes by the Icelandic media – migrants are often portrayed as dangerous Eastern European men (Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, 2008).

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Our research also points to the conclusion that the discourse about immigrants is actually often discriminatory, and that the discrimination is not only imagined – since the better the respondents were able to understand articles, the more they felt discriminated. In a new report from European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2009) ECRI reaffirm their concern about the racial prejudice and lack of tolerance amplified in the media. ECRI suggests that the Icelandic media should scrutinise their reporting, so that they do not contribute to the unpleasant atmosphere towards minority groups. According to the International Federation of Journalists (2007) the problem is that too many journalists don't attempt to mirror the positive sides of societies in relation to different races and cultures.

Jessica ter Wal (2003) has pointed out that background reporting on immigrants is limited and little attention is paid to everyday common aspects of migrants' lives. According to the data from the *Media Watch*, only in roughly 17% instances immigrants participated in debates about migration (Creditinfo, 2007). According to research among Asian teenagers in Iceland (Hlöðversdóttir, 2005) the results shows that immigrants invisibility in the media is one of the main reasons why they don't see themselves as a part of the community. Another consequence is that immigrants experience themselves as excluded from the society they live in - from the dominant culture and political experience. To solve this problem it has been recommended to involve immigrants in creating the discourse about them, also by hiring people with immigrant background in the media (see e.g. ter Wal, 2003; Klute, 2006). This way media can reflect multicultural society more fairly – they can gain more insight into their lives, increase the connection to ethnic minority societies, as well as introduce new perspectives. Several transnational projects concerning media and minorities have been established by the Dutch umbrella organization Mira Media, founded in 1992. Their main goal is to achieve more diversity and ethnic pluralism by supporting the participation of immigrants in the media. Diversity policies and various initiatives to promote diversity, particularly in public service broadcasting, have been developed in Europe since the 1960s according to Hulten and Horsti (2010). Now in the 21st century there is a variety of strategies to increase representation of minorities and recruitment of journalists with minority background in mainstream media. Susan Bink (2007) in her article about the situation in the Netherlands claims:

To make cultural diversity part of broadcast reality requires change. This change is needed in both the production and distribution of radio programmes and personnel policies. Personnel have to be re-trained. Diversity policies have to be introduced, implemented and monitored. Journalists should debate how to make their structures accessible to journalists from minority or excluded groups. Minority spokespersons will have to be empowered to put themselves in the picture. Media training centres need to review their curricula and most important of all, more young people from immigrant and of ethnic minority origins will have to choose career in the media (p.252).

It is generally believed – both in Nordic countries and worldwide – that learning the language is the key element to adjusting to a new society (see e.g. Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2004; Hlöðversdóttir, 2005). As stated in the Icelandic integration policy, knowledge of the Icelandic language is the key to the Icelandic society, and can be a deciding factor in the successful integration of immigrants (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). However, the results of our analysis show that the more migrants learn the language, the more they feel discriminated – which may in fact make them less willing to integrate with the rest of the society. This is confirmed by our respondents. According to our results, the better Poles are skilled in the Icelandic language, the worse they feel treated, which is a serious matter concerning the multicultural society Iceland has become, and not in coherence with the aim of Icelandic integration policy.

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