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## Romaphobia and the media: mechanisms of power and the politics of representations

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Identities*, entitled 'Romaphobia and the media', examines entrenched and ongoing media coverage of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people across Europe. The focus is on how the media problematises the Roma, how it constructs a 'conceptual map' about Roma people and what this tells us about the societies we live in. This special issue includes five academic articles all examining the constructions and stereotypes used in the media in various formats and European countries. After these academic articles, this special issue then deviates from the normal journal structure by including three commentary pieces from professionals from varying Roma backgrounds to give their views and experiences on how they tackle Romaphobia and the media. The inclusion of these commentary pieces are very powerful in offering a perspective of active interventions and resistance that we should not forget amidst the depressing continued circulation of racialised stereotypes.

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**KEYWORDS** Media; representations; ethnicity; racism; Roma; Gypsy; stereotypes

In 2013, the UK media pounced on Page Hall, a suburb of Sheffield (South Yorkshire). There had been reports of criminal and antisocial behaviour from Roma migrants who had recently moved into the area. The headlines were sensationalist, including terms such as 'terror', 'civil unrest', 'boiling pot' and 'ghetto':

Slovakian Roma in Sheffield: 'This is a boiling pot ready to explode'; (*The Guardian* 15 November 2013)

Roma migrants cause terror for South Yorkshire residents. (*The Express*, 14 June 2014)

The Roma Empire. Locals blast crime-hit Sheffield 'ghetto' where 6,000 Eastern European immigrants have settled since 2012. (*The Sun*, 6 December 2016)

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The UK media's approach to reporting on antisocial behaviour is well known for its role in stirring up 'fear of crime' from groups ranging from teenagers, people from working-class estates and minority groups (Farrall, Jackson, and Gray 2009). In the coverage of Page Hall, media commentaries combined this projection of antisocial behaviour with the persistent negative political discourse on migration from Central and Eastern Europe at the time. The insertion of 'Roma' then made for irresistibly dramatic headlines that Richardson calls the 'grip points' in reproducing the distorted social constructions of Roma (Richardson 2014, 61). In the Sheffield example, these 'grip' points tapped into the zeitgeists of the day: migrants, benefit cheats, terrorism and antipathy towards the EU (leading up to the 'Brexit' vote in June 2016).

The media thus played along and played with the systems of classifications reproducing what Stuart Hall calls 'a shared conceptual map' (Hall 1997, 4), in this case of Roma people as criminals in ghettos who live in conflict with 'locals'. The mode of reporting is aimed at a shock factor. However, it is not shocking because it is new – we know already that media representations of Roma are on the whole one-sided and derogatory – it is shocking because these headlines quickly become normalised with politicians then providing substance for such claims. For example, former Home Secretary and the then Sheffield Labour MP David Blunkett gave an interview in which he warned that tensions in Page Hall could lead to rioting, saying 'We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the incoming community, the Roma community, because there's going to be an explosion otherwise. We all know that'.<sup>1</sup>

According to van Baar, this 'new norm' rests on the 'problematism' of Roma 'as profiteers, criminals and nomads' – a representation that is intensified because of the assumed 'irregularisation' of Romani identities and mobilities (van Baar 2011, 205). State-sanctioned forced evictions, threats and compulsory fingerprinting in France and Italy have all been reported in media outlets as 'necessary' securitisation measures, specifically and very publicly targeting Roma communities (Sigona 2015; McGarry and Drake 2013). In Greece, the media frenzy surrounding the discovery of supposed kidnap victim 'little Maria' provoked a wave of media coverage about the Roma as child traffickers, resulting in some Roma families having their children removed by social services (e.g. in Ireland) on the suspicion of being trafficked just because they had blonde hair (Okely 2014). In the United Kingdom, the eviction of Traveller communities from Dale Farm in 2011 was a slow, painful battle that was emblematic of the problems Travellers face in the United Kingdom to gain the right for places to stay and for land ownership, yet was reported in the media as (ironically) a problem with Travellers *opposing* the settled lives of locals (Richardson and Smith-Bendell 2012). In Hungary and the Czech Republic, extremist groups have repeatedly attacked Roma individuals and families in organised (and unprovoked) incidents, which have then received biased or very ambiguous media coverage, frequently

blaming the victims instead of the perpetrators (Feischmidt et al 2013; Bernáth and Messing 2013).

In this special issue of *Identities*, 'Romaphobia and the media',<sup>2</sup> the focus is on how the media problematises the Roma, how it constructs a 'conceptual map' about Roma people and what this tells us about the societies we live in. In this special issue, we include three articles that enable an in-depth critical understanding of how hegemonising representations are formulated: in-depth examples from Hungary (Bernáth and Messing) and Germany (End) begin the special issue along with a conceptual mapping of how media stories on Roma are embedded in wider practises of neoliberalism and racialised discourses (Kóczé and Rövid). But we do not stop there. What we noticed as special issue editors was that most of the literature on media representations of Roma details entrenched and pervasive stereotyping. This literature is really important and we are certainly not saying it is sufficient, as researchers themselves point out: we still have much to learn about the construction, power and effect of media representations of Roma (Kroon et al. 2016; Richardson 2006; Richardson 2014; van Baar 2011). However, there is also a real dearth in understanding how to challenge and change such images. In this special issue, we therefore also include articles that focus on mediums that might be able to challenge such damaging media representations. Films and documentaries can provide spaces for alternative stories, although they still tend to be mired in age-old stereotypes (Hoffman and Hadziavdic), whilst approaches that focus on Roma themselves producing images on the 'everyday' can provide different insights into Roma lives than those shown in the press or other public spaces (Tremlett).

Finally, this special issue deviates from the usual journal structure by asking three professionals from varying Roma backgrounds to give their views and experiences in shorter commentary pieces on how they tackle Romaphobia and the media. Daniel Baker writes about the role of art in challenging Romaphobia and connecting to Roma identity in his personal life, in his work as an artist in the United Kingdom and internationally in the exhibitions he has curated; Mária Bogdán, journalist and academic, in conversation with Ernő Kadét and Gábor Bernáth, discusses how the Roma Press Center in Budapest continues to challenge distorting media stories in an internet age, whilst Iulius Rostas shares his extensive experience of being an educator and activist in Romania and beyond, and how he attempts to ensure that reforms aiming at inclusive education for Roma are accepted and succeed at a local level. We find the inclusion of these commentary pieces very powerful in offering a perspective of active interventions and resistance that we should not forget amidst the depressing continual circulation of racialised stereotypes.

## Conceptual challenges: Romaphobia, exclusion and inequality

Whilst racism against Roma can draw on very similar stereotypes that point to a long tradition of othering, it is important to recognise the characteristics of particular waves of racism that occur in specific contexts and under particular regimes (Ladányi and Szelényi 2006, 59–74). Our big challenge is to build a conceptual framework that can both investigate power and broad normative/negative/historical discourses whilst being sensitive to local contexts, histories of racism and differing ideas of ethnicity and ‘race’ that are apparent across Europe. Such a framework needs to address both the approaches to ethnicity and the approaches to socio-economic positioning that are frequently used when discussing Roma people. This introduction now outlines the basis of these two approaches.

### *Romaphobia, ethnicity and ‘race’*

The way Roma have been politicised, romanticised and demonised says more about our societies and the history of ethnicity (including how ‘difference’ and ‘identity’ are constructed), than it tells us anything about Roma people themselves (Surdu 2016). ‘Roma’ is often used as a homogenising category for highly heterogeneous (hybrid, superdiverse) populations who possess a wide range of identities, languages, social statuses and can self-identify using different ethnoyms e.g. Rom, Gypsy, Romani, Sinti, Traveller, Kalderash and so on. Investigating ‘Roma’ as a construction, asking for whom it is important, when, why and where, is a useful way to investigate claims and positions taken by public (politicised) discourses, moving the question from ‘who is Roma?’ to ‘who defines who is Roma, why and what for?’ (Tremlett 2009).

In this special issue, authors use different terminology, which is explained in individual articles. Overall, we do take a ‘constructivist’ view of Roma as a heavily politicised label in the media, and each of the five academic articles (written from varying academic positions) clearly state their theoretical influences in understanding the specific constructions under analysis. This has not always been the case in Romani studies (the academic field of research on Roma minorities), where concepts of ethnicity and ‘race’ have not always been used in a critical way. Moreover, in most Roma-related studies, the social and political racialisation remains invisible under the mask of ethnicity and cultural difference. This in part is a result of the folklorist tradition from which Romani studies emerged (Stewart 2013, 418). However, the anti-essentialist, constructivist approach taken by this special issue is not to lose sight of the fact that Roma people experience lived realities – a common criticism of those who take a ‘constructivist’ approach (Matras 2013, 214–216). The final three commentary pieces do bring us back to

the lived (and diverse) realities of professionals from different countries and varied Roma backgrounds.

We use the term 'Romaphobia' in the title of the special issue not only with purpose but also trepidation that is important to explain, particularly as this terminology is not accepted by all the authors in this special issue. It is all too easy to want to coin a term for the purposes of attention seeking, when other terms (e.g. anti-Roma racism, antigypsyism, antiziganism) already exist. Whilst all terms point to racism, 'Romaphobia', we argue as the editors, better describes the fear that has become inherent in the racism towards Roma people. Rather like the arguments for using the term 'Islamophobia',<sup>3</sup> so 'Romaphobia' can reflect the resentment as well as the hostility and anxiety that surfaces in many anti-Gypsy discourses and actions against them. For instance, media representations of Roma play a significant role in sustaining 'Romaphobia' in a form of resentment and fear of Roma as well as the reiteration of stereotypes.

'Romaphobia' is not just about the prejudice, discrimination or antagonism usually associated with 'racism': Romaphobia also emphasises the ideologically based aversion to certain minority groups that such a term, along with Islamophobia, can more accurately represent. As sociologists Meer and Modood put it, it is 'evolved' racism (Meer and Modood 2012). Nonetheless, not all our authors agree with us, and in healthy divergence make their case for other terms in the articles themselves.

### ***Romaphobia and socio-economic constraints***

The socio-economic positioning of Roma is frequently distorted by the media to create the image of poverty and marginalisation as something Roma people bring upon themselves and which is specific to Roma people alone. The idea of Roma as instrumental in creating their own poverty and thus being parasitical on welfare systems is endemic. Research shows that when extreme poverty is shown, even in a sympathetic light, readers and audiences still link poverty to a Roma characteristic rather than a structural issue (Csepeli and Simon 2004; Janky et al. 2014). This special issue wants to vehemently challenge this image, and so here we outline the backdrop to the exclusion and inequality frequently faced by Roma people.

The exclusion of Roma people materialises in various intersecting spheres of life: the labour market, social services, education, housing, welfare and health provisions and even concerning human and citizenship rights. Despite the existence of harsh forms of exclusion, such as the denial of citizenship (e.g. the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1990, see O'Nions 2015) or the expulsion of Roma (e.g. from France and Italy, see McGarry and Drake 2013; Sigona 2011), most of the Roma in Europe experience more subtle, but no less destructive, forms of exclusion. One important terrain of exclusion with long-lasting impact is education (Kertesi and Kézdi 2006). Roma children experience blatant or more

concealed ethno-social segregation in all member-states (Messing 2017, O'Nions 2010). Segregated education has lasting negative consequences for youth: it affects their identity development, creates ethnically biased network of social ties, damages self-esteem as well as their future chances of a good standard of living (Szalai and Schiff 2014). Exclusion of Roma is also evident in the labour market. Racial discrimination in employment and its intersection with gender, housing marginalisation and health is well documented in a number of important research projects (FRA 2009; Tardos 2015).

All these intersecting structural and discursive exclusions result in Roma being 'othered' and excluded from the national character of their countries even where they have been settled and fought alongside non-Roma in historical struggles for national autonomy and freedom (e.g. in Hungary in 1848–1849 and in 1956). They are often seen and perceived as others, as a burden to their country, as outsiders (Vidra and Fox 2014), which, in the end, results in Roma people being excluded from the notion of the nation and seen as non-members of a society. As a result of these processes, Roma are often treated in a dehumanised way, denied personal dignity as well as pride of being in an ethnic community, while they may also be subjected to ethnic-based violence and harassment and racist statements from politicians (see the Amnesty International Report 2014).

Our special issue focuses on exclusion from the idea of a society (or nation) that informs the conceptual maps of who 'we' are. Although literature on Roma exclusion deals with various policy fields such as housing, education, employment and social services, there has been relatively little attention paid to the role of mass media in the exclusion of Roma. The mass media, reaching out to a significant share of the population, becomes a primary source of information, opinion and attitudes about the minority group and is therefore worth examining in-depth.

## Conclusion

'Roma' are ingrained in the European discourses of 'others' – Roma are seen as irregular (non)citizens, problematic nomads, passive or parasitical. Racism occurs amidst a background of stark socio-economic inequality across Europe that must be taken into account in order to understand – not where the media representations come from – but where the representations are taken to. In other words, how media representations frame such inequality through racialised and biased lenses that will affect the social positioning and racism against Roma in the future. Racism against Roma minorities is not just the ghost of Europe's past, but, as van Baar writes, 'the ghosts of Europe yet to come' (van Baar 2014, 26).

This special issue raises awareness of the (mis)representation or lack of representation of Roma through media discourses. However, in the course of preparing for this special edition, we faced some challenges: namely how



we, as special issue editors, can avoid the replication of the power dynamics of the media in which Roma voices are completely ignored or used as a token to legitimise the dominant discourse. Academic scholarship, just as media discourse, is strongly connected to the operation of power. Until today, a significant proportion of academic knowledge, particularly articles in international journals about Roma-related issues, has been produced by non-Roma (mainly Western European) scholars. We have challenged this intellectual trajectory by facilitating the involvement of a diverse range of Roma and non-Roma writers from both Western and Eastern Europe in this issue at each stage, from guest editor and academic voices (some of whom are also practitioners) to the reflexive pieces from practitioners (some of whom are also academics). These are small steps, but ones we hope can start a dialogue that aims to investigate and reveal the power structures of producing damaging representations of Roma people in the media.

## Notes

1. Available at *The Guardian* website. Accessed 21 November 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/nov/15/sheffield-page-hall-roma-slovakia-immigration>. Similarly, the then deputy prime minister Nick Clegg (from the Liberal Democrat party) criticised Roma migrants for behaving in a 'sometimes intimidating, sometimes offensive way' saying that Roma migrants needed to be more 'sensitive' to the British 'way of life'. Available at the BBC website. Accessed 21 November 2016: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24949349>.
2. in May 2015 This special issue was inspired by the seminar 'Romaphobia and the media', a collaboration between the Centre for European and International Studies (CEISR) at the University of Portsmouth (Dr Annabel Tremlett), and the Centre for Language Discourse & Communication at King's College London (Professor Ben Rampton). The event was part-funded by a British Academy Small Grant (SG112414 received by Annabel Tremlett). We are also grateful for the 'Small Incubator' grant given by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences that enabled Tremlett to visit Messing for a month in Budapest in May 2015 to work on this special issue.
3. The Runnymede Trust Report first used it in 1997.

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