



THE IMAGE OF THE ROMA PEOPLE ONLINE: CRIME AND NON-INTEGRABILITY AS DOMINANT OPINIONS

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Abstract: *The social integration of the Roma people is a permanent theme in the public debate. One of the barriers of the integration of Roma people is their reputation as criminal and aggressive, inside and outside of the country. Paper explores the image of the Roma people online, on three categories of sources: online media (large audience online press), blogs, and free forums. The method applied is the content analysis with its particular formula, the image analysis. Findings show that crime is the main characteristic displayed in online media, while bloggers are rather skeptical about the possibility to integrate the minority, and racism and nationalism are very frequent attitudes in free anonymous discussion on forums.*

Keywords: *Roma, image, online, crime, opinion*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades a great amount of sociological research has been made in the Romanian territory in order to facilitate the social integration of the Roma people. The current state of opinion in the public space suggests, however, that either the implementation strategies have not been designed properly or the project goals were unrealistic or not sufficiently supported in order to have the desired outcome.

Another hypothesis on these results refers to the high level of intolerance in the Romanian space. According to the theory of Hofstede (1998), which set the dimensions of national culture and was followed by extensive investigations in many countries (from which Romania has a score of 6 out of 10 on the intolerance scale) Romania is among the countries where social innovation is not easily accepted by the public, whether it refers to the integration of the minorities considered "deviant" (minorities of all kinds, including the chronically ill with certain diseases), or it refers to social phenomena (e.g. alternative sexual orientation or alternative religions).

Therefore, in order to investigate the current status of the majority population's attitudes towards the Roma people, it is useful to make an analysis of the image and reputation of this ethnic group - not only to highlight the most important obstacles in the way of perception and acceptance of the Roma people, but also to show the intensity of the intolerant attitudes.

Any project for social integration of the Roma people should consider the Internet as a main source of information. In any controversial social issue, and especially in minorities issues, people will be less inclined to express their real opinion. Therefore, the views expressed in the real environment can be either forged or severely limited, due to the fact that the respondents are more cautious in responding to interviews and surveys.

Another reason why the Internet should be the main source comes from the theoretical perspective, considering the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1964). According to this theory, people tend to express themselves in accordance with the quasi-static evaluation of most of the opinions. Thus, if they consider themselves as part of the majority, they tend to take a stand; if, on the contrary, they see

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themselves as part of the minority, people will tend to refrain. The spiral of silence theory acquires a specific character in the online environment (Cismaru, 2012: 14), this environment being the only one that provides traceability of the "spiral" process by which minorities are silenced. Therefore, besides providing a statistical record, the Internet also offers the opportunity to pursue the formation of collective opinions.

However, referring back to the preference for the Internet, the attitudes for or against the integration of the Roma people are the most visible, as the people who comment (on blogs or forums) can retain their anonymity and they can express themselves freely without being suspicious of the fact that they might be seen as part of a nationalist movement or suffer the consequences (formal or informal) of their way of thinking.

Research questions in this analysis:

1. Which are the main ideas that the media transmitted online about the Roma people in covering events related to them?
2. What are the main topics in the media regarding the Roma people?
3. Is the dominant attitude of the media neutral or biased when commenting negative aspects (crime, lack of education)?
4. Do the bloggers have the tendency to tolerate or exclude them?
5. Which are the main characteristics of the Roma people as reflected in discussions?

2. METHODS

For the reasons stated above, in the online environment the most appropriate method is the content analysis with its specific alternative called "image analysis" (Halic, 2002). For many years, the classic image analysis (Chelcea / Halic) could not be applied online due to the inability to select and prioritize sources and also due to the difficulty to find online materials and evaluate them according to certain criteria. However, recent online tools have made it possible to transfer the method in the online environment in order to conduct analysis which is sociologically

valid. Google enables an appropriate sampling (over the past months different types of sources have been classified: media, blogs, forums, videoclips, etc.). Therefore, the sources can be selected by categories and a preferred topics can be monitored (Google Alert). Ranking sites for any online publications allow people to identify the online market share for publications and this can be used as weighting coefficients to obtain a profile picture (for online news, especially).

Thus, the online information was monitored during 22.02-29.02.2012, based on three categories of sources: media, blogs, free discussions (forums). Of these source categories, the coefficients resulting from the market share (source: website traffic.ro) were applied only in the case of the media. As illustrative elements: sources as Libertatea, Realitatea, Cancan have a strong impact (on average 10%). Other high-impact publications are Evenimentul Zilei, Jurnalul National, Adevarul or Ziare.com (average 6%). Other sources have a slightly lower impact (Gandul, Hotnews) while most local media has a market share less than or equal to 1%. These figures were used as weighting factors in the results, to calculate the correct weighting coefficients in order to determine the likelihood of the impact of the broadcast image (broadcast image - image via the mass media). For blogs, the market share is less than or up to 1%, so that the sources have an approximately equal weighting coefficient. Regarding forums, there was a significant difference between large-sized boards (Softpedia - 6% market share, about equal to a high impact publication) and Hotnews.com forum, which has a triple weighting coefficient compared with the rest of forums. Blogs image is both a released and reflected image (Cismaru, 2012) while forums image lies within the reflected image category.

A special feature in the selection of the blogs was that a supplementary selection was made in addition to Google (the search engine provides a series of articles coming from the local media sites registered as blogs). The selection of individual blogs was preferred (due to its authenticity).

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The content and the title were also considered as analyzed material for the media. Only the content of the articles was used for blogs, as titles are irrelevant in most cases. For discussion forums, the criterion of analysis was posting (entry site). As type of analysis, frequency analysis was used combined with the intensity one, according to the model of V. Stancu (1998) adapted by Iacob *et al.* (2011). The intensity of opinions is established by providing opinion intensity ratios for each unit analyzed by the following rules (Iacob *et al.*, 2011: 162-163):

- (-4) negative superlative adjectives towards the subject, as shown to affect communities or countries (including allegations of proved participation in organized criminal networks);
- (-3) negative comments, involvement in public scandals and offenses proved in court;
- (-2) negative evaluation of adverse actions;
- (-1) ironic appreciation, humorous stories;
- (0) informative news, stories related from an objective point of view;
- (1) slightly positive feedback;
- (2) reports of actions with positive impact;
- (3) positive comment on actions or results;
- (4) positive feedback on efficiency and competence, contribution to solving social or national interest problems;

After granting these coefficients to the analyzed unit, the final calculation is done by adding the importance of the source, thus obtaining a value on this dimension.

The sample of materials used was:

a. News media: 33 articles (those published during the monitoring period were removed, but the references on "Gypsy" were contextual) located on first page obtained by searching on Google topic "Gypsies";

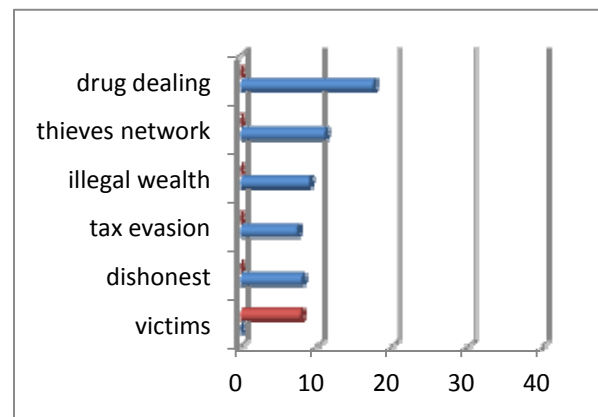
b. Blogs: 30 articles published on blogs (online portals were removed and only individual blogs were maintained);

Forums: 100 Forum Posts by Softpedia.com (topic called "The Gypsy issue") between 22.02-26.02.2012. In the analyzed period, there were only three topics (active discussion forums) in which the issues connected to the Roma minority were

effectively discussed. Of the three, the topic was selected because it is on the forum with the largest audience and was the most "specialized" (the alternative topic related directly to the potential tolerance of the respondents). Due to the large volume of postings, only the first four pages of ten were analyzed.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Online media sources analysis. The main issues reflected in the media refer to organized crime, either outside or inside the country. Also, tax evasion is an old issue that is constantly present in the media. Dimensions of organized crime are complemented by reports of individual cases, either locally or less spectacular. The profile, mainly negative, has only one positive aspect (resulting from a small proportion of the articles analyzed, where the case of a poor minority settlement where no offenses had been committed was presented, and a child being assaulted in a supermarket) (see graph 1).



Graph 1. Image profile and the impact expected in the online media. *Note. Last bar: positive dimension*

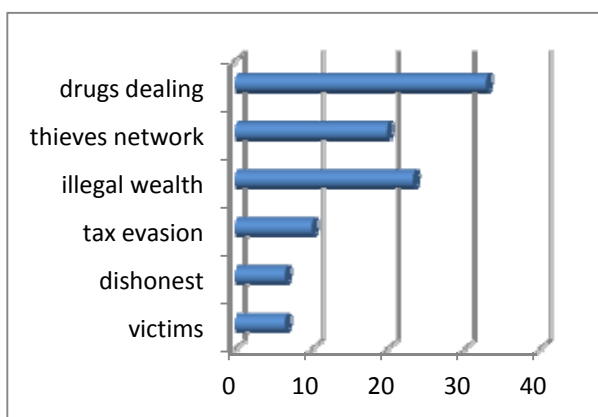
In graph 1, the impact is shown on a scale from -40 to 40, the weighted importance of the source, by the formula μ (average coefficient) = $\sum (\text{absolute value} \times \text{the importance of the source}) / \text{total of counting}$

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units on the particular dimension (in this case articles).

The importance of the source was calculated by reference to the market share of the online media: sources of high online audience, such as Libertatea, Realitatea or CanCan have a market share of 10% and therefore have a maximum impact factor (10). Sources of large audience, such as Adevarul, Jurnalul National, Ziare.com oscillate around 6%, with an impact factor of 6. Journals with low audience like Romania Libera or Cotidianul have an impact factor 1 (with a market share less than or equal to 1).

Returning to the data results, there is only one dimension which presents a positive impact, namely the one concerning the unreasonable assault as a result of discrimination (because this news was broadcast by Realitatea, a source with a maximum impact).



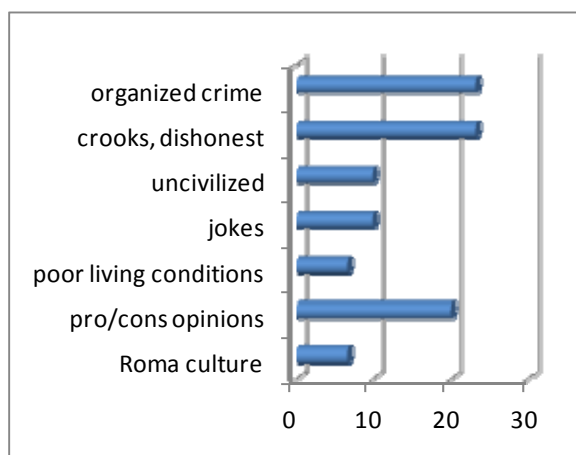
Graph 2. The structure profile of the image, on dimensions

In graph 2, the share of structural dimensions in the image profile shows again a very high proportion of issues relating to organized crime (43% of the total references concerns crimes committed abroad). Both the idea of criminal organizations and the idea of operating outside these groups have a very negative impact on the image of the Roma community. In this context, any member of the minority can be considered *a priori* a potentially aggressive person and a criminal.

The most favourite topics of the media are as follows: drug trafficking (10 releases) is a preference that has news value (it is a relatively new phenomenon in Romania). Also, the network of organized thieves in England was a major issue (6 releases) because of taking place abroad and deceiving Great Britain (high value of story). Finally, illegally acquired wealth is a subject on the agenda of the media. Basically, the subject concerning "illegally acquired wealth" (7 releases) referred to the same network of criminals who had committed robbery, forgery and identity fraud in the UK, but has been reformulated in Libertatea.

3.2 Blogs' image analysis.

The image profile on the analyzed segment is mainly negative, except for some views that have interpreted cultural issues (in a slightly positive way). One observation that can be made is the splitting of opinions about integration: subjects are either extremely intolerant or racist (down to the assertion of intention to eliminate / exterminate / neutralize the Roma people) or positive, arguing about mitigating circumstances and generalizing labels (more moderate voices). To what regards the terms "crooks" and "uncivilized", the content of the articles has also involved the lack of education and training as the foundation of the anti-social behavior and the anti-work cultural models of the Roma people.



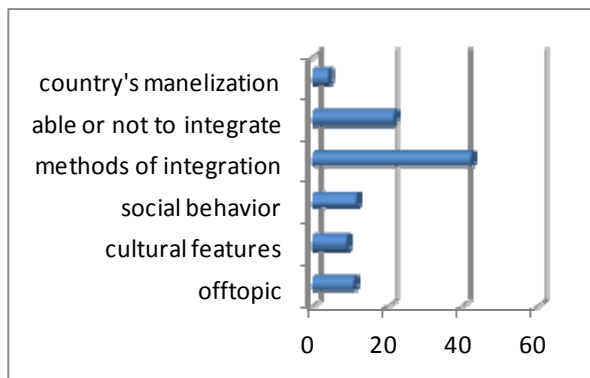
Graph 3. The image profile dimensions on blogs

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As a difference from the similar profile made based on the media articles on the largest audience, we can see that there is no mention to tax evasion. This topic, often brought up on the agenda of the media, is absent on blogs (because the Romanian state and the respect for the law is not a norm for the Romanians) (graph 3).

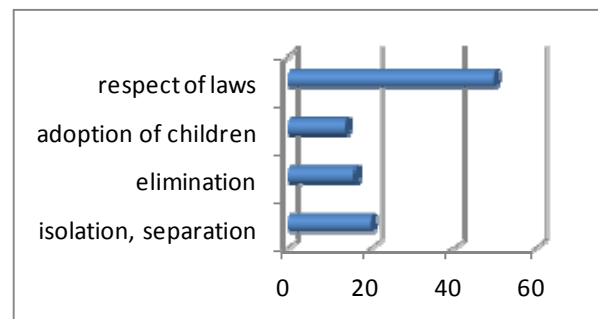
As shown, criminality does not have the same weight as in the profile broadcast by the media channels with large audience. Topics like "crooks, dishonest, poor living conditions" are mainly found on blogs (compared with the traditional media agenda), as blogs consist more of evidence from subjective, individual experiences. The cases presented in the media were taken and debated to an extent, but were seen as additional elements adding to the already established reputation (negative) of a community. Articles about the possibility or impossibility of integration have a low share (20%). Also, on blogs and forums we can find ironic jokes (labels translated in the anonymous folk as poems and jokes) in 10%.

3.3 Forums' discussions analysis. As can be seen, the structure of an online discussion forum has a different configuration than that present in the media, where it is required by the moderator. Since the segment of the Forum Softpedia users is informed and competent in assessing the social measures taken on a macroeconomic level, the methods of integration have attracted the largest participation (graph 4).



Graph 4. Issues related to the Roma people on the public agenda

Of social behavior, aggression, illegal gains and high demographic growth were the most discussed (described as worrying). Among the cultural aspects, the term of "closed community" stood out ("intolerance" as some respondents noted) and the unfortunate incidents in recent history were reminded. Also, elements of the nineteenth century history were mentioned as well as correct names or internal cultural issues. Under the theme "able or not to integrate" more than half (14%) felt that the Roma people cannot be integrated, giving as example the failure of integration policies in Europe.



Graph 5. Integration measures proposed
Note. The percentages in chart 6 are calculated from the total units on "integration measures".

As to the measures that were discussed on integration, there were three types of views: those inclined to radical measures, nationalist and racist (half) and those who lean towards more punitive sanctions given in court (but also these, with a rather severe judgment, suggesting the introduction of the death penalty or forced labor in prison). It was emphasized the inefficiency of the current system of justice in punishing crimes committed by the Roma minority and that they "are used" to the punishment and, given the imperfections, in particular when it comes to catching, arresting and prosecuting them, they are not effectively "corrected" (graph 5).

4. CONCLUSION

The media gives little or no space in its agenda to the issue of the Roma people

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integration. It is not considered a theme of public debate or something urgent and important. The deterioration and disappearance of journalistic objectivity in the social story type leads to a lack of coverage of the Roma minority's issues or any information about the progress or the position of this minority.

The news presents mainly scandals related to the network of criminals acting abroad, the offenders affecting Romania's image abroad, the confusion made in some countries between Romanians and the Roma people; also, the national news presents only the damage done by the Roma people through state tax evasion and organized crime. The fact that the articles published relate to networks rather than isolated cases and the ongoing law suits (and therefore on facts proved, not presumed) causes greater reflection of these facts and a greater impact on the audience. Moreover, articles propagated in the media almost identical in their content, were all on the same topics (illegally acquired property, an internal network involved in drug trafficking, an external network involved in extortion and robbery in the UK). Since those materials relate to only a selected week in the analysis, we can estimate what profound impact the constant repetition of this type of articles could have on the collective image, in time.

In the conclusion drawn based on the results of the analysis done on blogs, we can see the same severe observations about the state of the public. The balance clearly tilts towards exclusion, the attitude is rather nationalistic, and there are relatively few voices defending the honest members of the Roma community. It should be noted that although cases of scandal commented in the press during this period had quite a strong impact (as shown in the chart on the news), they had a much lower impact in the blogosphere (not considered of high current value so as to be retransmitted). Opinions rendered are more concerned with personal experience and the labels are linked with education and uncivilized behavior in society.

Regarding the discussion forums, the analyzed postings confirm the findings for blogs, with a more pronounced shade of extremism. Even though both on blogs and forums there are isolated voices defending the poor Roma, the abused or those labeled unfairly, the general consensus is that the Roma people cannot be integrated and they are a social problem (a "lost cause") that Romanians must get used to. The general opinion is that there are no integration solutions for this minority, because of their "cultural" and social resistance. Also, the findings indicate that there have been attempts to communicate with Roma minority, but this is a "closed caste" which refuses to adapt. And in terms of integration methods suggested by some respondents on the forums, not only are they radical but also unacceptable to a European civilization. The tone of these discussions suggests that not only the Roma community is closed but the public's intolerance is also on a high level.

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