

THE REPRESENTATION OF GYPSIES IN THE MEDIA

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In cyberspace as well as through conventional forms, the media perpetuate stereotypes of gypsies, a situation which has been aggravated by both the economic crisis and the precariousness state of journalism. Only journalistic rigour and the interventions of Gypsy people can interrupt these patterns and bring change in times to come.

Nowadays, everybody understands —or at least, has an inkling— that the media define the world in which we live. After the boom of social networks and new technologies, this fact has become a paroxysm, for everyone has the chance, so to speak, to be a journalist. Therefore, we are being told, both in the Internet and in traditional media, how our social life has been, is and should be. Beyond historical analysis and sociological study, the media transmit an image of reality that is assumed, unconsciously, by the majority of the planet. Big media are doing this more and more frequently; they are experimenting with new forms and ways to achieve this. Sometimes they do so clumsily, and sometimes with a more subtle perspective. They decide what exists and what does not, and even how it exists and from what point of view we must think about it. The Internet endlessly copies this, goes back to it, and clarifies it, but it does not change it. At least, not yet. On the one hand, we have the work that many Gypsies are doing to communicate and promote their own point of view via social networks and a real and vivid use of the Internet. This is contrasted with the reflection of Gypsies in the majority of digital media that can be found on the Internet; this reflection is quite different, and usually overwhelmingly negative.

When illegal immigration began to proliferate in Spain, we started to think that the gypsy community would no longer be what the veteran journalist Maruja Torres once called “Spaniards in the junk room.” This change would not be due to the media suddenly becoming supportive of gypsies, but rather because of the new immigrants being in worse condition than gypsies. The new immigrants were weaker, unknown and, therefore, more susceptible to social abuse and becoming more easy targets for journalism professionals. If, as expected, immigrants were badly represented in media, the mistakes of Spanish journalism

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with regard to racism would finally be revealed not as the consequence of the inherent characteristics of the group described, but of the position of superiority from which larger society can sometimes observe and describe its environment. However, things did not happen in that way; although there are many examples of written or audiovisual information that, in a larger or smaller degree, have been infused with xenophobic undertones, in many cases the image of immigrants has been more positive than that of gypsies. In fact, their bad reputation in the eyes of society and the media seems to have been intensified, leading to an association of gypsies with wretchedness. The gypsies that do not have this low social status, or those who overcome poverty and achieve economic empowerment, are no longer perceived as a *real* member of their group, neither by society as a whole nor by the media. Dependency (as a major feature of the policies of many gypsy associations), the continuity of illiteracy, educational failure, all the opportunities missed by our people, the lack of referents... All this has contributed to keep the gypsy people out of pressure groups, which seemed to be plausible in the early and vindictive days of the so-called *gypsy associative movement*. As a consequence, gypsy issues usually are as scarcely present in the media as those of other social groups that neither protest nor transmit a sense of progress and influence.

FOR THE SAKE OF SENSATIONALISM

Because of this, gypsy people, sometimes unaware of their own common goals, are sometimes unable to see that it is possible to fight for a change of reputation. They have instead become a suitable target for any type of negative comment about them, always for the sake of sensationalism. They are considered neither a Spanish nor an immigrant community but something entirely different, and that is the way they are treated. This favours a grotesque depiction by voicing only those individuals best suited for coarse, easy and effective stereotypes. On the other hand, when some spokespeople insist on promoting an idyllic, paternalist and sublimely fake image of gypsies, the consequences are even worse. This is especially the case in crime reporting; it makes external views on the gypsies worse, in regards to the image that will be shown by the media. Journalists may feel they are not being told the truth, and understand that they are being sold an embellished substitute. Subsequently, that overtly fake image is discarded.

It was not long ago that violence against women or homosexuality was dealt with in an offensive way on many television shows. Legal and political changes have made journalistic treatment of these topics subject to accountability. However, had various

pressure groups not influenced in these matters, had they not appeared on television and had the media not have responded to such socio-political pressure, these topics would still be dealt with in an immoral way. Immigration is a similar case: there are many examples of ignominious and sensationalist depictions of these issues in the media, but at least many signs point in a different direction and associations actively defending their rights abound when they are violated in the media; many journalists have shown their sensitivity to these objections.

But this idea sinks into darker waters when we deal with the treatment of gypsy issues, not because poor information is not being contested —both the Fundación Secretariado Gitano and Unión Romani have issued press releases related to certain violent episodes— but because this reaction is not being given any attention, as listening to such advice on rectification is not perceived as a moral obligation. The proliferation of sensationalist television shows selling themselves as a public service —or as harmless entertainment— has resulted in someone with a Watergate face holding a microphone, after each accident, each death, each scandal. The speed and the need to find broadcast material has led —as predicted by the American journalist Mike Sager, linked to *Rolling Stone* magazine and later to *Esquire*— to the replacement of facts, rigour, originality, self-made topics and deep analysis with fraud and abundant gory details. Obviously, the radio and the written press have not ignored this drift in television, so as to give the impression that the only type of journalism possible is the most vertiginous and exaggerated one, which is able to touch and affect, deriving from opinion rather than analysis. The structural crisis that has destroyed our profession in Spain and the grotesque use of digital forums —where all racist and violent opinions are permitted on the pretext that they come from the public—, the gypsy people are a common target for bad journalism of the yellowest kind. This “journalism,” with the guise of distance or neutrality, reproduces assimilated topics and does not bother to consult sources on the side of the gypsies, only approaching those offering a sensationalist image and voice.

When in a time of changes and obstacles, such as today, this is the definition of information practices dealing with a collective that has a generations-old topical image and has little effective influence in their favour. We thus find ourselves the current, startling situation. For that reason, giving bad information about the gypsy community becomes routine, an easy thing that has always been done, that is unproblematic, that does not need to change. In spite of some brilliant cases of excellent journalism, most of the times *the*

gypsy matter is only dealt with to further ascribe it to a stigmatized description, since this is the most newsworthy and recognizable aspect.

Crime, marginalization: this is the prominent view through which gypsy stories are framed in the news, which has been turned into a social phenomenon, into something backward, hurtful, anachronistic, a constraint from dark times that is magnified by the media when reporting the latest phenomenon, the immigration of Romanian gypsies who have become the lowest pariahs, a sort of itinerant tribal cancer. They are being talked about and their most miserable members are being exposed. They are being described in the media, and the police or any neighbours are the ones doing it. There are few cases explaining other circumstances, researching about who they are, what they have become. The *norm* is the assumption that the roughest or most picturesque part is representative of the whole, without a deeper analysis, and lacking the will to do it. As a matter of fact, in order to demand a more appropriate and unbiased treatment, we gypsies must make this easier by showing our coherent compromise with change. It is reasonable to think that the progress of gypsies should be promoted, in the first place, from the bosom of the community proper, from gypsy organizations. If gypsy NGOs do not devote themselves to this, we should simply consider them inoperative—to put it mildly—regarding one of the key issues for present-day gypsies: their social image in the new century. If it is a bad one, it not only affects how gypsies are being perceived, but also how we gypsies perceive ourselves.

CONDEMNED TO THE SOCIAL AREA

During a recent interview, Professor Marcel Courthiade, linguist and promoter of the standardization of Romani language, declared to the author of this text that he was still surprised about how little it is known in Spain about the language of the gypsies. As a matter of fact, not many Spaniards know they have millions of potential speakers in Europe and that in Spain it is practically extinct. According to Courthiade, Romani has been persecuted for centuries as a language of demons, of deception for Christians. When asked about the interest, beyond a sentimental one, in its recovery among Spanish gypsies, he answered: “without their own language, gypsies lose their cultural heritage and are condemned to remain a figure in the area of social aid, where they have stood since decades ago and which is an empowering force for racism”. “I would divide the history of European anti-gypsy racism in three main stages”, he continued. According to him, “there is a first main stage of overt racism in Europe, when being a racist was even well-regarded, which lasted until approximately the French Revolution; then, until the Second World War, there was a legal

and *scientific* racism that tried to find an explanation to racism itself, having Nazism as the end of a long process that caused the assassination of half a million gypsies”. The most recent type of racism against the gypsies, Courthiade said, “is based on manipulation, on the negation of culture and identity”.

This is the situation in which we find ourselves now. The majority of media do not guide the people and do not aspire to do so, they just depict them as they can or as it best suits them. Basically, such is the truth, though we may wish for something different. For that reason, many of them are soaked in their worst fears and own reflections, their deficiencies. However, the best of them usually are brave enough to bet —or eventually bet— on their very best, on progress. For the gypsies, the bet on culture, once more according to Courthiade's point of view, is the key to drive the gypsy element into the realm of “identity” and away from the common stigma of misfortune and marginalization. “It is necessary to deal with tradition from a critical perspective by revisiting the history and the language, and, after this, by reinforcing the knowledge of both”, insisted the promoter of contemporary Romani in the interview. Well-meaning reports, those reflecting the bright side of traditional gypsy life, would no longer be an exercise on pyrotechnics and Manichaeism, and biased information would hardly be produced and reproduced. From a cultural standpoint, the concept of *race* would be finally replaced by *ethnicity*, thus allowing for the comprehension that the marginal and folkloric elements do not stem from a gypsy state-of-being, but rather they condition it. The emphasis on culture and the meaningful existence of the Instituto de Cultura Gitana can finally bring into light that tribal or antisocial behaviour of excluded gypsies that is linked to the urban mafias of each country rather than to the gypsies who might be reading this now.

By prioritizing culture in the representation of the gypsy universe, journalists would therefore be forced to disregard topics as an easy resource, and they would be forced to confront issues related to the most important ethnic minority in Spain more seriously and cautiously. In turn, the representatives of this minority would not be able to elude their obligation to explain things as they are to the media. The law, and this is true, already protects gypsies as they do any other citizen. What is still to be achieved is the infusion of such spirit in our daily lives so that both journalists and gypsies get to understand that we have a fundamental obligation to collaborate with honesty and rigour.

REJECTS OR ARTISTS

JUAN DE DIOS RAMÍREZ HEREDIA²

For gypsy organizations, one of the most important objectives, if not the first one, is to change the opinion that the majority of society has about us. And such a change will only become true if two convergent attitudes meet before public opinion: on the one hand, the manifest will of gypsies themselves to overcome centuries of separation; on the other hand, that the media devoted to social communication will actively cooperate by refusing to spread information that in a pejorative context could create or promote an image of gypsies that does not correspond to reality.

The media have an immense power, and it is like that for good and bad. We are either identified with all the vices and antisocial behaviours of the rejects or criminals, or we are described as the best singers, dancers or bullfighters as though these qualities were inherent to our way of being. The first association is as unfair as absurd is the second.

In general terms, journalists would like to treat minorities, gypsies among them, as they would treat any other social group, but many media professionals have come to the conclusion that saying so is easier than doing it...

We Spanish gypsies are larger in number than the population of many regions of the country. Our influence in history, language and culture, and even on some of the customs of our country and of the nationalities that conform it, has been crucial. Taking these ideas into consideration, it would be fair that, from an informative point of view, things would change.

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