Representation of Minorities in the Media

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Content

1. Introduction

In times where (social) media is part of every day life, aswell as an important tool of education, the demand for equal representation of minorities in the media rises.

A 2011 swiss study found that there was a high descripancy in perceptions of representation and participation between migrants. While some subjects – migrants themselves – felt that they were standing in the spotlight, creating a too obvious display of the minority, others felt there was not enough representation. (Trebbe und Schoenhagen 2011, p. 411)

Broadcasting companies like the BBC have already published future goals and „on-air portrayal targets" (BBC Press Office, p. 4) regarding their representation of minorities in TV-shows and general broadcast. The long term expectation: To further equality, showing that minorities are a normal part of society thus deminishing prejudice.

This essay discusses the idea of implementing quotas by law in order to establish equality of representation in German media. First, there will be given background information on minorities and marginalized groups in Germany and in (German) media. Then follows an overview of relevant psychological constructs, a discussion, and ultimately the conclusion to the question

> *Should media, such as newspapers, TV or radio be obliged to improve the representation of minority groups, for example by introducing quotas?*

2. Minorities in Germany

In order to discuss representation of minorities in the media, a defintion of the *term minority* is neccessary, as well as a description of the current situation of minorities in Germany.

The UN defines minorities as follows:

> *A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing*

from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly,
a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, tra-
ditions, religion or language – Francesco Capotorti in 1977 (Office
of the High Commissioner 2010, p. 2)

Minority therefore – as the opposite of majority – discribes a group within a population that is smaller in size, and different in reference to nationality (demographic minority), ethnicity (ethnic minority), faith (religious minority), or in the general more colloquial use of the term also in opinion (political minority), or social factors (social minority – marginalized group) such as sexual identity, disability, age or specific circumstances.

While the term *minority* does not neccessarily include the idea of the sub-group being discriminated against, being part of a *marginalized group* in society implies social stigma and a life outside of the accepted norm. Being associated with both groups is possible, although probably originates from two different factors. (Hradil 2012; Pöttker and Geißler 2005) [1]

Studies on **minoritiy representation in German media** focus mostly on immigrants, migrant workers and refugees because of these groups' size and (historic) importance. Moreover the majority of studies investigate news channels such as newspapers and news broadcasts on TV and radio, rather than fiction (TV shows, movies, advertisements, PR publishings). (Müller 2005, p. 111)

The results of various (meta) studies show that the general portrayal of immigrants and/or migrant workers and/or refugees (in the following paragraphs referred to as minorities) tends to be rather negative or combined with topics with negative connotations such as crime, government spendings or lower levels of the social hierarchy. (Müller 2005, p. 88, p. 112; Geißler and Pöttker 2005, p. 393)

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[1] This assigment primarily contains the term minority to make reading easier, though both groups are being adressed.

3. Influences on Attitude, Behaviour and Decision Making

3.1. Acquiring and Accessing Knowledge

Forming opinions is greatly influenced by the surroundings, the individual perception of the surroundings and the consequences of actions taken. The following psychological phenomena can have impact on human's behaviour and general attitutes.

Observational Learning was first explored by Albert Bandura. The resulst of studies he conducted stated that only a behaviour or action that is (a) conciously perceived by the person, (b) remembered by the person and (c) relevant to that peron's life can truly be learned. In order for the action perceived to *change* the person's behaviour longterm, a positive reinforcement has to follow the action (Wiswede 2012, p. 73).

Mere Exposure Effect is the general hypothesis that a more frequent exposure to a person, action or product will change the attitude towards it. A person or object, perceived as neutral at first, will appear more attractive and similar to well known objects the more frequently the subjects are exposed to it. (Moreland and Zajonc 1982, p. 396) Essentially, proccessing information becomes a modified *self fulfilling prophecy*, similar to the *Confirmation Bias Theory*: (1) Information that is consistant with a pre-existing idea of a product or person is valued much higher than information that is inconistent. (2) Non conforming information will be changed to fit the image of the person and the person's identity. This can create the illusion of (3) complete absence of dissimilarity. Repeated exposure intensifies that feeling. The person is perceived *as similar to me*, and according to the experiments of Moreland and Zajonc (1982) „[…] people who [seem] similar to the subjects [are] regarded as both more likeable and more familiar" (p. 396).

Similar statements have been made by Higgins (op. 1996), who explains that if knowledge has been perceived recently or more frequently, it will be more present and accessible when reacting to a relevant stimulus. Meaning that the more frequently something is experienced, the higher the chances of it becoming a relevant standard (Higgins op. 1996, p. 164). This effect translates to the media world as **Agenda-Setting-Theory.** Bonfadelli and Marr (2008) describe it to be the most important role of the media: By selecting the content they want to present

and what aspects to focus on, the media decides what topics become popular or known to the public. Depending on the personal involvement certain topics and opinions get adopted without questioning, or valued higher depending on the frequency and vividness of a topic.

3.2. Heuristics

Similar to what Higgins and the Agenda-Setting-Theory discribe, **Heuristics** explain that desicions and opinions are signifiantly influenced by paterns and rules people establish in situations, in order to be able to make decisions quickly and correctly, given the circumstances. (Wiswede 2012, p.30) Heuristics can lead to a large amount of different biases and systematic errors, as rational background knowledge is not always considered. They therefore can have a negative influence on perception and rememberance of knowledge, as well as decision making. (Kahneman and Tversky 1982, p. 4) In their book *Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristic and Biases* (1982) Kahneman et al. discribe three main heuristics:

Representativeness Heuristic: Assessing a situation based on „[…] the degree to which A is representative of B, that is, by the degree to which A resembles B" (Kahneman and Tversky 1982, p. 4). The realistic validitiy of the judgement is not being considered in the decision making process. (p. 4-11)

Anchor Heuristic: Every judgement is (subconciously) based on previous occurances – so called anchors. „[In surveys t]he initial value, or starting point, may be suggested by the formulation of the problem, or it may be the result of a partial computation" (Kahneman and Tversky 1982, p. 14).

Availability Heuritic: When assessing the likelihood of an event or a risk, people are mainly influenced „[…] by the ease with which instances or occurrences can be brought to mind" (Kahneman and Tversky 1982, p. 11). This relates to Higgins' statement mentioned before. Information that is easily accessible is valued higher, the event is judged more likely to (co-/re-)occur. The accessability and retreivability of information is influenced by the frequency and recency of perception, as well as the individual search set and imaginability. (p. 11-14)

The discussion following in Chapter Four will focus on Availabiliy Heuristic rather than Representativeness and Anchor Heuristic. The latter are discibed here in order to explain the general idea of Heuristics.

3.3. Reactance Theory

„Any elimination or threat of elimination of freedom to choice [...] can be perceived as a threat to personal freedom, thus producing reactance" (Palmer and Wright 2012, p.141).
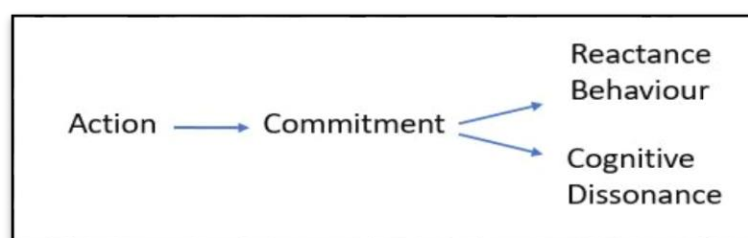

Chart 1: Reactance Theory (Own chart based on Wiswede 2012, S. 89–90)

The chart above describes the basic structure of Brehm's **Reactance Theory** based on Wiswede (2012). An **action** that is implemented out of control of the subject – such as censorship or laws – and perceived as illegitimate, or not transparent in monitoring nor neccessity can create reactance. One factor that determines the grade of reactance is **commitment**. If the action restricts freedom in a sector that the subject is very engaged in, frequently exposed to, or if it directly restricts their freedom of choice, it will most likely be followed by **reactance behaviour**. On the other side, if the action does not directly or just slightly affect the subject, **cognitive dissonance** can occur where eather the effected sector is being devaluated, or the neccessity of the law/ censorship/ etc. is valorized. (Palmer and Wright 2012, p. 141; Wiswede 2012, p. 89-90)

4. Discussion

The importance of the media as „[…] one source for adolescent identity development and social identity gratifications" (Ellithorpe and Bleakley 2016, p. 1426) has been broadly accepted, as the daily use of mobile phones, the internet, TV and radio has become normality in Germany. With that normality the power of media increases: decisions and opinions can be influenced on a large scale by the way

and frequency that events and opinions are being portrayed (see Chapter Three). By choosing content, the media can decide what topics will become broadly known, and has the power to make certain topics a standard or norm by broadcasting it frequently.

As explained in the introduction of this assignment the goal of quotas in media – as in any other segment of life – is not solely to assure equal representation, but more importantly to indiretly use the media as an educational tool to overcome prejudice that comes with the *unknown*. Long term a more tolerant, global and inclusive society is supposed to form. The idea: by making sure broadcasting companies are obliged to present society proportionally and realistically, people will take notice and acknowledge minorities and marginalized groups as part of their cultural group. This assumption can be based on the Mere-Exposure-Effect and Agenda-Setting-Theory: The more frequently people are exposed to certain content, the more it becomes the norm and a relevant standard. Following, the knowledge is more present, even valued higher or more important due to availability heuristics.

But in terms of preventing - or better: counteracting – discrimination, quotas may not help as presentation alone will not necessarily result in acceptance or change of attitude. More important is the context in which minorities are presented, as well as the roles they play. This is especiall significant when talking about representation of marginalized groups, as per definition, they go hand in hand with bias and stigma towards them (see Chapter Two).

As referenced in Chapter Two, minorities are already present in the media but predominantly in a negative context, which techniqually could meet future quotas but not neccessarily the goal of working against prejudice and discrimination. To achieve that, quotas for minorities in the media would also need to be defined in terms of content, roles, characteristics of the role, perhaps even opinion that is represented, averages of on-air-time, etc.

In this context freedom of press can not be ignored. Having a neutral unbiased press/media is essential to educating and sharing information with the public. By undermining the freedom of press, the credibility of the media will suffer damage. The content and the media scene will be questioned, making it difficult to use it

as the important tool of education that it is, essentially creating a boomerang effect.

Same goes for channels that were against quotas in the first place. Considering the worst case, they might portray minorities as requested, but only in minor or negative roles (TV - this would mostly apply to right-wing, conservative or certain religious media), subconciously select negative content to present (radio, news) or simply publish their opinion on quotas on the internet, possibly conducing reacctance behaviour. This might cause negative publicity that again would influence the opinion of the public: As mentioned in Chapter Three, availability heuristics can result in people valueing or overestimate the impact of events, topics or knowledge that they have been exposed to frequently or recently. With implementation of quotas huge public protest could arise. Not only by broadcasting companies or news reporters, but pushed by that also by the public who will demand freedom of press and will feel restricted, even though the difference in the media won't be hugely noticable to the average consumer, and techniqually even benefit society. This originates from the perceived loss of control and illegitimacy of the decision.

Refering to Bandura's observational learning theory (Chapter Three), only content that is easily applicibal to a person's life, and content in which an action is followed by positive reinforcement can truely change a person's behaviour – therefore portraying positive content in connection with inclusion in the media, as well as rewarding inclusion and tolerance in schools and homes would have a greater impact on the mindset of society than obligatory quotas.

Considering the aspects mentioned above, quotas alone will not change the situation of minorities being discriminated against or stereotypes being established further, but rather create reactance, therefore more negative publicity in connection with minorities. Instead, an alternative to quotas by law could be a voluntary agreement between the main broadcasting companies to establish and further equality in representation and content as well as to fight discrimination and stereotypes. The voluntary aspect would counteract the reactance of the journalists and the public, perhaps even work towards the opposite. Since equality is a modern value people are willing to work for – only without being restricted in their

perceived freedom – there will be pressure on the broadcasting companies to be part of the agreement to avoid protest thus negative publicity for themselves.

Having discussed the possible consequences of implementing quotas on representation of minorities in Germany, one problem remains: Especially on TV there is a broad variety of movies, shows, etc. that have been produced in different countries. Implementing quotas in Germany would eather mean (1) not to broadcast international content that does not meet the criteria, again restricting the freedom of press similar to a censorship and creating reactance, eventually resulting in people using private streaming services rather than public TV channels, or (2) broadcasting them anyway – eather way making the implementation of quotas appear arbitrary and undermining the government that introduced them.

5. Conclusion

The surroundings have great power over the way people, objects or actions are perceived, as thoughts can be easily influenced by the frequency, connotation and consequences of actions presented in every day life as well as the media. Using media to teach about the variety of society is one of the first things that comes to mind in order to establish equality.

Although setting standards for representation only seems appropriate in a modern, global and educated country in the 21st century, quotas for minorities in the media alone seem to be inaplicable in this context. Yes, equality in media representation should be improved, e.g. by a representation agreement. But implementing obligatory quotas alone will not treat the problem, only the symptoms, as well as create more negative publicity in connection with minorities. If the general idea is to diminish prejudice and discrimination against minorities, the content is just as relevant as the frequency in which they are portrayed.

So in order to truely implement change, educating children early on and openly discussing diversity in an unbiased manner, and acknowledging and rewarding tolerance should remain the main tool.

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