

Chapter 9. Polish immigrants and the Icelandic media

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The media play an important and special role in the society – they convey the reality and at the same time influence it. Whether the national media facilitate or delay integration depends on the chosen media policies and the contents of the media. 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. Immigrant population has increased remarkably during the last ten years, and immigrants are now around 8% of the population. This chapter analyses media usage among Poles, the largest immigrant group in Iceland, how they experience media coverage in relation to language skills, and how it affects their integration into the new society.

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 multiplied, rising to 9% in 2009. From 2003, the economy witnessed an unprecedented growth followed by concomitant labour shortages, making Iceland an attractive destination for migrants. Following the financial crisis in Iceland a number of migrants have returned to their home countries or moved elsewhere, but clearly not as many as might have been expected. Apparently a majority of recent immigrants in Iceland intend to remain in the country – being in the beginning of 2010 – 8.2% (Statistics Iceland 2009, 2010). The Icelandic integration policy, accepted in 2007, is based on the general ideas of multiculturalism, and learning the language is considered the key to integration (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007). With integration, the society tries to meet the immigrants' needs enabling them to become

active citizens in the society (Christiansen 2004). Integration works in both directions, implying equal rights and obligations. The society has to take responsibility for assuring that immigrants and ethnic minorities have the same rights as others in the society (Klute 2006).

National language is an important element of national identity (see e.g. Skaptadóttir 2004) and the media have a vital role in constructing the shared ideas and values of the society. Special emphasis is on protecting the Icelandic language – knowledge of the language is the key to Icelandic society and can be a decisive factor in the successful integration of immigrants into Icelandic society (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). The emphasis on Icelandic language is evident, according to research about the influence of the Icelandic media on the self image of Asian teenagers living in Iceland (Hlöðversdóttir 2005). The results show that Icelanders are impatient towards those who do not speak Icelandic fluently. None of the young Asian participants in the research said they considered themselves Icelandic, neither those who moved to Iceland, nor those who were born in Iceland and were raised there. The reality of the Asians is interwoven with the media, and they receive most of their information through the media. They don't see themselves in the media, and therefore don't experience themselves as Icelanders. These results are comparable to other results (e.g. Christiansen 2004; Alghasi 2009) showing that immigrants experience themselves excluded from the society they live in, from the dominant culture and political experience. A parliamentary resolution about immigration policies recommended in 2008 that the media should realistically represent immigrants as a part of society, as the media have an important informative role in the society (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security 2008). Icelandic society has powerful media that mediate the opinion of the majority, and media usage per person is among the highest in Europe (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2005). Icelandic public television, which belongs to everyone and is supposed to serve all people, hasn't formulated any policy as to whether they should serve any minority groups at all. According to a research from 2005 (Hlöðversdóttir 2005), TV executives in Iceland agreed that the reason for not having a policy is the small population of migrants. Because such a large group of immigrants have moved to Iceland in the last few years, their insufficient skill in the Icelandic language makes it difficult for them to follow the Icelandic

media (Skaptadóttir 2008). The largest news rooms only produce news in Icelandic, but two monthly newspapers are published in English, and a few news websites offer news summaries in English. The Intercultural Centre published a quarterly newspaper translated into several languages and the news website offered news in Polish. The newspaper no longer exists, and the website was closed in May 2009 because of the recession. The Polish news forum informacje.is is efficient in translating news into Polish.

Research on the media and migration is scarce in Iceland, although Media Watch in Iceland has monitored media coverage about immigrants, and according to their report from 2007, one third of the coverage was in relation to crime and police matters (Creditinfo 2007). According to a study carried out among Poles, the largest immigrant group in Iceland, they consider the media discourse about them, and foreigners in general, as negative, and the discourse is often discriminatory (Ólaf & Zielińska 2010). Research also reveals that foreigners have been molded as a threatening stereotype in the discourse in Iceland in relation to organized crime and unlawful activities, such as rape and gang fighting (Ólafsson 2008). Unfortunately, it is common in many European countries that discussions about immigrants are too often centered on crimes and prejudice, which results in depreciation towards them. This is one of the main reasons why immigrants choose to acquire information from the international media (Alghasi 2009; Horsti 2008; Klute 2006; Christiansen 2004). Georgiou (2007) believes the reason is that there is too large a gap between media producers and consumers.

The same year as the integration policy was approved in Iceland, it was stated in a report by ECRI, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (2007), that the private broadcast television is guilty of stereotypical remarks and negative discussion about immigrants. In a new report by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2009) they reaffirm their concern about the racial prejudice and lack of tolerance amplified in the media. They suggest that the Icelandic media should scrutinize their reporting, to avoid contributing to the unpleasant atmosphere towards minority groups. ECRI recommended that the Icelandic government should participate in a debate and discussion with the national media. This has also been confirmed by Icelandic research – that foreigners have been portrayed as threatening stereotypes in discourse in

Iceland, and in particular that Eastern European men are stereotyped as connected to organized crime, rapes and fighting (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 Kaldal, the editor of *Fréttablaðið*, a free daily newspaper distributed to every house in the capital area (Kaldal 2007, p. 22). According to 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 where immigration is more recent, 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 claim that they are just registering facts, the presentation of news is by its very nature selective (ter Wal 2003).

Too often the media is stuck with outdated ideas and stereotypes of migrants and foreigners, as the aliens that bring unfamiliar and exotic ideas and cultural traditions into the new country. Unfortunately, according to the International Federation of Journalism (2007), some media encourage prejudice and subjectivity rather than fight against it. Consequently, the media publishes inaccurate, provocative and one-sided news that encourage negative propaganda towards foreigners and other races, and intolerance towards them.

Method

This research is a part of my doctoral research project about presentation of immigrants in the media. The data collection was done in 2008 among Polish people living in Iceland. The survey was based on a convenience sample and conducted with migrants of Polish origin¹ in various companies in Iceland with a remarkable amount of Polish workers. In addition, the survey was also carried out through the Internet by email lists and through

¹ Polish migrants were 11 000 or 45% of the population of migrants in 2008. A migrant is defined as a foreign national who has settled for a long term in Iceland but was born overseas, or both of whose parents were born overseas or have held foreign citizenship at some time (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007).

the Polish consulate. In total, 649 Poles answered the questionnaire about their media usage and their perception of discrimination. The sample reflects age and residence among Poles in Iceland. As many Poles have lived in Iceland for a short period and have a limited knowledge of Icelandic the questionnaire was translated into Polish.

Language skills and media usage

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 colleagues. Therefore, they were sometimes good at communicating with others, but not able to read newspapers. The majority of Poles – roughly 70% – want to learn more Icelandic. There is a significant correlation between newspaper reading and own assessment of Icelandic language skills. Among those who have good knowledge of Icelandic, 64% read papers daily, while among those with moderate Icelandic skills it is 46%, and only 33% among those who have little knowledge of the language. Even though their Icelandic was not always good, almost 70% of respondents monitored newspapers, especially Fréttablaðið. Most often they read currency exchange rates, weather forecasts, advertisements and skimmed through pictures and headlines. Six in every ten read the Intercultural Centre newspaper, however, the paper was translated to Polish among other languages. Television is the medium that is least used among participants. Participants watch Polish television a lot more, but almost 60% have access to Polish stations via satellite. The preference in television watching is news; both on Icelandic and Polish television, but among those that have access to Polish television 96% watch news, compared to 70% who watch news on Icelandic television. Next comes entertainment both in Icelandic and Polish television, followed by sports. There was a significant positive correlation between watching Polish TV and the length of stay in Iceland. The fact that so many participants watch Polish television news is characteristic for transnational cultivation – they maintain a bifocal vision of reality by watching Polish television (e.g. Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska 2008; Skaptadóttir 2004, 2008; Horsti 2008).

Access to the Internet among participants is very high, as 96% have access and almost half of the participants use the Internet. Even though so many have access only 22% use Icelandic websites every day, or almost daily. The proportion of those using Polish websites is almost four times more than of those using Icelandic websites, and around 80% use Polish websites daily or almost daily. The Internet is more important for acquiring information about the homeland than seeking information about the country the participants live in. Compared to the Internet access among participants and the use of Polish websites, the Internet compensates the lack of information in the national media, plus special news needs.

The better Poles assessed their Icelandic skills, the more negative they thought the coverage was about Polish people in Icelandic media. More than 43% of those who assessed their Icelandic language skills as high thought the discourse about Poles was negative, and 56% of them thought the discourse about foreigners in general was unfair. 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 image of Poles

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 about the image of foreigners – roughly 43% from the first group thought it was negative, compared to one third from the second group. In both of these questions, the correlation was significant. 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.

Conclusions

To summarize, the media usage among Polish people living in Iceland is quite varied, both in regards to Icelandic and Polish media. The media is used for various purposes: listening to music on the radio, watching news on TV, keeping up with advertisements, including classified ads, and weather and currency news in newspapers. A considerable amount of advertising has been published in Polish in the newspapers, and according to the results it reaches the market group. At the time when the survey was conducted, the value of the Icelandic krona was changing rapidly so it doesn't come as a surprise that participants kept track of exchange rates. The Internet is most likely used to make up for the lack of information, plus to obtain news for individual needs. These results are consistent with other research showing that Polish people in Iceland live in a transnational environment.

The media discourse about immigrants in Iceland is generally considered to be negative by Poles. The more Poles understood Icelandic, the longer they stayed in Iceland and the more frequently they read newspapers – the more they considered media discourse to be discriminatory. However, they often considered the discourse to be more negative about foreigners in general than about Poles in particular, and in interviews they especially pointed to the unfavorable portrayal of Lithuanians (Ólafss & Zielinska 2010). This reaffirms the aforementioned research results about threatening stereotypes being molded of Eastern European men (Ólafsson 2008). The results point also 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 (Ólafss & Zielinska 2010). 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. It is likely that media leaders are not aware of the scope of immigrants usage of the media, especially if we compare usage to the way they are represented in the media. Without a doubt, Georgiou (2007) made a valid point when she said that there is too large a gap between media producers and media consumers. The Polish news website that *dv.is* offered was surely a positive enterprise, but because of the recession it was shut

down. Also the Intercultural Centre quit publishing their newspaper that was read by 60% of the survey's participants. Polish people in Iceland are a deprived and underprivileged minority group despite the fact that they are by far the largest group of immigrants (Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska 2008; Skaptadóttir 2008). It is generally believed – both in Nordic countries and worldwide – that learning the language is the key element to adjusting to a new society (e.g. Skaptadóttir 2004; Hlöðversdóttir 2008). As stated in the Icelandic integration policy, knowledge of the Icelandic language is the key to the Icelandic society, and can be a decisive factor in the successful integration of immigrants (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). However, 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.

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