"Creating a New Roma Identity": TV Production as an Alternative Site for Identification and Identity Negotiation

AZETA HATEF[1]
Emerson College, USA

Romani people are often portrayed through long-enduring cultural stereotypes in media, perpetuating myths of criminality, nomadism, and deviance. Such representations have received extensive analysis; however, additional work is needed on the responses by communities to these portrayals, including developing more diverse representations for Roma. Using a political economic analysis that considers the structures and practices contributing to the exclusion of Romani voice within media in the Czech Republic, this article examines the production of media by Roma, for Roma, as a critical intervention into an exclusive media environment through interviews with key community organizers and observations of various gatherings. This article emphasizes the tensions and opportunities of minority media production, paying close attention to how organizers identify media as a critical site to articulate belonging, which works in tandem alongside other activist efforts. At the same time, this article addresses the challenges of the media production including resistance by mainstream media, financial barriers, and the possible reification of marginality by a production that exists outside of the mainstream purview.

Keywords: Roma, Czech Republic, representation, minority media production, identity

In January 2019, the Czech Republic aired a new comedy program, *Most!* (Reitler, 2019), an eight-part scripted series about the Czech town of the same name. Reactions to the show varied, particularly with the representation of several Romani characters in the program (Albert, 2019). Though some have welcomed the program as an opportunity to see Roma on television and find humor in the depictions of characters and storylines, others have condemned the program for its stereotypical and damaging portrayal of Roma.

Most! (Reitler, 2019) was not the first time that television representation of the Roma in the Czech Republic was viewed as problematic; the program's critics pointed to the unfair representation of Roma in the program as part of an enduring situation. As a Romani reviewer of the program noted, "Among the

Czech productions it is difficult for us to find any film in which Romani people are not depicted as 'Gypsies' living on the edge of legality or poverty" (Berkyová, 2019, para. 18). One activist, Monika Mihaličková, poignantly discusses the current challenges of Romani characters in Czech television:

> The problem is not in the series. It's in the fact that so few Romani people are ever depicted on television—and when they are, it's always stereotypically. . . . How much space do we even get on Czech Television so that we, as Romani people, don't always have to be ashamed by what we see on TV? (Albert, 2019, para. 10)

This quote captures the essence of the Czech media environment, where Roma are often absent in media, and in the cases in which Roma do appear in storylines, these representations are deeply stereotypical—a literature that I unpack in the following section. At a structural level, there are few mediated spaces that welcome Romani voices and experiences in the mainstream.

Much research on media representations of Roma exists (e.g., Messing & Bernáth, 2017; Schneeweis & Foss, 2017; Vidra & Fox, 2014); however, additional work on the responses by communities to these representations, as well as the possibilities that diverse representations serve for Roma in particular contexts, is needed, and this article contributes to the development of this work. Specifically, this article explores the creation of an online TV channel by a group of Romani organizers in the Czech Republic. Considering the structures and practices contributing to the exclusion of Romani voices within Czech media, this article examines the production of media by Roma, for Roma, as a critical intervention into an exclusive media environment. This article engages the complexity of both ethnography and political economic analysis to articulate the cultural politics of minority media production and representation. This approach focuses on the multiple ways and sites in which identity and media power are produced and negotiated. The importance of this online TV channel is highlighted by the conversations with creators of this project demonstrating how this production is created with the intention of negotiating one's individual and collective identity and by offering diverse media representations of Romani experience. At the same time, this article addresses the challenges of the media production including resistance by mainstream media, financial barriers, and the possible reification of marginality by a production that exists outside of the mainstream purview.

Roma in the Media

Roma are presented in the media through a limited framework, one that not only limits the diversity of representation but also emphasizes problematic behaviors and associations (Kroon, Kluknavska, Vliegenthart, & Boomgaarden, 2016). Media often present Roma through long-enduring cultural stereotypes—for example, the "lustful Gypsy woman," "myth of nomadism," and the "poor but happy Gypsies" (Pusca, 2015, p. 329). The trope of the seductive Romani woman is found in countless storylines (Schneeweis, 2016). Schneeweis and Foss (2017) argue, "The media have portrayed Gypsy women both as oppressed and as free spirited" (p. 1148). Such limited representations often portray women as culpable in the violence inflicted on them (which typically happens in these stories) and contributes to the ongoing objectification of Romani women that continues to exist in contemporary media texts (Matthews, 2018). Richardson and Ryder (2012) argue, "The negative images used to portray Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in

some sections of the media serve as a tool to highlight their 'otherness' and their so-called deviancy from societal norms" (p. 171).

Beaudoin (2015) suggests that television programs and popular films in the United States have built storylines around Romani characters. However, these characters are often presented as "sociopathic murderers and kidnappers, secretive and backwards, distrustful and suspicious, and sexual predators" (Beaudoin, 2015, p. 313) as characters are limited within the parameters of criminality and possession of paranormal abilities. Criminality is a prominent feature of Romani representation within news media (Okely, 2014; Richardson, 2014) as well as scripted and reality programming. These television programs promise a glimpse into the lives of "tight-knit" Romani families and reinforce deeply held stereotypes of "tradition" and "nomadism." For media, the emphasis on deviance is a convenient and well-established trope and, with its emphasis on sex, criminality, and exoticism, a way to attract viewers. The impact of such images may be especially influential for people and places that have limited interactions with the Roma. Discussing Roma and media representation, Beaudoin (2015) argues,

> When there is a vacuum of accurate information on Romani realities, compounded by historic and mythical Gypsy stereotypes, entertainment media fills a factual void; in this way, minor characters, or even fleeting references in fictional shows end up serving as the basis for understanding and categorizing an entire ethnicity. Similarly, for many people, the "reality" show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* constitutes the whole of the body of knowledge regarding Roma. (p. 315)

Such images also naturalize the separation of Roma from their respective societies—a distance that media often use to attract viewers. The discursively constructed "Gypsy way of life" is positioned at odds with the culture of the majority, suggesting that the two cannot coexist, contributing to the further marginalization of Roma. Comănescu (2015) suggests, "Because Romanies tend to be defined in terms of behavior, rather than other characteristics, almost inevitably any antisocial behavior will be pinned down to some innate characteristic of their culture" (p. 5). These media representations have serious implications for governmental, economic, and social practices. As discussed by Schneeweis and Foss (2017), "If people regard Gypsies as violent and aggressive (as perpetuated in the media), they may be more likely to discriminate against them in employment, housing, event rental, air travel, and other important interactions" (p. 1164). The result of such media-reinforced practices contributes to the dehumanization of Roma. Dalsklev and Kunst's (2015) experimental study found that "reading a newspaper article focusing on allegedly low hygienic standards among the Roma increased the feeling of disgust, which, in turn, led to higher degrees of dehumanization and support of deportation" in Norway (p. 28). As this research illustrates, media representations may influence attitudes and behaviors. Tremlett, Messing, and Kóczé (2017) suggest "one-sided and derogatory" (p. 642) representations are common within media and function to bolster the racist appeals of populist politicians in locations where the Roma are a significant part of the population. Such anti-Roma policies and rhetoric are particularly enduring and prominent in the Czech Republic, echoed by the country's highest officials, including President Miloš Zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who publicly perpetuate divisions among Roma and non-Roma ("Czech President Defends," 2018). This type of cultural power is contested within mediated spaces, as audiences are "invited to construct a sense of who 'we' are in relation to who 'we' are not" (Cottle, 2000, p. 2).

Representation is a site in which identity exists, and as Hall (1994) notes, it enables "us to discover places from which to speak" (p. 237) and challenge cultural power. It is within media that identities are produced through "becoming as well as being" (Hall, 1994, p. 225)—that is, the "play" between histories and futures. For identities are constantly in motion, responding to the histories, cultures, and power structures that surround them. And it is through these "dominant regimes of representation" (Hall, 1994, p. 225) that groups are Othered and may come to see themselves as Other. Echoing this point, hooks (1992) argues,

> Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves. (p. 5)

For non-Roma audiences, there are countless media representations that audiences may identify with and futures to imagine. However, for Roma, media often present one-dimensional experiences and characters, which limit possibilities of identification and imagined futures. The invisibility and stereotyping of Roma in mainstream Czech media function to further marginalize them, rendering their experiences and lives unimportant. This notion demonstrates the status conferral function of the media, which Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) describe as the media enhancing the "authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status" (p. 235) through media coverage. This recognition via media coverage suggests to audiences that people, groups, policies, and views are worthy of public discussion. The sheer lack of serious coverage of topics related to Roma illustrates that mainstream Czech media do not consider these stories and, by extension, these lives, significant topics of public discussion. These factors contribute to a "discursive exclusion" (Vecino, Ferrer, & Dallemagne, 2015, p. 87), wherein Roma are denied authority over the construction of mediated experiences and identities.

As the case with most marginalized groups, there is little space in mainstream culture welcoming counternarratives. If mainstream media do not offer diverse portrayals or the possibility of significant counternarratives, where can these be found? As with many groups, one attempt to address deficits in media representation is through indigenous/alternative media that are produced and created by the underserved groups (Lysaght, 2010). Such efforts are underway by Roma activists and community leaders in the Czech Republic who articulate their own relationship to mainstream media as well as look to create their own mediated representations.

Using a case study of a local attempt to create minority media, this article sets out to address the following questions: How do activists respond to the limitations and barriers in editorial control with constructing Roma representation in mainstream Czech media? In what ways can media created by Roma for Roma combat stereotypical portrayals of Roma and serve as a site to negotiate identities? What are the affordances and drawbacks of a media production that exists within a peripheral mediated space?

Methodology

The data engaged in this article was gathered as part of a larger ethnographic project investigating media engagement among Roma in the Czech Republic. Fieldwork began in Spring 2016, with trips to the

Czech Republic throughout this time, and a yearlong stay in the country from September 2017 to July 2018. This article engages specifically the interviews with three key community organizers and activists who currently work within media and have extensive experience working with and/or alongside Czech media productions. All three are Roma and heavily involved in various activist and community organizing efforts, where their professional work also centers Romani rights through collaboration and employment at various governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Two of these individuals are the founding members of the online TV channel that is the main activity in the analysis. Drawing from Kraidy (2003), this article examines the various political, economic, cultural, and symbolic elements that are in conversation and tension with one another.

The data are gathered primarily through formal in-depth interviews as well as informal conversations and observations at multiple sites throughout the country, and specifically in Prague and Brno. I connected with interlocutors at various public gatherings to better understand their community-building efforts, one of which focuses on media production. Heavily involved in various activist efforts, I observed organizational practices and gatherings around protests, cultural celebrations, and the recording of a pilot show for the channel developed by two of these individuals. This provided further insight into how activists think through the role of media in negotiating Romani identity and belonging, and further situates the development of this online TV channel within a larger discussion of Romani rights. The development of this online TV channel is one way in which these activists contextualize and respond to the struggles of accessing and controlling Romani stories within the Czech media system. Analysis of interview data consisted of multiple and close readings of transcriptions. Themes developed through an open-coding process, where I clustered keywords and topics (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These data were supported by observations of various gatherings over an extended time.

It is also important to note my positionality, as an Afghan American, U.S.-born, and educated woman. The ways in which I was read and how I expressed these identities were shaped by the environments around me. The Czech Republic is a relatively homogenous country, meaning that my physical appearance immediately positioned me as an outsider (as I was often read as Roma), and while this posed challenges within non-Roma communities (e.g., routinely surveilled in public spaces), this allowed for rich conversations with participants. While my position as an outsider to Czech society created connections with several interlocutors, as we shared stories with one another, I remained aware of my identities and position as a researcher, and, as Schneeweis (2016) writes, "I am conscious of the practice of articulating 'original,' repressed voices, of speaking for the *other,* of articulating Romani practices and cultures for a non-Romani audience" (p. 93). Following this point, I adopt Couldry's (2003) "reversibility of the principle" in which "every attempt to describe others must allow them the complexity of voice that one requires to be acknowledged in oneself" (p. 49). Exploring how Romani voices are often marginalized within the Czech media environment, this article engages the complexity of ethnography to better understand the logics of minority media production through both interviews with key figures in the production of this online TV channel and analysis of the cultural, organizational, and economic factors in which this production operates within. This article was designed in accordance with and received approval from the Institutional Review Board. To maintain the confidentiality of those participating this this research, names have been changed.

Findings

The findings focus on three interrelated themes: (1) how Roma in the Czech Republic are often denied construction over their mediated identities, thereby highlighting the desire and need for a production that centers Romani voice and experience; (2) "creating a new Roma identity," which focuses on the development of television programming to connect diverse groups through shared language and fair representations; and (3) the challenges of minority media production existing outside the mainstream media space and the possibility of such a production reifying a marginal position. The findings examine "the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of the production of meaning" (Hardy, 2014, p. 7) to better understand some of the challenges and opportunities in developing media for Roma, by Roma.

"It's Everything About Us, Without Us."

In one of our conversations, Jana, a prominent Romani activist and creator of the online TV channel, says, "We are officially Czech, but by [the] majority of Czech[s], we are not felt as being Czech." This sentiment is shared by many Roma in the Czech Republic, negotiating an identity that is situated between repeatedly being denied Czech-ness and acknowledging aspects of Roma identity, which is demonized and define whole communities. Jana discusses how Roma are excluded from Czech society in systematic ways and suggests that one of the main problems is discourse, "we need to change that we are not just a topic." Jana's partner in this production, Marek, who is also a Romani activist, shares this view. Roma have been excluded from the construction of Roma identity within media; as one of the organizers argues, Roma are a topic of discussion, but in ways that further marginalize communities. Jakub, a Romani activist and artist, suggests that when Roma are presented in the media, as a group, they are talked *about* rather than talked *with* or engaged in dialogue, demonstrating the intentional exclusion of Roma from discussions about their experiences and the struggle between Roma and non-Roma over representation. Jakub says, "Now we don't have . . . voice in our media. It's everything about us, without us." Jakub shares the example of a debate format talk show on a Czech broadcast, where spokespeople are chosen who reinforce, rather than challenge stereotypes. Discussing the Romani guests selected for these televised debates, Jakub says they have strong accents that are "really comic[al] for non-Roma." This perspective illustrates the way mainstream media attempt to present Roma as "uneducated"—as in, for example, an exaggerated Roma accent or the cultural connotations of such an accent—and further, suggests a malicious intent to devalue this experience by making fun of Roma. He continues, "They don't give the voice [to] educated Roma who can be the partner in the debate. . . . This is not good for us." These struggles over representation between Roma and non-Roma reflect the social position that Roma occupy within Czech society and struggles over the construction of meaning (Louw, 2001). Organizers like Jana, Marek, and Jakub recognize the potential of media in addressing concerns and challenging one-dimensional portrayals of Roma. Jana says, "So, I think that topics of Roma identity is crucial for the whole community, for anyone who is thinking about media—this sense of creating something." These organizers also note the challenges in combating this situation, specifically at that level of production, where there are few, if any, Roma who work in mainstream media production, especially in decision-making positions.

Organizers often had first-hand experience with Czech media. Jana, who had worked for a prominent mainstream media production, spoke of her coworkers lacking the cultural understanding and

sensitivity needed to work with diverse communities. Recalling a specific moment when a member of the media production offended an elder, Jana continues, "Czech people are not very [pause], they just don't know how to adapt when it comes to acting with someone who is a different culture." She mentions a number of instances in which the mostly non-Roma production team would arrive to a location and lack the cultural awareness to meaningfully connect with Roma. This speaks to the dilemma of the disconnect of a predominantly non-Roma-based production culture attempting to represent a culture about which they have little insider knowledge or exposure: in other words, outside of their worldview. Nevertheless, it is non-Roma often constructing media representations of Roma. Jana mentions this as something that often comes upon among Roma, "[non-Roma] speak about us in just a certain perspective which we don't like." We see here, as Louw (2001) notes, "people are positioned differently by the power relationships into which they are embedded, and these positions impact on the access individuals have to media production and circulation" (p. 3). As a result, Roma want a place at the mediated table to shape how they are represented in media. For these organizers, it is crucial that media productions employ Roma and allies who are able to present topics related to Roma fairly. In response to the damaging depictions of Roma in mainstream media and the lack of Romani voices at the production stage, these organizers are finding alternative spaces to produce content.

Creating Space for Roma Voice and Media

Early in our conversations, Jana discussed the need for new mediated spaces, saying, "Opening with fact that we need, we want to discuss, we want to communicate, we need space for us, like Roma, we need it for us." She goes on to describe how some non-Roma do not want to communicate with Roma in the process of media production, which makes creating such a space for dialogue all the more significant. The need for Roma-produced media both for Roma and for communication between Roma and non-Roma is emphasized. Groups have been denied access to mainstream media, which has led to a narrow range of stereotypical portrayals and an emphasis on ideologically problematic messages. As mainstream media access is limited and representational tendencies crystalize, these Romani organizers are coming together to create media with their voices and experiences central to the production structure and programming content. They want projects that offer diversity, including entertainment genres and are accessible. As community organizers involved in various efforts, they understand that struggles related to accessing and controlling media representations are tied to struggles for belonging. For it is in the articulation of meaning within these representations that Roma may identify additional sites to negotiate identities and belongingness.

"Creating a New Roma Identity" Through Television

Media production by Romani organizers for their communities challenges how Roma identity is traditionally constructed and encourages identity negotiations from the ground up, meaning by Roma. This approach demonstrates what hooks (1989) refers to as "talk back," which allows groups to create their own representations and to speak to the "structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities" (as cited in Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002, p. 21). The types of programs the organizers are developing focus on representations that reflect Roma reality and depart from one-dimensional portrayals. This is not suggesting that negative representations should be replaced with positive ones, but rather portrayals reflecting Romani diversity should be included in media. As Ross and Playdon (2001)

suggest, "minority audiences do not want special favours in terms of portrayal but rather would like to see their many and diverse selves and their different lives represented with more balance" (p. xiv). During the planning stages, Jana and Marek discuss various programming options, including a show on "invisible superheroes" highlighting the everyday lives of Roma. As an added benefit, producers of this show hope that it may build pride in communities through the presentation of everyday people being seen as superheroes in their communities, challenging the limited representations of Roma frequently found in the media like the "poor but happy Gypsy." In a conversation with Marek, I raise the concern of negative media representations of Roma in Czech media. In response to this, Marek shares that he plans to develop a sitcom-style show—which he has already run as a theater production—to combat these representations, saying, "It has to be a normal sitcom, like *Friends*." It is interesting to note that Marek refers to these productions as "normal sitcoms." At the surface, this sitcom-style program may appear trivial; however, this production may hold transformational potential for communities. I ask Marek to explain the topic of the sitcom, to which he responds, "Oh, the topic is that we are creating a new Roma identity. This is it." He goes on to share that characters will face situations like any sitcom character and that their "identity" will be Roma. Marek's comments touch on several important points about the purpose of this production: (1) the idea of "creating a new Roma identity," which is further discussed below, and (2) presenting Roma in roles that depart from stereotypical portrayals navigating the same situations as non-Roma, which functions to normalize Romani lived experiences. The production promises a more nuanced perspective of life for Roma in the Czech Republic to provide a site for recognition and inclusion.

In one of our early conversations, Jana tells me that she believes entertainment programming, at times, is more effective than other activist efforts. She shares an example from the television program *Výměna manželek* (*The Wife Swap*; Kadeřábek, Mádle, & Křenová, 2005), saying, "I've seen two or three times [a] Roma family . . . being the better family [laughs] than the second [non-Roma] wife. It's the format." A television program such as *The Wife Swap* presenting a Romani woman as a good mother and, in this case, a "better" mother than the non-Roma woman may challenge strongly held stereotypes about Romani motherhood. Jana suggests that viewers may be more receptive to this type of content—as an entertainment program that does not have an explicit political agenda—but implicitly, it may challenge viewers to think about their biases. Unlike a newscast or politically motivated message, Jana believes entertainment media, specifically reality shows like *The Wife Swap,* may serve as a better platform to engage Roma and non-Roma communities as a form of intercultural dialogue. This sentiment echoes George Marcus's concept of "the activist imaginary," wherein subaltern groups use media to "pursue traditional goals of broad-based social change through a politics of identity and representation" (as cited in Ginsburg et al., 2002). In this regard, media work in tandem alongside other activist efforts demanding recognition and sites to articulate belonging.

Audience and Genre

Continuing from a previous conversation with Marek about the importance of Roma representation for Roma youth, I ask him about the people and communities they hope to reach with the programs, and he responds, "Target audience is very open, but mainly it is oriented [toward] Roma youngsters from 12 [years old] to I don't know, but this is the priority." According to Marek these programs are for Roma, where he hopes that more diverse representations will help with identification and thereby contribute toward

creating a new Roma identity, or at least providing a space to negotiate more complex identities than are currently provided by media. Non-Roma are not denied access to the online channel; however, it is primarily a space for Romani viewers, as a response to the limitations of mainstream media.

Marek's partner in this project, Jana, provides her views on the imagined audience for the production, saying that it is for a much larger audience, including the "majority," referring to non-Roma. For Jana, non-Roma viewership is encouraged, where audiences may engage with topics that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. She continues, "And, that for me, that is [the] starting point for any other communication." Jana believes that this production creates a possibility for connection that is currently missing and can also open up other forms of communication, perhaps even encouraging intercultural awareness and dialogue among communities, Roma and non-Roma alike.

Speaking about the intersection of media and identity, Marek suggests that an "important and strong" Roma identity can be reflected in the media. A Roma-originated television service would be multigenred and serve different sectors and demographics of the Roma audience; this would help build a Roma identity (or identities) with not just one vision but with different ones, reiterating an earlier quote from Marek about "creating a new Roma identity." When planning the online channel, there are specific programs that the organizers envision, including musical programming, debate/talk show, scripted drama, and cooking show. The selection of music and food programs illustrates how the organizers would like to present and think through Romani identity. Jana discusses how music is a central part of Romani culture and that a television show focusing on music will connect with audiences. The organizers also plan to run a cooking show, where guests will cook traditional Romani dishes while speaking Romanes and include Czech subtitles.

Television in Romanes

Language is an important aspect of cultural identity and for the Roma, a complex topic especially in the context of media representation. Similar to the word *Roma*, which serves as an umbrella term for a diverse group of people, *Romani* or *Romanes* is the language spoken by Roma, but there exist several varieties and dialects of Romanes (Hancock, 1993). Part of "creating a Roma identity," as discussed by organizers, is also reclaiming parts of Roma identity that have been forcefully removed. The Romani language has experienced considerable suppression, a history that highlights its significance. Language purity was a key focus for the different ruling classes throughout Europe that enforced prohibitions on Romanes. Assimilation practices that punished those speaking the "Gypsy language" led to what New (2014) refers to as "language loss," part of an ethnic cleansing project where a number of factors, including social exclusion, contribute to changes in language and in many cases, fewer people and communities speaking Romanes—a phenomenon documented in my research as well (p. 167). Language, of course, plays an integral role in the expression of identity and serves as a resource for identity negotiation and community formation (see Matras, 2015, on the role of language in serving as a unifier among a diverse and dispersed group).

The organizers of this production suggest the use of Romanes in programs will connect groups. In this regard, the use of Romanes is a resource for collective identity formation, incorporated into efforts to help build connections and reclaim parts of a shared identity. Hearing Romanes in television programming is one way in which media may reflect diversity in Romani experiences. In preparing this channel, organizers

interviewed Roma to understand audience interests and found a significant number of people prefer programming in Romanes. Jana noted her surprise that "70% [of people surveyed] really want Romani language." She acknowledges that although some Roma may not speak Romanes or may partially understand the language, there is an interest in this representation within media. Jana says, "the importance of language as a core of identity is huge, and I think it's really a common point for all the different groups, like different groups by age, by economic situation, by education." She continues, saying that the "Roma nation is so divided that language" can be a common thread connecting people. Jana acknowledges the different dialects and levels of comprehension, but sees this as an opportunity to provide educational services to audiences as well, where viewers may acquire more of the language from their engagement with the media content. In this aspect, the organizers believe the inclusion of Romani language in programming functions to bring audiences together over a shared sense of identity and community. This is an argument also supported by Banda (2015), who suggests minority language media could serve as a resource for intercultural dialogue.

There is a clear yearning for this type of representation, as a majority of those surveyed prefer programming in the Romani language. When I ask Jana if the people she interviewed are seeking a particular type of program in Romanes, she responds, "Well, many of them said that it would be great for them to hear their language somewhere." In this regard, it is less about the actual storyline than about presence made more authentic and affirming through a language typically ignored by media; to adapt a concept mentioned earlier, it becomes a form of linguistic status conferral. Minority language media, as argued by Cormack (2005), "enables language users to see themselves as a community (something that is particularly important for dispersed languages)" (p. 115). While this is true, it is critical to examine tensions, for example, the linguistic diversity within Romanes and the possibility that this production may further marginalize smaller language groups (see also Svonni's, 1996, analysis of the Sa'mi minority group, who are fragmented by language). The complicated nature of minority language media illustrates the challenges of fair representations. For these organizers, media productions in Romanes aim to produce a visibility and acceptance in one's experiences, but there are challenges in doing so.

As summarized above, the vision for Roma-produced and targeted content was ambitious and involved multiple audiences, genres, and use of Romanes. But it was also very much in its infancy during and immediately after my fieldwork in the Czech Republic. However, I did have the opportunity to witness a "trial run" production shoot of a pilot program. It generated energy among many of the participants and offered unique voices a forum, but it also displayed the rough-and-tumble nature of minority/alternative media production and the need, at times, to compromise visions for the practical concerns of available human and physical resources, time constraints, and economic realities.

Pilot Show Recording

On April 9, 2018—during a week of celebrations and remembrance to mark International Roma Day—the organizers invited community members to an exclusive taping of a pilot show. The talk show recording took place at a café run by a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) that serves as a cultural space within the community, bringing together Romani artists in the city of Brno. For this occasion, it serves as a TV studio.

The evening of the recording, I see Marek from across the café as he waves, busily running back and forth, setting up the room. He stops to chat for a moment, sharing with me that there are currently four other groups working on a similar TV project for Romani communities. He says that their production will be "better," and there is a sense of competition to get the channel off the ground first. There are interesting tensions within this media space that I already begin to notice. I ask Marek when the pilot will be available, and he says in about a year because funding remains unclear, so the talk show will be ready to broadcast once funding becomes available.

As the production prepares to record, Jana walks by and asks members of the audience to put their phones on airplane mode. A young man takes the seat next to me behind the bar in the audience, and I later learn that he will be a guest on the program, perhaps displaying the sometimes-compromised nature of this early production and its lack of resources (such as a green room for talent). The show opens with a musical duo—the camera panning across the room—focusing in on Jana, who now serves as the host of the talk show. The guests on tonight's show are a Romani comedian, actress, and Pavel—the person I was sitting next to—who works with Roma youth, comes from a famous musical family, and speaks Romanes fluently—a point that Jana made sure to emphasize in a later conversation.

Reflecting on the recording experience, it was clear that this was pilot production. The production team had high-quality equipment like a camera crane, but there were some hiccups during the filming. The makeshift studio was located on a busy street, where filming and audience attention was interrupted several times by loud police sirens and trams riding past the café. Since the café provided food and drink, there was a constant background noise of ordering and serving throughout the recording. In a follow-up interview, Jana discusses her decision to hold the pilot recording at the café, and notes that there were multiple reasons for the choice, including aesthetic, economic, and cultural. One factor that stands out and perhaps the most critical issue for minority media production, is funding. Jana says, "We didn't have to pay additional money" to rent the space. Funding is a significant barrier to accessing mainstream spaces, but also in creating media within an alternative space.

The Political Economy of Minority Media Activism

For groups working to create localized media production, several immediate realities can limit their vision. One of the most challenging, as illustrated by my conversations and observations, is financing. During one of our last in-person conversations, Jana shares that the production is working with four distinct sources to provide financial support. They are in conversation with a U.S.-based philanthropy committed to addressing social issues related to the Roma in the Czech Republic; the Czech Ministry of Culture; a Czech foundation; and a global soft-drink company. I ask for clarification about this specific connection, and Jana mentions that one of the organizers has a personal connection at the soft-drink company, who has helped fund other projects at a local organization. The struggles associated with demonstrating profitability and commercial power can be alleviated with the support of such a large company; however, these financial ties become an important site of investigation. The oversight with which these organizations and companies may have on content—or the potential for self-censorship given the pressure to keep sponsors content—should be monitored. The role of a corporate sponsorship with this level of significance and branding goals introduce a number of implications. On the one hand, it may boost the quality of the production and the reach of the channel with both increased

funding and cross-promotion. On the other hand, such support from a large corporation may come with potential conditions, including influence over the content to have it fall in line with the sponsor's promotional goals. As with most minority media projects, organizers rely on the resources of government and government-related agencies, but in this case, the Ministry of Culture may provide limited funds. As a result, members of this small production wear multiple hats—talk show host, director, cameraperson, scriptwriter, and fundraiser. "Minority media activists," as Husband (2005) refers to them, are in complicated positions, navigating the tensions between lobbying for funding and advocating for their minority group (p. 475).

There are other challenges present in minority media production—namely, access to financial resources and support to develop quality productions. Creating and maintaining a sustainable production is a real concern, as the consumer power of the group plays an important role in potential sources of funding. In other words, are advertisers interested in reaching this consumer group? If not, then other sources of funding (foundations, the government) could be sought, but that often may put organizers in a perpetual state of fundraising. My observations of the pilot talk show saw some evidence of the lack of funding: choosing a practical talk show format rather than front listed genres like cooking and music; a noisy set chosen in part because of cost that was not particularly TV friendly; a "make do" quality that had talent sitting with the audience; a series of technical issues that caused a couple of false starts. However, such qualities can be positive: They can add a cinema verité feel to a production and emphasize its authenticity. But if a goal is to mimic professional entertainment productions, then this costs money.

Today, the online TV channel broadcasts their programs over Facebook and YouTube with regular programming that includes music, cooking, and talk show formats. On social media, the channel has a modest following, with a little more than 500 subscribers on YouTube and more than 900 followers on Facebook. However, viewership of the content ranges from a couple of hundred per video to an impressive 16,000-plus for their most viewed video. To better understand programming selection, audience reception, funding, and how the group is working through some of the challenges inherent in minority media production, I connected with Jana over a video call in September of 2020.

Discussing the pilot show, Jana tells me that the recording helped the group better understand what was feasible. She discussed how through mistakes, the group was able to learn how to move forward and identify the formats that are too complicated for their production. Jana says, "It was really helpful for us to realize where we stand, where we can evolve, realize that there is a big potential for supporting this [and] that [it] is the right time for doing these things." As she mentions, there is continued interest in this production, but the group has scaled back on some of their initial plans and have struggled with viewership. For example, Jana shares that it has been a challenge incorporating Romanes into programming. She says, "many of our guests are not willing to speak in Romanes in front of the camera, which was surprising to us." So, they are working on ways to organically include Romanes—"basically we get to the part of the show, where they switch several sentences in Romanes, so we try to make it natural." The group is also finding other ways to include the Romani language in their programming—for example, by focusing on Romani songs in musical programming. Incorporating Romanes into programming is a critical component of encouraging connections among a diverse and disperse groups; however, the challenges in doing so reflect a reality common to minority media productions.

During our conversation, Jana also shares that the production crew now includes seven members with expertise in various areas, including audio-visual and production management. However, like Jana, many of the team members also have other jobs, so it presents some challenges in committing time and resources to the production (Husband, 2005). There are also differing visions for the production that contribute to internal fissures that create specific struggles for a minority media production group, as members also have personal, community, and advocacy connections.

Funding remains a barrier, as the group is working through securing sustainable sources of support. Jana says,

> The music show really goes well. . . . We were able to get state funding, but not for the whole thing, just for the music show because they liked it. And the cooking [show] will be transformed, we will have [a] longer journey to the final format.

It is important to note that such funding is reliant on interest from funders—creating source dependencies (Cottle, 2000)—and thereby influences the type of content the group is able to produce. This demonstrates the complicated nature of state funding, as minority media projects operate within the parameters established by state interests (Mandel, 2002). Further, the selection of only the music show for funding reinforce ideological constraints on Roma-created media by state gatekeepers. Confronted by these limitations, the organizers continue to piecemeal funding as Jana shares, "We now have these four resources and combined four small grants, which is somehow maybe more complicated than one huge grant from one donor. This is really alchemy and magic we do."

In addition to securing a stable flow of financial support, there are specific challenges to establishing and maintaining this production, including considering the possibility that this online channel may actually do the opposite of what it intended. If one aim of the production is to create intercultural awareness, then non-Roma viewership is required. As Jana mentioned, non-Roma are encouraged to watch, but the placement of this channel online in an alternative space outside of the mainstream media landscape makes it a difficult task to achieve. The possibility of confronting stereotypes and assumptions about Roma by non-Roma—especially those non-Roma whose ideas may need confronting—through interaction with these alternative messages becomes a significant challenge, as unsuspecting viewers will less likely happen to come across the online channel. If Roma are seeking inclusion to the public space via the media, then the question becomes whether a production outside of the mainstream media space could potentially further marginalize Roma in Czech society. There are other challenges that the organizers are confronted by as well, including competition in the Roma activist community, as highlighted by Marek during the pilot recording; resistance by mainstream media, outlined by Jakub; and financial dependencies that present obstacles for Roma media production, as discussed by Jana. While it is important to identify these challenges, this article encourages reflection on the liminal spaces in which minority media and identity exist, engaging both the tensions and opportunities within these spaces.

Conclusion

As this article illustrates, organizers have attempted collaboration with mainstream productions in the Czech Republic, but have been given little if any authority over the narratives and stories produced. As a result, the activists have located an alternative space online—bypassing the traditional structures that have denied Roma voice and assumed control over the construction of Romani representation—where they are able claim authority over the stories and perspectives presented. This allows producers to create more diverse portrayals that allow for entertainment, but more importantly, reflection. Media are sites for identification and negotiation of belonging; as Hall (1993) notes,

> It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (p. 113)

While there exist challenges to producing this online television channel, it is important to acknowledge that this production challenges the structures that continue to present Roma through damaging and long-enduring cultural stereotypes. This online channel may exist on the mediated margins, but it is nevertheless a space for Roma, as evidenced primarily with the engagement of content on the channel and through competition among groups to develop entertainment programming for Roma. The power that lies within this authority over the construction of representation is important to consider, where groups may see themselves through their own construction of what it means to be Roma.

Engaging the complexity of ethnography and political economic analysis, this article pays close attention to the struggles that Romani activists identify and the various efforts taken to confront these issues. For those working at the intersection of media and activism, they identify media as an important site to negotiate identities, build communities, and challenge the structures that have denied Roma access to and control over Roma representation. The three individuals working on the online channel and related productions identify media as a critical site to articulate belonging. Further, as the observations in this article illustrate, media are additional sites—alongside other activist efforts—that contribute to fighting for Romani rights in the Czech Republic. The online TV channel provides Roma in the Czech Republic a place to connect histories, elevate Romani voices, and imagine diverse possibilities. This imagination is a critical aspect of organizing that provides activists with the tools and resources to imagine and create new sites of meaning and recognition.

The findings presented illustrate how media can serve as an alternative site for identification and aid in how Roma negotiate individual, community, ethnic, national, and transnational identities. This is especially relevant for geographically dispersed groups and diasporas (Dayan, 1998) as well as groups experiencing spatial and cultural alienation (Shohat & Stam, 1996). As Shi (2005) suggests,

> The deterritorialized subjects find points of cultural identification in ethnic media, along which they can imagine coherent and continuous identities and hence create desirable meanings of their ruptured and shifting experiences. In other words, ethnic media constitute a liminal space where ambivalent and unstable points of personal, national, and ethnic identifications are negotiated. (p. 66)

Ultimately, these findings contribute to ongoing discussions of how Roma and other globally dispersed groups may challenge and circumvent traditional media structures to produce media content that embraces and provides diverse representations.

References

Albert, G. (2019, February 3). Romani community opinion divided over new Czech television sitcom with Romani characters. *Romea.cz.* Retrieved from http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/romani-community-opinion-divided-over-new-czech-television-sitcom-with-romani-characters

Banda, F. (2015). Minority media as intercultural dialogue: Towards a communicative praxis. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, *4*(1), 25–37. doi:10.1386/ajms.4.1.25_1

Beaudoin, J. (2015). Exploring the contemporary relevance of "Gypsy" stereotypes in the Buffyverse. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *48*(2), 313–327. doi:10.1111/jpcu.12259

Berkyová, R. (2019, February 8). Czech sitcom is rocking the Czech-Romani world. *Romea.cz.* Retrieved from http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/renata-berkyova-czech-sitcom-is-rocking-the-czech-romani-world

Comănescu, L. (2015). Representations of the Romanies in *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*. *[Inter]sections*, *18*(2015), 1–16.

Cormack, M. (2005). The cultural politics of minority language media. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, *1*(1), 107–122. doi:10.1386/macp.1.1.107/1

Cottle, S. (2000). *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Couldry, N. (2003). Rethinking the sites of agency and reflexivity in a mediated word. In P. Murphy & M. M. Kraidy (Eds.), *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 40–56). New York, NY: Routledge.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Czech president defends assertion that most Roma don't work. (2018, October 7). *Reuters.* Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-roma/czech-president-defends-assertion-that-most-roma-dont-work-idUSKCN1MH0Q5

Dalsklev, M., & Kunst, J. R. (2015). The effect of disgust-eliciting media portrayals on outgroup dehumanization and support of deportation in a Norwegian sample. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *47*, 28–40. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.028

Dayan, D. (1998). Particularistic media and diasporic communications. In T. Liebes & J. Curran (Eds.), *Media, ritual and identity* (pp. 103–113). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ginsburg, F. D., Abu-Lughod, L., & Larkin, B. (Eds.). (2002). *Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hall, S. (1993). What is this "Black" in Black popular culture? *Social Justice*, *20*(1/2), 51–52, 104–114.

Hall, S. (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora. In R. P. Williams, P. Williams, & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader* (pp. 227–237). London, UK: Routledge.

Hancock, I. (1993). On the migration and affiliation of the Domba: Iranian Words in Rom, Lom, and Dom Gypsy. In Y. Matras (Ed.), *Romani in contact: The history, structure, and sociology of a language* (pp. 25–52). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Hardy, J. (2014). *Critical political economy of the media: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black* (Vol. 10). Boston, MA: South End Press.

Husband, C. (2005). Minority ethnic media as communities of practice: Professionalism and identity politics in interaction. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *31*(3), 461–479. doi:10.1080/13691830500058802

Kadeřábek, J., Mádle, J., & Křenová, I. (Directors). (2005). *Výměna manželek* [The wife swap] [Television series]. Prague, Czech Republic: TV Nova.

Kraidy, M. M. (2003). Globalization avant la lettre? Cultural hybridity and media power in Lebanon. In P. Murphy & M. Kraidy (Eds.), *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 276–296). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kroon, A. C., Kluknavska, A., Vliegenthart, R., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2016). Victims or perpetrators? Explaining media framing of Roma across Europe. *European Journal of Communication*, *31*(4), 375–392.

Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1948). Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 95–118). New York, NY: Harper and Brothers.

Louw, E. (2001). *The media and cultural production*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lysaght, R. (2010). *Teanga & Tikanga: A comparative study of national broadcasting in a minority language on Māori television and Teilifís na Gaeilge* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Auckland: Auckland, New Zealand.

Mandel, R. (2002). A Marshall plan of the mind: The political economy of Kazakh soap opera. In F. D. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod, & B. Larkin (Eds.), *Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain* (pp. 211–228). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Matras, Y. (2015). *The Romani Gypsies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Matthews, J. (2018). *The Gypsy woman: Representations in literature and visual culture*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Messing, V., & Bernáth, G. (2017). Disempowered by the media: Causes and consequences of the lack of media voice of Roma communities. *Identities*, *24*(6), 650–667. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2017.1380264

New, W. (2014). Regulating Roma language and culture in central Europe. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, *2*(2), 165–181.

Okely, J. (2014). Recycled (mis)representations: Gypsies, Travellers or Roma treated as objects, rarely subjects. *People, Place and Policy Online*, *8*(1), 65–85. doi:10.3351/ppp.0008.0001.0006

Pusca, A. (2015). Representing Romani Gypsies and Travelers: Performing identity from early photography to reality television. *International Studies Perspectives*, *16*(3), 327–344.

Reitler, M. (Producer). (2019)*. Most!* [Television series]. Prague, Czech Republic: Ceská Televize.

Richardson, J. (2014). Roma in the news: An examination of media and political discourse and what needs to change. *People, Place and Policy Online*, *8*(1), 51–64. doi:10.3351/ppp.0008.0001.0005

Richardson, J., & Ryder, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and inclusion in British society*. Bristol, UK: Policy.

Ross, K., & Playdon, P. (Eds.). (2001). *Black marks: Minority ethnic audiences and media*. New York, NY: Ashgate.

Schneeweis, A. (2016). Desired, yet unwanted: Hugo's Gypsy bodies in popular media. *Popular Communication*, *14*(2), 99–110.

Schneeweis, A., & Foss, K. A. (2017). "Gypsies, tramps & thieves": Examining representations of Roma culture in 70 Years of American television. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *94*(4), 1146–1171.

Shi, Y. (2005). Identity construction of the Chinese diaspora, ethnic media use, community formation, and the possibility of social activism. *Continuum*, *19*(1), 55–72.

Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1996). From the imperial family to the transnational imaginary: Media spectatorship in the age of globalization. In R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Global/local: Cultural production and the transnational imaginary* (pp. 145–172). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Svonni, M. (1996). Saami language as a marker of ethnic identity among the Saami. In I. Seurujäryi-Kari & U. M. Kulonen (Eds.), *Essays on indigenous identity and rights* (pp. 105–125). Helsinki, Finland: Helsinki University Press.

Tremlett, A., Messing, V., & Kóczé, A. (2017). Romaphobia and the media: Mechanisms of power and the politics of representations. *Identities*, *24*(6), 641–649. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2017.1380270

Vecino, L. E., Ferrer, A. F., & Dallemagne, G. (2015). Discursive inclusion and hegemony: The politics of representation in Spanish migrant minority media. In O. Ogunyemi (Ed.), *Journalism, audiences and diaspora* (pp. 87–103). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Vidra, Z., & Fox, J. (2014). Mainstreaming of racist anti-Roma discourses in the media in Hungary. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, *12*(4), 437–455.