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ICUREZZA TERRORISMO SOCIETÀ

Security Terrorism Society

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Italian Team for Security,
Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

20

ISSUE 2/2024

Milano 2024

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

ISSUE 2 – 20/2024

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione); librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
web: www.educatt.it/libri

Associato all'AIE – Associazione Italiana Editori

ISSN: 2421-4442

ISSN DIGITALE: 2533-0659

ISBN: 979-12-5535-352-2

copertina: progetto grafico Studio Editoriale EDUCatt

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Diversity in media discourse. Plotting a way to break the usual frames and regain the trust of the audience and the safety of journalists

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Abstract

In today's media ecology, it is not so much a question of entering the debate on whether or not to cover news related to the phenomenon of discrimination, but rather how the mediatization of minorities and cultural diversity often does not go beyond certain narrative frames. Within the field of journalism, there are frames that (re)produce and reinforce negative stereotypes of groups and communities over time, often due to confused and overloaded information or journalists' lack of training in specific historical and cultural realities. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the relationship between the media, the profession of journalism and discrimination, and to offer useful perspectives and tools for exploring the ways in which journalism deals with the current pervasive challenges of multiculturalism.

Nell'odierna ecologia mediatica, non si tratta tanto di entrare nel dibattito sull'opportunità o meno di coprire le notizie relative al fenomeno della discriminazione, quanto piuttosto di capire come la mediatizzazione delle minoranze e della diversità culturale spesso non vada oltre certe cornici narrative. Nel campo del giornalismo, esistono cornici che (ri)producono e rafforzano nel tempo stereotipi negativi su gruppi e comunità, spesso a causa di informazioni confuse e sovraccariche o della mancanza di formazione dei giornalisti su specifiche realtà storiche e culturali. L'obiettivo di questo articolo è riflettere sul rapporto tra i media, la professione giornalistica e la discriminazione e offrire prospettive e strumenti utili per esplorare i modi in cui il giornalismo affronta le attuali sfide pervasive del multiculturalismo.

Keywords

Media; diversity; journalism; discrimination; ethnic media

1. Introduction

In the last months of the year 2023, one of the institutions most active in analysing changes in the news business, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, circulated questions to many newsrooms for an annual survey on two main topics: how greater flexibility in face-to-face work is changing newsrooms and how newsrooms are positioning themselves with regard to creating more 'diversity' within them. In this case, the term diversity was used to refer to diversity, a word that is at the forefront of an almost all-American debate on the under-representation of 'minorities' of various natures in journalism where ethnicity, disability and gender are mentioned.

The Reuters Institute's questions pose issues that are for the most part far removed from the agenda and thoughts present in the newsrooms of our country, with the exception perhaps of the one concerning the role of women. Even if we are talking about communities that are currently much smaller than those present in the American or English, French or even German reality, those minorities exist and grow in Italy too, but it is our entire cultural system that does not seem to contemplate them except in their transitory and coarse form of 'migrants'.

Reflections should be made on this, which could even precede the issue of 'diversity' in editorial offices, or be stimulated precisely by starting from this recent fact that fully touches the world of information from within, its actors and its practices, such as the reporting methods used by journalists on ethnic or religious issues, or the cultural level of the latter on issues that cross national borders.

Some examples can still be commonly read in newspapers today: from disrespecting the dignity of a migrant to unacknowledged gender identity, from pointing the finger at a suspect as guilty to the publication of photos of minors involved in news cases.

While in some cases discrimination does not reflect the intent of the writer and publisher, it is just as frequent that discriminatory language is purposely used in both print and digital environments.

Studying the causes and processes of representation of discrimination, reported by traditional and digital media, means first of all recognising their existence, being able to identify them within the multiple narratives that are increasingly hybrid today, and shedding light on the connections that exist between the communication systems of modern Western countries and a social structure that is often unequal and unjust. The media frame the world around us in a way that favours certain interpretations and inevitably play a major role in our societies (Newman, 2023).

The phenomena that contribute to discrimination are widespread, are rarely the expression of a clearly identifiable intentionality and act in an inconspicuous manner. The detrimental effects of this sort of insidious, multi-factorial mechanism weigh ever more heavily in our public and private lives.

Critically analysing journalism in relation to the phenomena of discrimination allows us to take a critical stance towards intolerant and violent behaviour, to consider the links between information systems and the broader prevailing social structures that may eventually be challenged in the public space (Gottfried et al 2022).

Thus, it is not a question of calling a journalist a racist or a xenophobe, or accusing that specific media outlet or platform, blocking a protester's account or filling public profiles with vulgar comments, but of understanding how a specific system, in our case that of constant news production, can fuel or reduce discrimination.

In the following paragraphs we will highlight the increasingly fluid boundaries and critical issues of the contemporary publishing world that could jeopardise the main social functions of journalism (finding, disseminating and commenting on news; building a culture of dialogue; accompanying critical thinking) by reducing the process of news construction, as well as the profession of journalist, to mere containers/actors polluted by prejudice and disseminating information without any ethics, passion and credibility.

2. Beyond the "usual frames"

Journalistic narratives reflect heterogeneous editorial lines. Nevertheless, certain articles, news reports or interviews, convey negative stereotypes, reproducing prejudices and contributing to the creation of hostile and stereotypical narratives (Bhatia et al. 2018). Generally, the treatment of religious, linguistic, historical or ethnic elements, peculiar to minorities within a specific community, tends to focus on deviant cultural behaviours or practices.

In the article proposed here, it was not so much a matter of entering into the debate on whether or not such news needs to be dealt with, but of noting how the mediatisation of minorities and diversity often does not go beyond these narrative frames. Such frames (re)produce and reinforce negative stereotypes, ingredients underlying not only prejudice, but also the stigmatisation that groups and communities suffer on a daily basis, as well as often indications of a lack of knowledge of the subject on the part of information workers.

These aspects have been the subject of countless media and entertainment studies. Regardless of editorial line or political connotation, most journalists vehemently contest the idea that the information produced may contribute, even unintentionally, to discrimination.

In fact, it is difficult to admit that the pursuit of truth in the service of the public interest can foster intercultural conflicts within social groups.

The most 'problematic' media content or content with obvious discriminatory aims is in fact signed by journalists who are often ill-intentioned, provocative or racist, particularly close to a political party that is intolerant on certain ethnic issues, or who have a low level of knowledge of the phenomena or characteristics of the communities that are the subject of their narratives. Profiles of professionals who nevertheless remain a minority and tend to be ostracised by their peers, while exposing themselves to penal sanctions of a criminal nature (Bhatia et al. 2018; Gottfried et al. 2022).

Beyond the exceptions, or the more complex cases, an important question remains open.

Very often, journalism contributes to the creation and reproduction of stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations that weigh heavily on social coexistence by fuelling phenomena of hatred, polarisation and incivility, falling victim to the logics that characterise the profession itself (Bentivegna, Rega 2022).

Prejudices do not explain everything, they advocate an approach that questions the factors intrinsic to public information production systems. The media's emphasis on deviance and immigrant criminality, for example, also stems from the routines and constraints intrinsic to news production.

Nevertheless, journalists often find themselves in situations that they find impossible to cover satisfactorily. This is the case of the numerous nationalities and religions that have a low percentage of presence within a specific community, of peoples with ancient, tormented and complex histories, of countries where personal rights and freedoms struggle to assert themselves and local information can hardly be defined as 'free and impartial', and therefore credible, since it is under the control of political power (Caliendo et al. 2011).

Elements that, while favouring the abuse of generalisations by some commentators or public figures, are not always able to go into the details of the story, but are nevertheless indispensable for the understanding of a criminal case, or to distinguish a hate crime from a hate incident, incitement to violence and freedom of opinion from public opinion.

Various characteristics of the journalistic profession and of the media system more generally, among them competition, organisation, genre, format and technological nature, largely contribute to the emergence of potentially discriminatory content.

The main effect of strong competition, for example, is the urge to process and publish a news item as quickly as possible through the fastest possible medium (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2001).

It is in this way that contextual elements that could minimise the risk of abusive generalisations are omitted or, conversely, stigmatising terms and formulations are included. It is precisely competition that is at the origin of the media's sometimes deliberate choice to distance themselves from other publications.

As is to be expected, these logics move mainly through narrative formulas and content with a strong discriminatory potential, such as when a media outlet decides to mention the nationality of a suspect in its article when its competitor-colleague journalist has made no mention of it in his piece (Beluati, 2018).

Narrative choices and the constraints of form and format can also reinforce the discriminatory potential of a journalistic production. Storytelling, as opposed to classical reporting, may involve wording that alludes to negative stereotypes. At the same time, even any newspaper, by reserving a very limited space for a news story, can induce journalists to sacrifice fundamental contextual elements in order to avoid any 'problematic' associations (Marini, 2021).

In this sense, an in-depth examination of information today, taking the issues of discrimination and fundamental rights together, means rethinking the function of the media and journalism at the same time, and it is possible to extend this consideration within, and beyond, the contemporary communication environment.

Paraphrasing the words of Richard Sennett (2012), ours is a world populated by strangers who are different from us, but where, paradoxically, what we have in common with the Other is difference. For centuries we may have been able to conceal and remove this plurality, but the current processes of global information impose the discovery and narration of otherness.

The attempt of the reflection proposed here is to understand how to study the role and transformation of the new media, as well as the journalistic profession, in relation to the treatment of different discriminatory phenomena and its hybrid forms in the public sphere. Specifically, the aim is to redefine the most common interpretative frameworks used to address the complex issue of discrimination, especially discrimination of ethnic origin, within the field of journalism and the media space more generally, while offering useful perspectives and tools to investigate the relationship between otherness and hypermedia.

3. Haunting realities

In the field of journalism, where duty of truth and accountability have historically been considered deontological principles, an undeniable but intricate relationship emerges that is intertwined with the lingering spectre of

discrimination (Stephens 1988; Kovach, Rosenstiel 2001). Journalism, as a provider of information and forerunner of social change, has always grappled with the profound implications of discrimination and its far-reaching effects on the stories it tells and the communities it informs.

Discrimination, in its myriad manifestations, remains a ‘haunting reality’ to be explored, even for the media, a phenomenon that hinders human progress and the path to equality (Sacks, 2002). Within information processes, discrimination weaves its fine threads, shaping distorted narratives, influencing representation and, at times, reinforcing societal prejudices.

The media, as a reflection of the world they tell, should face that uncomfortable truth that through their practices, both intentional and unintentional, they can perpetuate stereotypes, amplify prejudice, silence marginalised voices, and remove the dignity of Difference (Farrell et al. 2020).

Yet, amidst the shadows cast by social (and digital) discrimination and the rigid logics that guide organisational media behaviour, journalism could still be a potential catalyst for social change, for exposing injustice and inequality.

In 1995, Barrett and colleagues, in their well-known work entitled *The central role of discourse in large-scale change: a social construction perspective*, believed that real change could only take place when a ‘certain way of talking would be able to replace another way of telling social facts’.

The authors believed that effective change required the members of an organisation intent on communicating (in our case, a newsroom) to alter their cognitive schemata in order to understand and respond to the events that are the subject of the narrative under construction, since it is language that frames and determines how and what we think about things. When a new language begins to generate new actions, in turn, different possibilities for social action are triggered, and basic assumptions and beliefs will thus be altered (Gottschall, 2022).

The power to inform and educate offers journalists the opportunity to shed light on untold stories, unveil the reality of systemic biases, work towards the construction of appropriate public policies and practical solutions in collaboration with institutions and non-profit organisations for the respect of diversity and human rights (Balabanova 2014; Zindritsch 2016).

4. The importance and role of media trust/safety

In a hybrid, de-facto, multimedia and multicultural, news-overloaded world, there is a need to properly recognise the ambiguities and contradictions of global culture and cultures. We need to know what needs to be done to preserve diversity and enhance the interests of minorities who find them-

selves having to negotiate their specificity in different contexts in and through the media.

The media offer resources for these operations on both sides: the information that minorities often produce and that they receive, local news or news more related to their culture of origin and news from the host culture, even if not always accessible due to language.

In any case, whether it is social justice or a war crime, the news-event is now global and shared from the moment it enters public space. The story penetrates into the deepest layers of national, regional, ethnic and religious cultures, and while on the one hand it becomes a resource for expressing local and particular identities and interests, on the other its meaning and importance are shattered.

Indeed, it cannot be assumed that there is a single interpretation, nor can it be assumed that the extraordinariness of the story-news and its global presence can generate an unambiguous response.

Newspapers, radio, television and digital platforms still offer ample space for a plural traffic of voices, images, ideas, beliefs that can be shared cross-media.

However, the tension towards pure truth and the taste for information-entertainment often overlap and make the relationship between reality and fiction even more complicated.

In this sense, when we talk about the importance of regaining trust in the media, this does not simply mean trusting the ability of the individual newspaper, or television programme, to tell the truth through a post, but it is about trusting that 'the media are what they are supposed to be and do what they are asked to do' (Kovach; Rosenstiel 2001).

Too often, the playful dimension of the media allows them to evade criticism and share banal views and cultural prejudices through the most varied forms of entertainment, feeding a vulgar culture, interested in frivolous things presented as important (Postman, 2021).

In the new ecology of information, both audiences and journalists can make errors of judgement, sometimes cunningly and competently. Media communication processes are increasingly shared activities involving reciprocity and mutual assistance, as well as responsibility, despite the fact that they take place within an infrastructure whose guidelines are most often dictated by politics and ideology.

Trust in the media is something extremely topical and problematic, as it is difficult for users and institutions to manage and because it forces a confrontation not only about ends, but also about means.

Following Roger Silverstone's suggestion (2009, 203-204), we should trust the media 'despite their weakness if we want social life and relations with the

Other to continue. A trust that obviously cannot, however, be blind, we must be sceptical, we must ask questions (...) we must demand that the media take responsibility, we must demand respect and hospitality’.

This last word, in particular, is the necessary requirement for the existence of a multimedia and multicultural society. Hospitality is the mark that seals our relationship with the stranger and our openness to diversity; within the mediated representation of the world, it is the precondition of media justice.

As Rawls (1999) has already suggested, injustice can be fought in the periphery with social policies adapted to the context, but also by offering minorities spaces of communication that do not allow distortions, distortions, discrimination and by allowing, for example, access to the net, the birth of local radio and TV stations representing that community in that same periphery.

If we accept this principle of media justice, then we need to imagine and guarantee the presence of a subject that Silverstone calls a ‘universal audience’. Universal, and not global, since this is more a philosophical than an empirical concept and because it is based on the assumption that being a member of an audience is a right.

Indeed:

‘no one should think that he or she can be excluded, although of course in practice it is impossible for a condition of total inclusion to occur (...) Medial justice needs an institutional system of global scope that through its intervention can enhance and maximise basic rights, without which the mediapolis would continue to be plagued by injustice, unfairness, discrimination (...) What the system needs (...) is accountability’ (Silverstone, 2009, 237-238).

A concept that cannot, however, be dissociated from that of citizenship.

To be responsible, the individual who produces or consumes media content must be in a position to see and act beyond that often limiting and limited representation of the world.

The ecological transformation of the media has not only changed the relationship between physical and social place, but has broken down the distinctions between the here and the there, the direct and the mediated, the personal and the public (Colombo, 2020). The new social movements, the disruptions, the speaking out in the squares of minorities in neighbourhoods all over the world, are just some of the adaptations of behaviour, attitudes and laws to adapt to the new socio-media scenarios.

It is perhaps the result of a now evident and lasting merger of previously separate environments and a backstage now revealed no longer, or not only, by newspapers:

‘(the media) have helped to move from the deferential ‘nigger’ to the proud black, they have united ladies and young ladies under one appellation, they

have transformed the child into a human being with natural rights (...) They have fostered the emergence of hundreds of minorities, individuals who, having perceived the existence of a larger world, have begun to consider themselves unjustly isolated' (Meyrowitz 1993, 510).

5. Between indifference, spectacle and complexity

This Differences between individuals are better noticed by sharing the same environment than by being apart. But in spite of the many media injustices still present and the 'indifference' of the in-between space, the media-dense public sphere has shed more light on the forms of discrimination present in the information space, has offered almost every individual a new perspective from which to see Others and gain a reflexive perception of Self.

However, when the media alter the boundaries of situations, they often also affect value systems, and our evaluation of actions follows the boundaries and definitions of the new situations as they appear in the communication space.

Therefore, any judgement on new social phenomena, on what is or is not right or wrong, discriminating or inclusive, moral or immoral, must be made today with great caution. We can condemn and appreciate particular aspects, but considering today's information environment to be made up only of therapeutic sick parts can lead to a further misunderstanding of the general dynamics involved in social change.

Both pleasant and unpleasant aspects are often part of the same process.

Today we witness different 'spectacles' in the media, instead of a greater or lesser amount of spectacle, we have a different reality and not a different amount of reality (Boorstin, 1962).

As Sennett (1982) states, we have perhaps lost the sense of distance that once characterised social life, and today the belief that closeness between people is in any case a moral good dominates.

Being aware of the limitations of information systems means being aware that one is resorting to assumptions about unknown or empirically not always verifiable aspects (such as anthropological ones), or, again, that one is selectively emphasising one part of reality at the expense of others (Barisione, 2021).

The issue of diversity and its public narrative is a rather complex operation that has to do with the everyday lives of subjects, relationships, norms, rights, and cultural-institutional contexts. It is about understanding the needs, emotions, conditions and useful tools of important parts of the world's population and elaborating common political strategies to avoid forms of abuse and surveillance. Also in the media.

The problem is that while journalists show us the Difference outside and inside the screens, they are more often than not unable to offer us the appropriate tools to understand it. Certain media and political narratives/views have, over time, produced hostility and indifference, reactions or, rather, drinking strategies of removal (Sacks, 2002).

Perhaps the time has come to build a moral public space, also made up of good information, but not only.

The condition of pluralism of postmodern societies is also characterized by this ability of the individual to fully express his or her subjectivity, to satisfy his or her communication and information needs. The need to be adequately informed, outside and inside one's own borders, as well as maintaining a link with one's origins, translate for minorities into useful strategies to try to emerge from invisibility, take the floor, participate in collective life and communicate with institutions, supported by local media, even if often with unsatisfactory results (Giaccardi, Magatti 2022).

Resuming the thought of Edgar Morin (2015), people are able to feel human sympathy and understanding especially when suffering and injustice suddenly appear to us through an image or on any other technological support. Even through social and media representation, understanding of the Other and altruism can be generated.

This happens because a process of identification and sympathy is implemented that allows us to see the complexity of the aspects of a person. The important thing, however, is not to forget the entire context, limiting oneself to the sole search for a forgotten place or to the care of a single wounded community, only because it is illuminated by the powerful beacon of empathy and the media narrative (Bloom, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Technological infrastructure moves and evolves faster than journalism and it couldn't be otherwise. Information follows different times, dictated by the care that each reality puts into producing its own content and maintaining solid editorial standards.

Just think of artificial intelligence (AI), a topic that is still a protagonist in global public debate, already a tool available to the most important newsrooms, used both for gathering information and for its processing and distribution. Journalism that is born from artificial intelligence is guided by highly sophisticated algorithms, but this does not mean that it is never subject to errors (Jarvis, 2023).

These are complex calculation procedures that are difficult to verify and, therefore, it will become complicated to attribute any amount of responsibility to them.

This is because AI is a tool created by humans and can make mistakes, just like them. Errors that often arise from the prejudices of our world and that we insert into our technical systems.

The result of an algorithm will only have value if the human inputs are correct.

The pervasive diffusion of AI could therefore create the ideal condition of cultural conflict for those who intend to fuel and reinforce stereotypes and prejudices starting from journalistic stories.

The debate around the issue of AI non-neutrality is leading, albeit with a certain delay, national and international organizations to equip themselves with tools to increase the awareness of developers and users and to promote the design of ethical and reliable solutions (Jarvis, 2023).

Complex and still open questions, therefore, that cannot be addressed by absolutizing the relevance of techno-communicative processes in an uncritical way, thus adhering to a mythologized vision of communication (Sorrentino, 2021). Rather, by knowing the cultural contexts specifically and contributing to the construction of a less stereotyped media narrative, and more attentive to social injustices, as well as to the defense of a universal culture of human rights in society, with a vision of the promotion and protection of fundamental freedoms.

Displacements and censorship, manipulations and disinformation have always characterized journalism that has always suffered or committed them. The current problem of the journalistic field concerns the communicative abundance of powerful and contradictory stories, the divergence of opinions on the one hand, and the reduction of discursive space, on the other.

However, precisely because it is increasingly less possible to think of an all-encompassing citizen and universally accepted opinions, there is a need for what journalism can still do: to be a negotiating field in which various actors, different opinions, stories - news move. A guide, therefore, that helps to connect and interpret the many points of view characterizing every fact, every social phenomenon, every form of discrimination (fig.1)

Journalism also retains, therefore, an absolutely central function in the fight against discrimination, which goes well beyond the reporting of facts: building meaning, that is, those forms of social bonds that are created through interaction with the Other and that allow us to understand the world around us (Buoncompagni, 2021).

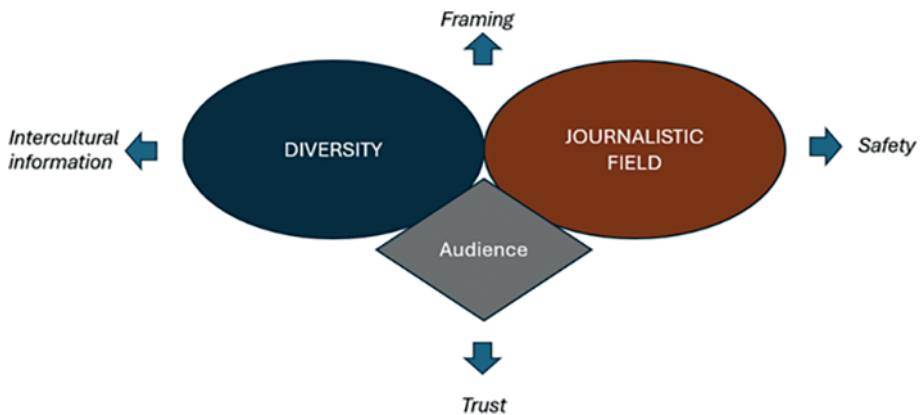
Even the most hybrid forms of contemporary racism.

However, information professionals should refer to a different journalistic epistemology, which cannot still be based on the old rhetoric of “mirroring reality”.

It remains essential today to take into account the dynamism of facts and contexts, which are never immobile and always evolve, recognizing the limits of a journalism too often focused on opposition and slogans that only hopes for the pursuit of spectacular and business logic.

Informing, limiting discrimination, means making journalism that is able to contextualize the facts, to provide them with a perspective that allows users to interpret them with greater knowledge of the facts. No longer hiding behind the hypocritical expression of “limiting oneself to the facts”, but going further by trying to give shape and meaning to the innumerable information that increasingly occupy the media ecosystem through a critical reading of the data at our disposal.

Figure 1 – Connections between news media, audience, diversity



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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione) - librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
redazione: redazione@itstime.it
web: www.sicurezzaerrorismosocieta.it
ISBN: 979-12-5535-352-2