

Comment on Ulrika Sjöberg's and Ingegerd Rydin's working paper *Discourses on media portrayals of immigrants and the homeland*

by

Kira Kosnick (Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt)

Dear list,

First of all many thanks to Ulrika Sjöberg and Ingegerd Rydin for allowing me to engage with their ongoing research on immigrant audiences in Sweden and their critical media practices. Their paper „Discourses on media portrayals of immigrants and the homeland” was first presented at the ECREA Barcelona conference in November of last year, which I did not attend, so apologies for not being able to pick up the discussion from where the authors and some of you might have left off.

“According to the informants, the media’s discursive power is strong in maintaining exclusion and symbolic segregation rather than being inclusive and promoting mutual understanding” is the concluding summary offered in the paper. What the authors have shown in the preceding pages is that immigrant audiences practice what can be called, following Stuart Hall and David Morley, oppositional ‘readings’ of various kinds with regard to mainly Swedish mass media representations. The paper is framed by a concern with migrant integration, thought of in terms of their involvement in a (national) mass-mediated public sphere that might seem under threat if migrants withdraw into alternative spheres provided by satellite- or internet-based mass-media circuits with links to former homelands.

Two of their research findings are very pertinent to answering such concerns: the finding that migrant families in Sweden do not turn away from Swedish mass media but rather complement them with a range of transnational or ‘home country’ media sources, and respondents’ demands for more diversity in the Swedish media, both in terms of immigrant participation and of more nuanced ‘home’ country or regional representation. Both of these findings (though established on the basis of a relatively small and diverse group of respondents) echo and support research results obtained elsewhere in European countries, where different immigrant audiences have been shown to develop complex media uses and critical interpretative abilities in response to changing mediascapes (in the sense of Appadurai) and political circumstances (a long list of references would have to be mentioned here).

What strikes me as particularly interesting in the paper, however, is what I see as the strong influence of a 20th century Western European public-service broadcasting tradition that seems to implicitly set the tone for both the framing of the main research question – how media coverage of migrants and their home country is perceived among migrant families – and of its operationalization in the context of interviews and focus groups. This influence can be detected in the highlighting of media as facilitators of a national public sphere and the linked concern with integration, as well as in the allocation of responsibility for symbolic inclusion or exclusion. Raising these issues as concerns is certainly legitimate and possibly expected in a national context that has a strong public-service tradition, but I’d like to problematize some of the assumptions that underlie this focus in the paper and invite the authors to engage with a few provocative comments.

‘Media coverage’ is in the paper very quickly linked to a notion of ‘the Swedish media’, emerging

in the text as mainly television and newspaper coverage produced within Sweden, as opposed to transnational or country-of-origin media. I find it remarkable that the notion of media is so self-evidently taken to refer to mass media here, of a type that positions their users as (albeit critically) receptive audiences of a mass-targeted product - i.e. 'classically' 20th century forms of mass media with a pronounced divide between producers and audiences. While the internet does receive some mentioning in the text, there is little discussion of the fundamental transformations that have been a preferred topic of media-anthro list discussions so far.

What about the momentous shifts of the past three decades in terms of new media technologies, economies and practices that challenge, among other things, the production-reception divide? And can we, in this context, still hold on – empirically and normatively – to the idea of a single, national mass-mediated public sphere that is invoked with the notion of 'the Swedish media'? Is the invocation of that idea by migrant respondents, their wish to 'belong' to it (p.1), a tribute to the continued practical or ideological importance of public-service broadcasting traditions in Sweden, an indication of specific media practices and understandings among migrants, or potentially even influenced by a research methodology that might unwittingly introduce the notion of such a public sphere in interviews and focus groups as a given? Let me haste to say that I am not accusing the authors of methodological naivety, but it is difficult to discern from the text what status should be accorded to the notion of the public sphere in relation to 'Swedish media'.

I wonder, as a consequence, if the Habermasian undercurrent in the paper might be somewhat at odds with the recognition that we live in a period of transnational media development which calls into question many of the former tenets of early 20th century mass communication research in Western Europe and the United States.

As many of you know, Jürgen Habermas famously described the rise of a national mass-mediated bourgeois public sphere as the necessary foundation for the practice of democracy in complex modern societies (Habermas 1991[1965]). It was the newspaper-based arena of male bourgeois debate that seemed to him to exemplify the principles of the ancient greek agora, a public sphere that democratically decided the common interest of the greek polis. Habermas was quickly criticized for his neglect of alternative public spheres that challenged the very idea of a public sphere in the (national) singular (Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt 1993[1972], Robbins 1993, Calhoun 1992). Nancy Fraser (1992) in particular made an interesting contribution thinking about what Habermas' model could mean to immigrants and their participation in processes of democratic deliberation, albeit not on the basis of empirical research.

The idea of a singular public sphere was thus debunked even before the historical demise of public-service broadcasting monopolies in Western Europe, the drive toward commercialization, and the radical transformations in media technologies and practices. Technologies and practices that challenge both the producer-receiver divide, the national frame as the privileged arena for information/communication circuits, as well as the separation between different types of formerly distinct media.

Having done research on media and migration in a German context that has similarly been marked by a strong public-service broadcasting tradition (Kosnick 2007), I am quite surprised that these themes do not emerge as relevant for the contemporary Swedish situation. While there was a strong political impetus in the late 80s and early 1990s to make public-service broadcasting more responsive to the needs of immigrants and more reflective of ethnic diversity in Germany, the development of mediascapes not just for immigrants but more generally has taken the punch out of

these arguments over the past decade. The prime manifestation of German public-service broadcasting with a diversity mission, the Berlin-based radio station Radio MultiKulti, was shut down just a few days ago (<http://www.multikulti.de/>).

And the perceptions among many immigrant groups seem to have changed as well. It might well be the case that migrant focus group discussions led by German researchers could still produce similar distinctions between 'German media' and 'home country media', and demands for different representations in the former, particularly when highly divisive issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or the so-called war on terror are concerned. Yet, I would tend to then interpret these as calculated discursive interventions intended to mark out a position in particular political contexts, rather than as statements indicating migrants' basic understanding of contemporary mediascapes.

The focus on immigrants demands for more images of themselves, more positive depictions and more truthful representations might also keep us from exploring the possibility that something might have changed in our (including immigrants') very relationship to media representation as a depiction of 'reality'. What, James Der Derian has asked, happens to the idea of reality/authenticity, no longer in the Benjaminian age of mechanical reproduction, but in the age of photoshop? It would be interesting here to consider whether the contemporary immediacy and modifiability of images through networked information technology produces new 'truth effects' that have consequences for the ways migrants think about impartiality, objectivity, reality. As James Der Derian has argued in an interesting essay on media representations of terror, "...not just cultural interpretation, moral judgement and ideological fervor, but also new technical means of reproduction, real-time transmission and global circulation via the internet produce profound and potentially uncontrollable truth-effects through the use of photographic and videographic imagery." (Der Derian 2005:33)

To sum up, my worry is that the paper might not give quite enough thought to the kinds of contemporary media practices and understandings that do not surface within the nationally framed public sphere orbit of 20th century mass media. Not that migrants' access to media from the former home country or new transnational media productions is ignored here, but that the changed conditions for the very existence of mediated public spheres and the production as well as interpretation of media representations seem to form no integral part of this picture. Mark Deuze has persuasively argued that the expansion and growth of 'ethnic' media needs to be situated in the wider context of emerging participatory media practices (Deuze 2006), Karim H. Karim drew attention to the growth of ethnic- and diaspora-based commercial broadcasting infrastructures and their diverse effects already ten years ago (Karim 1999). All of these contributions render the public sphere

discussion infinitely more interesting – and complicated.

Could we, should we take them on board?

Thanks for reading!

Kira Kosnick

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Kira Kosnick
Jun. Prof. of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt
Grüneburgplatz 1
60323 Frankfurt/Main
Germany
<http://user.uni-frankfurt.de/~kosnick/>