

## Age Matters - Media as a Tool of Social Exclusion

The media in the society of late modernity is an important agents taking part in the structuring of everyday life. Theorists of media studies conceptualise today's media as agents that consciously construct the image of outer reality. This holds true also for the news genres, which are generally considered to be objective sources and disseminators of information. Even a reported news is a representation of social reality (not reality itself) and always shows only a part of it. In addition, the media have the ability to claim their reports to be an "authentic reflection of reality". Behind the "illusion" of objective news and independent media there are hidden factors influencing the production of news, such as for example the taste of the public, the method of collecting news, communication strategies of participants, and communication technologies. Research shows that the media present the outer reality selectively; from a great number of events they select some on which to report, and they themselves decide how to report on them. Although there is no agreement among theoreticians concerning the question of the influence, most authors admit that the media are able to influence the themes which we will be pondering or discussing with our colleagues and friends. In this way can the media accentuate the prejudices and stereotypes concealed in the subconscious of the Czech population through presented images. Eventually, they can in this way contribute to discrimination against members of different social groups or minorities – or in the least fail to explicitly deprecate it – thus taking part in their social exclusion from the majority society.

Population ageing has become one of the major characteristics of modern developments in Euro-Atlantic societies and the situation in the Czech Republic is not an exception. The rapid second demographic transition, the increasing hope of reaching a high age and other deep demographic (and also interconnected social) changes gradually change the shape of the Czech society. Thus far, however, only minimum attention was paid to old age as a social (socially constructed) phenomenon and the role of the media in the creation of this construction. In 2005 Diakonie CČE in Prague ordered the pilot research on the media representation of seniors (Sedláková, Vidovičová 2005) as part of an extensive project "Seniors and I" (NROS project). This paper refers some findings from this mentioned project. We shall draw attention mainly to the regularities in depicting the given social group (seniors), that is to what is being nearly stereotypically repeated. Since what is being represented is a reflection of a certain interpretation of the given group, person or phenomenon; it is a resonance of a view of them – a view that is usually, in the society where representation takes place, dominant or even hegemonic. According to Burton and Jiráček

[2001], these “images” then convey a dominant meaning of these groups, and it is through them that recipients probably learn to perceive the depicted characteristics as natural and as the norm of their behaviour. In his book *Stereotyping*, M. Pickering [2000] adds that representations in the form of words and images that represent certain social groups (persons, phenomena) provide the recipients also with guidance of how to describe these groups and in what categories to think about them. At the same time, these representations influence not only those who find themselves outside the given group but they can also form the self-perception of members of the group and their views of the surrounding world and its organisation. This is why it is necessary to know which reports the media present to their readers and viewers.

We have analyzed media messages printed in five important dailies and the main news bulletins of the three biggest national television channels issued in 2004<sup>1</sup>. The pilot analysis was conducted using the news monitoring service provided by the Newton IT agency (news provided without visual documentation). But we kept in disposition only the transcriptions of the articles and tv shots – what was restrictive especially in the case of audiovisual media. The sample selection was based on the occurrence of key words in articles published in all nationwide dailies (*Blesk*, *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta DNES*, *Právo*) and main nationwide television news reports: *Události* (ČT1), *Televizní noviny* (Nova), *Denník* (Prima) in the period between 1 January 2004 and 31 December 2004. The selection of the relevant news items was done on the basis of the following key words: *senior*, *seniors*, *pension*, *(male/female) pensioner*, *retirement*, *retired person*, *old age*, *old aged people*, *old*, *old woman*, *old man*, *elderly*, *elderly person*, *grandmother*, *grandfather*. We have analyzed according to 8000 printed articles and about 260 news shots. Although this count could seem relatively high, in the whole amount of news printed and broadcasted during the year 2004 it is very low. It is not possible to signify it as a systematic coverage of topic related to senior life and the old age. The coverage of the life of seniors is in researched media very selective and we have discovered highly differences between proper analysed media. In common apart from one daily (*Mladá fronta Dnes*) we cannot talk about systematic coverage of old age and senior life in researched media.

The research aims at exploring grand narratives about old age in Czech media, topics which are covered and the context within which seniors are placed in Czech media. Following main frames were identified: *economy*, *criminality*, *tragedy*, *social problems*, *culture*, *health*,

*human interest stories, demography, housing and politics.* The biggest attention was paid to news from criminal area, in which seniors act as offenders as well as victims of criminal offences. Although it may seem that the topical spectra, in which we learn about seniors is quite wide, it is not truth. The three most referred categories (criminality, political economy, tragedy) made up the majority (more than 72 %) of all reports. There was only a small space left for other topics.

On the basis of our preclusive outcomes it is possible to declare that in Czech media environment, questions relating to seniors are underrepresented in terms of the amount of information as well as its variability. Seniors are a group that print as well as audiovisual media report on selectively and in a stereotyping manner. Seniors are, in Czech media, particularly described as economic and social problem, cause of overburden of pension system, as victims of criminal offences and catastrophes or as authors of bizarre criminal offences. Common attribute of Czech media senior is poverty, mental defect or another illness. Vice versa, if they don't fit in this scheme, they are admired for their extreme or unusual vitality or life story. When doing a content analysis it is often emphasized to also pay attention to topics which media don't cover at all. For example we didn't note any reports about discrimination of seniors. Viewers were rarely notified of problems which describe everyday life of people in pension and of their activities. Reports were generally notifying of separate topics mainly from the majority point of view. Only in some cases seniors were given a chance to express their opinion of the situation. Besides, seniors were asked to express their opinions only in cases, when they weren't satisfied with reported situation. This conduces to perception of seniors as chronic complainers dissatisfied with benefits provided by the welfare state. Inappropriately chosen names of this group of people also contribute to biased perception of seniors. In particular, names like *old people, grandma, granny, gramp* shift perception of people concerned in the report toward image of very old, helpless and kind people. Image of seniors printed and broadcast in Czech nationwide TV stations and daily paper is not neutral, but rather imbalanced and simplifying.

Although it is common to distinguish between tabloids and traditional media, in our case it is very difficult to trace the division. Almost all of the monitored media use slightly scandal language and attributes in order to boost the drama of the situations. They are also used to describe the cases in detail or in an effort to concisely express the essence of the

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<sup>1</sup> There are five national wide newspapers: *Blesk, Hospodářské noviny, Lidové noviny, Mladá fronta DNES* and *Právo* issued in the Czech Republic and four television channels – two broadcasters of public service: *Czech television 1, Czech television 2* and two commercial subjects: *Nova* and *Prima*.

situation, which usually goes beyond the information need. The only exception is the newspaper *Hospodářské noviny*, which saves its reputable face even while notifying of seniors. We haven't noted any differences in style of messages between the public service TV and commercial stations. It is possible to summarize, that all analysed news issued in all media types were presented with the endeavour to strengthen their attractiveness by the dramatisation, personalisation and negativisation. It means by techniques of infotainment which is common for contemporary media style of information

It follows from the above summary that media representations of seniors are considered an important empirical indicator of the society's approach to the issue of ageing and that the quality of these representations can tell us much about the dominant discourse within the given society. With this report I wanted to contribute to discussion on the seniors and aging as a media topic. I also wanted to draw the attention to certain areas in which media could contribute to form age inclusive Czech society of the 21st century. The fact, that image of seniors created by media matters, illustrates following citation, which we consider to be a motto of our research project:

Motto: (... why media matters...)

»„***But why such old ladies? And why so cruel attacks,“ not just the judge but also the associate justice asked.***

„***Old people are trustful and inattentive. I learned from the media how easily they could be deceived,“ explained the human monster how his long serie of crimes had started.***«  
(*Blesk* 14. 7. 2004, str. 6)

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