

Creating Interfaces

Polyethnic Media and Cultural Diversity

Facticity, Diversity and Globalization

Social, ethnic and cultural diversity is not just a social reality. It is to an increasing extent a political issue as well. Our societies have long since become polyethnic, and the way back to the way things were before—questionable in any case—that the platforms of populist, right-wing parties term “homogeneous national communities” is an illusion. In polyethnic societies, diversity can no longer be reversed even by the most restrictive immigration laws.

In order to diminish the potential for conflict and prevent discord in a multiethnic society, it has long been insufficient to merely oppose racism. Above all in the domain of media, this is a matter of creating the framework conditions and prerequisites for a multiethnic media landscape. Charles Husband¹ points out that in the past, practitioners and scholars paid far more attention to the “elimination of racism” than, for example, to the conceptualization and implementation of a “polyethnic media landscape.”²

Radio FRO'S Approach

Radio FRO's (a free, non-commercial radio station based in Upper Austria) mission is to function as a model for a polyethnic media landscape—a forum for a discourse that is open, wide-ranging and diverse in its mode of reflection, an open space of self-formulation and autonomous media utilization. The spectrum of diversifying and contradictory opinions is very broad and provides a stark contrast to paternalistic and hesitant efforts on the part of establishment media, whose reduced offerings of information and communication are far too loosely-knit and thus non-inclusive with respect to linguistic and cultural minorities to make the differences within these spheres visible. For instance, in the Turkish and Kurdish language alone, Radio FRO currently makes available seven programs with highly diverse content. With “incitement of initiative” as its guiding principle, an attitude that has its roots in the artistic and media policies of the Stadtwerkstatt, Radio FRO, in contrast to conventional consumer media, pursues an approach that is also not uncontroversial even within the free media scene. Debates and conflicts surrounding attitudes and positions are not watered down or inhibited. From the very outset, “the other” is a party to the discourse that is carried on by a wide variety of groups or individuals—“segments of the general public.” Since establishment media tend to contribute to a homogeneous image of “the other” in the sense of “good-natured acceptance,”³ the task at hand is representing the experiences and interests of ethnic minorities, and displaying thereby their full diversity that is so often swept under the carpet. This is an openness and diversity that can also ultimately reveal the potential for conflict that is hidden within this sphere and the enmities that exist between the groups that make it up. The existing establishment media are not the only potential mouthpieces for racist smears and political rabble-rousing. “Possessing a particular ethnic identity—be it that of the majority or of a minority—is no guarantee for virtue.”⁴

Multi-Ethnicity and Suspicion of Terrorism

Ultimately, in the wake of migration and globalization, national borders have become increasingly permeable for political, ethnic and cultural conflicts that in certain cases have their roots far outside concrete regional circumstances or go far beyond them—a development that reached its preliminary climax in the events of September 11. With the attack on the WTC, the problematic issue of multiethnicity and migration has become entwined in a most dubious fashion with the phenomenon of terrorism. Especially Moslem immigrant associations and mosques have been confronted by the charge of working hand in hand with extremist terror organizations. Austria's equivalent of the FBI, for example, noted a radicalization of the political climate in several such groups shortly after the attacks and beefed up its surveillance.⁵

Interaction and Responsibility

Media bear considerable responsibility for coexistence (not only) in transnational contexts. Radio FRO is cognizant of this responsibility and of the necessity of dealing sensitively with ethnic and cultural diversity. According to Husband's hypotheses, a functional polyethnic media landscape on one hand furthers a dialogue that transcends ethnic boundaries and thus gives rise to interfaces on the borders between different segments of the general public. On the other hand, this is a matter of a dialogue within ethnic communities and thus has to do with the reflection of internal diversity.

Contribution to the Festival

Radio FRO's contribution to the 2002 Ars Electronica Festival is an analysis of this issue together with its scientific and political contexts. Experts from academia, politics and everyday practice will be discussing the role of polyethnic media in contemporary societies, their necessary framework conditions and their contribution to integration and understanding. Opportunities, structures as well as lines of conflict will be elaborated on by a research project on Radio FRO's foreign-language programming, the results and conclusions of which will be presented to the public for the first time in conjunction with Ars Electronica. Radio FRO's contribution sheds light on "the others" in the microculture of Linz and in the context of the concept of a polyethnic media landscape. It is above all the portrayal of the current political explosiveness of this issue that is a matter of particular importance. It is evident that immigration and asylum policies are being made more restrictive all over Europe. Integration measures are increasingly becoming compulsory procedures—consider, for example, "language courses for foreigners." Aside from regional and national political debates and approaches, the international and European dimensions of this issue are increasingly shifting into the foreground.

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald

- 1 Charles Husband is professor of social analysis at the University of Bradford (U.K.) and heads its "Ethnicity, racism and the media" research program.
- 2 See Charles Husband, "Über den Kampf gegen Rassismus hinaus: Entwurf einer polyethnischen Medienlandschaft," in: *Bewegte Identitäten: Medien in transkulturellen Kontexten*, edited by Brigitta Busch, Brigitte Hipfl and Kevin Robins, (Klagenfurt 2001), pp. 9–20, p. 15.
- 3 See *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 5 Michael Völker, "Terror in den USA: Ausländische Extremisten und Geheimdienste aktiv", in: *Der Standard*, (September 14, 2001).