

What do we think of Romani people?



A report on the relationship between the news media and an ethnic group

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Introduction

The Romani people are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with an estimated 10 - 12 million people. They are known by various ethnonyms including Roma, Gypsies, Travellers and Sinti. Since their arrival in Europe 700 years ago they have been marginalised by the dominant population. Yet they have maintained a distinct identity and resisted assimilation into the dominant population. There are over 100,000 Roma in the UK who migrated from central European countries over the last decade, with an estimated further 300,000 British Gypsies and Irish and British Travellers in the UK according to a Commission for Racial Equality Report in 2006. Exact numbers are not known as many Romani people do not declare their ethnic identity.

The dominant population's perception of Romani people is normally negative with stereotypes applied to the whole ethnic group. The news media cast them in a similar way. Although a few international non-governmental organisations (like Amnesty International and the European Roma Rights Centre) inform the news media about severe violations of the human rights of Romani people, on the whole there is little representation in or support from the media or public relations professions. Can public relations and communications theory explain the relationship between Romani people and the media, and how they are perceived by the dominant population?

The research aims to analyse how the news media portray Romani people and set this against the views of Romani people and their supporters on how they are perceived. The research tools used included a media content analysis and a survey of Romani people.

Literature Review

Broom and Dozier (1990) suggested that the relationship between an organisation and one of its publics results, at least in part, from what that public *know* about the organisation and the knowledge within the organisation about the public. What each party *feels* about the other has an impact on this relationship, and what each party *does* to each other determines the nature of the relationship. Reactions about each other stem from their respective knowledge, predispositions and behaviour to each other.

Broom and Dozier stated that the most frequently used audit to determine the state of an organisation-public relationship involves conducting interviews or document reviews on the organisation's position on an issue; undertaking surveys of the target public to determine the prevalent view from the perspective of the public on the same issue; and then calculating the distance between the two sides. A public relations campaign could be established to move one side's views closer to the other side's. Broom and Dozier said that social scientists refer to this as the *individual agreement* approach to studying the relationship.

Broom and Dozier put forward an alternative model to take into account any inaccurate perceptions by one side of the other's views: the *co-orientational* approach. This requires the collection of data in a public relations audit to answer the following four questions:

- What are the organisation's views on the issue?
- What is the dominant view within the organisation of the public's views?
- What are the public's actual views on the issue?
- What is the dominant view within the public of the organisation's views?

The answers to these questions make it possible to calculate three variables - agreement, accuracy, and perceived agreement. Agreement is the extent to which the organisation and the public hold similar views on the issue (and forms the relationship between the two parties). Accuracy indicates the extent to which one side's estimate of the other's views is similar to the other's actual views (again, describing the relationship between the two). Perceived agreement represents the extent to which one side's views are similar to their estimate of the other's views (how one side views the relationship, and probably how it deals with the other side). The co-orientational approach takes a more sophisticated view of the relationship than simply estimating the gap between the organisation and its public on agreement (or not) to the issue, to consider inaccurate perceptions from either the organisation or its public.

Broom and Dozier suggested that there were four possible outcomes from such a public relations audit. If both sides hold accurate views of each other's positions on the issue, (a) *true consensus* occurs when both parties actually agree and accurately perceive that agreement; (b) *dissensus* occurs when there is actual disagreement that is accurately perceived. If one or both sides hold inaccurate views of the other's position on the issue, (c) *false consensus* occurs when there is actual disagreement that is inaccurately perceived as agreement (and one party will probably eventually believe it has been misled by the other), and (d) *false conflict* occurs when there is actual agreement that is inaccurately perceived as disagreement. Broom and Dozier assert that in the case of dissensus, strategies by either side could be developed to change the other's position. In the case of false consensus and false conflict, where inaccurate perceptions are the basis of the relationship, public relations activity should be designed to improve the accuracy of the other's perceptions. The goal is to improve the relationship between an organisation and its publics by not only changing what people know and feel about an issue and each other, but by increasing the accuracy of their perceptions of each other's views.

Could this theory be applied to an industry as the organisation in Broom and Dozier's model (the UK news media), with an ethnic group (Romani people) as the public, and the issue being what we think of Romani people? That is the underpinning theory applied to this research and is analysed in the 'findings' section of the report.

In order to conduct a survey of Romani people, difficult to reach when many do not openly declare their ethnicity and are wary of non-Roma, I looked into communication network theory. Rogers (1986) defines a communication network as 'interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows' and communication network analysis as 'the interpersonal linkages created by the sharing of information in the interpersonal communication structure'. Windahl and Signitzer (1992) maintain that virtually everyone in society belongs to one or several communication networks. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) state that linear models of communication (source - message - channel - receiver) cannot describe what happens in dynamic and complicated communication situations, when information passed within a network is the most influential form of communication. Despite the recent popularity of the term, social networks are not a new concept: Barnes (1954) is credited with coining the notion. Kincaid (1979) suggested a model of convergence communication as a central concept of network analysis. A key element of the convergence model is mutual understanding. That through sharing information over time within a social network, participants may arrive at a state of mutual understanding, which may lead to mutual agreement and possibly collective action. It is also possible that the participants will diverge from each other in their understanding of the topic. Could the convergence model help participants reach mutual understanding in the complicated

communication situation that exists between the dominant population/media and Romani people? This is also analysed in the 'findings' section of this report.

On previous research on the dominant population's views on Romani people, Ureche and Franks in a Children's Society publication 'This is who we are' surveyed the views of Romani young people in England on how they described themselves and set this against a survey of general attitudes from 'people on the street' towards Romani people, including questions about how the media portray Romani people. In a street survey of people from diverse backgrounds, respondents were asked to offer words or phrases that they would associate with Romani people. The researchers found that about the same number of derogatory words were given as neutral or positive ones. And many of the neutral words were romantic views of gypsies (earrings, long hair, music, dancing). Negative attitudes held across age and gender differences. There was found to be an increase in positive comments from respondents who said that they had friends from different ethnic backgrounds, and an even higher rate when respondents had met or had Romani friends. Very few were able to name any famous or well-known figures of Romani origin, and expressed surprise when prompted with such names.

From the street survey slightly more than half of the respondents thought that the media's portrayal of Romani people was negative, and more than one third regarded it as prejudiced or racially-biased. About one quarter believed it to be ill-informed. Only a few of those interviewed considered the media justified, accurate or fair and reasonable in its portrayal of Romani people. The researchers came to the conclusion (among other things) that people generally had little information available to them about Romani people. What information they received through the media was mostly negative, ill-informed, biased and on occasions, racist.

In his paper 'Living on the edge: The East European Roma in post communist politics and society', Barany (2005) suggested that the way the media in eastern Europe portray Romani people is no different to the UK. He said that the media in eastern Europe does little to alleviate social tensions and Romani marginalisation by routinely portraying the Roma in an unflattering light. Newspapers frequently display anti-Roma prejudice and occasionally incite racial hatred. In crime reports only Romani suspects are identified by their ethnicity.

Not about Romani people specifically, however a research report by Garner et al (2009) on 'Sources of resentment, and perceptions of ethnic minorities among white people in England', showed that perceived competition for resources - typically housing, but also employment, benefits, territory and culture, was a prime source of resentment against immigrants by white, working-class people resident on poor housing estates in England. Yet few of the respondents had frequent contacts with ethnic minorities. One of the key recommendations from the study was to reduce the information deficits around immigration and resource-allocation. The issue of integration was raised by the respondents. To them 'integration' meant that ethnic minorities should give up their identity and merge with the local one, i.e. 'assimilation'. This is a concern that is often raised by Romani people. I therefore asked my Romani respondents what integration meant to them. Their views can be found in the findings section.

Two works helped to inform the research questions and analysis in this study: Szondi and Theilmann's chapter on 'Public relations research and evaluation' (2009) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's 'Public diplomacy evaluation toolkit' (2007).

Methodology

Media content analysis

To answer the research question 'How does the news media portray Romani people?', I conducted an analysis of all of the on-line content of UK daily newspapers between 1 August - 25 September 2010. As the unit of analysis I used the terms 'Romani', 'Roma', 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller'.

I collected the data by publication, headline, date, journalist/writer and allocated a favourability rating using the following criteria:

- positive = article took the Romani standpoint
- neutral = straight, factual reporting without comment
- negative = article took a standpoint opposing Romani.

Although the aim was to see how the UK news media portray Romani people, I decided not to include regional or local newspapers in the media content analysis but to concentrate on the more influential national daily newspapers. I didn't include Sunday papers. After consideration, I decided not to include television and radio news reports (and any on-line content of broadcasters like the BBC) because of the complexity and cost of collecting the data. I didn't include the printed versions of daily newspapers (only on-line content) due to the cost of buying the papers over the near two-month period. A check on a couple of newspapers showed that most printed news content on Roma issues was placed on their on-line sites, albeit sometimes edited (shortened) for web use. At the conference when I presented the research, the participants agreed that 'on-line daily newspapers' was sufficient to answer the research question.

Survey on Romani views

To answer the research question 'How do Romani people view media reporting on Romani issues and how do they perceive themselves', I conducted a on-line qualitative survey using the free survey monkey tool. Romani people, especially activists and their supporters, tend to use social networks like Facebook to share information so I targeted the most popular pages used by Romani people and supporters to promote the survey. These were my own organisation's recently created page - Equality (400 'likes'), Gypsy Chronicles (2,800 'likes'), Roma Rights Network (1,500 'likes') and European Roma Information Office (800 'likes').

After some demographic questions to determine whether the respondents identified themselves as a Romani person (Gypsy, Roma or Traveller), or worked with/supported Romani people, and which country they resided in, I asked the following questions:

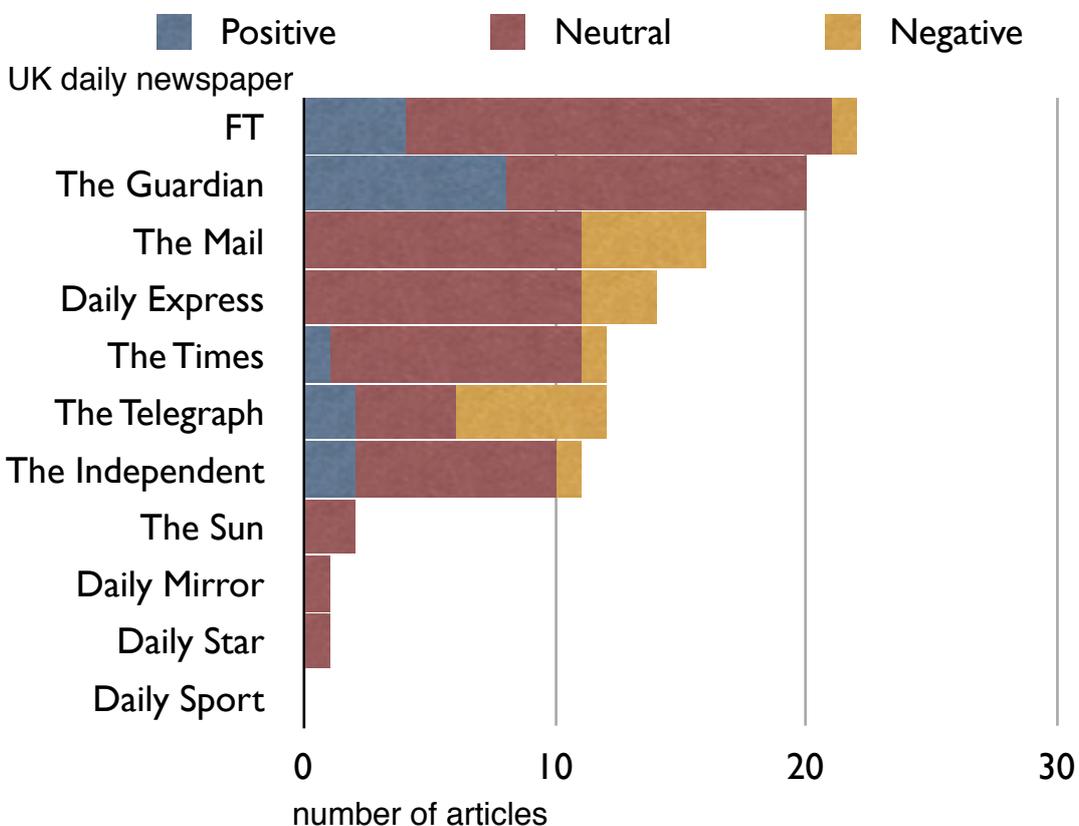
- In your view, how does the news media portray Romani people?
- How would you describe the way Romani people portray themselves?
- What do you believe are the causes of prejudice and discrimination against Romani people?
- What does the term 'integration' mean to you?
- How much do you agree with the following statement: 'The news media generally portray Romani people fairly and justly' (using a Likert scale)
- If you disagreed with the statement, why do the news media and general population have a negative perception of Romani people?
- How might negative perceptions of Romani people be overcome?

Findings

Media content analysis

There were 111 articles over the period of analysis that were about Romani people. This was a figure far greater than expected due to media reporting of President Sarkozy and the French Government's policy to publicly deport Romanian Roma and the ensuing spat with the European Commission. A story that grew in mid-August and was subsiding by mid-September. The question has to be raised as to whether this political 'event' skewed the research findings. There was certainly far greater reporting, commentary and analysis of Romani issues than would have normally happened. However, the majority of reports about France and the Roma deportations were neutral reports on the political situation and probably did not skew the findings.

Favourability results



As shown in the table, the FT had the most articles on Romani people over the period, The Guardian had the most positive articles on the favourability rating and The Telegraph had the most negative articles.

An example of a positive example was an editorial in The Guardian entitled: 'Treatment of the Roma: the shame of a continent. It would be a bitter irony if Europeans cannot reconcile their cherished right to free movement with the Roma community'.

An example of a negative article was a piece written by one of The Independent's commentators, Mary Dejevsky, entitled: 'Sarkozy is right about the Roma. Should French tax-payers have to pay for schools and services and training to yank their families up to minimally acceptable standards?'.

The Sun even managed a punchy headline (Sun-style) from the deportations story: 'Narky Sarky's argy-bargy', in describing a meeting between the French and Romanian Presidents.

My findings from analysing the data:

- reporting on the Roma deportations from France and the political issue were mostly neutral
- reporting on UK Gypsy Roma Traveller issues was mostly negative
- positive stories tended to be commentary, editorial or analytical articles and tried to explain the causes underpinning a situation
- negative articles frequently used stereotypes applied to the whole ethnic group, such as thieves, stealing, looting, crime, gangs, parasites, pickpockets, muggers and illiterate
- negative articles often used emotive language (influx of gypsies, trail of destruction, chaos, hordes of travellers and terrorising villagers)
- negative articles frequently used the pejorative spelling of Gypsy - 'gipsies'
- negative articles often used 'scare quotes' in the title to distance the writer from the words inside the quotation marks, thereby allowing the journalist to absolve themselves of responsibility for the words used.

At the conference in which I presented the research I was asked if the source of the report (agency or named journalist/commentator) had an impact on the favourability rating for the article, and related to that whether news as opposed to commentary had an impact on the favourability results.

There were 31 agency-sourced articles. Of these 26 were neutral, 4 were negative and 1 positive. Most were short articles reporting on the political situation in France and the European Commission's response.

Of the 80 named journalist/editor/commentator articles, 50 were neutral, 13 were negative and 17 positive.

In-house journalists and commentators were more likely to express an opinion, positive or negative, than agency staff. However, commentary (as opposed to news reporting) was either neutral, positive or negative and would appear to depend on the publisher's or journalist's stance on the issue.

I was also asked at the conference whether photo content analysis would add another dimension. Most of the on-line articles had an accompanying photograph. These were always relevant to the article. Most were agency photos from France of Roma camps being dismantled, people being deported or deportees back in Romania; or photographs of the main political figures (such as President Sarkozy and European Commissioner Reding). Even the negative articles on British Gypsies had photographs of peaceful caravan sites. My analysis is that photo content would not be an additional dimension to the textual content.

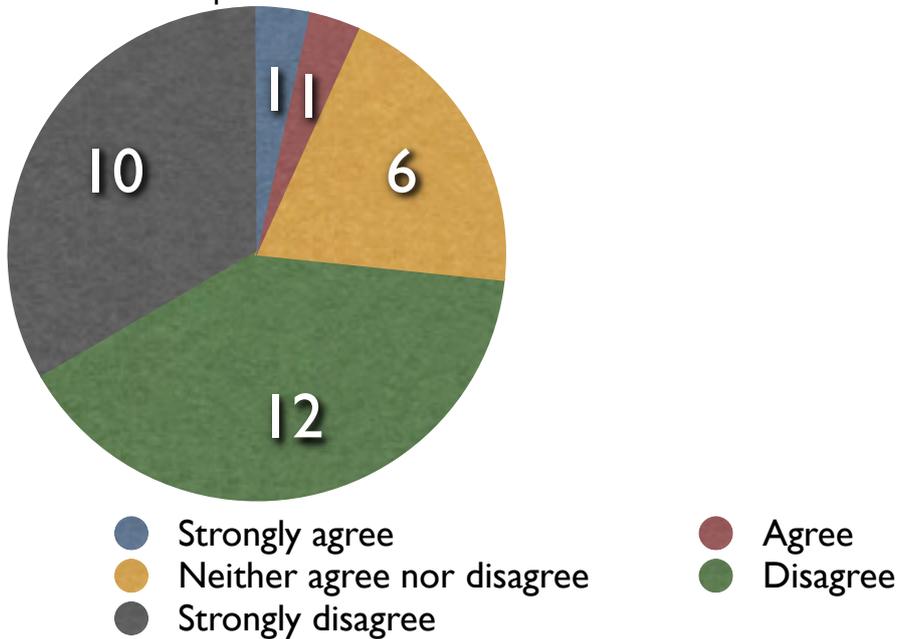
Survey on Romani views

A total of 52 Romani people or their supporters completed the on-line survey. 13 respondents lived in the UK, 21 in the 'old' EU Member States, 6 in the 'new' EU Member States and 11 lived outside of the EU.

The response to the following statement sets the tone:

How much do you agree with the following statement: 'The media generally portray Romani people fairly and justly'

Number of respondents that:



The 'Wordle' tool graphically shows the key descriptive word response to the question: 'How does the news media portray Romany people?'. The larger the font size, the more often the word was used.



There was an overwhelming opinion that the news media portrays Romani people in a negative light, treating them worse than other ethnic groups, with sensationalist, stereotypical and prejudicial reporting.

One respondent said that 'Romani people are being used by the media for bad-news-is-good-news campaigning and only rarely are Romani people portrayed neutrally or even positively'. Another person said 'I am Romani and a journalist. The success stories are ignored, but the pictures of ghettos repeat and repeat in the media.' Another person commented: 'Out-of-date stereotypes from history are kept alive by the media'.

One respondent highlighted the issue of naming someone's ethnic group in a news article: 'Most of the newspapers focus their attention on some social behaviour of the most poor Roma (whereas positive cultural contributions of Romani people are totally neglected). and they suggest that if a Rom is responsible for some crime this is not due to social conditions but is due to a genetic reason. Their possible fault is to be a thief, not to belong to an ethnic group.' The view that the media treat Romani people more negatively than other ethnic groups was put forward: the media treat Romani people 'as if exempt from all the usual constraints of balance, fairness, equity and respect governing the representation of ethnic minorities'. A respondent said that 'In the media, Romani people are seen mostly as a problem. Sometimes you see that they have problems, and more often Romani people are portrayed as being the problem. Something to be solved either way. Rarely if ever are they portrayed as just plain human beings like everybody else'. A few respondents did point out that there was some fair reporting from a few newspapers and (named) broadcasters.

A 'Wordle' showing the key descriptive words in response to the question: 'How Romani people portray themselves':



Romani people see themselves as proud of their ethnicity, different than the dominant population and having a distinct identity, rich in culture and family oriented people who get on with their lives having suffered discrimination and persecution for centuries. A lack of personal contact with Romani people (and many said they were 'closed' to outsiders) mean the dominant population find it hard to see the humanity of individuals behind the stereotypes.

Respondents stressed the normality of how Romani people view themselves: 'usual people trying to run their lives', 'good and bad, like any other race, religion or creed', 'most get on with their difficult lives without concentrating on their image'. A wariness of strangers and possibly a proud demeanour inhibits local-level communication, although one respondent noted that Romani leaders 'lately give more focussed comments. Previously they have seemed less coherent and just angry (in reaction to stressful situations). They seem less media savvy than other spokespeople, which reinforces stereotypes about education levels. People just don't understand Romani lifestyles, so any time they get to speak in the media should be a real opportunity to redress that and get a useful, focussed point across'.

In answer to the question about the causes of prejudice and discrimination, the overwhelming response from Romani people and supporters was 'misunderstanding', 'lack of information', 'misinformation', 'lack of knowledge', 'lack of information', 'false information', 'poor press'. Related to this was 'a fear of the unknown' and 'afraid of Roma'. Although a few respondents noted that 'some of our people are not helping in the way they behave'. 'Media exaggerate the negative qualities of a small part of the Romani group' and 'Play to the popularity of the prejudices of others to sell papers'.

Romani people recognise that they have to counter the misunderstanding, lack of understanding or information, and misinformation, with proactive public relations work. They identified during the survey that the first step needs to come from Romani people, with the help of supporters. In the words of one respondent: 'I think that people/society have the negative perception, not the media. I think that Romani don't use the media well enough as a vehicle to address this. The media just reports what there is to show... it just happens that the Romani can look bad in that scenario. However, the recent news re-evictions from France had rightly condemned the Romani treatment'.

Understanding of the term 'integration'

The term 'integration', often used by governments, international organisations and civil society, would appear to mean very different things to different people. Romani respondents in the survey regarded its meaning as (to list just a few responses) 'to get the same opportunities in education, employment, medical care and decent housing'. 'It should not mean assimilation. Language and culture should be promoted'. 'Coexistence in peace'. 'A political tool with no effect to those who need it'. 'One can choose ones life and possibilities and take part in the *gaje* (non-Roma) world'. 'Its a mal-word for a process that forces one side to loose. We need a new word'. 'Adapt to the cultural traditions of the host country'. 'Tolerance of any race, religion or creed'. 'Being part of the dominant culture'. 'Forced assimilation'.

The term needs to be used with caution, and when used it needs to be defined.

Findings applied to communications theory

The media content analysis and survey of Romani views applied to Broom and Dozier's co-orientational approach model:

- Media views on Romani people: mostly neutral with some negative and positive reporting, negative articles applied stereotypes to the whole ethnic group and used emotive language, positive articles tried to explain the causes of a situation.
- Dominant media view on Romani views: closed society, do own thing, don't integrate with dominant population, marginalised minority.
- Romani views on how they portray themselves: proud, different and having a distinct identity, rich in culture and family oriented who get on with their lives having suffered discrimination and persecution for centuries.
- Dominant view among Romani people on how media portray them: negative, prejudicial, stereotypical and sensationalist, highlighting the worst seldom the best.

However, different newspapers and even journalists and commentators within a newspaper took different standpoints on Romani people. For the newspapers that carried a number of positive and neutral articles about Romani people, such as The Guardian, then the outcome of *false conflict* probably applies. Strategies to improve the accuracy of the media's perceptions of Romani people need to be developed. For the negative and neutral newspapers, such as The Telegraph and The Mail, then *dissensus* occurs. Strategies to change the media position need to be developed.

In both cases the information gap on Romani people needs to be reduced, more so for the negative to neutral media.

Can a state of mutual understanding (Kincaid's model of convergence communication) be achieved? Not at present between media or dominant population and Romani people as the two participant groups do not share common social networks. In the future, possibly, when Romani leaders become 'more media savvy' and the media take an interest in engaging Romani people in debate. Yes, between the various groups (Roma, Gypsies, Travellers, Sinti) that make up the ethnic group of Romani people. Particularly noticeable during the French government political action to deport Roma was mutual agreement and collective action by all groups to support the Romanian Roma being deported from France. For example, British Gypsies and Travellers organised a demonstration outside of the French Embassy in London in support of Roma in France, something unheard of until recently. Activity on social networks like Facebook show that Romani groups are sharing information and reaching a state of mutual agreement.

How might negative perceptions of Romani people be overcome?

The survey asked Romani people and supporters how negative perceptions might be overcome. Respondents suggested that 'positive stories about Romani people should be promoted', for example 'gypsies that are active in the professions'. Education of Romani young people was mentioned by many people, as was developing exemplar Romani media professionals. Providing 'factual information on the Romani situation, history, culture and people to the dominant population, media and politicians' was mentioned by a number of respondents. 'Until governments embrace Romani people no one else will'. More visibility in the media and in local areas was suggested. Common activities and discussion involving Romani people and the dominant population to understand each others viewpoint and differences was proposed by a few respondents. Romani people

themselves had to take the initiative was a common suggestion. They should play a 'more active role to make their own lives better, participating visibly in society, educating themselves, working, leaving bad habits to history, respecting non-Roma as they would wish themselves to be respected'.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is a wide communications gap between the way the news media generally portray Romani people (although with much difference between individual papers and journalists) and the way that Romani people portray themselves. Misunderstanding and a lack of information needs to be corrected. For the newspapers that generally portray Romani people in a negative to neutral way then strategies to change this position need to be developed. For the newspapers that generally portray Romani people in a positive to neutral way then strategies to improve the accuracy of their perceptions of Romani people need to be developed.

There was widespread agreement among Romani people that they should do something about the information and communications gap as a means to better their existence. With so few Romani journalists or public relations professionals, they understood that they will need help from sympathetic non-Roma. They identified the need to concentrate on positive stories about individual Roma to get away from historical stereotypes applied to the whole ethnic group and to provide accurate information. Education of Romani young people was seen as a key to a better future. Developing more Romani communications professionals would enable a more balanced portrayal of Romani people in the news media.

Mutual understanding within a social network is being reached by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers that form the ethnic group 'Romani people'. In the political deportations of Romanian Roma from France; Gypsies, Travellers and Roma reached a state of mutual agreement and collective action. But mutual understanding between the dominant population or media and Romani people is a long way off.

The research gave a fascinating insight into perceptions of Romani people, both from the news media and the Roma themselves. I am extremely grateful to all who gave their knowledge and time to answer the survey. My organisation, Equality, provides a support service to Roma families and organisations (government and civil society) in the UK that want to work with them. The research provides a robust benchmark that could be used as a tracking study. I intend to repeat the research in twelve months time to see if perceptions on the relationship between Romani people and the news media have changed.

I have recommendations about the value of undertaking such research, and on taking action from the research findings:

- All civil society organisations should have an evidence base for their communications work. Research provides this evidence.
- Once one is clear about the aims of the research, it isn't necessarily difficult to do. Using on-line news reporting from UK daily newspapers gave a cost-effective solution (two news sites charged a small fee). No need to buy all the printed copies of newspapers. No need to buy-in high cost analysis from television and radio reports.

- On-line surveys using the survey monkey tool (free for first 100 respondents and free if limited to 10 questions) and using Facebook or other social media groups are ideal approaches for civil society organisations that have limited resources. So long as the chosen social network is where a sufficiently representative sample of the target group prefer to engage.
- My organisation, Equality, will publish this paper on its website (<http://equality.uk.com>) to share with like-minded organisations and with the news media.
- We will also work to take forward the suggestions in the survey on how one might counter the negative perceptions of Romani people, developing (with other like-minded organisations) strategies to change the position of negative to neutral media and strategies to improve the accuracy of positive to neutral media perceptions of Romani people. Filling the information/communication void with facts about the situation, history and culture of Romani people. Promoting dialogue and discussion between Roma and non-Roma. We will also try to influence how journalists are trained at colleges/ universities on reporting on ethnic minorities and by working with respected training organisations to enable change in the profession.

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