



Media information on racism, a mixed bag

by Paola Barretta

Both in Italy and Europe migration has been an often debated phenomenon, both by politicians and civil society. Media, reflecting the most relevant social phenomena, have also devoted considerable attention to this issue and have given voice, in some cases, to violent reactions and rejection from social and political sectors. This overabundance of information has brought out the existence of a rhetoric based on "ethnic-racial" stereotypes and prejudices.

Already in 1997, scholars such as René Gallissot and Annamaria Rivera, noted a trend in media communication: "Today, political and media discourse, in Italy and France, only takes on the negative dimension of ethnicity, to talk about wars, massacres and other behaviours considered as barbaric, savage, premodern. [...] more and more frequently the neo-racist discourse in Europe uses the term ethnicity as well as culture, giving them a racial meaning"¹. It is especially in recent years that "hostility against black people is expressed in Italy and Spain, with messages and speeches that come to evoke the forms of expression and terminology of biological racism. Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, people of Muslim faith and Roma are the privileged/designated target groups of discriminatory and violent political rhetoric"².

In fact, in 2018, there is an exceptional/atypical recurrence of episodes of aggression and physical injury against black citizens. This trend was also confirmed in 2019: during the election campaign phase for the European elections, Amnesty International's monitoring revealed that

1 R. Gallissot, A. Rivera, *L'imbroglione etnico in dieci parole chiave*, Edizione Dedalo, Bari 1997.

2 Lunaria (Ed.), *Words are stones. Analisi dell'hate speech nel discorso pubblico in sei paesi europei*, International Report 2019: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/pubblicazioni/>.



immigration, religious minorities and the Roma were the issues that caused more online controversy³.

Is it possible to identify a responsibility of media in spreading and amplifying a climate of hostility and rejection towards "foreigners" and minorities? Is it possible to determine narrative "recurrences" that have accompanied the treatment of migration and the foreign presence in Italy, and therefore legitimized discriminatory discourses? Although in a synthetic and not exhaustive way, the following pages will try to provide an answer to these questions, retracing the lights and shadows of mainstream information in Italy⁴.

It is current shared opinion among scholars and media experts that media operators are responsible for spreading and consolidating ethnic-based prejudice by concluding that individual behaviours are common to entire communities. Such comments/attitudes also led to the subsequent legitimation of racist opinions in public debate.

From this point of view it can be affirmed that journalism itself is responsible, albeit often unintentionally and unwillingly, for the propagation of symbolic racist content, which, in the definition of the sociologist Enrico Caniglia, corresponds to "a social climate of hostility and rejection towards individuals and minority groups to which prejudices and strongly negative stereotypes are associated"⁵.

3 Amnesty International Italia, *Il barometro dell'odio, Elezioni europee 2019*: <https://www.amnesty.it/cosa-facciamo/elezioni-europee/>.

4 The data reported refers to analyses contained in reports from Carta di Roma/Pavia Observatory. These diachronic analyses include the main national newspapers (Avvenire, Corriere della Sera, Il Fatto quotidiano, Il Giornale, La Repubblica, La Stampa), the prime-time news of the Rai, Mediaset and La7 networks and specific thematic focuses on an annual basis (e.g. comparison of information in the main European public broadcasters, immigration in TV infotainment, analysis of case studies on Facebook and Twitter).

5 E. Caniglia, "I codici deontologici alla prova. La regola di rilevanza nella rappresentazione giornalistica delle minoranze", *Problemi dell'informazione*, n. 2, Il Mulino, Bologna 2019, pages 315-337.



The juxtaposition immigration/crime, and the consequent and arbitrary conclusion that people of certain nationalities behave in certain given ways, is among the elements of greater continuity that arise over the years. Some episodes of chronicle fill the media agenda, highlighting how national belonging (Romanians and Albanians in the late 1990s, North Africans in the mid 2000s, Africans, Nigerians and migrants in general since 2016) is an explanatory variable of crime.

As early as 1997 (on April 19), in Capriolo (province of Brescia) the headlines in the news and press reported the following crime: "They rape a woman and torture her husband". "Two bandits break into a house. The Slavic or Albanian bandits try to rape his wife"; "Lega Nord (Northern League) demands for more control over foreigners". Only a few days later, retraction came: "It wasn't the Slavs not the Albanians but the woman's lover caught by her husband".

In 2001, in Novi Ligure (province of Alessandria), on February 22 media report: "Mother and son killed by a gang of thieves: Slavs or Albanians, they are certainly foreigners"; "We need the death penalty"; "The inhabitants point the finger at the immigrants: it's them". A few days later was retraction time: "The immigrants had nothing to do with it: the crime was committed by the woman's daughter and her boyfriend.

Years later, in 2006, another heinous crime, known as the "massacre of Erba" (province of Como), occupies for days and weeks the headlines: "Massacre in Erba in the Como area: a 25-year-old Tunisian with criminal records stabbed his wife and son to death and exterminated the family"; "Massacre in the family: a previous offender of Moroccan nationality released on pardon, woman's flatmate wanted"; "His name is Azuz Marzuk, responsible for the murders"; "We must send them all away, from the first to the last". A few days later, the information was retracted: "The perpetrators of the massacre are the family's neighbors, Olindo and Rosa Romano⁶.

⁶ For further details, see the chapter written by Paola Andrisan in this report.



The above is the framework in which "foreigners" - migrants, Italian citizens of foreign origin and refugees - are presented as violent, as a cause of insecurity in Italian cities and town, as an element of disturbance of the public quite villages and towns, as possible terrorists, as carriers of diseases, as incapable of respecting the rules of civil coexistence, as "invaders" of public spaces.

On July 26, 2019, following an episode of crime occurred in Rome and when the outcome of the investigation was still pending, media point their finger against two "North Africans" as (alleged) perpetrators of the murder of Vice-Brigadier Cerciello Rega. " Rome, Prati neighborhood, the thief reacts and hits Vice-Brigadiere Cerciello Rega to death: ...North-Africans"; "Vice Brigadier stabbed by a Maghreb man, police is looking for the two North Africans who escaped on foot"; "The police is hunting two North Africans who have killed for 100 euro and a cell phone"; "Tall, of North African origin, one with highlight streak and the other with a tattoo on his arm, they were wearing jeans and sweatshirts: here is the identikit". A few hours later, two young American citizens (presumably) authors of the murder, are arrested.

Such media attitude is potentially dangerous and can have the effect of identifying foreigners, immigrants or refugees or even Roma or Sinti, as a social category to be pointed out when criminal episodes occur as well as the effect of fueling a spiral of fear, distrust and anger towards them.

As Gallissot writes, this phenomenon is one of the matrices of the neo-racist narrative because it "naturalizes" nationality, a gift of nature (therefore of privileges, rights, status), and on the contrary blames, negative traits, responsibilities and, consequently, exclusion of rights. It is precisely at this stage, from 2007 to 2008, that the Order of Journalists and the Italian National Press Federation, with the support of international associations and organizations, draw up a



set of simple principles that journalists are required to follow regardless of what they think of immigration and immigrants.

Four rules (appropriate use of terminology, identity protection, use of sources, respect for the substantial truth of the facts) which because of their simplicity can easily be respected even by those who have a political vision that is even hostile to immigrants⁷.

From 2008 to 2013, the media narrative is characterized by a "discreet" racism especially in relation to criminal episodes often told with emphasis put on elements of "ethnicization". As pointed out by the historian and political scientist Marco Revelli when seven Chinese workers lost their lives in the fire that broke out in December 2013 in Prato, in Macrolotto: "It may seem strange, but the names of the seven people dead hardly ever appear. Neither in the articles that reported on the episode nor in the many media reviews issued in the following weeks... Of "our" people on the scene or arrived at different times we know every detail, name, surname, even nickname [...] But we do not know the names of the bodies reduced to ashes. The non-presence of a ghost people..."⁸.

A form of media silence that does not tell about the victims of tragic episodes like the one in Prato or those lived in conditions of exploitation and deprivation. A form of selective activation of the attention (a selective focus) that guides the media in choosing events coverage on the basis of geographical origin. Foreign nationals, immigrants and refugees rarely make it onto the prime-time agenda in the news or on the front pages of newspapers.

If and when it happens, it is because the news is so relevant that cannot be ignored.

In 2011, for example, in the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" and the intensification of migratory flows, public debate started focusing on the so-called "immigration emergency" and

⁷ Please consult: <https://www.cartadiroma.org/editoriale/linee-guida-2018-carta-roma/>.

⁸ M. Revelli, *Non ti riconosco. Un viaggio eretico nell'Italia che cambia*, Einaudi, Turin 2016.



statements such as "immigrants must go home, it is better not to move them to the northern region, let's keep them in the South" were very frequent⁹.

Narratives focused on pietas and the dramas behind the escapes or the initial choices, an attention to the humanitarian issue, balances sometimes the scaremongering and discriminatory narratives.

Then between 2014 to 2016 we enter a new phase in which media attention to migrants and refugees becomes central. In 2015, figures are impressive, both in the press and on TV: the headlines that the major Italian newspapers have dedicated to the topic increased from 70 to 180 percent, compared to the previous year; news report in newscast have quadrupled (the highest figure in 11 years)¹⁰.

While foreigners are commonly depicted as invaders, potential extremists and as a menace to public safety, on the other hand it persists a moving/touching and more human narrative on migrants as was the case in the aftermath of the publication of the photo of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian child who died on the Turkish coast, or after the spread of photos of families camped along the Balkan route waiting to reach Europe.

At the same time, the importance given to (the focus on) migration contributes to provide greater visibility of criminal episodes in which "foreigners" - Italian citizens of foreign origin, migrants, refugees - are protagonists as victims and not perpetrators.

In July 2016, the aggression perpetrated by the right-wing football fan Amedeo Mancini that caused the death of the young Nigerian Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, occupied the news agenda for days and was widely condemned on media.

9 G. Milazzo, M. Marchese, "La rappresentazione mediatica delle crisi umanitarie nel 2011", in *Medici Senza Frontiere* (a cura di), *Le crisi umanitarie dimenticate dai media 2011*, Marsilio Editore, Venice 2012, page 141.

10 Associazione Carta di Roma, *Notizie di confine*, III Report, December 2015:

<https://www.cartadiroma.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Rapporto-2015 -cartadiroma.pdf>.



In the same period, another episode echoed on the front pages of newspapers and prime-time news: a twenty-six years old man from Mali, Sekine Traore, was shot dead by a carabinieri, who had intervened to quell a brawl broke out in the slums around the labor camps of San Ferdinando. The episode triggered a debate on the workers labor conditions in the countryside in the Southern part of the country, who also victims of crimes and abuse by criminal organizations.

These episodes become an opportunity, albeit with different editorial choices, to condemn and stigmatize racism and the perpetrators of acts of discrimination and violence on ethnic and national grounds.

The main Italian newspapers and newscasts on the main TV channels (Rai, Mediaset and La7), all condemn unequivocally racism, although following the developments of the investigation and the resumption of the debate on immigration adopting different editorial choices. The information, therefore, remains within the confines of "tolerance" and, indeed, interviews with the victim's widow as well as with representatives of African communities, day laborers and associations close to workers, shed light on cases and contexts in which racism takes shape and acts.

In the same year, these cases condemned and stigmatized by the "traditional" media, became the occasion of a violent ideological clash between accusations of racism on the one hand and excessive "bleeding heart" towards immigrants on the other. The shadows of racism thicken especially on social media.

"The debate on social media is characterized by a de-humanisation of the language: racist and sexist insults appear along with exaggerated judgements in a virtual conflict between opposing parties; anger take the upper hand over mourning, shattering every bond of social and civil contract. The main protagonists are transfigured from symbols of victims into



executioners, to confirm or reinforce stereotypes and generalizations about the groups they belong to, be they refugees, Africans, Nigerians, immigrants all of them¹¹.”

The next phase, which also includes a good part of 2019, can be defined as "racism in words" in public, political and media debate. There is a progressive liberation of the racist vocabulary, which "is one of the components linked to the return of the “race”, as also emerges from some broadcasts on Tv that happen to host theses extolling the extermination of the Roma, or propose the black people/ape association".¹²

Among the events that start a phase of continuous and repeated opposition between "us" and "them", with a progressive "clearance" in the public and media debate of insults and racist invocations against "foreigners", there is a case of crime. The rape, in Rimini, carried out by 3 minors of Moroccan origin, and an adult of age originally from the Congo and provided with humanitarian protection, occupies the media agenda for days. Some news programmes also dedicate 9 reports in the same edition¹³.

This contrast feeds on various episodes that reinforce negative frames, where the presence of migrants and refugees is associated with "invasion", the threat to the security of citizens, to which are added those for diseases and "aggression" to Western cultural identity, and degradation, and which legitimize suspicions and threats that in the media arena are accompanied by the use of racist expressions.

The tone is that of the "shouted" accusation that amplifies the grudges and wipes out the more cautious voices, the only antidote to the spread of negative associations and discrimination, "they are protected, these people who enter, delinque, they do everything, even give them the house, the money, they give them everything. The accusations of collusion with the traffickers brought against the NGOs, the difficulties in the management of migratory flows,

11 Associazione Carta di Roma, *Notizie da paura*, V Rapporto, December 2017: https://www.cartadiroma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Rapporto-2017 -cartadiroma_small.pdf.

12 S. Pasta, *Razzismi 2.0. Analisi socio-educativa dell'odio on line*, Editrice Morcelliana, Brescia 2018.

13 Cfr. Associazione Carta di Roma, *Notizie da paura*, cit.



the blocking of the proposed reform of the law on citizenship, criminal cases of marked "brutality", evictions and unrest in reception centres occupy the front pages of the local and national press and the opening headlines of the news. And they create a climate conducive to the spread of social resentment and rejection.

This is the phase in which some journalistic reports establish associations in a voluntary way, echoing a climate of polarization, political confrontation and consolidation of opinions intentionally aimed at strengthening certain binomials: immigration and violence, immigration and religious radicalism, immigration and poverty.

A symbolic racism that feeds on redundancy, often devoid of information content that would be essential in news stories, and dense, on the contrary, of emotional elements and morbid, disturbing details. This happens often with local news that report national information in an apparently neutral way, hiding the re-proposal of clichés. The treatment of the case of Don Biancalani is emblematic. The parish priest, after having uploaded in his social profile the photos of some asylum seekers swimming in the pool, is overwhelmed by waves of xenophobic and racist insults. Invited as a guest in some information program, the priest is still in the dock, considered to be co-responsible for the noise triggered on social media, not so much because of the photograph of immigrants in the pool, but because of the sentence that accompanied it ("They are my homeland, racists and fascists are my enemies"), considered provocative. Therefore, the focus is on the parish priest, rather than on the virulence of the messages and statements on social media.

This trend continues and consolidates in the following year, 2018, when - in the two months preceding the election campaign - the word "nigger" is counted in the newspapers 57 times, almost once a day, written inside articles that quote phrases like: "dirty nigger", "nigger of m...", "niggers come to steal, to kill our women...", "I don't let a nigger doctro touch me...", "shut up nigger".



Border lights

Among the main responsibilities of the traditional media in the story of migration and its protagonists are the generalizations of countries and groups of people, aimed at simplifying the reality, but which end up preventing its understanding. A bad representation is not only a misrepresentation based on misinformation, but also one that chooses to "tell someone else's story without considering their point of view, i.e. to tell only a part of the story, a unique story, without listening to the protagonists".

From this point of view, the second half of 2019 shows some important results: a greater contextualisation, the voices of victims of racism, the decrease in the use of stigmatizing terms.

From the first point of view, there is the presence of reports in which migrants and refugees are presented in "normal" urban contexts without references to the conceptual area of "degradation" and poverty. On the contrary, in the prime-time information, solidarity between foreign workers and Italian trade unionists, who participate in their struggles, is highlighted. This news represents the most positive and proactive frame in which to place the voices of immigrants and refugees: "it is the interviews with workers, often exploited, who ask for more rights, or, simply, the possibility of enjoying the elementary rights of every worker, such as a decent wage or insurance against accidents at work"¹⁴. Some Tv reporting insists on the role of organised crime in labour exploitation, shifting the focus from the management of migration flows to the "caporalato" and irregular work.¹⁵

The second positive change lies in the wide visibility to cases of racism, giving voice to the victims. These are interviews with foreign citizens who have suffered acts of discrimination or

¹⁴ *L'Africa mediata*, Dossier sulla rappresentazione dell'Africa, ottobre 2019: <https://africamediata.amref.it/>.

¹⁵ Associazione Carta di Roma, *Notizie senza approdo*, VII Rapporto, dicembre 2019, disponibile qui: https://www.cartadiroma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CdR-Report-2019_Final.pdf.



violence because of their ethnicity. In addition, there are voices from communities that tell their lives within a plural society.

Finally, there is a decrease in the use of stigmatising words such as "clandestine", "gypsies", "nomads". "Clandestine" has a strongly negative connotation, as well as being legally incorrect when it comes to migrants requiring forms of international protection. Despite this, the use of the term clandestine has entered the current language and is still widely abused in the headlines of newspapers, there were 168 headlines in 2018, an increase compared to previous years (1.6% compared to 1% in 2016, on the total headlines)¹⁶. In the last three months of 2019, this trend is reversed: there are "only" 19 titles that carry the word "clandestine", and they do so because of editorial choices. And overall 2019 closed with a more positive balance sheet than in previous years, returning to the values of 2016: the word is present in 1.1% of headlines (out of 168).

Similarly, over the years, a decline in inappropriate terms such as "gypsies", "nomads", "vu cumprà" has been noted. The use of the term "nomad", often incorrectly used to describe permanent settlements of Roma and Sinti, has decreased significantly over the years: after a peak use in 2014 (176, equal to 1.3% of the securities), the presence of "nomads" in the securities has decreased significantly, with 23 securities in 2018. In the first half of 2019, the trend is reversed and, on the contrary, returns to its central role, particularly in relation to the story of the family of Roma origin, "expelled" from the social housing assigned by the Municipality of Rome in Casal Bruciato, an area in the outskirts¹⁷. There are 27 headlines with the word "gypsy", in reference to the threats made by a Roma woman to former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. In the last months of 2019, the term was not used in headlines.

¹⁶ The database is provided by the press review of the Associazione Carta di Roma, which collects daily the headlines and articles with migration relevance and their protagonists.

¹⁷ See the following contribution of Elisa Pini dedicated to this case.



As noted by the political scientist Ilvo Diamanti, the last months of 2019 open the way to a new trend that marks a drop in insecurity towards "foreigners" of 10 points compared to the same survey conducted in the previous year. "The interpretative key used to explain this trend refers to habit. A message proposed and repeated for a long time creates inurement. In the end, this redundancy produces counter-intuitive effects. As it "normalizes" events and processes that, precisely because they are repeated and amplified, stop being frightening. While they become a daily refrain, they enter everyday life [...] While in this case, the "trivialization of the foreigner" and the "migrant" indicates a feeling of "acceptance" towards a phenomenon emphasized and amplified well beyond the real measures"¹⁸.

The story of "recognition" therefore remains the simplest and most effective way to create empathy, an antidote to racism and discrimination. And it is precisely in the phases in which the climate of hostility and permanent confrontation subsides that it is essential to promote a journalism that is participatory and open to new alliances with civil and scientific communities.

¹⁸ Associazione Carta di Roma, *Notizie senza approdo*, cit..