

Learning Point

Public perception of A8 migrants: the discourse of the media and its impacts

What is this Learning Point about?

This learning point is about how the press' portrayals of A8 migrants impact on our perceptions of them. It was written by Jan Semotam from BEMIS (Empowering Scotland's Ethnic and Cultural Minority Communities) and develops from a research paper written by the author during the Collaborative Dissertations project established through a partnership with GRAMNet (Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migrant Network). By A8 countries we mean the eight countries from the former 'Eastern Bloc' that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004. These countries – Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - have been grouped together as the 'Accession Eight' or 'A8'.

The paper was created from a combination of theoretical and empirical research. It involved three interconnected stages. First, a library-based analysis of academic literature on the media, their operation, role in our society and potential impacts on public perceptions. Second, an analysis of five newspapers (Scottish tabloid - *Daily Record*, Scottish edition of a free newspaper - *Metro*, Scottish broadsheet– *The Herald*, national broadsheet– *the Guardian* and Scottish edition of a national tabloid - *the Scottish Sun*) that together have a majority share of the Scottish market. And thirdly, interviews and focus groups were carried out (24 respondents) to look at the audience's general awareness of the A8 countries and nationals, preferences of newspapers, reasons behind their choices and the ways these newspapers influence their perceptions of A8 migrants in Scotland.

This learning point provides a summary of the main theoretical issues found in academic literature and key findings from the empirical stages of the research. It also offers a list of recommendations both for future research and for ways forward in dealing with the issues connected with media impact on public perceptions.

What are the important issues?

- How does the press portray A8 migrants in Scotland?
- What is the impact of the portrayal on the audience's perceptions of the A8 nationals in Scotland?

- How does the portrayal impact the social processes of integration and inclusion?
- How much does the Scottish audience know about the A8 countries, their peoples and cultures?
- What can we do to influence the ways in which the A8 migrants are portrayed in the media?
- How can we involve the migrants themselves and various migrant bodies in this process?

What do we know already?

- Following their 01 May 2004 EU accession, over half a million A8 nationals have come to the UK. This makes it one of the most important social phenomena in recent years.
- The Polish are now the largest migrant group in the UK.
- Scottish population is ageing and decreasing and the Scottish Government has been actively encouraging migrants to come to Scotland.

Research on media impact is not conclusive but raises important issues:

1. For a large number of people, mass media provide the best – and only – easily accessible approximation of ever-changing political, economic and social realities.
2. Most academics agree that media do not influence what we think but what we think about.
3. Audiences are active because they can interpret messages in their own way and use the media as a tool to help them make sense of current events.
4. Media compete for influence directly with other social factors such as friends, family, colleagues, class and education.
5. Media tend to focus inordinate attention on the more bizarre and unusual elements of minority communities, such as youth gangs, illegal immigration, or interracial violence.

What have we learned?

Although mostly positive, the coverage of the five newspapers cannot be called ‘balanced’ as it did not offer a viewpoint of the A8 minority. The analysis showed that:

- Only very few articles offered the ‘A8 viewpoint’ by looking at everyday lives of the migrants in Scotland.
- Crime-related features received the largest share of the press coverage (42%) which potentially shows the A8 group as prone to be involved in criminality.
- Second largest issue covered was that of jobs and employment (21%). Vast majority of articles showed the A8 migrants as hardworking people who come to Scotland to find better lives and fill in the country’s employment gap.

- There does not seem to be an openly negative campaign in the press against the A8 migrants. Most coverage was considered either positive (39%) or neutral (34%). Only *the Sun* sensationalised the group through the 'flood of migrants taking British jobs' rhetoric.

There is a lack of general knowledge about the A8 among the Scottish audience.

- Only a third of the respondents could name all A8 countries that joined the EU in 2004. The rest were struggling with the question, with only four naming Hungary and only two Lithuania.
- Looking at the interview and focus group results, it seems that a majority of the Scottish population has little or no awareness of the diversity among the A8 and tends to treat the community as a homogenous one.
- Most common answer to a question asking what the participants knew about the A8 countries included references to their Communist past and major economic and/or social problems. Nobody mentioned any concrete examples of the countries' culture, events, things like music, art, food and drinks or personalities.

The interviews showed that a majority of participants did not see the A8 nationals in Scotland as 'problem people' and instead praised the benefits they are bringing to the Scottish society.

- Most respondents suggested that the media coverage of ethnic minorities was not balanced and favoured the 'white' majority.
- Press coverage of the A8 migrants was seen as negative by a majority.
- A majority of respondents found the perceived negative press coverage in direct contrast to their personal experiences with the A8 migrants.

What Next?

Two main issues are of an importance here; first, the 'pigeonholing' of A8 migrants by the media and second, the lack of knowledge and awareness about them among the population. They create a situation where there is a gap in understanding between peoples which complicates the process of the migrant group integrating into the society as well as the society's inclusion of this minority.

The challenge is to try and find a way of effectively making people aware of the need for a balanced, wider coverage of the A8 minority (and consequently, of minorities in general). By people, we mean the media industry, the policy makers as well as the minority groups themselves. There seems to be a need for cooperation that would lead to the theme being examined from different viewpoints and a wider variety of issues reported on by the media. Ideally, this would mean an increased understanding between people easing the social processes of integration and inclusion.

BEMIS is currently working on generating a forum where representatives of the media industry, policymakers, and minority groups can debate these issues and work constructively towards a creation of a charter that does not only recommend what

could or should be done but also outlines who is responsible for the set of undertakings agreed on in the course of the forum.

Training remains a crucial value to advancing and tackling media perceptions and how to deal with this by migrant groups, wider community and stakeholders. Bemis will be seeking with interested parties to develop and deliver training seminars in this regards in its forthcoming initiatives.