



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Challenges and opportunities for Roma voices in the Hungarian media space

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Introduction

“There are hardly any minority-owned media left, and barely any Roma journalists in the mainstream media,” said Róbert Báthory, a Roma journalist working in Hungarian mainstream media. “This is a lost cause.”

I am not Roma, nor do I belong to the community. But I have been drawn to reporting on minorities and underrepresented communities in Hungary throughout my journalistic career. When I’m asked why, I’ve always given the same answer: because the way minorities are treated in a society reflects the condition of the society rather than the minority.

Today in Hungary, one does not need to reflect for long to see that the situation is unhealthy. Research on mainstream media suggests [decreasing press freedom](#), [increasing political influence](#) and the [concentration of media ownership](#).^{1, 2, 3} Many have done work to record these challenges. This project aims to capture the struggle of minority-owned outlets and voices in this context.

I have interviewed dozens of journalists, editors, and media researchers, both Roma and non-Roma. I aim to show how a changing media landscape means minority audiences are simultaneously flooded and starved of information, and record how minority voices say they are faring inside mainstream outlets that increasingly centre majority voices and talking points.

We’ll consider Hungary’s history to understand why that struggle should matter to Hungarian journalists of every background, then weigh up the challenges and opportunities for both minority-owned media and minority voices in mainstream media today.

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956474820910071>

² https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-02710-0_13

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2019.1662398>

A brief history of the Roma in Hungary

The Roma ethnic group arrived in Hungary from India around the 15th century. The exact reason for their migration is contested: some say they were fleeing Turkish troops, others say they followed them to the Carpathian Basin.⁴

In the 18th century, after Turkish troops had been expelled and Ferenc Rákóczi had led a war of independence, the Habsburg monarchy remained in power. Empress Maria Theresa and her son pursued a campaign for Roma settlement and assimilation. The aim: put an end to traveller lifestyle for those living in carts, tents, or huts. The campaign involved discrimination at every level.

In the so-called Horthy era – between 1920 and the arrival of the Nazis – efforts to make the Roma settle or leave were still ongoing. Despite the Roma having been in Hungary for more than 600 years at this point, records indicate the majority ethnic group wished to differentiate and distance themselves from the Roma.

They blamed epidemics like cholera and typhoid on Roma people. Discriminatory laws were enforced, including a so-called child protection order under which children could be removed from Roma families on charges of “moral destruction”.

World War II and its aftermath

In 1944, approximately 200,000 Roma people were living in Hungary. The arrival of the Nazis marked a dark turn in their history. What began under the guise of “re-education” soon morphed into genocide. Against the backdrop of the previous 600 years, there was little resistance to the Nazi’s plans for the Roma.

At first, the Nazis and their Hungarian supporters from the Nyilas Movement wanted to exterminate only itinerant Roma but, when they couldn’t find any, they turned their attention to settled Roma.

As with Hungary’s Jewish population, there are no precise numbers for how many Roma lives were taken during the Holocaust. The number is estimated to be between 5,000 and 30,000.

After WWII, the emancipation of the Roma people began. But systemic discrimination remained, meaning they were left out of initiatives like land reform.

⁴ Kállai, E. (2000): A cigánység története 1945-től a rendszerváltásig és a rendszerváltás után. In: Kállai, E. – Törzsök, E.: Cigánynak lenni Magyarországon. Jelentés 2000. Budapest: EÖKIP, 1-16. p.

The Socialist Era: 1956-1989

During the Socialist Era in Hungary, in a 1961 party resolution by the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the "Roma question" was declared to be a social issue and not an ethnic matter. Focus shifted to the reduction of segregation and easing of poor living conditions through the elimination of the more than 2,000 slums, and assimilation.

In 1971, István Kemény conducted significant research on the Roma community.⁵ Of the 320,000 Roma living in Hungary, he found two-thirds were housed in slums. The majority had Hungarian as a first language.

Hungary's regime changed again in 1989, with devastating consequences for Roma communities. Many workers lost their jobs due to privatisation, leading to lost homes when they couldn't afford to pay loans or rent. In the meantime, discrimination and hatred towards the Roma community was on the rise.

Those years can also be seen as a political awakening in the Roma community, including the creation of Roma NGOs. Years of campaigning resulted in the passing of [Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities](#), a law that officially recognised Roma people as an ethnic minority group and afforded them protection from discrimination.⁶ It also extended an option to form minority self-governments. All was certainly not perfect from then on; some 20-odd generations of discrimination cannot be undone by the passing of a single law. Without the redress of political, economic, and educational opportunities, the path to Roma equality remains a long one.

The progressive 1990s

From 1990 onwards, following regime change, the presence of Roma in the Hungarian mainstream media grew. But while Roma-related subjects gained a presence in the public discourse, they were often framed through the lens of stereotypes and biases.⁷ Media coverage often mirrored a prevailing political notion that portrayed Roma people as sources of difficulties rather than contributors to solutions.⁸ They were depicted as poor, uneducated, quitters, thieves, prolific breeders who lived in squalor and relied on welfare benefits. Their voices were completely missing from the coverage, and they had no influence on the news written about them.

⁵ Kemény, I. (1974) A magyarországi cigány lakosság. Valóság, 1, pp63–72.

⁶ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3476272.html>

⁷ Munk, V. (2013): A romák reprezentációja a többségi média híreiben az 1960-as évektől napjainkig

⁸ Vidra Zs., Kriza, B. (2010): A többség fogságában – kisebbségek médiareprezentációja. In: Feischmidt, M.: Etnicitás. Különbségteremtő társadalom. Gondolat-MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 391-405. p. Retrieved from <https://cps.ceu.edu/publications/vidra/2010/25153>

In 1997, the ombudsman passed a resolution that the ethnic background of crime offenders should not be published. This led to a slight alleviation of negative narratives in the early 2000s.

Entertainment media provided what looked to be a turning point, following the introduction in 2000 of the first Roma character on the popular prime time soap opera *Among Friends* (*Barátok közt*).⁹

A 2001 focus group by two media researchers, Vera Messing and Gábor Bernáth, asked Roma people what they thought about this move and the character portrayed. Respondents found the character to be real and credible but also found it problematic that the plot did not portray a positive image of a Roma family and that there were so many conflicts around (and discrimination against) the character.

While representation was growing, it was still not necessarily good representation. In 2003 a show called *My Big Fat Roma Wedding* was broadcast on one of the biggest commercial television channels, TV2. After complaints from Roma politicians and activists, a National Radio and Television Board review found the show guilty of violating the dignity of an ethnic minority by representing derogatory stereotypes of prostitution, crimes against property, drug use, sexual excess, restlessness, and hedonism as innate characteristics of the Roma people.

The board said the representation was particularly damaging as it could contribute to deepening prejudices against minorities and legitimizing discrimination. They punished the channel [through taxation](#), leading to a suspension of broadcasting.¹⁰

Surveyed about media representation in 2001 ([Bernáth, et al](#)), a Roma audience sample said their voices were missing from coverage, and that they were mostly portrayed in relation to negative issues and hardly for positive achievements.¹¹ There was not much in the media to be proud of as a Roma, they said.

Still, at least the conversation was being held: it seemed like progress. Until a 2006 incident sparked regression.

The 2006 Olaszliszka incident

In 2006, a tragic incident occurred in the small town of Olaszliszka: a teacher driving his two children home came dangerously close to hitting a Roma girl with

⁹ Messing, V., Bernáth, G. (2001): Roma szereplő a „Barátok közt”-ben: Az első fecske. Retrieved from https://epa.oszk.hu/03000/03056/cikk/2001_01_tavasz/01_roma_szereplo_a_baratok_koztben/

¹⁰ <https://kreativ.hu/cikk/tv2-buntetes-a-romalagzi-miatt>

¹¹ Bernáth, G., Messing, V. (2001): A magára hagyott közönség. Retrieved from <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/a-magara-hagyott-kozonseg>

his car. The girl had no injuries, but the teacher was pulled from his vehicle by alarmed Roma neighbours and beaten to death in front of his two children.

Because the perpetrators were Roma, the far-right used this story to incite hatred against the community. Roma rhetoric in the mainstream media flipped from “lazy and uneducated” to “dangerous”, and the term “Roma criminality” (*cigánybűnözés*) became widely used in defiance of the 1997 resolution.

Gábor Bernáth, a media researcher who specialises in Roma coverage, recalls it as a pivotal event – shocking both visually and narratively. While the far-right subculture had already begun to organise itself politically in Hungary, this incident paved a way for their narratives back into the mainstream.

A far-right political party known as Jobbik, and an associated movement called Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guards), co-opted “Roma criminality” as a political talking point. By stoking fear and anti-Roma rhetoric, Jobbik doubled their supporter numbers between 2003 and 2009.¹²

Although it had been coined as a sociological term in the 1970s, it moved out of the margins and into the mainstream after Olaszliszka for two reasons. Firstly, it was seen as symbolic resistance to political correctness obscuring frank discourse.¹³ Secondly, it was repeated in the mainstream media, who were reporting on its use by political leaders as well as opposition politicians.

It was way worse on the far-right sites, like kurucinfo.hu where a column “Roma criminality” was created. All the crime-related stories were put there, implicating that most Roma people are perpetrators and criminals.

Not even a wave of Roma-targeted violence in 2008 and 2009, which resulted in the murder of six people, including a 5-year-old boy, could alter the tide of negative media coverage.

NGOs and some Roma-led independent outlets took concerted actions to beat the far-right narrative, with mostly short-term effect.

In 2007, [Zöld Könyv](#) (the Green Book) was launched, containing practical advice for journalists covering Roma issues.¹⁴ The paper includes suggestions such as:

¹² Vidra, Zs., Fox, J. (2014): Mainstreaming of Racist Anti-Roma Discourses in the Media in Hungary

¹³ Juhász, A. (2010): A „cigánybűnözés” mint „az igazság” szimbóluma

¹⁴ Hammer, Ference. (2007): Zöld Könyv -

https://www.academia.edu/38142900/Zo_ld_Ko_nyv_A_roma_k_me_diaa_bra_zola_sa

- Acknowledge the stereotypes and avoid them;
- Mention the possible solutions provided not just by those in power but also by the community itself;
- Make Roma voices heard even if the question is not related to the Roma community: interview Roma experts, treat them as reliable sources even if the topic is not related to any minorities;
- Personalize stories, while showing the systematic problems.

There was advice for the government, too: run sensitivity training for broadcasters, and support applications from Roma people for public media vacancies.

Róbert Báthory worked for the public radio station Kossuth Rádió around that time. He told me they compiled a list of potential minority sources and experts whom journalists could call to request interviews or comments on all sorts of topics. “We had 10 to 20 [regular contributors] and besides that there were a further 60 to 70 more on the list who belonged to some kind of minority group. We aimed to include Roma experts as well as other minorities, and tried not to talk to the same person all the time. We seem to have forgotten this aim since then.”

Media researcher Vera Messing points out that it is normal for bad news to be published about all sorts of people: “What the Roma people took amiss was the total lack of positive stories, that they were depicted only in a stereotypical way.”

She and Gábor Bernáth have examined Roma mainstream coverage in several studies. Their 2017 research found no major improvements compared to the early 2000s.¹⁵ They found that many Roma still felt their voices and views cannot be heard, that they are predominantly spoken for by community “authorities” who drown out the views of ordinary Roma people.

They found generalising to be a big problem, too. One of the Roma interviewees said that “if somebody steals a chocolate from a shop, then the whole slum stole that chocolate – the whole Roma community is guilty.” Visual representation was also problematic: pictures of dilapidated neighbourhoods were used to illustrate Roma stories, implying that all the Roma people live in squalor.

Hungary is not alone in this. Zeljko Jovanovic, [the director of the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office in Berlin](#), told me news about Roma people is overwhelmingly negative across Europe. “In the macro picture there is not much development; the situation is rather constantly worsening. One of the reasons for

¹⁵ Bernáth, G., Messing, V. (2017): Romákkal beszélgetve a médiáról – Ellenállni a hatalom értelmezésének

that is the more and more aggressive right-wing politics against the Roma which is present all over the continent.”

But it's not the only reason. In Hungary at least, negative rhetoric is not the sole domain of the far-right – it's often just unconscious bias. As Messing and Bernáth wrote in their 2017 research: “We argued that the distorted image of Roma is due (in addition to historically rooted prejudices and social exclusions) to issues of power, such as their lack of influence over or access to media content production, and the weakness of their self-representation.”¹⁶

Why does media coverage matter?

When it comes to any historically marginalised minority group, depictions in mass media can have real-life consequences for what opportunities they can access socially, politically, and economically.

Research on Romaphobia in the media (Tremlett et al, 2017) found:

“the socio-economic positioning of Roma is frequently distorted by the media to create the image of poverty and marginalisation as something Roma people bring upon themselves and which is specific to Roma people alone.”¹⁷

Again, this is not unique to Hungary. Neither are its attempts at the homogenisation of this highly heterogeneous group, nor the politicisation, romanticisation and demonisation of the Roma people. Indeed, Hungary's case is quite representative of other European responses.

But a close study of Roma coverage in Hungarian media offers insightful clues to the role journalism plays in social perception and shaping public attitudes.

¹⁶ Bernáth, g., Messing, V. (2017): Disempowered by the media: causes and consequences if the lack of media voice of Roma communities

¹⁷ Tremlett, A., Messing, V., Kóczé, A. (2017): Romaphobia and the media: mechanisms of power and the politics of representations. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1380270>

The decline and dispersal of Roma voices

A 2001 examination of Roma media consumption patterns in Hungary revealed a reliance on television, especially commercial channels.¹⁸ More recent studies are unavailable for many reasons, but one reason stands out: the current media landscape in Hungary is unrecognisable compared to the dynamic early 2000s.

Written research and expert interviewees offered several different perspectives on reasons behind the decline and dispersal of Roma voices in Hungarian media, although all mentioned sustainability as a factor. We know for sure that there is little room now for the vibrant and diverse media initiatives that once played a crucial role in shaping Roma voices and narratives.

Tied to this obstacle – and partly to blame for it – is the shifting nature of digital communication in a social media age. The digital media landscape means many more Roma voices should (theoretically) be able to emerge independently, but the market is flooded by so much user-generated content that it becomes hard to find a coherent public agenda.

The founder of the Roma Press Center (RPC) Gábor Bernáth told me that before the advent of Web 2.0 it was easy to identify unhelpful narratives in the mainstream news, identify the gatekeeper of those messages, and involve watchdogs or media owners to correct course. The current director of Roma Press Center, Ernő Kadét, agreed. “There is so much fake news, and it’s hard to see through it. People are influenced by Facebook and TikTok and we can try creating quality programmes without any stereotypes, but if the audience’s newsfeed is full of racist and anti-Roma content, then we have a very difficult job.”

Roma researchers, activists and journalists convened online to discuss media representation of Roma people at event held by the [European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture](#) (ERIAC) in January 2021.¹⁹ The panel agreed that establishing more Roma-led media initiatives and having more Roma journalists in the mainstream media was important, but said equal focus should be paid to raising voices on social media, which increasingly shapes the discourse.

A third challenge comes from the government. Recent political communication strategies have involved creating moral panic, often targeting specific groups such as migrants, the LGBTQ community, or the Roma. These demonizing narratives serve as political agendas, fostering fear and positioning the government as the sole

¹⁸ Bernáth, G. Messing, V. (2001): A magára hagyott közönség

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanRomaInstituteERIAC/videos/media-representation-of-roma-in-the-age-of-social-media-by-dr-maria-bogdan/695410244680198/>

protector. The Roma community, historically marginalized, has occasionally become a scapegoat in this environment.

Sociologist Endre Sik characterises moral panic in Hungary as a form of “[state-supported](#)” communication involving the perpetual presentation of threats through various means such as billboard campaigns, media manipulation, national consultations, and referendums.²⁰ Under this orchestrated approach, the government is portrayed as the sole secure option amid the constant threats.

What’s more, the Hungarian media landscape is increasingly repressed by government control. In a 2016 report, Bernáth and Messing wrote: “An important characteristic of the Hungarian news media is that it’s almost exclusively political discourse that determines both its language and its characteristic settings.”²¹ When we talked, Bernáth added: “It’s difficult to talk about the mainstream media in Hungary today without mentioning that much of its content is produced and distributed centrally”.

Both factors make it more important than ever for mainstream media to employ diverse editorial teams that can identify and challenge false narratives and group think where possible.

The promise of minority-owned media

Social media holds promise for Roma representation but is currently disorganised and cacophonous. Mainstream media can only provide Roma communities with access to a variety of generalised public service information about society at large. But minority-owned media, operating successfully across multiple social media platforms, has the potential to change everything.

As Messing and Bernáth explained: “Minority media is one of the most important tools for maintaining the identity patterns of the given minority, it is a place for internal self-organisation, and for internal control of minority politics.”²²

Other roles of minority-owned media include:

- Reaching the minority with information which the majority media doesn’t provide them;
- Uniting the Roma community;
- Having an advocacy role as pressure tool to influence policy;

²⁰ Sik, E. (2016): Egy hungarikum: a morális pánikgomb

²¹ Bernáth, G., Messing, V. (2015): Bedarálva

²² Bernát, G., Messing, V. (1998): „Vágóképként, csak némában” – Romák a magyarországi médiában. Retrieved from: <https://mek.oszk.hu/00100/00144/>

- Being the voice of the otherwise voiceless;
- Highlighting the potential and the positive developments of the community.

Notice that the list does not include challenging the majority outlook or stereotypes. In a controlled public sphere, the government is the primary actor that decides what gets on the public agenda. It's difficult for independent voices to challenge the narrative, let alone independent minority voices.

As Elek Balogh, founder of a Roma-led media organisation, told me: a good minority media outlet can operate as a bridge between the Roma community and the rest of the society to better understand each other. But this should not be a primary aim of minority-owned outlets. To succeed in 2024 and beyond, they will need to meet the needs of a clearly defined audience – not dilute the message for mass appeal.

Paying for news, especially online news, isn't the cultural norm among the Hungarian audience, but subscription and reader revenue models have started to grow. There is [evidence in other markets](#) to suggest that, with the help of seed grants, innovative minority-owned outlets with robust editorial plans that encompass multiple formats (newsletter, audio, vertical video, and events) and offer the Roma audience unique utility may succeed.²³ “If the minority media can get away from trying to influence the majority media and its depiction of the Roma community, they can work just fine,” said Bernáth. “That’s how Radio C [the most popular Roma radio station] worked and that’s how I think a prosperous minority media outlet would work today. I must admit, they saw the future better than us. I would do something like Radio C today.”

In the end, there are two parallel paths journalists can take that will improve the representation of Roma people in Hungary: facilitate better representation in mainstream outlets, and promote more independently owned Roma outlets. What are the challenges and opportunities present along both of these paths?

²³ <https://inn.org/news/eight-practices-lead-to-revenue-sustainability-for-these-statewide-nonprofit-news-outlets/>

Challenges and opportunities for minority-owned outlets

Progress made towards better representation in the 1990s was largely thanks to the growth of minority-owned independent outlets. There were monthly print magazines affiliated with different political organisations (namely *Amaro Drom*, *Lungo Drom* and *Phralipe*), a popular radio station (Radio C, see page 12), and the first Roma news agency (RPC).

These were the first Roma minority media products to reach a wider audience, fulfilling the role media researchers describe as: “important sources of minority identity, culture, and political participation as well as interfaces through which issues of identity, language, and culture may be maintained and reinforced. At the same time, these can also disseminate discourses and representations that contradict the narratives of the majority.”²⁴

None of them exist today (at least not in their original form), but what lessons can be gleaned from their successes and failures?

Challenge: Popularity is not a guarantee of investment

Founded in 2001, Radio C was not only the [first independent, grassroots Roma community radio](#) in Hungary, but the whole Central and Eastern European region.

The first station chief was György Kerényi. Kerényi, a *gádzsó* (non-Roma), was known to the community as former editor-in-chief of one of the Roma newspapers, *Amaro Drom*, and for having written several articles about the Roma community in mainstream newspapers.

The atmosphere in the early days was incredible, he said. “Ambassadors would come to the station to check out how we worked, as well as the prostitutes and pimps from the neighbourhood.”

Because the station’s frequency did not extend beyond Budapest, Roma living in the city would record shows to play back when they visited relatives in rural areas. Some people would drive to the capital just to listen to the radio, parking outside the station’s editorial office.

There were around 50 employees, of whom 70 to 80% were Roma. Language was key, which is why Kerényi said he always tried to hire Roma people for on-air talent.

²⁴ Bernát, G., Messing, V. (2017): Disempowered by the media: causes and consequences if the lack of media voice of Roma communities

They played a lot of music, but there were also political programmes, talk shows and news. The station broadcast the same big news stories as the mainstream, but through a Roma lens.

“Radio C was the radio of the Roma people,” Kerényi told me. “We didn’t set out to change the majority’s discriminative attitude towards the Roma; we believed that was the responsibility of the state, the education system, and the mainstream media. We wanted to show that Roma cannot only exist on a small exotic island granted by the white people. The radio was their empire, and they were proud of it.”

When it started, government ministries and political actors from both sides of the aisle had shown support, accounting for nearly a third of income. Another third came from the Open Society Foundation (OSF), and there were other international grants. Radio C also produced a one-hour show that it syndicated to a public radio station for additional income.

But funding was a constant struggle: crowdfunding never worked, and, despite tens of thousands of listeners, commercial sales were low. Advertisers weren’t interested in the purchasing power of Roma people, and most airtime was sold to pawnshops.

There were brief talks about making the station a public broadcaster with guarantees of independence. But these fizzled with the change in regime.

Radio C closed after 10 years of operation due to a lack of funding. When I spoke to other journalists and experts about which failed Roma media initiative had left the biggest void, they all mentioned Radio C.

Challenge: Investors don’t want to back serious content

[Dikh TV](#) was founded in 2016 as a YouTube channel, and quickly became popular.²⁵ The project was the brainchild of Elek Balogh, who was disillusioned by the discrimination he had experienced while attempting to find work.

Balogh and his Roma friends learnt how to handle a camera, how to shoot live videos, and how to edit material for YouTube. “We were amateurs: we had no expertise, no equipment, no budget... just our enthusiasm. But the Roma people really liked us from the start.”

It began as a YouTube channel producing music programmes, but Balogh’s intention from the start was to create a minority outlet that would cover all aspects of public life and tackle stereotypes. “The demand from the audience was surprisingly big. A

²⁵ *Dikh* means 'look' in Romani: <https://dikhtv.hu/>

lot of people started following our channels on YouTube and Facebook, everybody waited for our next move,” he told me.

Beside music programmes, they produced music videos for rising Roma talent, and then branched out further to make a Roma drama series, *Every dream of you*. As Dikh TV’s popularity grew, the team began to run talk shows with politicians.

But the money being earned from YouTube was not enough to sustain growth, so Balogh contacted Romanian businessperson Radu Morar, who already had a stake in the Hungarian media world, and asked him if he would be interested in investing. He was.

Balogh and Morar founded a company together, and Dikh TV became a “real television channel”. Balogh said he believed Dikh would be rivalling Hungary’s biggest commercial TV stations within a year. While he began plotting out new political content, his partner had another idea: he wanted to run a solely music-focused, cultural channel that did not deal with politics at all.

Soon, another wealthy investor appeared (whose husband had business relations with a close advisor of the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán). She shared Morar’s vision. In May 2020, Balogh left the company. “That was not my child anymore. That was not something I could be proud of. I wasn’t angry, I didn’t blame them or anything, I just couldn’t continue working on it,” said Balogh.

Before contacting Morar, Balogh had asked different political parties if they wanted to invest in his project. They did not. “It has never been beneficial to politics for the Roma people to become self-aware. Politics always fears an ethnic group who is not afraid of speaking up. Our channel was [becoming] a platform to shape opinions.”

Today, Dikh TV is a pure entertainment-themed Roma television channel, including newly established [Dikh Radio](#).

When Balogh left the company, he signed a non-compete agreement which means he is not allowed to start any kind of media business for five years. He has two years remaining on the agreement. “After that, I will establish a new platform but with a more serious tone, with more politics in it than before. I know what the Roma people need. Believe me, you will hear from me again.”

Challenge: Over-reliance on donor funding is the first step to oblivion

The Roma Press Center (RPC) was the first [Roma news agency](#) in Hungary's history.²⁶ While still active today, the wire service has gone through multiple transitions in its search for a sustainable business model.

Their aim was to keep Roma issues on the public agenda without establishing their own news site. There were two reasons for this approach: first, to influence the portrayal of Roma identity in the mainstream, second to allow them to focus on producing strong features without the distraction of filler content.

One of RPC's editorial values was not to publish anything about a minority community without including their voice. They wanted to produce content that would appeal to both Roma and non-Roma audiences, and they wanted to tell stories that challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice.²⁷

Gábor Bernáth was one of the four *gádzsó* founders of the RPC in 1995. He explained: "We wanted to ask for money in exchange for our articles, like all the press agencies do, but we did not manage. We received some money for the more exclusive reports, but [...] the Hungarian press was not in a position to pay regularly. And, back in the 2000s, reader revenue was unimaginable."

The lack of a profitable model impacted the original vision. News, analysis, and exclusives gave way to producing commissioned background material and campaigns. In 2004 they even launched their own website. In the same year, the Open Society Foundations withdrew its fundings from a lot of previously supported Roma media initiatives. RCP received a grant from the EEA and Norway Grants in 2013 and came to life again mainly as content producer.

OSF's Zeljko Jovanovic told me similar things happened in Serbia, where he once presided over a local community radio station.²⁸

Opportunity: Audience revenue holds promise but requires repositioning

Ernő Kadét first became involved with RPC in 1997 via their journalism training programme for young Roma. Every year, around 15 interns were accepted and trained for several months, then placed into a mainstream media organisation.

²⁶ <http://romasajtokozyont.hu/>

²⁷ Bogdan, M. (2017): Roma Press Center – 20 years of making a difference, Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1380266>

²⁸ My interview with Zeljko Jovanovic took place before the September 2023 announcement of a [\\$109 million investment from OSF in Roma initiatives](#). It remains to be seen how the fund will be distributed in 2024.

Today, Kadét is the director of the Roma Press Center. When he re-joined the RPC in 2013, they already had a different goal than when they started: target a Roma audience, and don't bother with influencing the majority. "There is barely a programme nowadays that speaks to the community. We are lacking original Roma voices who can address the issues and achievements of the Roma people," Kadét told me.

RCP is currently staffed by eight people, all of them Roma. They've been collaborating with Partizán, [a political YouTube channel](#), since January 2022 to produce *Telepjáró*: a fortnightly show tackling issues like the rise of designer drugs in Roma slums, life as a Roma refugee from Ukraine, and parliamentary representation for Roma people.²⁹ In addition, RPC still take on commissioned research and campaign work.

Their long-term vision is to return to the Roma Press Center's original aim and operate as a press agency again. But this time they also want to supplement income by establishing their own YouTube channel. They will become active on social media, especially on Facebook and TikTok. The aim is to become self-reliant through a subscription base: at least 2,000 in the first two years, Kadét told me.

Opportunity: New minority ideas for new platforms exist, and hold promise

In the face of the challenges listed above, new minority media initiatives with promise emerge from time to time. One of these is [Ame Panzh](#) (meaning "the five of us" in Romani), which came to life as a podcast during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰

The podcast features conversations between five young Roma intellectuals, talking about issues not being addressed in public life and the mistakes made by the mainstream media in reporting on the Roma community. Their target audience: journalists, editors, and photographers who are opinion-shapers of the Roma community – whether Roma or not.

Their podcasts are long – usually around 90 minutes – and put a lot of effort into thoughtfully highlighting mistakes made by the mainstream media in depicting the Roma community. Their critiques have been mostly well-received by journalists, with requests to consult on future minority coverage.

Joci Márton, one of the founders, told me they knew from the start that they wouldn't be for everyone. "We don't want to convert racists. We want to work with those who accept that everybody has prejudice, but can work on them. It's impossible to correct all mistakes made by the media but we can make a difference if we keep reaching the people who are part of this industry."

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEFpEvuosfPGIV1VyUF6QOA>

³⁰ <https://baxtale.tv/>

Challenges and opportunities for minority voices in the mainstream

Minority-owned media outlets are the largest part of the equation for better Roma media representation. But we cannot ignore the mainstream question – however challenging change is in this sphere now.

In discussions with stakeholders, including Roma mainstream journalists Róbert Báthory and activist Joci Márton, the consensus is clear: authentic Roma voices are conspicuously absent from mainstream newsrooms today. Review all the mastheads of major independent online outlets and you will be able to count only a handful of Roma journalists among them in total.

“There is a media outlet that considers itself progressive with around 40 editorial staff but without any Roma journalists, and they don’t think it’s a problem? I cannot imagine a newspaper in a Western European country or in the U.S. without any Black, Asian, or other minority journalists,” said Márton.

Challenge: Diminished ground-floor entry points for aspiring Roma journalists

Reflecting on changes in the industry over the past decade, Báthory told me: “Ten to 15 years ago, it was way easier to get into the media as a young and aspiring Roma journalist. There were several internships which have slowly died off, today there’s no resupply.” Now, he said, potential young Roma journalists are more likely to take a position at a big Roma NGO – that’s if they don’t emigrate to Western Europe or the U.S. first.

Báthory started his career through the RPC’s internship programme. He had a high school diploma when he applied for the programme, where he underwent six months of technical training before becoming an intern at one of the biggest commercial TV stations, TV2. He switched to Radio C where he stayed three more years, while also contributing to the launch of Roma Press Center.

Lajos Orsós worked at RTL Klub. He was 18 years old when he saw a call for young Roma who were interested in working in the media and learning English. He applied and was chosen from among a thousand applicants for the internship. After a year of training he was offered a job as a news producer, so he decided to stay. He stayed at RTL Klub for 18 years before leaving. “I lived my first 18 years in one of the most underdeveloped regions of Hungary, in a slum, in extreme poverty. And suddenly I found myself in Budapest, working for one of the biggest commercial TV channels. I am lucky. In my teenage years, the chances I would go in the wrong direction were high, but I was surrounded by people who set a good example,” he told me.

“I always say that I am Lajos Orsós: a journalist, a communication expert and (by the way), Roma,” he said. But while personal intention and diligence are important, he said the Roma youth also needs opportunities. That’s what he got, and that’s what is missing today.

Opportunity: Inclusion, not pigeonholing

Thankfully, neither Báthory nor Orsós have been forced to produce exclusively Roma or minority content through their careers. They told me they never felt stuck in a thematic ghetto.

Báthory currently works for Radio Free Europe in Budapest. “I knew from the beginning that I don’t want to be a Roma journalist; I don’t want to deal with only Roma topics,” Báthory told me. During a 17-year career in mostly mainstream media, he said he had not experienced any discrimination from his colleagues. He did say he felt the need to work three times harder than others, but couldn’t say whether the pressure was external or internal.

Sometimes Báthory and Orsós were asked to check the language or accuracy of pieces talking about the Roma community, but their origin has never felt like a burden for them. “Once in a while I noted that I had problems with some content, and it was always well received. Everybody can make mistakes and it was good to see that the journalists were eager to improve their Roma coverage,” said Orsós.

Opportunity: Public service representation is a legal requirement, but it’s not working

By law, minorities are guaranteed coverage in the mainstream media. To fulfil this requirement, Hungarian public television has aired a variety show called *Closer* (*Közelebb*) since 1992.

The 26-minute show airs on Monday mornings at 6.45am, and is repeated at around 1.25pm. [According to their website](#), they aim to present the everyday life, culture, traditions and social problems of Roma people for the purpose of preserving tradition, educating, and conveying positive messages. But can *Closer* really be considered to be fulfilling its legal obligation to representation when it only skirts around the perimeters of Roma lifestyle content?

A random sampling of their programming between January and March of 2023 yielded profiles of deceased Roma people, interviews with musicians, artists and tradesmen, and a tour of Roma schools.

There is no recent data to show how many people watch this show, although a 2001 study found only a third of Roma people interviewed had heard of it and only a fifth said they watch it from time to time.³¹

An opportunity exists here for a sufficiently motivated team to re-imagine the needs of a modern Roma audience. It will require concerted effort in a media sector as heavily government controlled as the Hungarian one, but change is imperative to meet the mandate of public media in service of Roma and other minorities.

Opportunity: Mainstream alumni may be well positioned to start independent projects

While still working at RTL Klub, Orsós founded a company working with multinational corporates and agencies in the field of audio identity, podcast, and radio show production. He also started his own YouTube channel roughly a year ago, but his motivation is more personal than building a new media outlet.

“I want to show my path to people without telling them what they should do if they want to break out from extreme poverty. I had my way, my struggles, my achievements. I talk about these things in my short videos and, if somebody gets inspired by that, I am happy to have a talk with them,” Orsós told me. His audience comes both from Roma slums and the wealthiest parts of Budapest.

³¹ Bernáth, G., Messing, V. (2001): A magára hagyott közönség

Conclusion

As I noted at the start of this paper, I am not Roma, and I do not belong to the community. But I maintain that talking about how minorities are treated offers a window into the overall health of a society or industry.

At a time when so much attention is being paid to the struggles of the mainstream media in Hungary, I wanted my journalism fellowship project to record the challenges and opportunities of minority journalists in this context.

Let there be no doubt: discrimination is still happening against the Roma in Hungary – even inside our own newsrooms, where we deploy tired tropes in our coverage of the community, and have ever-diminishing numbers of Roma journalists on staff.

It's alarming that a once-vibrant market of Roma-led independent outlets has all but vanished over the past 20 years. Yet, there are lessons what we can learn from them that may serve as handrails for the future.

Although it helps, money alone will not solve these problems: creative ideas, multi-platform experiments, and hardworking people are also needed.

In the end, one request remains to be communicated from the Roma community to media in Hungary. It is one repeated by minority groups around the globe: “Nothing about us without us.”