Discourses on media portrayals of immigrants and the homeland

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By
Ulrika Sjöberg (Ulrika.Sjoberg@hh.se)
and
Ingegerd Rydin (Ingegerd.Rydin@hh.se)
Halmstad University

Abstract

If they were to provide an equal flow of information and promote communication among people, the media might be seen as ideal facilitators of a living democracy. However, in today's media-saturated society with increased access to different media (e.g., minority, transnational, national and local media), claims are being raised that democracy is under threat and that multicultural civil society is tending towards fragmentation, encouraging exclusion rather than inclusion between cultural groups. Do specific cultural readings encourage the formation of, for example, so-called 'media ghettos' and/or 'multiple public sphericules'?

The present paper examines how media coverage of migrants and their home country is perceived among migrant families in Sweden. Most research thus far has focused on the media text rather than on media uses and practices. But by applying a media-ethnographic discursive approach, we have directed our attention to the migrants themselves in order to illuminate the complex relationship between different readings of certain media texts. Of importance is attaining knowledge about the role of the media in migrants' perception of Swedish society and "Swedes", but also about how one looks at oneself as a migrant. The study shows that there are close interconnections between specific media readings and the perception of, for example, dominating discourses in society related to immigration. Several key issues are discussed among the informants in order to confirm cultural affiliations such as the search for the 'truth' and media objectivity, seeking alternative portrayals of reality from transnational media (e.g., *Al-Jazeera*). Other topics raised are cultural imperialism, non-ethical Western journalism in terms of lifestyle, values and violence, but also the need to belong to a national mediated public sphere. The paper shows that, despite predominantly critical voices about media coverage, media use is not only a matter of minority and diasporic media displacing local and national media, but rather that the informants prefer to use a mixture of different media.

Keywords: family, cultural journey, media readings, constructionism, discourse.

Introduction

During recent years, we have seen an increased interest among media scholars in studying the portrayal of minorities and people with migrant backgrounds, especially how they are portrayed in newspapers and television news. These studies have revealed a picture of negative connotations such as problems, deviance and conflict. It has also been seen that people with migrant backgrounds are underrepresented in the media, and when they are given a mediated space, is the content mostly concerns being a migrant and issues dealing with immigration (see further van Dijk, 1987; Löwander, 1998; d'Haenens, Beentjes and Bink, 2000; Brune, 2004, 2008; Madianou, 2005; ter Wal, 2002; Olausson, 2006). However, some studies also indicate an improvement, for example that news media tend to be less stereotypical in their representations of migrants and that migrants are given less negative roles (ter Wal, 2002). Negative (news) media portrayals of migrants can be seen as examples of what Bourdieu (1999:11) labels symbolic violence, which means that symbolic capital, through for example communication, is used as means of power, which may in turn reinforce an institutional and structural form of discrimination (Kamali, 2005). Thus, the issue of how people are represented in various contexts, e.g. media, is of crucial importance to equality and a prerequisite for a living democracy. It is in other words a matter of the media's possibility to influence people's opinions, values and perceptions of reality.

In addition to media representations, another issue of importance is how media texts are actually interpreted by their audience. A review by Gray (1999) on international audience research, focusing on media readings (e.g., interpretation of TV programs), indicated a lack of studies concerning ethnicity and race, and she criticized this research for its 'whiteness'. However, this study is now ten years old, and the situation may have changed. Studies from, e.g., Denmark, France, The Netherlands, the UK and the US covering both media use and reception indicate an increasing interest in ethnic minorities – both on the macro and micro level (e.g., Gillespie, 1995; Hargreaves and Mahjdjoub, 1997; Barker, 1999; Qureshi and Moores, 1999; Cottle, 2000; de Bruin, 2001; King and Wood, 2001; Tufte, 2003; Madianou, 2005; Peeters and d'Haenens, 2005; Sjöberg, 2006; De Leeuw and Rydin, 2007). In Sweden, almost ten years ago, a study was conducted by Weibull and Wadbring (1999), which examined adult immigrants' access to the media and use of the media among 'new Swedes' in West Sweden. Furthermore, Camauër (2003, 2005) has made reviews of the availability of print and broadcast minority media in Sweden. Other Swedish media research has narrowed its focus to the public sphere, while the domestic arena still is unexplored (e.g., Camauër, 2000). In other words, the role of various media in processes such as belonging, integration and participation in people's daily life has received limited attention in Swedish research.

The present article looks at how media coverage is interpreted by families with immigrant backgrounds and at what possible consequences this might have. Compared to reception analysis, which is more oriented towards the text, so-called "primary readings", the article gives examples of "secondary readings" in which media are analyzed in a specific sociocultural context, i.e. the families' homes (Rydin, 1996).

The project 'Media practices in the new country'

The analysis presented here is based on results from a three-year project entitled 'Media practices in the new country'[1], which aims to highlight the role and utilization of the media in families (mainly with children in the ages 12-16) with an immigrant background. Key areas to be studied and examined by the project were the role of the media in the process of construction, reinforcement and reconstruction of identities for families stranded between different cultures. The purpose was to examine the media as part of the discursive everyday life of children and adults, and their significance in group solidarity as well as citizenship objectives. In total, 75 persons took part in the project, involving 16 families and three focus groups, in an educational setting, with origins from countries such as Greece, Kurdistan, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Syria, Turkey and Vietnam. Rather than just examining one specific ethnic group or comparing certain groups, the project wanted to put the experience of having made a cultural journey in focus, a journey that has often been compelled by war or political reasons. The project wanted to question taken-for-granted group labels and move beyond them by letting the informants' voices be heard and by highlighting their descriptions of daily life. But at the same time, the project did not want to ignore existing processes of objectification in society (including media), which may affect the informants' self-ascription. This overall theoretical point of view has permeated the entire research process from data collection, fieldwork, and analysis to presentation of the material. To avoid essentialist assumptions, ethnicity has not been seen as the only explanatory factor, but rather the result of wide range of aspects like gender, class, age, education, religion and personal experiences.

The methodological approach involved extended in-depths interviews and observations in the families' homes (both adults and children) as well as to some extent visual methods like pictures taken with disposable cameras. The study implied close readings of how media use (e.g., television, Internet, print media) was perceived and negotiated within the private sphere of the informants' homes. The families were approached in an inductive way in the sense that they were given the opportunity to talk about themselves and their perception of cultures, identities, media, etc., rather than the researchers presenting predetermined definitions of these matters. A unique insight into the family discourse about these issues was given, as both parents and children were interviewed, sometimes together.

It was in the discussions about the differences between Swedish media (e.g., how these represent people with immigrant backgrounds) and transnational media/media from the homeland that the power of the media was stressed among the informants. In their interview narratives, several media were mentioned such as television programs, films, newspapers, books and advertising. As many of the participating children in the study used media from the parents' homeland to a limited extent due to lack of interest and difficulties in understanding the language, it was mainly the adults who commented on the difference between Swedish media and transnational media/media from the homeland.

A constructive perspective: discourse

Research on the complex interplay between text, context and reception has often been inspired by Stuart Hall's influential work on interpretative frameworks (1980). While the ideological meaning of a media text is accepted in a so-called dominant-hegemonic position, it is questioned in an oppositional code, whereas in a negotiated reading of a text, some views are accepted and others are questioned. By bringing semiotics into the study of communication processes, the model suggests that media meanings are produced in social and cultural contexts, which include everything from the broader ideological discourses in a specific society to a person's unique personal histories, experiences and knowledge. In applying Hall's different types of interpretive codes, Morley (1980), in his classical work *Nationwide audience*, explored how, e.g., class and ethnicity influenced the type of readings that occurred among the viewers. That the type of genre at hand might influence the reading outcome has been highlighted among scholars, where news is seen as a more closed text compared to open texts like soap operas. "*So I would suggest that different genres invite different types of readings and media discourse strategies*" (Rydin, 1996: 51). While Hall's model is oriented towards specific interpretations in relation to certain content, his work was in turn followed by scholars who examined the functions of media in daily life (e.g., Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986). In these studies, the media user constituted the starting point of the research rather than the text per se. While Hall's model can be seen as a 'linguistic turn' in reception studies, the latter type of research emphasized the need to conduct ethnographic studies (Alasuutari, 1999a). With the aim of exploring the meanings people with immigrant backgrounds attach to various media, and with a special focus on Swedish media and their possible consequences, the present article is inspired by the thoughts and ideas of social constructionism and discourse. The article takes it point of departure in what Alasuutari (1999a: 6) called the third generation of reception studies: a constructive view: "[…] *the objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary 'media culture', particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life, both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourses within which it is discussed*".

Applying a constructionist perspective means that the researcher assumes that, besides media use, technology (in this case media and its content) is a social construct and that technology and society are inseparable, being closely interwoven and mutually dependent on each other. Thus, media are mediated and understood through our culture as a social process, and media on the market are received, modified and adopted by the individual's everyday life. The focus is turned to those social processes that shape and transform the relations between various actors and institutions, which socially construct the development, use and the perception of a medium among people (Bjurström et al., 2000). In other words, (social) constructionism makes us consider both the influence of different contexts (on micro and macro levels) and the agency of people to select, interpret, and construct reality. The relation between the two can be characterized as a continuous negotiation. The process and significance of socially constructed meaning-making and interpretation have been pursued by several audience researchers as the importance of media use in daily life has been brought to the agenda. Alasuutari (1999a) talked about the constructive view as the third generation of audience research within cultural studies.

A gradual shift has taken place from an interest in those mental processes through which media content is perceived and interpreted, and its effects, to the social embeddedness of the media user, belonging to a community with his or her interpersonal networks, all interwoven into the process of meaning-making of media and their content. The social construction of reality makes us acknowledge that even if the makings of meaning involve conscious, intentional, and mental processing, social and cultural frames make people share certain set of norms, values, and behaviors (Barlebo Wenneberg, 2001).

Given its (social) constructive perspective, a central concept in the present analysis is discourse with a general emphasis on context; linking meaning-making processes and media readings to issues related to power and knowledge production in society. The concept of discourse has been given various meanings and definitions, but a common feature is to describe discourse as a ”[…] *a certain way to talk about and understand the world*” (our translation) (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000: 7). In Stuart Hall's interpretation of Foucualt, it is stated how a discourse ”[…] *governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others*” (Hall, 1997: 44). A dominating discourse is advocated by various dominating institutions and actors in society and in his fieldwork in segregated Southall in London, Baumann (1996: 192) stated that this discourse ”*For so-called immigrants and ethnic minorities, it represents the currency within which they must deal with the political and media establishments on both the national and the local level. [...]. The dominant discourse represents the hegemonic language within which Southallians must explain themselves and legitimate their claims*”. Various prominent discourses float between various spheres on both the macro and micro level, and in his work Fairclough (1989: 25) distinguished between three interrelated levels of social conditions in which discourses are found: the society as a whole (e.g., laws, ideology, culture, religion, political system, our examples), social institutions (e.g., media companies) and social situation (e.g., media use in families, media representations). To Foucault, it is of less value to prove the truth of a discourse; instead the focus should be on exploring whether a discourse is perceived as true and its actual consequences. Foucault talked about the 'regime of truth'. ”*Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements* [...] (Foucault, 1980: 131)

The applied constructionist and discursive perspective not only have implications for the present analysis, but also for how the interview situation per se is perceived. According to Bernstein (1983), truth is created through dialogues within a certain discourse. Truth and knowledge are constructed in a social context and by people's different frames of references. Advocating the discursive construction on interview talks, Dickerson (1996: 60) noted "[…] *interviews could be read as entailing live dialogic activity rather than purely reading off from some fixed, separate, preformed mental image*". A similar line of thought was expressed by Storm-Mathisen and Helle-Valle (2008: 64), who criticized academic reasoning that makes inference from, e.g., interview data to a reality outside the specific research situation: "[…] *they neglect analyzing statements as the linguistic,*

discursive acts they actually are". Thus, utterances made during an interview not only refer to dominating discourses on the macro and micro level, but also to the interview in itself. Thus, the talks are not merely the result of certain interpretations of media texts, but also of how the informants position themselves in relation to the interviewer/ researcher with a Swedish background and the interview context. There were, for example, occasions when the discourse "we and them", which was also seen when discussing Swedish media, was evident in the talks, such as when the interviewer was labeled as "you Swedes". That we use language differently in various contexts (here the interview context) is seen, for example, in Bakhtin's work (1986: 60) on 'speech genre'. The interview context in the project may also have had the opposite affect, giving the impression that the informants were not immigrants and wanted to be perceived as Swedes, without any experiences of racism and discrimination. This might represent what Billig (1992) calls 'moral methodologies' and impressionability, that is, how the interviewee constructed a view based on "how things should be – the norm". The latter case is of course much more difficult to discern, and it is difficult to analyze its influence on the interview talk.

"Immigrants are all the same": to generalize

According to the informants in the project media, television in particular not only influences how immigrants look at themselves, Swedish society and Swedes, but also how Swedish people perceive immigrants. The representation of society in the media has a counter-productive effect, obstructing a dialogue and an understanding between different ethnic groups. That media have the power to influence society and its inhabitants, thereby enforcing existing discrimination and racism in society, was a well-known fact for the informants. One topic that was intensively discussed among the Arab families was that Swedish news and films portray Muslims as terrorists and always take the side of Israel. In their coverage, the media contribute to essentialism, in that all persons with an immigrant background are placed in the category 'immigrant'. Brune (2008: 349) states how these generalizations take place through various routines among journalists which "[...] *together give shape to a kind of "comprehensible immigrant", an intellectual construction that lives a life of its own beside real people and circumstances*" (our translation).

- I think Sweden on TV mostly shows the negative things about immigrants. It doesn't matter they come from which land but it's a bit discrimination and it can also negative affect people, Swedish too, then they maybe think everybody's like that. It's not true, everybody's not the same. (Man)

The term 'immigrant' is increasingly being called into question, and it has been stressed that media companies, authorities, politicians, researchers, etc., must move beyond this concept and instead place issues like racism, discrimination, ethnic relations and citizenship on the agenda[2] (see, e.g., Brune, 2008; Darvishpour and Westin, 2008). "*In the concept of immigrant, as it has come to be used in Sweden, social exclusion is built in. In one sense, being an immigrant means being non-Swedish, in a deeper sense, it means being nobody* " (our translation) (Darvishpour and Westin, 2008: 16). In the talks

about the media portrayal of immigrants, the term was reflected upon and the informants asked what it takes not to be labeled as an immigrant:

- I want to say well when we watched TV, news about somebody for some crime or something they say "okay, he's an immigrant" or well or but many of them, they're born here, maybe they have an immigrant background say grandma or grandpa, doesn't matter. They came 30, 40 years ago here in Sweden like, many are born here so why do they say "immigrants do this or immigrants don't do that" if they're born here, they're citizens and everything but just because they have different names or something so well maybe I react this way because I think that if somebody is born in a country and is a citizen then he belongs to that country, not a foreigner or. (Woman)

The informants' discussions on the power of media reflect the classical theory of cultivation, where television is responsible for the creation of a selective world image, which in turn affects viewers' beliefs and values (Gerbner, 1967). Morley (1999: 144) agreed: "*Thus the norms of that 'television world' […] naturally come to define, for many people, the basic contours of how it really is, out there in the big wide world, beyond their immediate personal experience*". The notion that media coverage of immigrants (especially Muslims) affects Swedish people's experiences and attitudes is supported by Hvitfel (1998), as few Swedes have had personal experiences of Islam as a religion. Especially Arab families emphasized their dissatisfaction with Swedish media and had thought about these issues extensively. This critical awareness is not surprising, as it was also these families who talked a great deal about racism and how Muslims are discriminated against on a daily basis. There is, in other words, an evident link between the amount of experienced or conceivable racism/discrimination in Swedish society and the type of interpretation made when using Swedish media (cf. Al-Ghabban, 2007). Relating to Hall's research on various reading positions, we can see examples here of so-called oppositional reading, where the "reader" dismisses the dominating ideology, which according to Hall is always inscribed in a media text and constitutes the sender's intentional reading. In the project, examples were also seen of what Hall called the dominating position, where informants were of the opinion that there were no differences between different media in terms of the news; it is the same structure and misery, but for example a television program from the homeland had longer news and provided detailed information about the country:

Now you watch both Swedish and Vietnamese news, is there a difference between them?
- Almost the same like they always start by saying what happened in the country, then comes the whole world, and then sports and last it's the weather. (Man)

A mother and father in one family talked about how the racism in Swedish society was also found in the media, creating an image of Muslims as a homogenous group with only negative features:

But I mean just concerning the news and the media.
Father- Some mass media they don't work for peace you see they work more for segregation than for integration. I'm talking, I hope you don't misunderstand me, I'm not talking about Swedes, I'm talking you

know part of society goes by the mass media, right, and there are many who've met before they were so kind and nice, but today they're completely different.
[...]
But have you noticed that racism has increased in everyday life?
Father- It's everywhere.
Mother- Has increased.
Daily?
Father- It's daily. There's both you know. If we say in X (the city the family lives in) then there's a lot and we've noticed it recently there's a lot in the mass media you know.
Right.
Father- Again I can say like we're here in Sweden but we don't live like the Swedish society, we live what George Bush says, what the US says about the world, about Muslims, Arabs and terrorists. We live with the mass media today, unfortunately.
With that image you mean?
Father- With that image right and as soon as somebody does here in X or something then identifies that person "that one's a Muslim or he's an Arab", identifies the person you know, the Arab, the Muslim.

The 14-year-old son in the family agreed with his parents, stating that it has become a popular style worldwide to perceive all Muslims as terrorists:

What you just said, is it the news that gives the wrong picture?
- Yeah, it usually gives the wrong picture, for example, well like now it's like the style, like wearing jeans, so it's just like what Papa said that George Bush said "now Arabs and Muslims are terrorists" so it's become the style over the whole world that like, well Arabs and Muslims are terrorists. You could say it's become a style.

According to the family, Western media express the present, dominating American (cultural, political) imperialism in society. The power of the media is strong, as the family felt the media have contributed to an anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourse in which all Muslims are seen as terrorists after September 11. The family's line of argument can be related to van Dijk's research (1988) on how news as discourse reproduces existing and dominating structures and concepts in society. Thus, maintaining a "we-them" discourse. That media generalize and treat all immigrants the same was also mentioned by the children. " "*Yes for instance the news, they say like "all black children" you know, "aren't good for the school, blah, blah, blah"* (14-year-old girl). One mother continued the discussion on the power of the media and on how Swedish media disfavored people with immigrant backgrounds. Every time a major crime takes place, she fears the news coverage. If an immigrant is put forward as guilty, all people with immigrant backgrounds are affected:

Yes, I understand. Several people have said that. Is there anything else you react to like if there are too few immigrants on TV or how immigrants are portrayed in newspapers, on the news…
-Well, if there's, you hear it if something's going on like a murder or something so they think "it's an immigrant that's done it" until it's proven that it wasn't an immigrant, if it wasn't an immigrant, ohh, we can relax. (Woman)

Statements were also made about journalists' eagerness to find something sensational, and owing to their lack of knowledge of how things really are, a biased and discriminatory image of immigrants is given. In the interviews, it was mentioned how the

discourse "we and them" marks the media content, which in turn leads to triviality, generalization and othering. There is a lack of knowledge among journalist (and Swedes in general) about, for instance, Islam and actual living conditions among Muslim families:

- […] I've never reacted, before this I haven't reacted afterwards I started to react a lot to documentaries like that. There was, when an immigrant group came from, I don't know which country it was, now I don't remember at all, oh well, so they took them up to Kiruna I think it was because there was more room there, empty apartments and then they showed interviews with the staff helping this group when they arrived and they said "we had to teach them how to wash themselves, how to do the dishes, how to use dish soap" I just held my head and thought "My God, are there cleaner people than those who live down there." I mean we're not living in the Stone Age, not even down there (Woman).

Poverty, ways of living and violence

Besides the fact that the Swedish media, including their readers and viewers, generalize and perceive immigrants as a homogenous group, the informants talked about how the media gave incorrect and negative portrayals of the reality in, for example, the Middle East and Africa, which in turn affected Swedish people:

- You know this picture they give not the mass media this Swedish people this mass media it plays a big role but sometimes it plays negative role when it comes to reality in the Middle East […]. […] They (Swedes) think that they (Palestinians) are barbaric they don't have anything to, they just think "kill people" you know, it's not like that for example they don't give this picture in reality, why should people do this, they will sacrifice their life for their country. Swedes never understand this, they'll never understand it because it's something that's a part of these, you know, and the mass media they "well, it's the terrorists, look what they do, five poor Israelis have died" but how many Palestinians have died on the other side. (Man)

During the interviews, it was stressed how images from the informants' homelands only present poverty and misery. A mother and her 20-year-old daughter were tired of the Swedish media, which only show ugly and repulsive pictures from their homeland:

Do you think the Swedish news presents for instance the Middle East in a certain way?
Mother- Yes, they do. They only show disgusting and ugly pictures from there and when it's about another country then they show pretty pictures, nice areas, pleasant news. They do, they do.
Can you give an example, something more concrete?
Mother- I don't remember any concrete thing but it's like that, I've had that feeling many times on different occasions. If they want to talk about Syria, you know, then they show a donkey or a poor man sitting on the street or something similar.
Daughter- Poor houses…
Poor houses.
Daughter- I mean the areas themselves.
Mother- But when they talk about another country then you see the nice streets. We have nice streets too of course, nice houses in Damascus but they don't film them.
Because that's the picture we get to see…
Mother- Yes, exactly. (Mother and daughter)

During the talks, movies were also brought up. The informants told about how they were offended when actors with immigrant backgrounds usually played the owner of a pizza place, that their accents were made fun of, instead of showing successful immigrants with positive features. In addition, the type of films broadcasted on Swedish television was seen as problematic: "*They've chosen from all the films, the really nice pictures that exist, they've chosen the one that really sick, or…*" *(Woman)* Two sisters mentioned how their mother did not want them to watch television programs that said bad things about immigrants. They themselves said that posters and advertising in public places were racist, as they always showed a dying and skinny colored person:

Sister 1: They shouldn't just show black people. They've never shown a white person who's dying. There are white people with anorexia. As you know, they're in their own world. They get food and everything, but they don't eat, they have anorexia. And like the ones who are poor. They don't show you like that. They show blacks. Then you feel like a racist, you know.
[...]
Sister 2: Yeah like ads on TV, it's usually a picture like that with a mother and her small child. The kid's covered with flies around its head and all. And you know, there aren't only colored people who are poor and need help. There are white people too. Who also need help, who aren't so rich and all. But they, you know in films like that and all, it's always colored people. I've like never seen that there …
(Two sisters in the ages 12 and 14 years old)

Besides the fact that one's homeland was portrayed as poor and miserable, another topic among the adult informants was the Western way of living (its norms and values) shown on Swedish television, which did not provide their children with a good role model. "*Basic to the formation of values is that people tend to hold on to the familiar, to an already given environment and type of life they are used to. Values are one part of personal identity*" (our translation) (Daun, 1994: 29). These talks about way of living exemplify what Alasuutari (1999b: 98) has come to call ethical realism, where media content is evaluated according to the extent to which it provides proper ethical models of life. For example, in the interviews, it was stated how the Swedish woman was discriminated against in ads:

Do you think there's a difference, I mean Swedish…
- Yes, not just a little there's a big difference. On Arab channels for example, sorry, for example they don't show sex, well, but unfortunately on Swedish channels they show.
There's too much nakedness…
Yes, exactly nakedness, everything. I want to tell you one thing the first to us is religion. […] Religion and tradition it's almost the same in that way anyway especially on this situation. In our Islam it's forbidden for instance that I see her when she's naked, looking at her is forbidden. (Woman)

Similar discussions on ways of living and how women are portrayed in the media did not take place among the young informants. It was obvious that parents and children did not always share the same opinion on what constituted a good program. The statement "*that's nothing for you*" got the reply "*but all young people watch it so why not me*". That media, especially series and soaps, are integrated into young people's daily youth culture, in the shaping of social relations and identity work, has received considerable attention among media researchers (e.g., Sjöberg, 2002; Suoninen, 2001). A mother described how she tried to make her 14-year-old daughter watch television programs with educational

content or programs from her parents' homeland rather than series filled with violence and sex:

Okay, interior design, Finally Home and… (programs the mother likes)
-Yes, I like that one a lot but not those series. I don't like because they show that series on young people, White Lies, and I watched a couple times "no, Christina, that's nothing for you to watch". It's not good role models you know, they fought, they drank, they got divorced, married, what role model?
So you don't want her to watch that?
No, I don't. They have another program Educational TV but they show in the middle of the day or late in the evening but that's good for children and they don't show it. They show something about sex, about everything imaginable, they don't do anything but sex, sex, sex. What will become of those children, what will they, they'll go nuts, sex in films, sex on TV, sex on the radio, sex, sex. Don't they have anything else to show.
Do you think this is specific to Swedish TV channels or is it also true of Greek TV channels?
They don't show, I don't know we don't have the Greek channels. (Woman)

Even if it was critical voices that dominated the interviews, there were also discussions about the positive aspects of Swedish media compared to media in the homeland: Swedish media content is less violent, which of course is related to the often violent situation in the homeland, something the parents saw as a problem for their children. The increased interest in sensational news, where violence, criminality and scandals are brought to the fore, is seen as the outcome of the accelerating commercialization trend in the media arena (Dahlgren, 1995; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). The violence in the media resulted in an ambivalent relation to the decision of whether or not to watch news from the homeland. Words such as "stressful, are forced to, difficult decision, must watch" were expressed to describe this ambivalence. These contradictory feelings about television viewing have also been found in other studies (e.g. Hagen, 1994) and are a matter that deserves more attention from media scholars. On the one hand, the informants in the project had a need to know what was happening in their homeland, but on the other hand, the media content could be perceived as violent and highly stressful. Thus, a "struggle" seemed to be taking place between the wish to be an informed citizen and the emotional stress evoked by the violent content. These ambivalent feelings towards violent media content have been the research interest of Höijer (1998: 77), who noted "*The meeting between the private and social lives of the viewers and the reports about seemingly inconceivable violence showing corpses and injured victims, give rise to many dilemmas with their conflicting feelings and thoughts*". Two women in the project discuss these matters below:

-Foreign news, but we've mostly listened to Arab news, not me, Arab news is stressful for me. But they also reflex reality, but in a way that makes you sick, really. That's why I don't listen so much, but my husband he usually listens to it, and I have to…
Does it go too fast, do you think? You said stressful?
-Yes, stressful, those you, you see pictures of people being killed or cut, or blood and children, or, a lot of things and it makes you sick when you look at pictures like that
[…]
- But you get upset and the children too. But I feel, I decide I close the TV. You want to know what's happening.
Yes, I understand
- It is big or hard decision if we want to know, if we want to see or not. (Woman)
Do you think that's okay, or what do you think?

-It's okay the way they (Swedish TV) don't show pictures like that, bloody pictures and people who are killed as punishment and such, but our channel shows everything.
They show everything.
-It's hard for the children.
So you think children should be protected, you have pretty much the same idea,
-It's children we've seen in our country too. It's for their sake. They get a bit surprised, yes.
What do they say?
-No, usually don't let them watch. Children aren't interested in news, only adults. I usually watch and my husband too. But sometimes I've decided not to watch the news, but maybe miss something, I have to watch. (Woman)

Another example was provided by a father (Kurdistan, Iran) whose daughter became upset when watching the satellite channel *Kurdsat*; he did not want her to see this violent mediated image of the homeland any longer:

- If my child is sitting in front of in front of the TV channel and is going to watch *Kurdsat* but it's going to show for example Saddam Hussain's attack on the Kurds then she gets sad because she's never seen such. Once we sat here, my nephew was here and they showed some films of the Kurds and Saddam Hussain's attack in Kurdistan, she started crying right away. Since that day now I've decided, when they show something I switch channels because I don't want, I want, I try to explain to my child, what's happened to the Kurds, but not this way. (Man)

Instead of letting children watch news about war from the homeland, one interviewed family preferred that their children listen and dance to Arab music, in this way taking part in their parents' culture:

Father- But it's just music, I think it's only the music they've listen to or for example sometimes they've given a party or with the family they've danced a little, tried Arab dancing but not news, not programs like Arab programs, or politics or other information. I don't think so…
Mother- Not in Swedish either…
No, not children of that age…
Father- No, they don't have interest in Arab news or anything. We don't want them to listen to Arab news, it's always bad news, always. War here, war there. It's better if they listen to Arab music, they have mixed, they sit together. (Woman and man)

The power of (national) media to generalize, to give selective coverage, and the lack of news from the homeland in the Swedish media caused the informants to turn to other news sources, for example, *Al-Jazeera*, which we will look at in more detail below.

Alternative images: Al-Jazeera

Even if freedom of expression in Sweden was highly valued, that every person can express his or her opinions without risking prison, it was crucial to the adult informants to find out what is actually happening in the homeland. *"There's not much foreign news in Hallandsposten and other newspapers and so we have to watch our own channel, because we can't find any other way"* (woman). Thus, watching news and other programs on one's "own" channels can be a forced choice owing to the lack of information about the homeland in the Swedish media. The fact that the informants wanted diverse coverage of foreign news and news from the homeland made transnational satellite channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* important information sources. Similar results have been seen in other studies. *"Western TV networks assume that Americans and Canadians are simply not interested; as a result, events in the region (Middle East) are not covered in detail"* (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003: 12). In the project 'Media practices in the new country', some informants meant that *Al-Jazeera* gave the true image of reality and that the people portrayed on the channel shared the same religion and nationality, but some also took a critical stand on these types of channels. Irrespective of the experienced reliability, the informants all agreed about the need to make use of different types of media, including Swedish, national, international as well as media from the homeland:

But do you think that these racist elements in some news programs cause people to watch the Arab TV channels more, that they almost stop watching the Swedish news?
Mother- No.
Father- That's not what we do.
Mother- We interested very much in watching the news on Swedish TV, almost 24 hours it plays. Swedish channels, not Arab channels, that I just like to watch sometimes, I have a Lebanese channel I like to watch…(Man and woman)

- I don't do that. My children don't watch *Al-Jazira* so much, but we do. Except like I said, you read, you hear, they're good at fast, they're fast and direct comments and debates, but like I said I listen to other channels too. I also read on Internet, from different directions and places. I do that and my husband too and then I can put together a picture. (Woman)

Thus, different media fulfill different functions and thereby complement rather than replace each other, a finding also presented in previous research: *"Evidence taken from recent research suggests that minority audiences desire far more mixed representation and manifest quite mixed-up usage, leading to a 'not only but also' approach to the study of minority identity positions and media use"* (Sreberny, 2005: 443, see also Hargreaves and Mahdjoub, 1997; Georgiou, 2005; Madianou, 2005; Peeters and d'Haenens, 2005; Al-Ghabban, 2007). In order to explain the complex relation between different media, their production, distribution and consumption, Adoni (1985) distinguished between functional equivalence and functional differentiation of the media. The more similar the functions being fulfilled by, for example, two media, the greater possibility that one of the media will be displaced. The opposite is seen when media have (partly) different functions for the user and thereby complement each other.

That *Al-Jazeera* has a special position in the news landscape is seen in talks about how the channel, since it started in 1996, has a crucial role in criticizing and scrutinizing established social, cultural and political actors and institutions, not only in the Arab countries but also worldwide (cf. El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Lamloum, 2006). *Al-Jazeera* is the most popular Arab channel, and its success among its audience can mainly be explained by its coverage of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, the war in Afghanistan and the war against terrorism (Lamloum, 2006:30). Among the informants in the project, the fact that the channel reports directly from a specific country and that comments are given by ordinary people on the streets was seen as evidence of the channel's great reliability. Reliability is a key factor in whether or not viewers will identify with the media content (Auter, Arafa and Al-Jaber, 2005). Once again, the possibility to identify oneself with the content, newsreaders and journalists was stressed; it is important to feel familiarity, to feel sympathy, to find out what is happening with friends and relatives. Hermes (1999: 74) noted: "*Seeing media figures as real and as part of our everyday cultural and emotional experience is part and parcel of how media texts come to have meaning*".

A channel like *Al-Jazeera* becomes important in a society that is experienced as discriminating and where day-to-day racism is a reality "*Al-Jazira expresses, produces conceptions and strengthens the identity of the audience the channel targets. It accounts for this public's demands, aspirations and frustrations, for its real or imagined perceptions of external threats*" (our translation) (Lamloum, 2006: 55). Besides news, these types of channels offer debate programs in which current topics of conversation are discussed (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002), something that, according to the informants in the project, is lacking in Swedish media. In the interviews among Arab families, statements were made about how channels such as *Al-Jazeera* showed the truth – "the other side":

Al-Jazira and Al-Arabiya is there a difference between these two channels?
-No it, it's just competition between them you could say. But Al-Jazira is the first channel that has begun for every uh you know that has broadcast uh war...
With Iraq or what?
-No, I mean uh they broadcast the truth always the truth.
The truth.
-Yes, no mistakes or such. You believe in it, in it more than in Arabiya. [...].
Always uncover because it's people who talk directly and say "this has happened to us" this and that. Why we lie and such, you listen to it. (Man).

-It sees the truth Al-Jazira, and the naked truth. If people here don't care so much that they don't want to see the whole truth.
You mean the other channels?
-I mean here, the public doesn't want to see the truth. They don't want to see death for example or they want, we get to see them, we get to suffer with them. When you for example read sometimes in HD, I don't know if you've seen it, it was big news that talked about that Israel, how many houses were pushed down, but we got to see the pictures, we got to see the children who lived outside, the girls crying, we got to see the blood running on the floor so when you read about it on the newspaper it's not exactly like when we see it right.
[...]

But then you mean that Al-Jazira gives the correct picture?
-Yes, exactly and the difference is that here in Al-Jazira for example we wouldn't watch Al-Jazira if it was exactly like the other channels because we want to see what's happening with our relatives but here in Sweden nobody cares if well if you see a lot about Israel or about Palestine [...]. (Woman)

Despite critical voices describing Swedish media coverage, and reports that other media from the homeland or transnational media are important sources of information on the homeland and international events, Swedish media were also used. The informants discussed how Swedish television could be improved so as to encourage participation and involvement in society and increase an understanding of the multicultural among both "Swedes" and people with immigrant backgrounds, a matter to which we will turn our attention in the following section.

"Wise TV channels": programs for, about and with immigrants

The phrase"wise TV channels" was uttered by one of the informants. It summarizes both young and adult informants' wish that Swedish media, especially television, would contain more topics and deal with questions that engage people with immigrant backgrounds and that shed light on their situation. They also requested that more immigrants would take part in various programs. Similar discussions were presented by Beckman (2003), who noted that immigrants' views on issues that involve them are absent in the news coverage. The fact that the news applies a "Swedish" perspective does not encourage people to get actively involved in different societal issues (cf. Sandström, 2005). In this context, Madianou (2005) talked about how the media create symbolic exclusion.

Do you think it's good what they show about immigrants on TV?
-Hm... There aren't very many channels that show about immigrants. There aren't many that do, actually.
Channels that show? Are the programs mostly in Swedish?
- Yeah... Like channels that show how it is in Somalia, I want channels like that (14-year-old boy).

While discussing Swedish media in the interviews, the informants usually brought up Swedish public television, which is especially interesting considering that it, as a public service organization, shall *"[...] provide a diversified selection that reflects the different cultures existing in Sweden"* (our translation) (Sveriges Televisions public serviceredovisning 2005:54). In the document, it is stated that television programs shall mirror a multicultural Sweden, consisting of people with various ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as religious beliefs and experiences. According to Swedish Television (SVT), the number of participants with roots in different cultures and religions has increased in all types of programs compared to previous years. Some of the examples given (during the period when the study was conducted) are *Orka! Orka!, Lasermannen, Före stormen, Det nya landet, Sju soffor i Tensta, Hej till hela Sverige* (Sveriges Televisions public service-redovisning 2005).

Olausson (2006: 310) was of the opinion that national media in a pluralistic democracy "*[...] should serve as discursive bridges for dissident voices and communities*" (our translation). Even international media research emphasizes the need for national media to reflect the multicultural nature of society and that people with immigrant backgrounds should not only be media users, but also media producers (Sreberny, 2005: 447). According to the informants in the project, many more programs must be produced that encourage viewers/listeners to take part in societal events, as opposed to programs that contribute to alienation. This can be achieved not only by directing specific programs to people with an immigrant background, but also by increasing knowledge and understanding of today's multicultural Sweden among the entire population. One father in the project noted that there is a great danger associated with the fact that immigrants do not get enough information during elections due to their lack of language skills:

- Get this, many immigrants in the latest municipal and parliamentary election voted for wrong – Sweden Democrats. They thought they'd voted for the Social Democrats (laughs). You know, there's a difference between the Sweden Democrats and the Social Democrats. Since there were no channels, there was nothing to teach people, who voted for a really dangerous organization against immigrants. [...]. They have to try to explain much more about the society. (Man)

While talking about the responsibility of Swedish media to inform about various social and political events, the informants also stated that the media from the homeland must offer more programs that encourage integration in the host country. The father above continued and told us how one series on the satellite channel *Kurdsat* portrays Kurds living in Europe and their daily life there:

-For example now serial channels, for example this serial program or films are mostly about immigration from Kurdistan to Turkish countries.
Is this a series on TV?
- Yes, series on TV. About what, how has happened, what has happened to them. Not documents but they have played a role for example like a person in Kurdistan who lives well I come from Kurdistan to Turkey and then to Italy and then to Spain and what's happened with me now. (Man)

Despite the fact that there is a need for more targeted programs in Swedish television, this may be problematic. According to the informants, the division between Swedish and immigrant programs could serve to strengthen existing segregation in society. The programs must instead have more multicultural features and be directed to a wider audience:

- But I mean that's also a mistake. There isn't so much difference between immigrant and Swedish children and there is also a problem. Then you have to have a broadcast that's together, immigrant kids and Swedish kids, so you have one picture from them (Woman).

When the present fieldwork was being conducted, the Swedish series *Kniven i mitt hjärta* (The knife in my heart) was running on Swedish public television, and this was a type of program that the informants (both children and adults) would like to see more of. Several aspects were mentioned that made the series popular, and once again its popularity was due to its portrayal of reality and the possibility to identify oneself with the content. The

film has an inner perspective in which the real-life situations and conditions of people with immigrant backgrounds are portrayed seriously and authentically, thus inviting viewers to participate and get involved in the content:

What makes them good?
Son- They're funny, young people so you see them like they make it real that's what they mean, it's like that sometimes too.
Daughter- I mean about foreigners, it's fun to watch to watch because they like they're more the kinds fight and stuff, it's fun to watch how they play.
Son- It's like they've been criminals like that and fight and all in gang fights and you know and then they make a film about what they've gone through and then and then they show how it works and stuff.
[…]
What makes the series so good?
Mother- We like we I follow it, when I've watched it, it was the first time like I recognized a lot from my oldest son because he was a bit involved in the whole thing so I recognized certain parts when they showed like that "oh, I recognize that part because my son has done the same thing" sort of.
So it may be that even parents watch it?
Mother- Yeah, I think there are a lot of parents who watch it.
Because the film also includes things about parents, exclusion, "nobody listens to me"...
Mother- Right, exactly. That's important. I think lots of parents watch it.
(Mother with two children)

Thus, their ability to identify with the content explains the popularity of the series among the informants, and it is this lack of identification with Swedish media output in general that made them use other sources of information, such as satellite channels and the Internet. The series portrays the brutal reality of life for immigrant youth and their families in a suburb outside Stockholm, and many parallels were drawn to the viewers' own personal experiences. This type of identification (cf. Livingstone, 1998; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999) was also discernible when the informants watched, for instance, news from the homeland, and one precondition for such identification with content is that Swedish programs, to a much greater extent, show programs produced by, for and about people with immigrant backgrounds. To use Hall's expression, a lack of equivalence is seen in the communicative exchange in relation to a specific content and its lack of meaningfulness to the "reader". "*Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded*" (Hall, 1980: 130). Media research has especially examined the importance of soaps among viewers by constituting frames of meaning for everyday life, such as personal relations and family life (cf. Buckingham, 1996; Silverstone, 1994; Sjöberg, 2002). In their work, Barker and Andre (1996) distinguished between whether a viewer thinks something can happen in real life or not and the extent to which a program can be related to the viewer's own life and personal experiences. These two types of understandings of the realism of programs - naturalism and emotional realism – have also been noted by Ang (1985) in her classical study of the soap opera Dallas. According to the informants in our study, increased interest would be directed towards Swedish television if more people with immigrant backgrounds participated in the programs. This did not only involve series, but also films and music programs like *Idol*:

-It's also different groups. Now for example you know, you said it too, Arab groups mostly watch documentaries from other countries and the news. When the news is over they change channels to the satellite, but when for example Idol comes, I promise that 100% watch it. Why. Because it's a pure music program and there are many immigrants on that program. Now there's a Kurd, for example.
So it doesn't need to be in different languages?
- No, I don't mean that that it should be in different languages. It can be in it's really good that everything is Swedish. Because you can't have a national TV in different languages, that's a bit difficult. This is more about immigrants, it influences really good on immigrant groups I'm sure about it. (Man)

There are other examples of viewer identification with certain media content. The ability to recognize places and current societal issues is a decisive factor, and this was also seen in discussions of how the informants enjoyed watching documentaries from their homeland on Swedish television:

What is it like for you then?
-We only have Swedish programs. We don't have a parabolic disc or satellite. The whole time we watch Swedish programs.
What do you think about that? If you compare with Bosnian TV?
-It's easier to understand on Bosnian. But it doesn't matter. I can understand on TV too. Yesterday we saw Bosnia on TV3 about...
About orphanages, SOS children's villages.
-I understand everything they talked about and I know about it and I lived there. (Woman).

Discursive identifications

As discussed initially in the present paper, Swedish media research has generally focused on representations of migration, refugees, racism and xenophobia (Brune, 2004). Here, we have instead showed how media reports on these issues are interpreted and perceived by individuals with a migration background. We have seen how the media are conceived of as creating and reproducing discourses of "the immigrant" and how the media are reinforcing the concept of "othering", thus implying a "we and them" relationship. It is intrinsic to media logic to dichotomize and draw lines in black and white. The informants also developed their ideas about how to improve journalism in this respect, by asking for more focus on important and relevant issues for migrant citizens, rather than making programs from the perspective of the majority population.

This paper has emphasized the informants' identifications with media texts and what meaning the texts are assigned. The discourses deal with all kinds of recognitions and emotional attachments to media images and reportages, e.g. recognition of physical places from the former homeland. Media play a crucial role in our daily life and are part of our overall 'map', which is used to navigate in day-to-day activities (Alasuutari, 1999b). An important question in this context concerns how people position themselves (cf. Hall, 1997) in relation to the various public discourses they face in their encounters with the media and in society in general. What are the consequences for their self-perception, their views on "the Swede" and on the society in which they live? The media are perceived as a discursive power apparatus, which originates from journalistic practices and such mechanisms as generalization, dichotomization, "othering" and trivialization (cf. Kamali, 2005). It was Arab families in particular that reflected on these

issues, and they particularly referred to increased everyday racism and discrimination in the aftermath of September 11.

What kinds of views did they have more explicitly? One view was that immigrants were treated as a homogeneous group, often with problematic backgrounds and experiences, which they mean creates negative associations with the concept of "immigrants". They explicitly mentioned that immigrants are associated with criminality. They also objected to the image of their home countries. Swedish reportages often focus on poverty and the negative sides of their country. Another objection among people from the Middle East was that the Swedish media tend to stand up for Israel. The informants were convinced that such images contributed to Swedish people's views about and attitudes towards migrants from the Middle East, in the long run causing racism and discrimination. In other words, the media stir up xenophobia. Swedish journalists were accused of being uninformed about the real conditions. Instead they reported sensational news.
We clearly cannot know the exact consequences of such media representations for migrants' self-perceptions and views about Swedish society, but one cannot neglect such statements either.

The concept of identity has been given different meanings over the years, but it is most often suggested that we should regard identity from a relational and contextual perspective. Robins and Morley (1995) started from Saussure and his theory of language, which is based on differences. Robins and Morley argued that this same principle should be applied in the analysis of cultural identities. Rather than analyzing cultural or (national) identities one at a time, they are constituted in and through their relations to one another. In other words, according to them, it is inappropriate to start by trying to define "European culture" and then discover its relations to other cultural identities. Rather, European culture is constituted precisely through its distinctions from and oppositions to American culture, Asian culture, etc. Thus, difference is constitutive of identity. Robins and Morley referred to Schlesinger in this discussion, who wrote the following: "*Identity is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion, and the critical factor for defining the ethnic group therefore becomes the social boundary which defines the group with respect to other groups…not the cultural reality within those borders*" (from Schlesinger, 1987: 235). And as Madiano (2005: 528) stated much later:"I examined the shifts in people's discourses, i.e. why they would identify themselves in certain ways in certain (mediated and unmediated) contexts. […] This interpretation indicates the fluidity and social construction of categories such as ethnicity and highlights the divisions within the minorities."

These thoughts are not new and hark back to symbolic interactionism and the view that individuals develop in interaction with others. As exposure to media portrayals is a social encounter, one can expect that migrants and minorities will develop and shape their self-representations and identities also partly based on the media. In other words, in media readings, they position themselves in relation to how migrants and minorities are portrayed and mediated in migrant discourses. As we have seen above, they often have oppositional readings (Hall, 1980) of the output in Western media representations (Sweden in this particular case).

The present paper has also referred to how informants emphasized various kinds of media, not only Swedish, but global media and transnational media from their home countries, e.g. satellite television or music videos downloaded from the Internet. Transnational media seemed to be very important, as the informants stressed the usefulness of local information. Swedish news media were not conceived of as particularly alert in picking up news that could be relevant to minority groups, not even the public service channels.

The discourses presented here also show how readings of certain media contents (in this case satellite TV) influence how other kinds of media (in this case Swedish news) are interpreted. Such comparative aspects are valuable, because they provide the viewers' perspectives and perhaps understandings of how news media are working. Some informants stressed the importance of channels such as *Al-Jazeera*, which they often trusted, but some were skeptical about news reporting in general. Thus, news programs from satellite channels were not always respected. There were sometimes critical comments about too much violence and that reports from the home country could be stressful. In this way, views about news reporting also implied some emotional ambivalence. One struggle with a desire to be an informed citizen, yet one also feels tension and stress when confronted with media reports containing violent content from the former home country.

In his discussion on how viewers attach different meanings to fiction genres (e.g., soaps) and television news, where the former "feels" closer to a person's daily life compared to remote events taking place far away in the world, Morley (1999) differentiated between the world and the television world. He wrote (1999: 141): "*This is to suggest that many viewers watch television news with the premise that it is describing some distant, other world (decisively not where they live) —a world disconnected from their familiar everyday logic: a 'television world' or environment with its own 'facts of life', its own personnel (the Pope, Madonna, the President, Yasser Arafat), who we will never meet. It is a separate world (a parallel universe?) with its own forms of dramatic hazard (volcanoes, earthquakes, floods)* […]". However, Morley's perspective seems to be an expression of a kind of Euro-centrism and does not hold for a multicultural society. For in this particular case, television news was about the informants' homelands, homes and families. It was about places and people of which they had a memory and with which they had a personal history. Thus, the distinction made by Morley is too simple and fails to grasp the wide range of cultural lenses through which television is watched and how various genres might be interpreted by their audiences.

Integration is a key word in the Swedish official and public discourse about migration and refugee policy, which in the true sense of the word implies adaptation to Swedish society, and its norms and values (Hellgren, 2008). But if we take a multi-cultural perspective, Hellgren claims, the transformation of Swedish society should be geared to a " *[…] a project of mutual integration, in which the ethnic majority and various ethnic minority groups collaborate and together construct a common social community*" (our translation, p. 81). According to the informants, the media's discursive power is strong in maintaining exclusion and symbolic segregation rather than being inclusive and

promoting mutual understanding. The question to be asked here is: Who has the preferential right of interpretation in the media, and why?

Notes

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[2] In the project 'Media practices in the new country' the word immigrant is only used when being uttered by other researchers or the informants in the project.

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