Narratives and counter-narratives in the representation of The Other. The case of the Romani ethnic minority

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Mainstream Narratives and Counter-Narratives in the Representation of The Other: The Case of the Romani Ethnic Minority

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Prologue

“The other kids say I’m dirty. At the beginning I was mad with them, but now I don’t respond anymore, I just let them say what they will. I have a hole in my shoes and I just walk like that. Sometimes I hit on stones. Like a horse...”

The Romani boy laughs as he completes the story about his experiences in secondary school. There is no sign of distress, hate, or madness on his smiling face as he reveals his difficulties in school attendance, the poverty, and the bullying of Romanian colleagues. He has been born a Kalderash Roma, or Gypsy, living in a rural community in South-Eastern Romania where the traditional ways of hundreds of years ago blend with selective forms of modernity. The Roma in the village of Munteni are traditional tinkers; they craft metal objects, cauldrons for spirits brewing, spoons, cups. Until little more than 50 years ago they used to be nomadic and travelled throughout Romania selling their products and settling for weeks or months in nomadic camps. Since the end of the 1950s, when they were settled by force by the Communist regime, the Kalderash in Munteni travel only in the warm months of the year, from April to October. In autumn they go back to their houses in a dedicated area of the village, the Gypsy neighborhood, where they spend the winter months.

If not for commercial activities, the life of the Kalderash Roma is lived almost exclusively among peers, attuned to rules of conduct inherited from the distant past that stay unquestioned to the present day. Women are held to wear long, colorful skirts, and braid their hair according to their status. Couples’ engagement and marriage is decided by parents and sanctified through a betrothal ceremony when the two are still in their early years. The first language children learn is a dialect of Romanes, the Sanskrit-origin language of the Roma. Romanian, the national language, is learnt only in later years as children start attending school. Despite their strong community focus and their culturally-bound rules, the Kalderash in Munteni have nurtured cordial relations with their Romanian neighbors. Their life is carried out peacefully in a pattern marked by the seasonal travels and the struggle to make ends meet as the re-

quest for their metal products continues to decline in competition with the cheaper products on the market.

At 20 kilometers distance, the Romani community in the village of Podoleni lives by quite different norms. They are part of the hearth Roma, a designation for the Romani populations that have been settled (in the sense of giving up nomadic lifestyle) several hundreds of years ago. Since they have been tied to the land for so many years, the cultural influence from the settled population has been such that today very little of the traditional Romani cultural elements remain. The most distinctive features of the Romani legacy are the *Romanes* language and the musical tradition. Conversations inside the group are carried out in *Romanes*, and Romanian is spoken with the other villagers and taught in schools. Music by voice and by instrument (in particular trumpet, accordion, and drums) is transmitted intergenerationally, taught and learnt by imitation, without formal schooling methods. Apart from these two features, the cultural traditions of the Roma are similar to the ones of the Romanians. The ritual life follows the most important traditional Orthodox Christian festivities such as Easter and Christmas, and the rites of passage in an individual’s life, such as Baptism, birthdays, weddings, and funerals.

The members of the two Romani communities are aware of each other’s existence, yet consider themselves to be distinct and do not cherish any direct relations. What ties them is the belonging to the *Romani* ethnic group. Along with this association, they also take upon themselves an invisible label that marks their otherness from the Romanian people and conditions the way they are approached and treated. *Being a Roma* means being different, and the grounds of this difference have been defined in many years of interactions between the early-date Romani travellers and the settled populations of Europe. It is a marker of identity as much as it is a stigmatizing label that often inspires fear, hate, fright, or reluctance to interact.

### Introduction

The fate of the Roma, like that of many other minority cultures and in particular indigenous people, has been marked by the interaction with other social groups that made the rules with respect to their participation in social, economic, and political life in the societal system they shared and determined their collective life choices: the languages they were allowed to speak, the cultural practices they could perform, and the ways of educating their children. In this process, the cultural ethos of many indigenous people was strangled and their voices suppressed. The position of marginality of indigenous knowledge persisted even when integration policies came to replace overtly oppressive ones.

One significant aspect of this position of marginality resides in the lack of agency in processes of social and cultural representation. Indigenous people have been 'spoken on behalf of'. The representation of indigenous people in art, narrative, as well as social research has been done from an Eurocentric perspective aligned to “vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (Said, 1978, p. 2). Their history was interpreted and written by those outside the group, infused with their own meanings, values, and perspectives. These representations of minority history, lifestyle, and culture may give an illusion of objectivity, yet in
Mainstream Narratives and Counter-Narratives

reality they communicate the values, projections, and ideas of those who produced them. From an anthropological standpoint, these accounts are just as many facets of the West's encounter with otherness. ‘The other’ and ‘otherness’ are concepts that mark the construction of a group’s identity on virtue of real or imagined difference from the dominant group’s identity (Staszak, 2008). Identifying a group as ‘the other’ dwells in reality on a negation of real identity, a portrayal of identity sketched around salient points of opposition and difference rather than acknowledgement of intrinsic group features. Defining ‘the other’ also implies an asymmetry in power relations: it is only the withholder of power that can impose its rationality and its values in constructing the identity of the other in opposition to their own (Staszak, 2008).

The representations of the other concocted and circulated by those in power are narratives that fix and stay, circulate, and may become slowly embedded in the collective representations of a society. Power over media production and distribution tools and infrastructures is determinant in these processes. Those narratives that are pushed over and circulated with particular force, what Martin-Barbero (1993) calls “hegemonic stories”, are created and maintained by alimenting the public opinion with messages that gradually build up to a coherent portrayal of a subject, person, or group. In time, this image is crystallized and arrives to define how a group is perceived and the attitudes towards it. Moreover, it may come to determine a group’s self-ascribed identity. This effect is particularly intense when representations are infused with negative stereotypes and stigmatizing attributes. The members of marginalized or stigmatized social groups are well aware of their stigmatized status and its reverberations in society, including awareness of the stereotypes labeled upon them and expectancy to become objects of discrimination (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major & O’Brien, 2005). In time, hegemonic stories may arrive to create and consolidate collective representations about the role and status of a group in society (Major & O’Brien, 2005). These narratives may define equally what Arjun Appadurai (2004) calls the “terms of recognition,” which delimit what types of knowledge and practices are valid and adequate in a society, and therefore may gain recognition and acceptance from its members.

The decentralization of media production and distribution processes and the rise of community media forms carry with them the potential of changing this state of affairs, by allowing the narratives of the marginalized to slowly make their way to the public. By having access to production tools and media distribution channels, previously marginalized groups may create and advance alternative stories (Martin-Barbero, 1993) or counter-narratives that in time may replace or change the representations consolidated by the hegemonic stories.

This chapter shows that counter-narratives can be created and published in largely accessible forms by mixed teams of designers and indigenous people. The chapter takes the case of an ethnic minority with a long history of marginalization and discrimination – the Roma – and reports on a participatory design initiative that sought to understand how digital media could be used for giving the Romani minority a voice starting from the grassroots. The project was carried out with two rural Romani communities in South-Eastern Romania, in the villages of Podoleni and Munteni, and resulted in the participatory creation of two video-based community websites.
The case of the Roma and the Romani Voices study are used to set in a mirror three kinds of representational narratives that seek to answer who are the Roma. First, mainstream narratives about the Roma in research circles and the public opinion are set against counter-narratives produced by the members of the two Romani communities. These counter-narratives are also of two kinds: those that people advanced in interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations carried out during the Romani Voices project, and those that were embedded and transmitted through the two community websites. Further, the chapter analyses critically the design process that led to the elicitation of the conversational narratives and the production of the online narratives. This analysis fuels a critical perspective which sets under scrutiny the production of digitally-mediated narratives of identity and the role of the designer and the design process in facilitating their emergence.

Who are the Roma? The Mainstream Narratives

The Romani people, popularly known as ‘Gypsies’, can be described as “a huge diaspora embracing five continents, sharing the citizenship of a multitude of states, while lacking a territory of its own” (Gheorghe & Acton, 2001, p. 55). Unlike other diasporas or minorities, they do not claim belonging to a shared cultural system and territory, and are not tied by a universally accepted history (Gay y Blasco, 2002, p. 173). The term ‘Roma’ covers a varied mosaic of different groups, such as Romanichals, Kalderash (also spelled Kalderaš and Kalderaša), Lovari, Sinti (also ‘Sinte’), Manush (Manuš), Kalë, etc. (Liégeois, 2005, p. 13). Each group spreads across various countries, and several different groups can live in a single country (Tcherenkov & Laederich, 2004, p. 217).

While each of these groups presents social and cultural distinction, there are two significant elements that tie them and indicate a possible common ethnic identity. One is their language, Romani or Romanes, an Indo-European language found to bear remarkable similarity to the ancient Sanskrit language and to present-day Indian dialects. A second element is the groups’ traditional nomadic lifestyle. While most of these populations are now settled, their ancestors used to be peripatetic communities with no fixed abode. Based on these elements, there are two grand theories attempting to explain who are the Roma.

The first theory argues for the ethnic unity of the Romani people based on the attribution of a common language, ancestry, and place of origin for the disparate groups of Roma now scattered around the world (Mayall, 2004). Theories on the origins and whereabouts of the Roma commonly draw on linguistic, biological, and historical evidence. The most significant claim for ethnic unity draws on the observation that the various dialectal forms of the Romani language all have in common notable similarities with Indian languages, which implies that a unitary linguistic origin can be assumed (Fraser, 2008; Liégeois, 2005; Matras, 2004).

The second theory denies any common ethnic origin and argues instead that Romani identity has been shaped by the nomadic lifestyle and the relation with surrounding populations, especially as a result of stigmatizing practices (Lucassen, Willems, & Cottaar, 1998). The proponents of this theory argue that Romani or Gypsy ethnicity should be treated as a relational variable: the Gypsy become Gypsy not only on the
basis of intrinsic features, but in a broader interethnic context and in relation to non-Gypsy populations (Durst, 2010, p. 13-14, 27). The term ‘Gypsy’ is often preferred in these scholarly writings to the one of ‘Romani’ precisely because it carries with it an outsider’s labeling: the ‘Gypsy’ tag, with the history of its wrong assumption that Roma come from Egypt and imbued with negative stereotyping, is a reflection of how the identity of these nomadic people has been forged in constant interaction with and by outsiders.

Yet the theories around Roma ethnicity are circulated in restricted scholarly circles of Romani studies and did not penetrate yet the public opinion. The portrayal of the Roma in the eyes of the non-Roma is crystallized around a combination of negative stereotyping and romanticized images of wandering outcasts. The Roma themselves have had very little influence in shaping the public opinion about them. Ian Hancock, a Romani studies scholar of Romani origin, writes:

“Although we Romanies have lived in Europe for hundreds of years, almost all popular knowledge about us comes not from socializing with our people at first hand, for we generally live apart from the rest of the population, but from the way we are depicted in stories and songs and in the media.” (Hancock, 2004, p. xvii)

The outsider representation of the Roma starts from the names they have been given. Throughout the history of their whereabouts in Europe from the early arrivals in Mediaeval times, various names have been labeled upon the Roma. Two terms encountered wide circulation and became the root forms for the names popularly assigned to the Roma in European countries: Tsingani, from which denominations such as Zigeuner, Cingano, tigan, and Cikan were derived; and Egyptian which gave rise to the popular terms Gypsy, Gitano, and Gitan (Hancock, 2007, p. 1). The term Tsingani comes from the Byzantine Greek word atsinganoi or atzinganoi (ατσίγγανοι), ascribed to a heretic sect, athinganoi (Fraser, 2008, p. 56) and meaning untouchable, or don’t touch people (Hancock, 2007, p. 1).

At present the most widely accepted terms for referring globally to these populations are derived from the root-word ‘rom’, which originally meant ‘married Romani male’, and then ‘husband’ (Hancock, 2007, p. xix). The new term replaces the one of ‘Gypsy’ and is intended to reflect the Romani intrinsic affirmation of identity, through a term of Romanes origin. At the same time, the new term is meant to discard a denotation that is invested with negative stereotypes. The ‘Roma’ term is however a political construct and does not reflect the vision nor the wishes of the grassroots Roma. Paloma Guy y Blasco emphasizes that the Gitanos with whom she conducted fieldwork in Spain have never heard the word ‘Roma’ and continue to define themselves as ‘Gitano’, despite the sometimes pejorative connotations the word has among the Spanish (Gay y Blasco, 2002, p. 173-174).

The Roma have been the object of social exclusion for most of their presence on the European continent, including direct and explicit targeting as outsiders by state governments and local populations alike (Bancroft, 2005, p. 1-2; Thelen, 2005). Historical studies on the perception of the Roma reveal that the process of stigmatization was constructed in time and evolved more in relation to the values and standards of the settled populations rather than to reflect actual facts and deeds committed by the
Roma (Lucassen, 1991). For instance, a study on 62 accounts in historical chronicles and town council registers in Europe for the period 1400-1450 identifies five categories under which the Roma were represented, none of which includes negative stereotypes:

1. Religious refugees, escaping from the Turkish invasion gradually penetrating in Europe.
2. Genuine pilgrims travelling to Christian religious sites. This category makes the bulk of the records.
3. Acrobats, earning their living by dance and acrobatic performance.
4. Dealers and horse traders, able to pay for their stays and earn a living with these activities.
5. Bogus pilgrims, which allegedly had been converted from Christian to Islamic faith and upon re-conversion to Christianity were given as penance a 7-year wandering during which they were to be supported by alms received from local people (Kenrick, 2004).

During this period, the relations between the Roma and the settled populations of Europe were peaceful. It was after the 1450s that the general attitude toward the Roma changed to refusal and even violence (Kenrick, 2004, p. 82-83).

The evolution of this negative representation is patterned by Lucassen et al. (1998) around three labels assigned to the Romani minority throughout their whereabouts on the European continent: criminality, marginality, and poverty. These labels are frames distorting the perception and understanding of the Romani travelers and can be linked to broad themes and discourses, circulated and held high at certain historical times. They betray the underlying assumptions and projections about the status of lower classes, concretized in labels that evolved from their alleged criminality to marginality and poverty.

The degree of discrimination they have been subjected to and historical parallels entitled some authors to compare the fate of the ethnic Jews and the ethnic Roma. Thelen (2005) notices that both groups are characterized by geographical dispersion and subject to general prejudice, for which the terms ‘Anti-Semitism’ and ‘Anti-Gypsyism’ have been coined. Yet, the size of Anti-Gypsyism has been by far more pronounced. The fact that the term Anti-Semitism has been coined in the 18th century, while the term Anti-Gypsyism has only been coined in the second half of the 20th century indicates that prejudice against Roma has been so wide-spread and unquestioned, that there has been no need to single it out and label it as an isolated phenomenon. The public opinion around the fate of the two groups during World War II was also different. The Roma in Germany and states under German control had the same fate as the Jews and the disabled, ranging from forced sterilization, castration, deportation in death camps, and mass murder. However, while the dimensions of the Jewish genocide have been amply documented and provoked public manifestations of refusal and condemnation, until recently very little has been revealed in public about the similar fate the Roma had under the Nazi (Thelen, 2005, p. 21-22). This and other manifestations of overt out casting are an indication that the Roma have been and
are still looked upon as inferior, destructive, unhealthy social elements (Thelen, 2005, p. 19).

At present, the level of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, stigmatization, and unequal access to work and education for the Roma of Europe is such that these various issues are compacted in a talk of ‘the Roma problem’ (Imre, 2006). A 2007 report by the European Network against Racism (ENAR) on the situation of the Roma in 12 European countries presents a multifaceted overview of the Roma problem in which multiple discrimination, negative stereotyping and anti-Gypsyism have been shown to affect employment, education, health, house ownership, equal access to goods and services, and to incite to racist violence (Halász, 2007, p. 5-6).

**Who are We, the Roma? The Counter-narratives**

The Roma in the Romanian villages of Podoleni and Munteni are unaware of most of the studies and theories around the ancestry, history, and lifestyle of what is taken to be a multi-territorial Romani minority. Yet, on virtue of being part of this minority, they have been carrying the Roma label and faced its effects in interactions with the majority population. During their involvement in the Romani Voices project they had the occasion to say who they were and put forward their own self-representations in two sets of narratives. Firstly, they did so while being engaged in interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations with the field researcher and designer. This is still a mediated level of representation, where the field researcher interpreted their views before communicating them on paper. Second, they could communicate their views and representations more directly and to a wider public through a community website that was developed in the project. The examination of these narratives reveals that they did not emerge as pure self-representations, but in a dialogue with an imaginary non-Roma, refuting stereotypes in an attempt to free themselves from stigma. In this process, negation and positive affirmation were used in succession: people felt compelled to say what they were not and refuse stereotypical attributes, while affirming the distinctive community features. This succession of negation and positive affirmation gave salience to particular patterns by which the two communities represented their identity.

**Self-representation in Conversational Narratives: The Roma in Podoleni**

The self-representation of the Roma in Podoleni gains salience in a game of affirmation and negation, differentiation and association with the Romani ethnic group, other Roma and with Romanians. In these dynamic transitions from affirmation to negation there emerges a set of community attributes, defined almost at all times as alternatives to stereotypical representations.

**Affirmation of ethnic belonging: Being Roma**

The identity of the group first resides on the acknowledgement of being part of the Romani ethnic group. The main feature of the Romani legacy is speaking Romanes. All village Roma speak Romanes, and the language is used in all intra-community conversations, except for cases in which outsiders are present. Members, especially
the elderly, consider the continuity of the language of utmost importance. People also acknowledge their identity of hearth (or settled) Roma, a historical feature that indicates the early time of settlement, but also an identity mark that enables distinction within the global ethnic Romani minority.

**Negation of ethnic relations: Being different from other Roma**

At a subtler level, the identity of the Romani community in Podoleni gains salience by insisting on the differentiation from other Romani sub-groups. Members repeatedly indicated how they were different from traditional Roma in lifestyle, social and cultural moors, living standards, values, and life goals.

“The long-haired Gypsies only marry their peers, so they won’t leave the community. We do not do this.”

“Yes, the long-haired don’t spoil their breed. They don’t mix with Romanians. This is their tradition.”

“They also marry their kids when they are very young. This is their custom. (...) We don’t have this. Only them. The long-haired, the ones with long, colorful skirts.”

- Focus group discussion

By constantly underlining difference from other Romani sub-groups, and especially traditional Roma, the community in Podoleni tries to put forward its own, distinctive features. This differentiation is a way to re-affirm their distinct identity, but also to refute global patterns of identification. Unaware strangers tend to think of all Roma as a homogenous group.

“Romanians think all of us are the same. If someone does something wrong, everybody says, ‘Look, he’s a Gypsy!’”

- Focus group participant, M, middle-aged

This distinction is also a means to elude discriminatory portrayals and dissipate eventual negative stereotypes. It is interesting to notice that every time a negative stereotype was rejected, this was done by taking distance from other Roma who allegedly may have been worthy of it.

“There are many groups of Roma. There are the Kalderash, the long-haired, the spoon-makers... Some of these groups do bad things. As the majority of Romanians think. Some steal, cheat... But it should not be misunderstood. This group of Roma of which we are part, never acted this way.”

“We have always lived through honest work.”

- Focus group discussion

**Affirmation of closeness to the Romanian majority: Being Romanized Roma**

The settled Roma of Romania are the most integrated ones, closer to the mainstream Romanian socio-cultural profile. It is on virtue of this quality that they are also called ‘Romanized Roma’. By this self-ascription, the Roma in Podoleni indicate not only a
historical feature, but also a series of qualities that are associated with being Romanized Roma: being trustworthy, hard-working, reliable, and ultimately more integrated, closer to the majority.

**Affirmation of Romani legacy features: Being musicians**

Underneath the above layers, which serve to distinguish these Roma from other Roma and to relate the group with the Romanian majority population, the self-characterization made by the Roma in Podoleni focuses on the core feature of their Romani legacy: being musicians. The Roma in Podoleni are recognized regionally for having a strong musical tradition. Many Roma know how to play an instrument, and use music performance as an additional source of income. In the past the community had a fanfare (musician performers group made of trumpet players) which enjoyed regional recognition.

**Affirmation of moral qualities: Being hard-working and honest Roma**

Lastly, the people identify themselves through a series of moral qualities on which all community members take pride. The outstanding moral qualities are ‘being hard-working’ and ‘being honest’. People included the desire to work, the joy of work among the most defining features of their community. One focus group participant remarked, “What is typical of us? Work! And music!” It is to be noticed how the two principal moral qualities – being hard-working and honest – differ from the stereotypical portrayals on the Roma, largely circulated in Romania as well as in Europe. The centrality of these qualities also confirms why for affirming their distinct identity people needed to emphasize first what they were not.

**Self-representation in Conversational Narratives: The Kalderash Gypsies**

The identity of the Roma in Munteni resides on proud identification with the Romani sub-group to which they belong: Nomadic Coppersmiths (Kalderash) Gypsies, and a denial of the generic ‘Roma’ label.

**Negation of ethnic belonging: Not being Roma**

In repeated instances, opinion leaders and especially the traditional leader (bulibașa) refused the ‘Roma’ label as an externally imposed identification mark which did not reflect the peculiarity of the community. There were various reasons for refusing the global ethnic denomination. First, in the opinion of the community leader, it was imposed externally, and therefore artificial, as it did not reflect the history and the tradition of the Roma. Second, it implied that all Roma are the same.

“If you say to somebody I am Stanescu, they would know, you are a Kalderash Gypsy. But when you say ‘I am a Roma’, oh well, Roma... Roma are many!”

- Community leader, interview

By refusing the ‘Roma’ label, people do not deny their Gypsy origins. What they refuse is a label imposed on them that they never had the occasion to understand, ac-
cept, or refute. At the same time, the refusal of the term indicates that the Kalderash in Munteni want to affirm their identity through affiliation to a specific Romani sub-group (Kalderash), over that of the global ethnic group.

**Affirmation of group specificity: Being nomadic Kalderash Gypsy**

The identification with the traditional Romani sub-group is charged with rich significance, encompassing lifestyle features that can be traced back in time across centuries. First, *being nomadic* is a feature which distinguishes the Kalderash Roma from other Romani sub-groups in Romania, which have been settled much earlier. The Roma in Munteni have been nomadic until the second half of the 20th century, when they were settled by order of the communist regime. Even if meanwhile they have built homes and settled in a village, most Roma in Munteni continue to travel from spring to fall and live in temporary camps while selling their traditional products. Second, *being Kalderash*, or Coppersmiths, is a traditional denomination, but also the indication of a profession. Virtually all families in Munteni have at least one coppersmith among their members. It is a profession inherited and transmitted for centuries, still alive despite the professional restructuring caused by modernization. Therefore, by insisting on their being nomadic Kalderash Gypsies, the Roma in Munteni affirm an unbroken tie with tradition manifested through two crucial lifestyle and economic profile features: being nomadic (or semi-nomadic) and being professional coppersmiths.

**Self-representation in Online Narratives**

A powerful narrative of identity emerges from the landing page wherefrom access to the two community websites is provided (www.romanivoices.com). The link to the website of the Roma in Podoleni is named “The Romani community in Podoleni, Romania”, while the website of the Kalderash is titled “The Kalderash Gypsies in Munteni, Romania”. There was a definite choice by each community to be called either Roma or Gypsy. These denominations indicate on the one hand the affirmation of ethnic belonging by the Roma in Podoleni, and on the other the rejection of a global ethnic identification label underpinning a strong desire for cultural distinction, for the Roma in Munteni. Further, each website conveys representational narratives through content as well as the information architecture.

The website of the Roma in Podoleni (www.romanivoices.com/podoleni) has a primary information architecture made of six categories. Four of these, ‘Romani identity’, ‘Cultural traditions’, ‘History,’ and ‘Religion’ represent the spirit of community life. ‘Re-integration’ and ‘Dialogue’ mark people’s aspirations to break the separation from the majority population. The category labels put forward an affirmation of identity with two foremost layers:

- Affirmation of belonging to the Romani ethnic group and their legacy (categories ‘Cultural traditions’ and ‘Romani identity’ in particular)
- Affirmation of closeness and interest to create a communication bridge with the majority population (categories ‘Reintegration’ and ‘Dialogue’).
These affirmations are further articulated in representational narratives conveyed through the website content, made of stories and testimonials embedded in either video or audio format. The content analysis reveals two aspects in which these narratives differ from the conversational narratives outlined above.

First, the affirmation of Romani ethnic identity blends with the affirmation of the closeness to the Romanian people. In two of the testimonials under the category ‘Romani identity’, ethnic boundaries are blurred into an affirmation of humanity that denies ethnic differences.

“If we cut one finger, some blood is dripping. We all have the same blood. But there is this separation, this separation ... this is Gypsy, this is Romanian.”

- MG, web testimonial, category ‘Romani identity’

“To be a Roma means to be a human being. (...) The relations between the Roma and the Romanians... I think there should not even be this denomination. I think there should be, simply, a relation (...) We should be able to interact with each other just the way the Roma interact among Roma fellows, and the Romanians among Romanian fellows. There should not be any classifications.”

- AI, web testimonial, category ‘Romani identity’

Second, many testimonials put forward positive attributes of the Roma in a straightforward manner, without the corresponding refusal of negative stereotypes, as in conversational narratives. Some of the qualities highlighted are:

**warm-heartedness,**

“We are very warm-hearted people, we put a lot of heart in communication. Because we have not communicated for a very long period of time, during the enslavement, we started now to communicate and if we are well received by the majority population, we will dedicate heart and soul to it.” – FI, web testimonial, category ‘Dialogue’

**generosity,**

“I was not a man to eat ten breads. I took the bread from my ten kids and I gave it to others, so that they can live as well.” – VG, web testimonial, category ‘Dialogue’

**endurance,** and

“We endured, we endured big waves. With the Bug (N. deportation during WWII), with the famine.” – IF, web testimonial, category ‘History’

**tolerance.**

“Due to the faith we have in God, we nurture very good relations (N. between people of different religious faiths), we respect each other, and we try to be close to each other.” – GB, web testimonial, category
‘Religion’

The website of the Kalderash in Munteni (www.romanivoices.com/munteni) has a simple taxonomy made of three terms: ‘Life on the road’, ‘Traditional metal work’, and ‘The masters’. The three categories put forward the two most distinctive features of the Kalderash: their nomadic lifestyle and their craftsmanship. Other community traits, such as honesty, trustworthiness, simplicity, endurance, and family care transpire through people’s testimonials.

The content under Life on the road emphasizes the distinguishing feature of the community – nomadism – along with the difficulties it entails. The key messages transmitted through content under this category are:

We go by tent because we have to, not because we want to.

Going by tent affects our life: we are poor, we cannot care for our children well when we leave, we cannot keep them properly in school.

Traditional metal work describes metal working in its traditional and professional aspects: how the tradition had been transmitted in the community until the present day and the process of making metal products. It presents as well the array of products that can be produced by the craftsmen in Munteni, together with their qualities and features. The key messages transmitted are:

Our tradition goes far in the past.

You can trust the value and quality of our work.

We can produce a large array of products, useful even for nowadays needs

The masters includes pieces of content focused on testimonials of traditional craftsmen, including information about how they learnt the skills and the range of products they are able to craft. Key messages transmitted are:

We have skilled workers who have inherited their professions from parents and ancestors.

We are hard-working.

The representational narratives transmitted herein are in general affirmative, rather than negative. Yet in the way some characteristic moral qualities are defined, the opposition to an imagined or supposed stigmatizing label still persists, for instance:

“We have very good craftsmen in our community, we have craftsmen younger than 18 years of age who can work very well, beautifully. And we work very honestly, we always respect our deals.” – Community leader, web testimonial, category ‘Traditional metal work’

Unearthing the Design Machine

The two community websites have been created in Romani voices during a participatory process that lasted 27 months in Podoleni, and 23 months in Munteni. Salient
design landmarks are outlined in this part from two perspectives: First, the key moments in the unfolding of the design process are described, with highlights from significant events from the two communities. Second, a more critical outlook is employed to understand the role of the designer and the design methods in giving shape to the online narratives produced.

**A Chronological Account**

The research and design process was based on a methodology that combined intensive data generation based on ethnographic methods with participatory techniques by which local people were involved in the documentation of local stories and issues, production of digital content, and its organization for publishing on the community websites. While the process was different in the two communities, a coherent account of the most important moments in the timeline is described henceforth, with a selection of illustrative moments from one or both communities.

**Entering the field**

In Podoleni, entrance in the community was provided through a family of traditional musicians who continued to play an important role as mediators and partners all throughout the project. The first meeting, taking place in their home, was done with open gates and was attended by more than 20 people of all ages that inquired with respect to the visit and stayed to answer questions, tell stories, perform music and even dance. This atmosphere was to become a defining feature for the rest of the community visits, whether it was for data generation, content production, or design sessions.

In Munteni, the first visit was prepared for months and was finally held in the house of the traditional leader, the *bulibașa*, in the presence of a mediator who facilitated contact. The meeting took place in a room filled to the brim with people of all ages, from small children to the elderly. Yet, nobody intervened in the discussion carried out with the leader, and the occasional assistance of the mediator, until a young boy exclaimed, at the sight of the photo and video cameras and upon hearing of the interest in Romani life: “Why don’t you make videos, so that you can put them on the Internet!” Encouraged by the thrill at such an incredible meeting of interests as the other people in the room acquiesced, it has been explained that the aim was to teach them to use the cameras, so they could be the ones truly speaking about themselves. People met the idea with surprise and disbelief that took months to shatter. Yet this episode marked early in the project the direction of the participatory design trajectory towards building the community website.

**Needs assessment and vision definition**

This phase was an intensive process of data generation and community discussions, meant to inform the design of the community interventions and the technological solutions they were meant to produce. For the community analysis, ethnographic data generation instruments have been used: emergent and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. The definition of the project vision has been done with the involvement of local people through focus groups and cultural
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probes. The outcomes developed included a synthetic community ethnography, a vision for the communication solution and the process of reaching it, and a series of guidelines for developing the communication solution. This phase produced as well tools usable during the next project phase: a list of content themes for guiding the content production work and an oral history guide used as roadmap during content production interviewing and stories elicitation.

In this phase, it was decided that a community website would be developed. Each community defined a different vision for the website. In Podoleni, the community website was conceived as a gateway for community expression, from traditions on which local people took pride, such as music, to present-day concerns, such as poverty. In its final form, the website was to become a business card for the community, a means for presenting and communicating itself to the outside, for a public audience. In Munteni, the process of defining the vision was much longer and had many detours. In its initial stage, the vision was formulated as:

“Create a community website that will mirror people’s traditional lifestyle, difficult life conditions, and showcase their traditional metal work professions, through authentic testimonials of its members. The website should provide visibility for the community, build positive image, and generate awareness of: the poor living standards; the traditional products marketed; and the growing Pentecostal Christian community.” (Sabiescu, 2011)

Later in the project course, people preferred to focus their communication exclusively on their metal work profession and their semi-nomadism, thus reducing considerably the content published.

Content production

This phase was focused on the participatory production of local content, using video and photo cameras. The content production model was based on an existing content creation model - The Inquiry Cycle (Bruce & Bishop, 2008), adapted to the vision and guidelines elicited during the previous phase. The final model employed had six steps: Inquiry-Planning-Creation-Observation-Discussion-Reflection, iterated around two types of production sessions:

Collective production sessions: content production facilitated by the field researcher and designer together with the local production team, spread along 2-3 weeks and iterated every 6-8 weeks.

Community-led production sessions: production managed by community members when the designer was not on the field, spread over 6-8 weeks in alternation with collective production sessions.

The format alternating between inquiry, production, visualization of footage, and discussion allowed people to gradually gain a coherent vision of the themes they were documenting as well as the growing database of audio-visual content that was being produced. The database included raw video footage, pictures, and early edited content that was shown and checked with members. All throughout the content production experience, content themes were tracked and discussed with local people for
understanding which ones were the most important to convey to a public audience. The themes were used to create the website information architecture during the design phase (see Table 1 for the list of themes elicited in Podoleni).

**Table 1. List of content themes in Podoleni. These became the basis for the website taxonomy (category- and tag-based)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The village</th>
<th>Life conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and work</td>
<td>Poverty and aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma children</td>
<td>Poverty and child education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of education</td>
<td>Access to education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations for Roma children</td>
<td>Discrimination at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romani identity</td>
<td>Romani continuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romani language</td>
<td>Community history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of the Roma in Podoleni</td>
<td>Deportation to Transnistria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life during Communism</td>
<td>Life in the 40s – 50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life histories</td>
<td>Cultural traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of cultural traditions</td>
<td>Traditions today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual events</td>
<td>The wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The baptism</td>
<td>Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter</td>
<td>The value of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimation at work</td>
<td>Christian faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The church</td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition in a family of musicians</td>
<td>History of musical tradition in Podoleni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music performances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Website design**

In this phase, the website has been designed with members’ participation. The design had to reflect the vision defined in the previous phases and host the multimedia content selected for publishing. While there is some variation for Munteni, to keep to simplicity in this part only highlights of the design process in Podoleni are provided.

The website design has been done in three sessions with the participation of local people (Figure 1 synthesizes the purpose and results in each phase):

1. Design of the information architecture
2. Detailed website design and initial content mapping
3. Final website design and content mapping
Figure 1. The role of each design session in designing the website of the Roma in Podoleni, with relations and outcomes.

The website information architecture was defined in the first session, and later validated in the forthcoming ones. The taxonomy for the organization of content was declined in two alternative navigation paths:

- By category, grouping content chunks according to grand themes highly representative for the community; and
- By keyword (or tag), grouping a smaller number of content chunks around more specific themes with a more limited coverage.

The technique employed was based on open card sorting methodology, used by information architects in user-centered web design for incorporating user insights into the design of website information architecture (Courage & Baxter, 2005). This technique was adapted to fit the profile of the participants (especially considering the low digital literacy) and aligned to the overall program format. One important adaptation was that the design used not only content samples, but also the content themes developed throughout the collaborative ethnography and content production phases. During the exercise, people firstly grouped the content themes into emerging categories. These categories were then checked for consistency by verifying to what extent the content samples fitted one of the categories defined.

During the later stages, the format for web content pieces and their mapping on the information architecture was defined using content samples inclusive of multimedia content and a website mock-up to simulate navigation on the website. Granularity of content pieces was defined taking as main criterion the centrality on a core subject: each piece of content was focused on a core theme, which could involve one event or one or more people narrating. Three types of content formats were approved, applicable especially for video-based content: (1) Story-based, focusing on the story of one storyteller; (2) Interview-based, in which several videos would be grouped in an interview or reportage format, and (3) Theme-based, in which testimonials from sev-
eral people were grouped around a common theme. With respect to multimedia, it was agreed that each piece of content was focused on a video file or, exceptionally, an audio file. Other media, such as text and pictures could be associated with a core content, provided they offered more contextual information on the same subject.

**Website development**

The website implementation was based on a Content Management System (CMS) solution, identified through an assessment of existing technological options against requirements generated in the community needs assessment and the website design phases. Requirements included visibility, user friendliness, sustainability (including low costs), host structured multimedia content, and multilingualism. Based on these requirements, the technological solution was searched among platforms that support quick content publishing requiring little technical experience. After evaluation of an initial shortlist of three free CMSs (Joomla, Wordpress, and Drupal), Drupal ([https://drupal.org/](https://drupal.org/)) was selected for implementing the website. In comparison with WordPress and Joomla, Drupal is more focused on content and offers a series of modules to deal with content complexity.

Drupal was customized for supporting the design format in terms of structure and content types. The bulk of the content was structured in compound documents – pieces of content focused on one theme and articulated in different media – video, audio, pictures, and text. Video content was hosted on YouTube, in dedicated community channels\(^1\) and embedded in the website.

**Delivery and maintenance**

The website domain ([www.romanivoices.com](http://www.romanivoices.com)) has been bought for three years. Socio-technical support for one year after the project end has been offered. In Podoleni, the website was presented during a community event occasioned by the International Romani Day feasted on April 8\(^{th}\). In Munteni, the website has been shown in a downloaded offline version and videos were delivered to participants on DVDs.

For the community in Podoleni, the agreement was to deliver a technological solution that could be sustained by the community after the project end. To this end, the CMS authoring interface was translated in Romanian, and a practical guide with all phases of content authoring (from production to editing and online upload) was created and delivered. The credentials for managing the website and the YouTube channel were entrusted to one of the main contacts in the community.

**Tales of Mediation and Agency**

The aim of the Romani Voices project was to be an almost invisible mechanism, a catalyzer by which the two communities could identify and articulate their priorities for expression and communication. A participatory approach was considered key to this goal. Yet the unfolding of the research and design process demonstrated that the manifestation of local voices could not be separated from the process of design and

\(^1\) [www.youtube.com/user/RomaniVoices; www.youtube.com/user/romanivoicesmunteni](http://www.youtube.com/user/RomaniVoices; www.youtube.com/user/romanivoicesmunteni)
production, nor make abstraction of the public selected as main audience for communication. The narratives produced by the Roma in the community websites were as much an articulation of local voice as they were the outcomes of a process in which the designer and the design methods, despite the desire to interfere as little as possible, were not completely silenced. Digital technology and the designer acted as two mediating agents for people’s voices. The two are tightly related, as the presence of the designer was the *sine qua non* condition for enabling people little accustomed to the use of digital technology to use them for giving shape to their narratives. The designer played a mediating role, firstly in bridging the world of the Roma to the world of the non-Roma selected as key audience, and secondly in facilitating the translation of community narratives in different representational media. In particular, the conventions and limitations of the online medium proved to be different and at times at odds with the free-flowing narratives in which people expressed. Whereas the Roma cherished group discussions, unstructured storytelling, and long narratives, these had to be balanced with the requirements of the online medium, asking for shorter, impactful messages arranged in theme-based structures.

The importance of the role played by the designer can be illustrated by describing people’s difficulties to participate and decide in an informed manner in the website design sessions. In both communities, the purpose of the first website design session was to sketch the information architecture and start to map content on it. The tools employed were content themes, content samples (both written and playable on the computer for video files), and white cards. In the Munteni site, despite that fact that content themes were as well included in the tools set, only content samples have been used, as the doable process of grouping themes and then content samples appeared too complex to handle for participants.

Participants’ initial response to this exercise betrayed a difficulty with handling the concepts indicated by the themes and content samples and appropriately manipulating and grouping them. In particular, it was difficult to come up with a higher-level category grouping themes based on semantics. In both communities, it was sufficient to give some examples of how themes could be clustered, for people to take initiative and make their own groupings. Yet reading through hesitations and the intricacies of the process, an important observation can be made. To group themes and items effectively, participants were actually required to work at two levels: One was conceptual, which enabled them to treat the themes and content samples as objects that could be manipulated and grouped. At a second level, they had to relate the bare concepts written on cards with their own issues, features, and values that had been documented all throughout content production. While apparently participants were required to group concepts designated by words, in reality to do so effectively they had to delve into the life matter that the concepts indicated. What they had to do was to relate facets, aspects, features, values, needs, and aspirations characterizing their lives.

Once this invisible bridge between the conceptual and the lived experience was clarified, participants were able to come up with groupings reflecting their own perspective. Particularly illustrative is the way the local representative in Munteni grouped a series of content samples that for the designer, even if exposed for so long to community life, appeared unrelated. The content samples titled ‘Travelling with the tents’,
Mainstream Narratives and Counter-Narratives

‘I want to go to school’, ‘Lack of work places’, ‘Child education’, ‘Poverty and everyday life’, and ‘Life in the tent’ were grouped under the category ‘Poverty’. The leader clarified his choice motivating that poverty conditioned all these aspects in community life and was, therefore, the appropriate name for the cluster of content samples. While the designer’s logic would have created different categories, for instance separating between ‘Education’, ‘Nomadism’, and ‘Poverty’, the bulibașa saw one simple straightforward narrative that echoed relations in community lifestyle and the problems permeating it. This episode illustrates as well that above the designer’s role as facilitator, trainer, and at times advisor, it was important to cultivate people’s agency and power over the process, so that they felt confident to take control and re-interpret the conventions of digital media from an indigenous logic. At times this required the acquisition of know-how, and at others that of critical analytical capacities. The Romani Voices experience indicated that enabling the acquisition of these capacities was significantly influenced by time rather than method: by prolonged engagement with digital media people could develop capacities to interpret, decide, appropriate, and use media to respond to self-identified communication goals.

**Conclusion**

In the article “Arts of the contact zone”, Mary Louise Pratt (1999) advances the concept of “autoethnographic texts”. These are creations in which people seek to represent themselves in dialogue with or in response to representations produced by others, often negative and distorted ones. Autoethnographic texts are not purely indigenous modes of expression, but productions in which the language and the images used to represent a group by outsiders are re-interpreted, counter-acted or questioned by members of the group. They are constructions by which people who have been marginalized and discriminated against seek to express their resistance to outsiders’ misrepresentations. The conversational narratives put forward by the Romani people involved in the Romani Voices project are examples of how autoethnography is not only a conscious process, but permeates attempts at self-representation advanced in free-flowing dialogues. The conversational narratives have been formulated in a game of negation and affirmation in which well-known stereotypes about the Roma were tackled and refused. Positive affirmations of identity often followed negations of stereotypical representations, for instance in the way the Roma in Podoleni sought to explain they are not like other Gypsies, but on the contrary honest and hard-working people.

To some extent, it is not surprising that people who have been silenced, discriminated against, and stigmatized take the opportunity to express for firstly refusing those distorted representations that they had to bear and assume for long, without questioning. Voice is instantiated in a dialogue. In Romani Voices, this dialogue placed face to face the labeled and the labellers. Engaging with and counter-acting discriminatory labels in the vein of autoethnographic textual production can be considered attempts at clearing the scene for allowing the people previously stigmatized to emerge as human beings with their own values and aims.

As different from conversational narratives, the narratives conveyed through the community websites were, moreover, shaped and refined in a design and production process assisted by an outsider to the community. In this process, the community
messages were mediated once by the production and distribution technologies chosen, and second by the figure of the designer who facilitated the transitions from oral expression to structured web content.

The issues around autoethnographic productions and the effects of mediation are meant to prompt a critical outlook on the authenticity of expression that design and technology initiatives aim to offer to those people who have been othered, marginalized and misrepresented for long periods of time. These open questions do not deny the importance of involving indigenous people in creating and advancing representational narratives that may counter-act and compete with mainstream narratives. Rather, these issues indicate that time is needed for those groups that have been socially stigmatized to truly take agency over processes of self-representation and make the leap from autoethnographic productions to genuine affirmations of identity in a dialogue with other social groups.

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References


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