

Contributed to a publication of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe.

Racism, the press and freedom of expression:

A summary of ten theses.

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- 1. Definition of Racism.** Racism is defined here as a social system of ethnically based social domination — in Europe (and elsewhere) of ‘white’ Europeans against Others — reproduced by a system of discriminatory social practices that are sustained and legitimized by a system of racist social cognitions (prejudices, ideologies).
- 2. The fundamental role of discourse.** Discourse (language use, communication, etc.) is the crucial interface of the systems of racism: It may itself be a discriminatory social practice, and at the same time it is produced by and reproduces underlying racist cognitions.
- 3. Racist public discourse.** This crucial role of discourse in the (re)production of racism is especially problematic for all forms of public discourse, such as that of politics, the mass media, education, scholarship and research, literature, legal discourse, and so on. Because of its wide distribution and authoritative status such discourse may affect the minds of many people, and hence has most potential to form the underlying racist beliefs that sustain the system of racism.
- 4. The role of the symbolic elites.** If racism in contemporary society is largely (re)produced by public discourse, those social groups who control public discourse, the *symbolic elites*, are most responsible for the perpetuation of — as well as the struggle against — racism. Research shows that, given their positive self-image, they are also the ones who most consistently and explicitly deny their involvement in racism. For the same reason, anti-racist policies should first of all target the symbolic elites and their institutions.

5. The role of the press. The role of the press in the reproduction of (and struggle against) racism should be understood within this theoretical framework: A vast amount of research in many countries has demonstrated, again and again, that — on the whole, and of course with notable variations — the press is rather part of the problem of racism, than part of its solution. This is more explicitly the case for the right-wing popular press (such as *The Sun* in the UK or *Bild Zeitung* in Germany), but also applies to quality newspapers, and not only those of the Right. Many studies show that the major problems of the press that contribute to the reproduction of prejudiced beliefs, and hence indirectly to the reproduction of racism as a system of inequality are among the following:

- a. **Biased newsgathering:** There is comparatively less attention for or reliance on non-white groups, persons or organizations as credible sources, experts, etc. – even when these are available. This also leads to **biased citation patterns:** Virtually only white elite sources are cited as reliable sources, thereby publicly marginalizing ethnic leaders and experts.
- b. **Biased topic choice:** Ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees (and the Third World) become main topics of news especially when they are associated with alleged problems or menaces, that is, with (i) real or construed negative aspects of immigration and — especially cultural — integration, (ii) deviance, drugs, crime and terrorism (iii) economic or financial scarcity (unemployment, run-down neighborhoods, etc.). Their contributions to the economy, culture, etc. are seldom highlighted, in the same way as racism of the dominant white group tends to be ignored or mitigated. Many normal news topics of white people/groups (politics, economy, health, education, science, human interest, etc.) barely involve minority participants. Biased topics are one of the results of biased newsgathering and biased news production. Despite its fierce resistance against censorship, *there is one definite taboo topic in the ‘free’ press: Racism in the press — never ever treated as a serious problem by any newspaper, and hence one of the major examples of self-censorship.*

- c. **Biased language use.** Biased topics also may control or be enhanced by many forms of biased language use or style, such as lexical items (*'illegal'*, *'scroungers'*, *'Scheinasylanten'*, etc.), threatening metaphors (immigration as *'invasion'* or *'waves'*).
6. **Freedom of the press.** By law and in practice, the contemporary press in (most of) the EU is 'free', that is, free from government intervention and censorship, and such freedom, in our neo-liberal nation-states, is not at all under threat. Any alarms on this topic, for instance on the occasion of the Danish cartoons against Mohammed, are a pseudo-problem created by the press itself. On the other hand, however, the press is not at all free from corporate control. Editors, reporters, newsgathering, topics and styles that are inconsistent with corporate interests (sales, etc.) have no place in the mainstream press — as journalists well know. Obviously, *these* threats to the freedom of the press are seldom, if ever, a main topic of the press — as is the case for the racism of the press. A press is truly free only when it has no taboo topics that are inconsistent with elite interests and domination, that is, a press that also is self-critical. In the meantime, journalists are the only profession that is never critically covered in the press. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are more sensitive to critical analysis than other professionals, and know how to deflect all such criticism by using the standard accusation: Censorship!
7. **Absolute freedom means absolute power.** In a democratic society, and given the requirement of check and balances, no organization, institution, group or person has absolute freedom. Without accountability, constraints, and controls total freedom, and hence absolute power, is bound to be abused and leads to domination and dictatorship. Such is true for the government, parliament, business corporations, organizations and citizens. Hence, such also applies to the press and to journalists. Only some of these constraints are formulated by law — such as freedom from slander, etc., not surprisingly a prohibition that especially protects other elites — whereas most others are self-imposed, and hence can be (and are) easily ignored.
8. **Racism is a crime. So is racist reporting.** Within this framework of liberty and constraint the press as well as journalists only have to obey the law, and the

Constitution and many laws prohibit racism and prejudice. Moreover the European states have signed international declarations of human rights, and against racism, and they are obliged to prohibit and prosecute all forms of racism. Again, such applies to all their organizations and all citizens, and hence also to the press and journalists. No “Freedom of the Press!” slogans protect against well-founded accusations of racism or biased coverage. Moreover, other symbolic elites — who also may be part of the problem — such as politicians and judges, will hardly want to restrain the freedom of the press when it comes to racism. On the contrary — there is no institution or professional group less prone to be prosecuted because of discrimination, even when thousands or millions may be victims of (e.g. immigration, labor or housing) discrimination based on prejudice formed by racist or even moderately stereotyped reporting. A racist politician may (mostly internationally, rather than locally) be discredited. A (more) racist newspaper only sells more copies, also because of the anti-immigration hysteria it has created itself among the readers.

- 9. The fear of the end of ‘white’ hegemony.** Although many of the symbolic elites and their institutions make us believe that immigration, integration or minorities are among the major problems of Europe, the economic and cultural facts tell a different story: Countries with more immigration and cultural diversity are often doing better than others. In other words, the concerns about immigration or integration, also in the press, should be interpreted as a concern about power — namely a fear of the imminent end of the hegemony of white Europeans and their (nearly exclusively white) elites.
- 10. The press and the situation in Europe.** So, if immigration and minorities are construed by the elites as a pseudo-problem to conceal domination and fears of losing hegemony, what are the *real* problems of Europe? There are many, and complex ones, not least widespread poverty — equally ignored in the press. However, if for a moment we recall the major moral and political problems of Europe and white Europeans in the past — such as slavery, colonialism, apartheid, segregation, the Holocaust and ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Bosnia, among many others — then we must conclude with W.E.B. Dubois, that indeed the major problem of the 20th century — and before and after, both in the USA and

also in Europe — has been the problem of the ‘color line’, that is, of racism. If we then look at Europe today, and see that also in countries that were believed to be solidly democratic, such as Holland, Denmark, and France, racist parties get large and larger number of votes, as is also the case in Italy, Germany and Austria, and if we also see in the Eurobarometer that on average up to two-thirds of the citizens are against (more) immigration — even when we know this will do their countries good and will make them more diverse — then we can only recognize that one of the fundamental problems of the old Europe, namely its historical racism and illusion of ethnic superiority and hegemony, has not only not been resolved, but is only getting worse again. Instead of problematizing immigration and minorities, or Muslims, or Islam, or cultural diversity, it is time that the press pays (much more) attention to some of the real problems of Europe. Contributing with its biased reporting to ethnic conflict, as all research shows the press is now doing, is not only racist and a threat to the everyday lives and welfare of millions of citizens (who already have enough problems due to the difficulties of immigration and integration) but also, even more fundamentally a threat to our a democratic Europe. It is for this reason that the press should be much more aware of its power and responsibility in managing the minds of the citizens. A press can only be truly free if it makes sure that *all* citizens are free, and our neighborhoods, cities and countries free of racism.

Barcelona, January 2007