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**ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF ENGAGEMENT: CONSTRUCTING MEANING  
THROUGH TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG ROMA IN THE CZECH  
REPUBLIC**

A Dissertation in  
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by  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the use of televisual media forms and social media outlets by Roma activists in the Czech Republic as these activists search for ways to ameliorate discrimination, exclusion and the challenges of identity and community building among the Roma within Czech society. Roma marginalization manifests in a myriad of ways including explicitly through practices such as discriminatory housing and educational segregation. There are also the implicit methods of exclusion including the silencing of voices and experiences. Media are one of the sites that have excluded Roma and continue to present Roma in limited and stereotypical ways with harmful implications. This dissertation explores the specific efforts and outcomes of those engaged in challenging and changing this situation, which is critical for ascertaining a broader understanding of the dynamics and formulating new strategies for change. In particular, this study sets out to understand the ways in which activists attempt to engage communities using media—televisual, online and social media—as sites for identity negotiation and community development, that may in turn contribute to a sense of belonging to help combat unjust systems. My findings are based on ethnographic analysis, including 25 in-depth interviews with people working with and within Romani communities, observations of public demonstrations, as well as analysis of online sites of engagement. I conducted this research over a two-year period, with a majority of my fieldwork taking place from September 2017 to July 2018 in the Czech Republic. Findings highlight the challenges and potential benefits of activists’ use of televisual and social media – including online television programs, Facebook accounts, and archival websites – to address the social and cultural inequalities of Czech-based Roma.

*Keywords:* Roma, Czech Republic, identity, belonging, social media, activism, television, ethnography

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## Chapter One

I sit across the table from a young Romani man on a cold winter evening in Brno, as we discuss his work as an activist, the organization of a recent public demonstration, and his hopes for the future. He says to me,

I believe Roma has bigger chances. We can be doctors; we can be lawyers. We can be anything... this is what we have to change. This is the challenge. How we can create our identity? This is the most important... we should create our identity new.

Roma identity is a complex topic and while this study does not attempt to produce a new conceptualization of Romani identity, it sets out to understand some ways that activists are using media to confront the current challenges facing Romani communities in an especially problematic country for them, the Czech Republic, where understanding and locating sites for the construction of Roma identity is instrumental to challenging the structures that continue to marginalize Roma. Identities are important to understanding one's affiliations and alliances. In other words, identities contribute to feelings of belongingness and in a society that largely excludes Roma, understanding oneself and one's community is crucial in the fight for justice.

There is an estimated 250,000 Roma in the Czech Republic, which translates to roughly 2% of the 10.5 million Czech population (European Union, n.d.). Drawing from Gurr (1993), it is important to note that estimates of the number of people who identify as Roma may be larger, as it remains difficult to "define and observe" the minority group (p. 5). In the case of the Roma in the Czech Republic, who may live in segregated communities or temporary housing census measurements are ineffective. The UNDP/WB/EC 2011 Regional Roma Housing survey found that approximately half of the Roma population fear eviction from their homes in the Czech Republic. Harsh living conditions and high levels of unemployment – only about 39% of Roma

between the ages of 15-64 were employed in 2010 – create a hostile experience for Roma, who are separated from Czech society from a young age. Roma children are often placed in “practical schools,” which serve students with mental disabilities. Furthermore, approximately 60% of Roma children are enrolled in ethnically segregated schools, where the level of education is of far less quality than regular schools (European Roma Rights Centre, 2012). The deeply homogenous country has made futile attempts to acknowledge and support Roma as equal citizens, where Roma remain at the margins of Czech society. Despite such efforts, the treatment of Roma in the Czech Republic, at times, is representative of their overall mistreatment in the larger East-Central European region. However, unlike neighboring nations, the Czech Republic is considered more democratic, where the development of programs to protect minority groups and presence of human rights organizations suggest a responsibility the country has assumed to protect the group from discrimination and thereby provide a better living situation than neighboring regions (Marden, 2004). This goal, though, is arguably not realized or at best inadequate. As Roma continue to experience segregation from Czech society through discriminatory practices as well as acts of racism, which can be violent, communities of activists and organizers are working towards changing this situation.

This study sets out to understand the intersections of identity, belonging, activism, and media engagement among Roma in the Czech Republic during a critical juncture. The Czech presidential election took place in January 2018, with an incredibly volatile campaign period. The incumbent candidate, Miloš Zeman ran an anti-immigration, pro-Russia campaign. The recent influx of refugees to the region—very few of which arrived or lived in the Czech Republic—provided Zeman the support to run with this idea. Zeman, who won the election against Jiří Drahoš, an academic with a pro-European Union stance, pinned his opponent as weak

on immigration. Leading up to the election, I received countless advertisements with Zeman's slogan "You are not alone anymore," in the mail. Other slogans for this campaign read, "This country is ours. Vote for Zeman." These advertisements, along with others calling for a Czexit (Czech exit from the European Union), created a phantom fear of immigration. Discussions around immigration in the Czech Republic focused on the Othering of Muslims in particular, but as several of the people I spoke with mentioned, Roma were often lumped into this category. One of the activists I spoke with told me about how during the "whole immigration crisis a lot of the focus was somewhere else, like Roma topic was out of media for a while or it wasn't that strong," but now the media's focus on Roma has returned and that it is stronger. Migrants, Roma, and others seen as threats or unfit to exist within Czech society become the targets of hateful rhetoric and, in many cases, violent acts. As tensions continue to rise, specifically in violence against Roma, this research explores how organizers and activists are responding and organizing communities (including the challenges in such efforts).

This project, then, captures a critical moment in Romani activism in the Czech Republic, led by a group of young Romani activists working within communities who are finding different ways to connect with communities and challenge the structures that have excluded Romani voice and experience. The activists are dedicated to combatting injustice through different venues including media, which is the focus of this research project, as well as politics, where several have expressed their political aspirations.

There is something about this moment, as one of the activists noted. The group of young Romani activists are equipped with a command of different languages. This point was raised by one of the activists who said that they are able to connect with Roma and non-Roma communities by speaking Czech. They are also able to connect with older generations through

their ability to speak (and in some cases learn) Romanes. Furthermore, several of the activists speak English, which may contribute to transnational collaborations. The current political environment, as volatile as it is, may see different strategies and collaborations by groups calling for justice. And, lastly, the current generation of activists are media literate, both in traditional entertainment forms of media, and in newer digital forms.

Examining the specific efforts and outcomes of those engaged in challenging and changing this situation is critical for ascertaining a broader understanding of the dynamics and formulating new strategies for change. In particular, this study sets out to understand the ways in which communities utilize media as sites for identity negotiation and community development, that may in turn contribute to a sense of belonging. The focus on media grows from an understanding that Roma identity has largely been produced by non-Roma: elites, governments, and media. In the case of media, it is largely responsible for informing ideas of who the Roma are, often stereotypically described as a closed group defined by their exclusion from dominant society. As Beaudoin (2015) suggests, when there is a lack of understanding or access to information about the lived experiences of Roma, media fill this void. Research illustrates that Roma are often presented in stereotypical roles (Pusca, 2015; Bell, 2016; Tremlett, 2014a), where media employ tired tropes of Roma as criminals, possessing paranormal powers, and marked by their clear separation from dominant society and even civilization itself. These representations are important to investigate as they inform not only how non-Roma see Romani people, but also for Roma, who lack identification with diverse representations. In the Czech Republic, most media focus on criminality when discussing Roma, and this has consequences. For non-Roma, there are countless futures to imagine. However, for Roma, media often present one-dimensional experiences and characters, which limit possibilities of identification and

imagined futures. For the Roma, as the case with most marginalized groups, mainstream media offer little space for alternative perspectives. With challenges in presenting counter-narratives, it becomes important to locate alternative spaces to present diverse experiences and perspectives, which is a key focus of this dissertation.

My exposure to issues of Roma perspectives in the media began in earnest with a visit to the Czech Republic in 2016, where I met with Romea, a news server focusing on topics related to Roma. It was during this time that I saw the challenges and possibilities of media for Romani communities. Romea developed in 2003 and serves as a watchdog to mainstream media, particularly so when media outlets inaccurately or negatively present Roma. Over the years, Romea has become a trustworthy news organization in its own right within the Czech Republic and beyond. After spending some time at the Romea office, I noticed the importance of mediated spaces for Roma in an increasingly digital world and the possibilities to challenge the structures that continue to oppress Roma through media engagement. I became curious of how community members, organizers, activists, and organizations were utilizing media in their efforts, including non-journalistic media. Initially, I set out to understand communication between different groups, to understand connection and disconnection. However, I returned to the Czech Republic in 2017 and was quickly drawn to what I found a more compelling phenomenon, that of activists working to reconceptualize Romani identity through engagement with different mediated spaces. The network of activists in the Czech Republic is an incredibly connected group. During my year in the Czech Republic, I met with and interviewed a number of people working with and within Romani communities to combat antigypsyism.

In this research, I utilize the voices of Roma activists in the Czech Republic to see how they understand and use non-journalistic media. This study investigates two specific media

modalities. The first examines one form that looks to simulate traditional media: the production of an online-TV platform by a group of activists. I follow the planning and development of an online-TV platform by a group of Romani activists, and observe the shooting of a pilot program for the platform. The group has set out to create entertainment-based programming to provide communities a different view of Romani experience, one that arguably is not present in other media outlets. As the chapters in this research illustrate, there are a number of challenges and possibilities to this venture.

Interviews with activists and their interests and activities in media also led to further exploration of other spaces that activists were engaging, most notably, Facebook groups and networking platforms, the second media modality I examine. These online spaces emerge as fascinating sites for understanding community. Facebook groups serve as sites to express experiences with discrimination and connect with others through a shared understanding, and in most cases, shared experiences. The development of groups online also opens up the possibility for transnational connections. Furthermore, these online spaces also become sites of remembrance and documentation of Romani histories, which contributes to a more in-depth understanding of identities and communities.

Before proceeding to an overview of the chapters, I will provide explanation for the use of certain words and labels. The terms Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller are at times used interchangeably, where such reductions collapse identities. Furthermore, they fail to acknowledge and honor histories and lived experiences. A history of the terms is provided in the following chapter, but I have decided to use the term Roma, as this is how the people I spoke with referred to themselves and their communities. As this research illustrates, self-identification is key. In this way, using the term Roma acknowledges the viewpoints and experiences of the



people I spoke with. Furthermore, the term gadje (also spelled gadze) is used by interviewees referring to non-Roma or those lacking Romanipen (the Roma spirit). Throughout this research, I employ the terms discrimination, racism, and antigypsyism. Antigypsyism refers directly to the type of racism that people and groups identifying as Roma experience, including explicit violent practices and implicit acts such as microaggressions. The results of which “reproduce structural disadvantages” (<http://antigypsyism.eu>). Antigypsyism.eu describes antigypsyism as:

The specific racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as ‘gypsies’ in the public imagination. Although the term is finding increasing institutional recognition, there is as yet no common understanding of its nature and implications. Antigypsyism is often used in a narrow sense to indicate anti-Roma attitudes or the expression of negative stereotypes in the public sphere or hate speech. However, antigypsyism gives rise to a much wider spectrum of discriminatory expressions and practices, including many implicit or hidden manifestations. Antigypsyism is not only about what is being said, but also about what is being done and what is not being done.

The term antigypsyism captures specific discriminatory practices that apply to those who identify or are identified as Roma, thereby providing a clearer understanding of Romani experience and how to combat the structural disadvantages that develop from antigypsyism, as well as the everyday experiences with discrimination. Furthermore, I use the terms activist and community organizer in different contexts and in conversation with specific participants. This is informed by conversations with research participants who self-identify as activist or community organizer and there are varying levels of distinction, as some may explicitly identify with one label or may not see a difference between the two terms and the efforts they are a part of, identifying as both

activist and community organizer. In some cases, I use both terms or use them interchangeably to include both activists and community organizers.

This chapter is informed by a series of research questions:

RQ1: How do activists/community organizers describe the current experiences of the Roma in the Czech Republic? Additionally, how do these activists describe their goals?

RQ1a: How do activists/community organizers in the Czech Republic utilize televisual, online and social media in the Czech Republic, in particular as spaces for articulating questions and concerns related to identity construction, community building, and social justice?

RQ1b: What are the contextualized dynamics of these media spaces (tensions, affordances, and limitations), especially as sites for civic engagement broadly defined?

RQ2: What are the mediated forms that these efforts take, both in terms of the use of televisual media genres and digital media?

RQ3: What are the challenges of producing such forms given the context of the Czech Republic, the particularities of the Roma, and the general challenges of activist media?

This dissertation argues that activists use a variety of media formats in an attempt to represent the diversity of Romani experiences in the Czech Republic, and believe that they have both achieved recent success and have cause for future hope with Roma-created and Roma-centered media. However, challenges of language, access, resources, and divisions among Roma activists, and the Roma themselves, in the Czech Republic create obstacles. This dissertation documents activist efforts in the Czech Republic, paying close attention to the utilization of media, both through the development of entertainment programming and social media engagement. Through

ethnographic analysis, this project provides insight to contemporary discussions around Romani rights, activism, and hopes to contribute to better understanding the potential of media in serving as sites for identity construction, community building, and combatting feelings of alienation. This dissertation argues that media, while contradictory spaces, have the potential to transform into meaningful places of engagement. For example, the internet provides an alternative site to create ethnic minority media productions when mainstream media fail to represent diverse experiences. Furthermore, this dissertation demonstrates how social media provide sites to process and share experiences with antigypsyism and belongingness. This project examines the tensions within these spaces, where generational challenges, language barriers, and the commercial interests of these mediated spaces collide with the ways in which these imperfect places are utilized in different activist efforts to work through questions related to identity, community, and belonging.

This study is organized into six chapters, including a review of literature, methodological practices employed, two empirical chapters, and a conclusion. The following chapter delves into existing literature on identity, specifically as it relates to Romani identity. This chapter examines some of the challenges in the construction of Romani identity, which contributes to difficulty in developing a collective identity. As some of the scholars in this section suggest, the lack of a collective identity complicates mobilization efforts. I do not subscribe to this point completely, as this minimizes or dismisses the efforts of activist groups. One of the main goals of this dissertation is to document some of those efforts and how activists articulate those efforts. It is also important to understand how Romani identity has historically been created and how this may look similar or different to how activists and organizers approach the topic of identity today. The literature in this section illustrates the different sites of identity formation. In addition to the

literature exploring identity, Chapter Two examines research around social media engagement among marginalized groups to identify the affordances and limitations of online spaces in the construction of identities. The chapter concludes with a review of literature on mediated representations of Roma. This section of the chapter explores how media continue to present Roma through stereotypes and the challenges of producing counter-narratives. Examination of the current media environment demonstrates how diverse voices and experiences are limited, and helps situate the current research within the existing literature.

Chapter Three provides an account of methodological practices. I begin with a brief discussion of the scholars' works that inform the research project. The chapter then turns to a discussion of my preparations for ethnographic fieldwork and is followed by an explanation of where my fieldwork began, including entering the field and the timeline for research. Chapter Three discusses the interviewing process and observation sites. Specific methods of data collection and data analysis techniques are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of positionality, where I share some of my experiences in the Czech Republic, including the challenges and insights gathered throughout my year in the country.

Chapter Four is the first of two findings chapters. This chapter focuses on the development of the online-TV platform, beginning with a discussion with activists working on this project. The beginning of the chapter documents initial conversations with activists, as the production was simply an idea growing out of an unwelcoming Czech media environment. As organizers and activists have been denied opportunities to share their voices and experiences, a group of activists have set out to create media for Roma, by Roma. In this chapter, I explore the connections between authority over Romani identity construction through the development of an alternative mediated space. Furthermore, I discuss decisions made by the organizers to include

content in the Romanes language and focus on specific traditions, including food and music. This chapter includes my observation of a live recording for the TV platform, where I am able to better understand the remarkable possibilities of this project as well as the significant challenges to minority media production. This chapter examines the ways in which a group of activists in the Czech Republic circumvent the traditional structures that deny Roma a voice in the media and explore the potential of this TV platform in serving as an alternative site for identity negotiation and community building, while at the same time noting the challenges of creating something as ambitious as a television operation that exists outside of the mainstream media system in the Czech Republic.

Chapter Five extends discussion of alternative sites for identity negotiation, community building, and place-making through the analysis of online spaces. As participants comment on feelings of not belonging in a society that continues to silence Romani voice and experience, communities are searching for alternative sites to combat these structures. Online spaces emerge as sites for engagement by the organizers and activists I spoke with during the year. Further, this chapter examines engagement through Facebook groups and events, where organizers and activists utilize various strategies to engage communities. This chapter focuses on the observation of two specific demonstrations, comparing some of the tensions among activist groups that the comparison reveals the different approaches employed, including analysis of Facebook event pages dedicated to the demonstrations. In addition to analysis of these Facebook pages and observations, the chapter examines the transnational aspect of community building through a discussion of an online mapping service as well as the development of a digital archive documenting Romani experiences. The chapter also examines the potential of media, specifically social media, in offering a space to ameliorate feelings of spatial alienation. Within this chapter, I

explore the possibility of social and digital media as emotional spaces as well as the manifestation of “material” space in discussing the notion of belonging and that of home. As with Chapter Four, the challenges of using media, in this case social and digital forms, for the cultivation of Romani spaces will also be examined.

Chapter Six culminates the different topics discussed in this dissertation project. In this chapter, I review the key findings and draw connections to the ways in which communities understand the challenges and potential of identity and community building, specifically as it relates to the online-TV platform and social media engagement. I also discuss the challenges that I encountered during this project. Moreover, the research has led to further questions about Romani activism in the Czech Republic and the potential for comparative work.

I am guided by the experiences and voices of the people I spoke with over the past few years, who graciously shared their time and insight with me. The fight for justice, in the midst of so much hate, was incredible to witness. It is my hope that this research may contribute, in any way possible, to the fight for justice for Roma in the Czech Republic and beyond.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

This chapter provides a review of previous scholarship to better understand the intersections of Romani studies and media engagement among marginalized groups. The chapter begins with a discussion of Romani identity, including examination of how Roma identity has been historically constructed and some of the challenges in understanding the complexities of a uniformed identity. Furthermore, the chapter explores the implications for activist efforts when the construction of a collective identity is difficult to produce. Previous scholarship examining media engagement among Roma is sparse, but the chapter examines social media among marginalized groups more broadly to understand the ways in which other communities utilize online spaces. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Roma media representation to illustrate the role of televisual media in the construction of Romani identity. The chapter focuses on literature that addresses questions of identity, belonging, media, and marginality to help situate the current study by exploring the specific dilemmas for the Roma in East-Central Europe, and, based on their applications in other context, the opportunities and limitations for different media forms to ameliorate potential forms of alienation and diffusion to which the Roma are subjected.

### **Identity**

The Roma of East-Central Europe make up one of the largest ethnic minority groups throughout the region, both numerically and politically. There are an estimated 10-12 million Roma living in Europe with a majority of this population (roughly six million) living in several different countries in East-Central Europe (European Union, 2000). Minorities encounter ideological, social, economic, and/or political discrimination. As a result, these groups are denied

access to opportunities made widely available to majority/dominant groups, may have discursive constructions about their collective identity originating from the majority groups, and have significant limits placed on their civil and political rights. This section explores literature that discusses the construction of Romani identity, how it has been historically created, the challenges in developing a collective identity (and how this may reinforce categories of difference upon Roma), as well as the idea of voice and belonging.

Roma, which means human being in Romanes, is a label introduced in the 1970s by the World Roma Congress (WRC) to replace terms such as gypsy (including variations of the derogatory terms *cikán*, *cygan*, *cigány*) which carry negative connotations (Vermeersch, 2001). The term Gypsy developed from the incorrect notion that the Roma originated in Egypt. Over the years, “Gypsy” has become associated with criminality, violence, nomadism, uncivilization, hypersexuality, and overall negative connotations. As discussed later, media are often responsible for such tropes, including in films that have long portrayed particularized and ideologically infused aspects of “Gypsy” life, goals, and personalities (Pasqualino, 2008). Therefore, efforts to distance communities from using the term gypsy was seen as an attempt to reframe public discussion and individual/collective identity. McGarry (2008) suggests that, “The creation of the endonyme of “Roma” is important in that naming oneself is a crucial component of a social movement and represents the elaboration of a collective identity” (p. 449). However, the term Roma is complex and is not necessarily universally accepted even in that community. McGarry adds, ““Roma,’ serves as a catch-all term propagated by elites within the Roma social movement which attempts to provide a unified voice to the international community, although most Roma in Central and Eastern Europe refer to themselves as “Gypsies”” (p. 450). This term serves as an umbrella term for a heterogeneous group with diversity along linguistic, religious,



and cultural ties. These wide-ranging differences complicate a single notion of Romani identity. Furthermore, the idea of a single Romani identity has been perpetuated from the outside, that is, by non-Roma in ways that operate ideologically. Comănescu (2015) suggests that Roma became visible to Europeans once they arrived in Europe. The author writes that German scholar H.M.G. Grellman found similarities between Sanskrit and Romani and thereby made the conclusion that Roma originate from India. Comănescu (2015) argues, “the basis for a unified Romani identity has always been subject to the discourse of the dominant groups” (p.2). From this perspective, Romani identity from its conception has been produced from the outside, that is, by non-Roma. With the ideological nature of dominant groups imposing both a unity and particular negative connotations on the Roma, and vague connections made to such eastern nations like Egypt, the labeling and stereotyping of “the gypsies” share some similarities to Orientalism, a concept developed by Edward Said in which the West characterizes the East as barbaric but also mystical and exotic, but in ways that also signal the presumed superiority of the West through the specific ways these notions work hegemonically (Said, 1978; Lee, 2000).

It is generally accepted that the Roma originated in India and made their way to Europe over 1,000 years ago, but some communities have challenged this view. Scholars have noted that one distinct feature connecting Roma is a shared language (Clébert, 1963; Acton & Mundy 1997). However, not all Roma share a uniform language today. Like language, notions of nomadism, strong familial relationships, and divisions between Roma from majority societies have been documented as attributes that create Roma identity, even when that may not be the case entirely.

*Nationalism, otherness, identity and (un)belongingness.* Roma identity has long been defined by its perceived otherness. Belton (2005) argues, “the identification of the other, [which] seen in a positive light, marks our uniqueness and difference that can easily be interpreted as strange and/or alien” (p. 23). This perception of otherness derives from practices that support systems of domination, which create and maintain a difference between Roma and non-Roma. Experiences and expressions of identity and belongingness are negotiated among community members as well as the nation-state. As McGarry (2017) argues, “The birth of ethnic conceptions of nationalism has a common denominator in otherness: ‘the position of Roma in European civilization from medieval times shows that, for Europeans, the Roma have always represented otherness’” (p. 97). In this way, the nation’s dominance is maintained by establishing and (re)establishing categories of inclusion, and by effect, exclusion. Within this framework Roma are positioned as the minority and not only in the numerical sense. The nation-state, as suggested by McGarry (2017), “is the peak logic of political power” (p. 105). As such, the nation-state maintains its dominant position and belonging, both through territorial control and practices that contribute to symbolic expressions and feelings of unbelongingness experienced by minority groups. Roma, in this context, are presented as the other, where their cultures and traditions are in opposition to the nation-state’s interests. In other words, Roma are framed as a threat to national order. As a result, state sanctioned practices, for centuries, have criminalized Roma culture and tradition, such as killing horses and destroying caravans to force settlement (Bancroft, 1999). Further, the systematic loss of Romani language also falls within similar state practices and is discussed later in Chapter Four.

Discussing the exclusion and marginalization of Roma in the Czech Republic, Bancroft (1999) links antigypsyism to the traditions of European racism and modernity. Bancroft suggests,

“Modernity is understood here as a set of organising principles which revolutionised the relationship between individuals and society, and especially between internal outsiders and nationalised-states” (p. 3). In this context, the Roma are the internal outsiders, living within Czech lands, but always presented and treated as outsiders or, as Bankcroft suggests, the stranger (employing Simmel’s concept of “the Stranger” here). There were countless practices created to “assimilate” Roma that function within the processes of modernization and nation-building, for example forced sedentarization of Roma (see the 1958 Act on Permanent Settlement of Nomadic People in Czechoslovakia) and forced sterilization of Romani women (Albert & Szilvasi, 2017; Zampas & Lamačková, 2011). The Roma have continually been presented as a threat to national and cultural identity, experiencing forced assimilation, even murder.

The Roma were some of the first targets of the Nazis, where they were seen as a threat to the German race. Bancroft suggests that 2,400 Roma were sent to Lety and Hodonin, the site of two concentration camps in the Czech Republic. And, in 1943, “the inmates of these camps were taken to Auschwitz along with another 3,000 Czech Roma who had retained their liberty up to that point” (p. 4). As most of the Czech Roma were murdered during the Holocaust, the Czech Republic moved Slovak Roma to the country as a new labor force following the war. After the Second World War, the destruction of Roma culture continued through aggressive state-sanctioned assimilation policies. Having their traditions, cultures, and skills further stripped, the Roma became part of the socialist labor system, which led to Roma taking on low skill and paying positions. The fall of communism, though, further displaced Roma as they were excluded from most jobs—no longer seen as another source of labor. As capitalism was embraced and individual talent encouraged, the Roma did not experience the same benefits as other groups in the country. Their exclusion was and continues to be multilayered. Along with the dissolution of

the Czechoslovak state, the Czech citizenship law of 1993 was another method of denying Roma place within the Czech Republic. Bancroft argues that since many of the Roma of the Czech Republic were technically Slovak, they did not immediately receive citizenship in the Czech Republic. The author suggests that the path to citizenship was difficult and done so on purpose to keep Roma from gaining citizenship in the Czech Republic. The 1990's introduced a new wave of violence against Roma, which mirrored previous practices, including police overlooking violent physical attacks and intimidation tactics against Roma (this is an important moment for several of the activists whom I speak with and is later discussed in the dissertation). Bancroft (2001) argues,

The violent actions of skinhead groups in the Czech Republic do appear to be having the desired effect of rendering some areas 'gypsy-free'. In doing so, they are working with the general desire of a large part of the population that the Roma 'simply disappear' and are reinforced by the actions of local authorities which segregate Roma or encourage them to leave the country. Czech Roma are seen neither as Czech nor as Slovak. They are considered to be neither foreign nor part of the nation. They are seen as belonging in no place (p. 150).

In a previous publication, Bancroft (1999) discusses how neo-Nazis represent the interests of the nation, holding extremely dangerous nationalistic views. It becomes clear, whether under the Hapsburg Empire or the Nazis, the practices of "assimilation" and expulsion may take different forms, but that that they support systems of domination, whereby the Roma are viewed as a threat to national identity. As a result, Roma experience displacement, the destruction of their cultures and traditions, and are explicitly and implicitly reminded that they do not belong.

Today, these exclusionary practices manifest in a myriad of forms including educational and housing segregation. This type of segregation is presented as something that Roma prefer. Several of the people who worked to provide children with access to quality education discussed how teachers and schools would tell Romani families that their children would be better off in a school among their peers, meaning segregated schools. At a conference I attended in Prague, one speaker eluded to the idea that Romani women preferred to be separated from non-Roma women in hospitals, but in fact in such a situation they were given far less quality medical attention. These actors and institutions, in this case schools and academics, are normalizing and extending state practices.

Romani identity is influenced and constructed by these same institutions and actors. McGarry (2017) argues that, “Roma determine who they are and who they are not while non-Roma create and sustain stereotypes and racialized meanings, so Roma identities are the product of this dialectic” (p. 87). Romani identity in this way is the result of competing ideological forces. The Roma attempt to create identities that more accurately represent their experiences while simultaneously working to combat the actors and institutions that have significant authority over the construction of how Roma and non-Roma think of identity.

Scholarship in the area of Romani identity is similarly complex, abound with conflicting perspectives. Vermeersch (2001) points to two dominant paradigms in Romani identity literature from the work of Lucassen, Willems, and Cottar (1998), with the latter again reminiscent of Orientalism. The authors explain two paradigms:

...one [paradigm] which defines these groups in terms of social status (criminality, marginality and poverty), and one which views them as a group with a common exotic, non-European origin. The latter categorisation seems to be in many ways the result of an

ethnographic tradition of examining ‘gypsies’ (while at the same time defining and constructing the very category of ‘gypsies’) (p. 7).

Challenges in defining the multifaceted nature of a “Romani identity” clearly complicate the construction of a collective identity. Roma identity, like all aspects of identity, is in a state of constant flux, responding to and being constituted by local and national contexts. Barany (1998) suggests an ethnic identity for the Roma is difficult to locate, as their experiences vary depending largely on where the community is geographically located. For example, the experiences of Roma in Macedonia are incredibly different from Roma living in Slovakia. To state the obvious, there is no nation-state of, or established land for, “Roma.” The diverse experiences, whether geographic or otherwise, make it difficult to identify an all-encompassing Romani identity.

However, the push for a collective identity becomes a significant point of focus for activists and scholars working towards the fairer treatment of Roma; many believe a more unified identity would contribute to a sense of belonging and facilitate coordination towards common goals and more equitable situations. But on what grounds to establish unity, given the diffuse origins of Roma constructions and their geographic dispersion? Some potential unifiers include language, ethnicity, and experiences of marginality. The group, according to Barany (1998), “is united by their ethnic, linguistic and cultural origins rooted in northwestern India, and similar historical experiences of political and socio-economic marginality in Eastern Europe for the past six centuries” (p. 313). Often, Roma identity is defined by a shared past of persecution and/or a contested origin connection to India, which continues to frame current experiences as well as social and political structures. Romani groups share Indian origins and experiences of marginality, however lived and varied experiences of Roma are frequently thought of and presented by scholars, policymakers, and activists within a limited framework based on ethnic

differences from the majority population and persecution. While ethnicity is an essential aspect of Romani identity, perhaps research in this area has focused too narrowly on ethnicity. In this regard, the concept of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) may provide a new way of thinking about Roma identity. Super-diversity approaches the study of identity in a more nuanced manner by encouraging the exploration of identities. This approach suggests factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location inform identity as much as ethnicity (Tremlett, 2014b). Tremlett (2014b) argues,

Super-diversity is useful for research on Roma minorities as it forces researchers out of their silos to notice and investigate the cross-cutting, multiple, hybrid components that feature in our everyday lives, from experiences of gender, sexuality, multi-media platforms (TV, internet, etc.), socio-economic status, disabilities, work environment, to the local environment and so on (p. 840).

The idea of super-diversity is one way of rethinking identity, and in the case of Roma, it calls for engagement with identities and diverse experiences.

Further, scholarship and researchers may employ and extend homogenizing terms to Roma that perpetuate limited interpretations of experience and identities. Debates among scholars – for example, the anthropologist Michael Stewart and sociologists János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi – encapsulate this point, as they claim to depart from homogenized conceptualizations of identity. Stewart (1997), in his influential piece, writes, “the Rom do not have an ethnic identity. For them, identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past” (p. 28). For Stewart, identity is informed by the present moment and is constantly changing. This is not a widely contested notion; however, embedded within his argument that there is not one way to think

about Romani identity, Stewart contributes certain practices and traditions as the “Gypsy way,” thereby contradicting his thesis. According to Tremlett (2009), János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi focus their analysis on socio-economic status and argues that both Stewart and the sociologists fall into narrow and essentializing notions of identity that counter their main arguments. Tremlett suggests thinking through ethnicity and difference through the theorization of the British Cultural Studies tradition, which may contribute to better understanding and theorizing diverse identities. The author argues,

With all people “ethnically located”, the possibility is opened for people to have a voice that is not constrained by one ethnic identity. Plurality of identities becomes not just a possibility but rather recognition of how identity is lived day to day (p. 163).

This raises the important point that experience and identity are influenced by many different factors and that one aspect of identity does not always represent an individual and/or their communities. As Hall (1993), drawing from Paul Gilroy suggests, binaries must be refused, arguing that “you can be black *and* British” (p. 111). Perhaps this may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of identity, which does not exclude ethnicity altogether, but examines ethnicity as one aspect of identity. As Tremlett argues, “bringing hybridity to the notion of heterogeneity in this context would mean to ‘de-essentialise’ the debates on Roma, without losing sight of ethnicity” (p. 165). Scholars are locating different theories and models to better understand Roma identity, but we must ask if these constructions are still being developed from the outside. That is, how often do these constructions include Romani voices? As Willems (1997) asks, “who defines who is a Gypsy?” (p. 7). A traditionally top-down process has largely excluded the voices and experiences of Roma. This project explores the importance of self-identification, and Romani media activist efforts to cultivate this. In the same way that it is



important to allow Roma to self-identify as Gypsy, Traveller, Roma or other descriptors, it is important that Roma are the ones constructing their identities. This does not remove histories and shared experiences, but it allows Roma to identify the attributes that create their personal and shared identities.

### **Media representation**

Traditional media, for example, television and movies, are other sites of understanding identities. As research illustrates, media are influential in shaping thoughts and beliefs about peoples and cultures we may not have direct experiences with. Bird (2005) references a 1987 study conducted by Hanson and Rouse that evaluates students' attitudes about American Indians. The study found that students generally rejected older stereotypes but accepted others, for example, associations to rural and traditional lifestyles. Television and movies were noted as the most important source of information influencing participant views of American Indians.

The following section examines scholarship in the area of minority media and, in particular, media representations of Roma. Literature in this section explores how Roma are presented in the media through stereotypes that perpetuate the homogenization, exoticization, and mistreatment of Roma. Furthermore, this section explores ethnic media engagement to better understand how media may contribute to challenging stereotypical portrayals of marginalized groups.

The media rely on long-enduring cultural stereotypes in mediated representations of Roma as in, for example, the “lustful Gypsy woman” (Pusca, 2015, p. 329). *Carmen*, the opera production, follows the story of a Spanish soldier begin “seduced” by a Romani woman. The seductive Romani woman is a hackneyed trope, which exists in countless other texts like the famous novel and production, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the character of Esmeralda.

These portrayals present Romani women as hypersexual and lustful with insidious intentions. The women exist for the pleasure and consumption of others, while also using their sexuality to manipulate. More recently, Enrique Iglesias' 2018 hit, *Move to Miami*, includes the lyrics, "she moving like a gypsy, her body got me tipsy", which shows the entrenched endurance of the hypersexualization and exoticization of Romani women, the focus on their bodies and the way Iglesias (read: men) are intoxicated by Romani women and their bodies. Such imagery perpetuates dangerous views and have real implications, for example the continued violence against Romani women (Oprea, 2004). The seductive Romani woman follows the idea that these women have some sort of otherworldly power, as if men are under their "spell." The "Gypsy curse" (Beaudoin, 2015) is a typical storyline in media that include Roma characters. Beaudoin (2015) suggests,

popular fictional shows including *Criminal Minds* (2005–13), *House* (2004–12), *Law & Order: SVU* (1999–2013), *Judging Amy* (1999–2005), and more have used Gypsy/Romani characters in special episodic plots. Respective to the shows listed, Roma are shown to be: sociopathic murderers and kidnappers, secretive and backwards, distrustful and suspicious, and sexual predators... Popular movies with Gypsy/ Romani characters include *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), *Snatch* (2000), *Thinner* (1996), and *Big* (1988), to name a few, where Roma are respectively shown as: psychic/fortune-tellers, criminals, paranormal/cursers, and paranormal/fortune-tellers (p. 313).

Some of these portrayals – including some of those listed above as well as *The Wolfman* (both the 1941 and 2010 versions) and *Drag Me to Hell* (2009) – link the Roma to pre-modern customs and rituals, such as knowledge of curses and spells, implying a people who are unable to be assimilated into modernity and civilization. Media also often attach criminality to Roma, whether

that is from the perspective of news media (Richardson, 2014; Okely, 2014) or scripted programming as seen in *The Riches* (2007-2008), where “a family of crooks assume the identity of an upper-middle-class suburban clan in the Deep South” (The Riches, n.d.). The trope of the cunning family is found in other media, for example the reality program, *American Gypsies* (2012). The television program documents the life of a Romani family in the psychic business—“a family of New York gypsies, named the ‘John’s’, as they, like many families, love and support one another, while trying to remain loyal to their traditions” (American Gypsies, n.d.). These television programs promise a glimpse into the lives of “tight-knit” Romani families (American Gypsies, 2019). *American Gypsies* takes on a mafia-like portrayal of a Roma family and perpetuates stereotypes around criminality. Furthermore, these television programs reinforce deeply negative ideas of “tradition” and “nomadism.” These tropes are also found in the popular series such as *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. The UK television hit documents the traditions around Romani and Traveller wedding celebrations. *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* illustrates a clash of culture and modernity. The television program opens with the quote, “For hundreds of years, the traveller way of life was one of ancient traditions and simple tastes...Then their world collided with the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Tremlett (2014) argues “*Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* loses any pretence that its participants are ordinary and instead focuses on the spectacular through using essentialized tropes of Gypsies as different and extraordinary/demonic” (p. 329). The success of the UK program led to the production of *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* in the US. The television program, airing on the TLC network, was marketed as:

From the most extravagant wedding gowns to explosive celebrations and the madness that follows, *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* takes you through the biggest bashes in Gypsy culture. With coming of age parties, arranged marriages, purification

ceremonies and a Veil of Darkness wedding ritual, the Gypsies have their own set of customs and superstitions, vital to the survival of their mysterious culture. But a gypsy wedding wouldn't be complete without an incredible gown created by the 'Queen of the Bling'—Sondra Celli! Come along as TLC explores the unique and ancient traditions that have shaped and defined the Gypsy community for hundreds of years (TLC.com, 2019).

These mediated representations function to reproduce stereotypes and further the idea that Roma are deviant. This deviance is both meant to attract viewers, a glimpse into "Gypsy lifestyle," as well as supporting the notion that justifies the separation of Roma from their respective societies. The "Gypsy way of life" is at odds with the culture of the majority, suggesting that the two cannot coexist, contributing to the further marginalization of Roma. Comănescu (2015) suggests, "Because Romanies tend to be defined in terms of behavior, rather than other characteristics, almost inevitably any antisocial behavior will be pinned down to some innate characteristic of their culture" (p. 5). Within these different productions, Roma are presented as Other beyond ethnic divisions to include behavioral differences inherit to Romani culture and tradition. This may be especially true for locations that have limited interactions with the Roma. In response to Roma and media representation, Beaudoin (2015) argues,

When there is a vacuum of accurate information on Romani realities, compounded by historic and mythical Gypsy stereotypes, entertainment media fills a factual void; in this way, minor characters, or even fleeting references in fictional shows end up serving as the basis for understanding and categorizing an entire ethnicity. Similarly, for many people, the "reality" show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* constitutes the whole of the body of knowledge regarding Roma (p. 315).

**Counter-narrative.** As the case with most marginalized groups, there is little space in mainstream culture welcoming counter-narratives. The previous literature in this section discusses the challenges of collective identity formation for the Roma, in that, there is not a single conception of Romani identity. Therefore, challenging negative media representations of Roma becomes difficult. Offering a counter-narrative requires identification of these representations as inaccurate/damaging with a counter of Roma identity. Ross and Playdon (2001) suggest, “minority audiences do not want special favours in terms of portrayal but rather would like to see their many and diverse selves and their different lives represented with more balance” (p. xiv). The following section examines ethnic media production to understand some of the ways in which communities are locating spaces to create counter-narratives. Ethnic media production provides opportunities to see oneself reflected in the media, understand identities from a marginal perspective, and may contribute towards a new understanding and negotiation of identities.

Minority media is an important and necessary part of challenging negative and limited experience, particularly so when mainstream media deny the presentation of these perspectives. However, there exist significant challenges in media production by minority groups. First, there are financial challenges to minority media production. Simply put, these productions do not have the same resources to develop high quality productions nor can they compete with mainstream productions for viewership (Husband, 2005). The question of where these productions will be broadcast also relies on the type of funding available. If minority media productions air during times (early in the morning or late in the evening) or in spaces outside of the mainstream (for example online or subscription-based platforms), this may further exclude minority voices and experiences. There are significant challenges to minority media production, including access to

quality production technologies and sources of funding. However, the possibilities of minority media production are important to consider.

In response to these limited representations and the perpetuation of negative portrayals, activists and scholars alike point to the importance of media that are created by or target minority populations in understanding respective identities. In analyzing identity formation among Chinese diaspora, Shi (2005), argues

More importantly, the deterritorialized subjects find points of cultural identification in ethnic media, along which they can imagine coherent and continuous identities and hence create desirable meanings of their ruptured and shifting experiences. In other words, ethnic media constitute a liminal space where ambivalent and unstable points of personal, national, and ethnic identifications are negotiated (p. 66).

Minority media engagement and development present opportunities to work through conceptualizations of identity and belonging. Speaking about popular culture, Hall (1993) argues,

It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time (p. 113).

Minority media also contribute to attachments and locating spaces of belonging. Examining engagement with satellite television among Maghrebi and Turkish diaspora in France and Germany, Hargreaves (2001), suggests “television is helping to strengthen among diasporic groups feelings of attachment to multiple cultural spaces, rather than a monolinear reversion to ancestral roots” (p. 155). These feelings of attachments and belonging are also found among other minority groups. In examining London’s South Asian and Greek-Cypriot communities’

engagement with ethnic minority media, Tsagarousianou (2001), notes a few factors that people identified as important factors of minority media consumption, one of which includes maintaining a connection to their country of origin. Furthermore, participants of the research stated that ethnic minority media provide a more balanced view of their home country's cultures, traditions, and politics—one that does not exist in mainstream media broadcasts. Furthermore, Tsagarousianou argues:

Despite the experiences of dislocation, marginalization and exclusion so common among ethnic minorities, audiences display remarkable resilience, resourcefulness and skill in their consumption practices, articulating discourses of cultural rights relating to their ethnic and diasporic specificity but also claiming inclusion in the 'mainstream'. South Asian and Greek-Cypriot audiences' usage of the media available to them illustrate their capacity for domesticating, translating, and creating a sense of space that is welcoming and inclusive in an institutional and cultural landscape that is often alien and exclusive (p. 30).

Engagement with alternative storylines and productions create sites of identification and spaces to think through belonging. These programs may also be educational, particularly so for children. *Nashe Maalo* ("Our Neighborhood") was a Macedonian children's program airing from 1998 to 2003. The program aimed to encourage intercultural understanding among diverse groups, where a cast of ethnic Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Roma children learn about prejudice and stereotypes and different ethnic groups and was designed to foster dialogue (Search for Common Ground, 2014). Television viewing may also play a role in providing symbolic and literal safety from the potential dangers of public spaces. Examining engagement with television programming and cultural practices that revolve around television viewing among Palestinian

children, Warshel (2012) provides important findings on television consumption and conflict zones. A key argument in Warshel's study suggests television takes on a complex role in the home of those living in conflict zones, for example, television viewing as a means to keep children in the relative safe space of the home. The author argues, "In relation to the context in which zone of conflict children live, television use may, in fact, therefore, foster children's healthy development and even do something more basic—keep them alive" (p. 234). As public spaces may present particular dangers, bringing leisure practices into the home where television viewing takes place, may help avoid conflict and thereby contribute to the literal survival of children. These findings are helpful in thinking about public spaces that may not be considered conflict zones per se, but equally present dangers to minority groups. For example, the development of community centers, after school resources, and the general restructuring of children's play spaces in the Czech Republic to potentially limit children's experiences with antigypsyism contributes to further understanding the purpose of these interventions. Televisual media provide sites for identification and belonging. And, in the case of conflict zones and other hostile spaces, play an important mediating role.

### **Roma and mobilization**

The Roma, as a political minority, have engaged in various efforts to improve living conditions throughout the region, but have been met with a number of challenges in their attempts to mobilize. Political mobilization, according to Barany (1998),

Needs to produce and maximize political resources that will amplify the group's influence: these typically include attracting votes, activating sympathetic third parties, forming coalitions and lobbying, and may entail less 'conventional' political goods like disruptions, protests, and violence which may be used as bargaining chips. Mobilization



may be measured by the active membership of the organizations created, the amount of resources accumulated, the number of programmes established and the protests organized (p. 310).

Barany (1998) suggests Roma have historically been excluded from political processes due to sociopolitical and economic marginalization. On the part of the Roma, there was, and continues to be, a level of hesitation about working with the majority population, who are responsible for the group's marginalization. Furthermore, the organization of Roma is sparse throughout the East-Central European region and thereby affects the ability to create a collective, transnational community. Roma identity is highly fragmented; the different histories and experiences (for example, languages spoken, socioeconomic status, beliefs, and values) create a weak Roma identity, which some scholars suggest affect mobilization. Additionally, the Roma culture, as one historically passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions (Toninato, 2013), makes it difficult to document the extent to which they have experienced discrimination since their migration to East-Central Europe, which problematizes how to use these experiences to mobilize community members. These factors pose great challenges to the political mobilization of the Roma, where varied experiences with discrimination make it even more difficult to mobilize. For example, Romani parties in Romania and Macedonia were successful in increasing the amount time for Roma language broadcast on radio and television. This was due in large part to the efforts by governments and political groups encouraging the participation of Roma in political processes. Contrary to the experiences of Roma in Macedonia and Romania, Roma in Bulgaria were unsuccessful in their attempts to gain more radio and television broadcast time. In Bulgaria, there are no political parties based on ethnic identification, and in fact such parties are banned constitutionally, which stymies mobilization efforts by Roma. In this case, there were

institutional barriers that made it difficult to achieve change. In addition to lacking a formal political party, the lack of precedent in minority broadcasts in Bulgaria created an almost impossible task for the Roma (Barany, 1998).

Political representation plays an important role in these efforts. In Romania and Macedonia, where Roma have achieved a level of political influence, the members of the community are provided with support on behalf of the government to engage in political matters. This is not the case in the Czech Republic. During the 1990 elections in Czechoslovakia, five members representing Roma won positions in federal and national parliament (Sobotka, 2004). While a considerable achievement for the time, political representation of the Roma in the Czech Republic is not representative, which clearly affect Roma efforts towards social and political justice (Vermeersch, 2003). Discrimination against Roma in the Czech Republic continues and according to Fawn (2001) the Czech Republic has a smaller percentage of Roma in the country compared to other post-communist countries, which creates specific challenges. During the time of Fawn's research, Roma made up roughly 11% of the Macedonian, 9% of Slovak, and 7% of Romanian populations. This is in contrast to the under 3% of Roma in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic may be considered more progressive on certain positions; for example, Fawn suggests that Czechs are "significantly less anti-Semitic than Poles, Hungarian or Slovaks and more disposed towards political compromise. In the new Czech Republic, the values of tolerance and liberalism were also expressed" (p. 1194). However, the injustices Roma experience demonstrate how the Czech Republic is not too different from its neighbors. In 2004, the Czech Republic became a member of the European Union (EU), where the nation's membership depended partially on the treatment of Roma (Marden, 2004). The EU developed a number of projects to assess the treatment of Roma in the Czech Republic and examined the extent to which

they could participate in Czech society. Guy and Kovats (2006) set out to investigate long-term opportunities for the Roma, where the authors found that the programs set in place lacked the proper resources and institutional support. Simply put, these programs were not set up to be successful.

More recently, the European Commission funded a large transnational project, Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP), to examine political and civic engagement. The Czech Republic participated in this project to examine civic participation among ethnic minorities. The authors of the project, Šerek, Petrovičová, and Macek (2015), suggest civic participation among ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic is supported by activities in their social environments and through the internet. Šerek, Petrovičová, and Macek note that ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic may go online to engage with others when they feel marginalized by the larger community. Data from the PIDOP research project is particularly useful in understanding civic engagement among minority groups in the Czech Republic. Clearly, the internet provides various uses for the Roma in the Czech Republic. However, there is a gap in the literature examining how Romani communities utilize social media for social justice.

There are various barriers facing the Roma in their fight for social and political justice. As political representation becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, it becomes important to examine the resources that may help the community fight for visibility and justice. According to Barany (2002) the Roma in East-Central Europe lack a strong ethnic identity, which makes it difficult to create a collective identity. Barany points to diversity among groups as a barrier to creating a collective identity, which he suggests has an impact on mobilization efforts. The author argues, “Intracommunity cleavages further split an already small potential constituency,

impede political organization, and suggest the unlikelihood of a single, united, Gypsy political party being established in any one country” (2002, p. 289). This bleak view, while partially correct, dismisses the work of activists. The challenges of organizing, specifically around a collective identity, are viewed as an individual/community shortcoming and overlooks the structures that have contributed to this situation.

Vermeersch (2003) suggests the concept of frames is useful for ethnic minority mobilization, where identity is constantly responding to the current social and political environment (see also Vermeersch, 2001). The author goes on to argue that Roma identity in the Czech Republic is constructed in large part by media and policy reports; here Romani identity is characterized by negative social behaviors. In this case, the Roma have been mostly absent from the process of developing Romani identity. Therefore, the task of fighting for justice becomes even more difficult as the minority group must reshape negative conceptions of Roma identity that has led to all-encompassing understanding of the minority group before attempting to challenge the structures that contribute to their marginality. Vermeersch (2003) argues,

Thus, when Roma want to mobilize protest ‘in the name of their ethnicity’, they are confronted with narratives that question a positive framing of this very same ethnicity.

The more they emphasize their ethnic identity, the more they appear to be held responsible for what is typically called the ‘Romani problem’ (p. 898).

One of the largest challenges for activists and organizations fighting for the more equal treatment of Roma in the Czech Republic is developing a movement based on an identity that has so many negative connotations attached to it.

Since Romani identity is framed in response to the situation within the local context, identity constantly shifts. It has become a difficult task for activists to employ identity in

mobilization efforts due to the complexity and lack of conformity of Roma identity. Mitchell (2005) suggests that Romani activists call for a reflexive understanding of contemporary Romani history that will encourage a more uniform understanding of past experiences to help shape current conceptualizations of Roma identity and potentially lead to better representation of the group. Furthermore, Ivan Vesely of the International Romani Union, in an interview conducted by Mitchell (2005), argues that:

Today's challenge is to build representation not from above, as is now taking place, but rather from below. We do not need elites selected randomly, but rather natural authorities from the community level – persons with trust of those around them, defending the rights of the people who choose them (p. 392).

Since Romani elite, media, and government have played a significant role in perpetuating particular negative representations of Roma identity based on one-dimensional interpretations of identity through ethnicity, scholars and activists today could benefit from the creation of Roma identity from the bottom up rather than top down, that is, from the Roma themselves. As a study exploring the potential of social media in understanding and negotiating Romani identity, the following section examines research in the area of social media engagement among marginalized groups to better understand the affordances, limitations, and potential of these mediated spaces.

### **Social media engagement among marginalized groups**

This project explores the dynamics of alternative mediated spaces that have been used by marginalized groups, and may be viewed as analogous to the situation of the Roma in the Czech Republic. Social media present a number of opportunities for marginalized communities in locating spaces to meet people with similar interests and share information with one another that

helps build community. This leads me to ask, what are the roles that such spaces may play in the development of a Romani identity created by Roma, especially as enacted by activists working on Romani rights? There is a considerable literature that examines media engagement among communities and activist groups to challenge injustice. One area of research includes activist/alternative media, which has become a significant area of exploration for researchers and has evolved over the years. As Lievrouw (2011) suggests, alternative and activist media has shifted from the ways in which communication technologies are being used, particularly that of mass media, to focus on “citizen, activist, or community engagement with issues and movements through the internet and related technologies” (p. 16). Similarly, alternative projects have also shifted their focus over time, where Lievrouw argues,

alternative media have sought to be participatory, emancipatory, non-commercial, authentic (i.e., faithful to a community’s point of view or experience), and anti-institutional. They combine both ‘creative expression and social responsibility’ (Atton, 2002, p. 13-14), in a way that departs from most mainstream media (p. 18).

Alternative and activist media is an intervention into the mainstream media structures that have denied minority voices and experiences a place of expression. Through engagement with information and communication technologies, alternative and activist media disrupt hegemonic practices and create a potential place of negotiation and resistance. For marginalized groups, alternative/activist media provide a site to express views and experiences that may be denied in mainstream media, which may also contribute to other aspects of alternative/activist projects including organization, coalition building and the like.

The role of social media in activist efforts has garnered a great amount of scholarly attention following events throughout the Middle East during the “Arab Springs,” and related

events around the world (for example, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong). In many cases, social media were presented as a major resource in contributing to the successful overthrow of corrupt governments and perceived liberation of people. But, as Christensen (2011) and many others have noted, the role of social media in dissent is not as clear. Social media is full of tension, rather than quickly choose a side in the techno-utopian or techno-dystopian debate, I suggest examining the nuance in between and engaging in analysis of the tensions within this space. In this section of the chapter, I discuss the ways in which social media have played an important role in activist efforts, particularly for marginalized groups, as well as the drawbacks of this space, which are equally important to consider.

One study exploring the potential advantages of social media is Radsch and Khamis's (2013), research examining cyberactivism among women during the Arab Spring. The authors employ a feminist approach, which focuses on "the relationship between awareness and action, consciousness-raising, and the importance of personal experience" (p. 882). Radsch and Khamis suggest social media allowed women to participate in the public sphere in ways that may not have been possible otherwise, for example, the anonymity of social media allowed women to speak openly and engage in political discussions that may be uninviting to women in person. The authors argue, "activists leveraged social media to enact new forms of leadership, agency, and empowerment, since these online platforms enabled them to express themselves freely and their voices to be heard by the rest of the world, particularly the global media" (p. 881). For these women, social media provided a place to intervene in the structures that have denied women space. Again, I will engage in what may be drawbacks of this space, but for the moment, I explore what scholars with different views and findings contribute to the field.

Rodino-Colocino (2014) examines the use of hashtags on Twitter as a tool for intersectional mobilization. In response to the Isla Vista shootings in 2014 in the US, people began tweeting about assault against women using the hashtag #YesAllWomen. As Rodino-Colocino suggests, the hashtag has urged self-reflexivity among users, as conversation around the hashtag illustrated the limitations in capturing intersectional identities and experiences. This led to the development of hashtags like #EachEveryWoman to include *all* women. This piece also illustrates the challenges of online activism, for example, the possible monetization and/or cooptation of efforts. The woman who started the hashtag removed herself from #YesAllWomen, as her identities as a woman of color and Muslim were erased from the message. Furthermore, the threat of violence against her functioned to silence her voice and experience. As Rodino-Colocino illustrates, Twitter is a useful platform in engaging in conversation and activism. But, it is also a space full of tension. There are specific challenges and limitations of this space, specifically for those interested in intersectional inclusivity.

The current project examines social media engagement among the Roma, where notions of accessibility, production, and use are arguably different than other groups in the country. Roma are not a forced migratory population. However, there may be useful lessons and concepts from other groups, including those of forced migrant communities. Therefore, it is useful to examine research investigating media use by such groups, and the role such media may play in the production of identity. Writing about the use of blogs in Tunisia, Zayani (2015) discusses how blogs became central to forming both political and virtual identities. Passive media users became active producers of content through blogging. Initially, blogs were used for mostly personal reasons in the country, where users would document mundane activities. But, the internet quickly became a political space, as bloggers began discussing controversial decisions,



such as their opposition to the US-led war on Iraq. Bloggers soon created communities around their interests, leading to strong relationships offline as well, where a group of members from the Tunisian diaspora met in Paris in 2007. As these social ties strengthened, subgroups developed throughout the internet to focus on specific interests. These efforts manifested in a myriad of ways. For example, Tarek Kahlaoui, a blogger within the Tunisian community, created an internet radio station, where members of the community would engage in debates around topics relevant to the community. As the internet evolved and the number of bloggers increased, the Tunisian blogosphere significantly changed. Zayani (2015) suggests,

The Internet became a tool in the hands of active members of a cyber-generation not simply to disseminate critical information about Tunisia, but also to denounce infringements of users' rights, mobilize bloggers, express concrete demands, and give an outlet to citizen claims (p. 130).

For Tunisians, the internet was and continues to be a valuable resource, particularly in forming online campaigns that encourage offline activism, and in the cultivation of “traditional” media forms like radio that may be distributed through digital means. As we will see, similar attempts are made by Roma activists in the Czech Republic.

Focusing more on Europe by examining accessibility among refugees living in Germany, Witteborn (2015) suggests that computers and mobile devices are particularly important for displaced populations to connect with family members and participate socially, that is to apply for jobs, receive information about health and education, and join communities in their new homes. Witteborn suggests online spaces are vital in helping produce identities and communities for forced migrants. Similar to Tunisian web bloggers, forced migrants living in Germany are able to produce content. This production is slightly different for forced migrants, as they

manufacture identities that may not reflect their current life, but their imagined reality. Witteborn writes,

Facebook provides a venue to construct a narrative that boosts the self as loved, admired, networked one—images which contrast starkly with the realities of forced migrants and their lives as a bureaucratically quantifiable category expressed through food rations and defined living space (p. 357).

Social media, in this respect, allow forced migrants to transcend the restrictions of their social reality, where online spaces help produce feelings of belonging.

However, it is important to note that there are barriers and limits to the emancipatory nature of such technologies, and these limits/barriers may vary by both group and geographic context. During the time of research, Witteborn argues that not many of the study's participants had smartphones due to financial costs and their legal status (which led to an inability to sign mobile service contracts), creating barriers to physical/material access to the internet.

Furthermore, uncertainty of one's legal status may hinder online activity for fear of online surveillance by the government, which could result in expulsion from the country. These are real concerns that people holding legal citizenship in a country may not consider (or, in fact, do consider and may be run by political actors who wish to continue that marginalization). Political discussions may still occur among forced migrants, but perhaps they may be more aware or concerned with the possible consequences of engaging in this type of discussion. Context, thus, matters, as it may be difficult to engage in political discussions for refugees in Germany in the same way as activists in, for example, the United States or Tunisia do (issues of surveillance exists in those places as well as well, but arguably the level and manifestations of such

surveillance may differ for forced migrants). More about the disadvantages of communication technologies will be discussed in the following section.

Other technologies such as mobile phones are also important for internationally displaced groups. Harney (2013) examines mobile phone use among asylum seekers, refugees, and what the author refers to as “irregular migrants” in Naples, Italy (p. 542). These migrants have very unique uses for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). For example, migrant workers use mobile phones to connect with family when they leave the camps to work in unfamiliar spaces. This is particularly important for migrants who do not possess local cultural codes, where Harney argues mobile phones have been able to alleviate some of the uncertainties of engaging with people. Harney writes,

In keeping with the Latourian notion that technology and society mutually constitute each other, a mobile phone for migrants in Naples serves as an indispensable ‘space-adjusting’ technology, enabling them to establish a network to enact a strategy for communicative defence in the face of existential, juridical and political insecurity (p. 542).

Harney’s research demonstrates how mobile phones are useful in providing migrants a sense of security in situations of uncertainty, specifically as it relates to labor practices and legal status.

Examining another forced migratory population and their use of media, Leung (2007) investigates mobile phone use among refugees in Australia’s immigration detention centers. In this context, migrants who do not have valid visas, are suspected of entering the country illegally, or hold the status of an asylum seeker, have their physical mobility restricted, as they are confined to the spaces of the detention facility. While refugees have access to fax machines and pay phones within the facilities, they are typically expensive and surveilled by detention center guards. Mobile phones on the other hand are easier to access and allow the refugees

greater levels of mobility, as they can connect with friends and family outside of the facility and thereby minimize the solitary experience of living in a detention center. Leung argues:

The “liberating” nature of such technology was regarded as unsafe in the hands of refugees, whose freedom of movement is institutionally contained by the Australian government through mandatory detention. The physical movement of refugees, as well as the agency and freedom with which they can claim asylum in a country, is actively discouraged through immigration detention policy and limitations on access to technology. The promise of self-expression afforded by mobile media seemed antithetical to the prejudicial administration of refugees, which is premised upon a distrust of their claims of identity and asylum. Subsequently, their use of mobile technology was also assumed to be suspect and therefore had to be restricted.

For a number of years, refugees were denied access to mobile phones and Leung eloquently argues that those living at the margins of society, the less advantaged, are seen as unworthy of new technologies. The decision to limit physical mobility as well as access to communication technologies arguably demonstrates the political power and creation of cultural meanings embedded within these technologies. The communication practices of detainees illustrate the role of technology in helping transcend physical barriers and maintain ties with friends and family.

Sreenivasan, Bien-Aimé, and Connolly-Ahern (2017) discuss similar concepts of homeland and belonging through their analysis of mobile phone use among Sri Lankan refugees in India. Mobile phones allow refugees to keep an open dialogue with friends, family, and communities in their homeland. Furthermore, mobile phones help refugees learn about the different services available to them in India. Sreenivasan et al. suggest mobile phones “create a virtual community for the refugees, to some extent replacing the physical community they left

behind” (p. 106). The authors of the study also address some of the negative aspects of mobile technologies, specifically monitoring and surveillance by authorities.

Along with forced migrants, other marginalized groups may also benefit from using information and communication technologies, specifically social media. These online spaces are helpful in creating virtual identities that can potentially empower offline identities and/or communities. In the case of bloggers in Tunisia, online communities helped connect people offline (Zayani, 2015). Social media play an integral role in providing minority groups a relatively safe space to access and disseminate information, organize public engagements, create identities, and find communities, which assist in producing feelings of empowerment and belonging (Faris & Rahimi, 2015). Social media may offer participants the ability to narrativize their identity in relation to different local and super-diverse contexts. Focusing on Polish refugees and Facebook postings to other refugees, Baran (2018) argues that such narratives illustrate how those who post on relevant Facebook groups discursively maneuver issues of belongingness, ethnicity, nationalism, and identity. Dessewffy and Nagy (2016) examine a grassroots group in Hungary, Migration Aid, and its complicated relationship to multiple activities, groups, and the blending of online/offline experience.

For forced migrants, these experiences vary depending on their use of social media. It may be even more important for migrants to access social media to keep in contact with family as well as create an identity that helps them transcend their current status, where they may feel like outsiders. There are a number of potential benefits of social media for marginalized communities, but activists and researchers need to remain aware of the barriers people and communities may experience, including access to information and communication technologies, the cultural codes and skills required to effectively use social media, and the hesitation of using

such platforms for fear of surveillance by authorities.

**Drawbacks of social media for marginalized groups.** Like blogging and mobile phones, social media present various opportunities for marginalized groups, but it is also important to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of these online spaces. There remain questions and concerns related to accessibility, that is, physical access to social media as well as other factors including literacy, educational attainment, income, and age. Witte and Mannon (2010), suggest that the internet may amplify inequality, arguing:

As political participation moves online, newspapers and books evolve into digital formats, social networking occurs through web applications, and e-commerce expands, participation in public life necessitates some Internet access and competency. Those without an email address or a Facebook profile may become excluded from the larger society. Internet access and use, then, are not simply mapped onto existing inequalities; they may exacerbate them over time as offline groups become marginalized from the Internet and from popular forms of political, social, and economic participation (p. 2).

In an increasingly digital and connected world, the ability to physically access the internet and competency to navigate and engage in these spaces may inform participation and/or contribute to further marginalization.

There are also structural drawbacks demonstrated by government intervention, control, and surveillance. Social media are easily co-opted by the same corrupt governments or organizations that communities are challenging. For example, Egyptian President Mubarak enforced an internet blackout lasting five days in 2011 to deny physical access to the internet (Tufekci, 2014). The draconian measure attempted to stop activist organizing taking place over social media and thereby stymie public protests. In a similar attempt to suppress political

participation, Pearce and Kendzior (2012) investigate how the Azerbaijani government employed successful censorship tactics to discourage citizens from political activism by allowing users to access the internet in an attempt to identify political activists. Similar tactics were employed by the Iranian government by restricting physical access to the internet and identifying activists (Golkar, 2011). These examples demonstrate the ways in which online spaces may be co-opted to suppress political participation. In a similar light, it is important to acknowledge the fact that social media platforms are large companies and this may present challenges for activists and activist communities. Similar to the way governments may co-opt online spaces, companies like Facebook and Twitter may impose restrictions upon users, perhaps in a more implicit manner, but nevertheless impacting use of the platform. These tactics have direct consequences for activists that may rely on social media to share information and communicate with communities. Elements such as advertising may dilute or distract from activist efforts. Papacharissi (2002) argues that in spite of the celebratory response to the internet, “it is still a medium constructed in a capitalist era” (p. 18). Youmans and York (2012) examine social media use by activists to comment on the commercialization of online spaces. The authors argue,

Firms focus primarily on increasing users, improving usability, boosting revenue streams, avoiding negative public relations, seeking access to new markets, and protecting other larger classes of nonactivist users. These privatized goals of platform owners and developers can conflict with their use as tools for civil society and popular mobilization.

Changes in architecture may thus adversely impact activists.

Looking specifically at changing policies, functionalities, and user guidelines, Youmans and York suggest that social media companies are not created specifically for activists, therefore governments may use these platforms in ways that constrain activists and their efforts. Through

four cases studies, the authors support claims by illustrating how a company's priority is monetary return for user information. For Facebook, the company benefits from knowing the real identities of users to be able to advertise to them; however, revealing an activist's identity may be particularly dangerous.

From a researcher's perspective, it is important to remain aware of these potential drawbacks and be critical of social media, or else we run the risk of falling into traps of technological utopianism, whereby we credit social media with more power to affect change than it actually possesses. Often social media are credited with creating structural changes – for example, removing corrupt governments or changing particular policies. This level of impact, though, is difficult to measure, as correlation does not mean causation. While a relationship may exist between media engagement and impact, it would not be possible to draw such a conclusion without testing this relationship. Many contextual factors in a given situation may influence social change: social media could be one of them, but in conjunction with other socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. This study does not attempt to draw a linear relationship between social media engagement among Roma and structural changes in Czech society. Rather, this study examines how Roma, activists, and organizations use social media and for what reasons. These findings will help understand how communities understand social media, their strategies and the realities of their context; in addition, a cautious approach to examining the role of social media in identity construction and possible contributions to activist efforts. The Roma have continued to face challenges in combatting ethnic discrimination, as several mobilization efforts have proven unsuccessful. Social media, as discussed by Witteborn (2015), provide migrants with a space to create an identity. Zayani (2015) argues that online spaces are central to forming political and virtual identities. It is with these findings in mind that I aim to explore the potential



of social media as an alternative/additional site for identity negotiation, community building, and combatting feelings of alienation among Roma in the Czech Republic.

### **Summary**

The literature in this section illustrates how Roma have largely been absent (read: denied authority) in the construction of their identities. The media play a significant role in perpetuating misconceptions about Romani people and their lived experiences through stereotypical portrayals. There has been extensive research conducted on media representations of Roma, however, responses from Romani communities about these representations have not received the same type of scholarly attention. This chapter illustrates the challenges and possibilities of televisual and social media for marginalized groups. Alternative and activist projects are an intervention into the structures that have denied Roma voice in the media and potentially serve as sites for identity construction and negotiation. There are significant challenges that activists encounter in these efforts, however, as the literature demonstrates, there are a number of opportunities made possible through the development and engagement of these alternatives sites of media production and social media. Revealing these connections and gaps in the literature, this study sets out to understand the intersections of identity, belonging, activism, and media.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter includes an explanation of methodological practices for this project, including data collection and analysis procedures. As a study that aims to holistically understand questions related to identity, voice, and belonging, through the experiences of those challenging the structures that continue to oppress Roma people in the Czech Republic, ethnography is selected as the appropriate method of examination. Ethnography, at its most basic, is the observation of groups, people, social practices, cultures, and/or interactions. As Fetterman (1998) suggests, “ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture” (p. 1). Ethnography may use a variety of techniques, including ethnographic interviews, described by Ortiz (2015) as a genuine connection between the interviewer and interviewee that takes place “in situ”:

Ethnographic interviews uncover the meaning participants make of their experiences, the context in which they live is a central feature of investigation... With sustained interaction in the social setting, researchers discern themes and patterns that represent collective understandings that include diverse perspectives (Ortiz, 2015, p. 37).

Works by Skinner (2012), Genzuck (2003), and Spradley (1979) also discuss the nature of ethnographic interviews.

In this chapter, I provide context for my methodological choices as well as reflection on my experiences conducting research in the Czech Republic. This dissertation project employs an ethnographic approach to data collection, where I ground my methodological practices in the works of Norman K. Denzin, George E. Marcus, and Shari Stone-Mediatore. These scholars’ works have been instrumental at different stages of the project, informing the construction of

interview questions, understanding of the “field,” deeper awareness and reflection of my role as an ethnographer, as well as my engagement with individual members, communities, and the different spaces I navigated. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the elements from these scholars’ work that have shaped some of the ways in which I have approached this research project. Later in the chapter I discuss more logistical elements of my method, including specifics about my visits to the Czech Republic, contacts made, characteristics of interviews, and observations of events. I end the chapter with some reflections on the role of self-reflexivity for my method.

### **Influential ethnographic methodologists**

Denzin’s perspective has helped me think through vulnerability, genuine human connection, and the political nature of ethnographic research, as he suggests, “ethnography like art is always political” (Denzin, 2000, p. 403). In particular, Denzin’s work has been important in thinking through the purpose of ethnography. Denzin writes,

ethnography attempts to better understand the conditions of oppression and commodification that operate in the culture, seeking to make these ways of the world more visible to others. The moral ethnographer searches for those moments when humans resist these structures of oppression and representation, and attempt, in the process, to take control over their lives and the stories about them (p. 402).

This research aims to understand conceptualizations of place and belonging, as well as voice and community, among Roma in the Czech Republic during a specific historical and socio-cultural moment. Ethnography is crucial to understanding these connections in the fight for justice, as communities challenge the structures that continue to oppress Roma people, and in trying to make sense of how certain people among the Roma (especially activists) describe these

challenges. In addition to the works of Norman Denzin, I have found George Marcus' contributions to ethnography, particularly those around multi-sited ethnography, useful in thinking through an evolving field. He provides seven suggestions to think through multi-sited fieldwork:

1) the movement of people; 2) the circulation of material objects—commodities, gifts, money, works of art, and intellectual property; 3) the circulation of signs, symbols, and metaphors; 4) plot, story, or allegory; 5) the life history or biography of a specific person or a group of people; 6) the conflict; and 7) the strategically situated (single-site) ethnography that focuses on the interaction between the local subjects and the world system (Marcus, 1995; also referenced in Kurotani, 2004, p. 202).

I draw loosely from this tradition, thinking of the different sites of investigation that help better understand the phenomena under study. As discussed below, there are several different points of investigation in this dissertation. These sites, including public and mediated spaces of engagement, and collaborations locally as well as transnationally, disrupt ideas of single-sited ethnography as well as conceptions of local and global. While my residence was in the city of Brno and a significant amount of time was spent there, I traveled throughout the country to understand experiences in different localities. The field is no longer one village or one blog. In the case of this research, the field is made up of local businesses and organizations, public gatherings throughout the country, and the organization of groups and communities taking place across different spaces including Facebook groups and event pages. Furthermore, the transnational existence of the Roma challenges single-sited conceptions of the field.

It is important to make a distinction here between multi-locale fieldwork and multi-sited fieldwork. The former, as noted by Muir (2004), “recognizes the many locations of culture, the

latter requires field study in many locations” (p. 187). In following community organization, it became clear that media production, public demonstrations, digital archives, and interviews do not exist on their own; these are not one-dimensional projects or experiences. These are complex systems of engagement, organization, and resistance. Examining the different sites, for example, public demonstrations and Facebook discussions, provide a more in-depth understanding.

For Stone-Mediatore, ethnography aims to learn more about an experience through the eyes of those living in it. Stone-Mediatore (2003) argues that ethnographic stories are not objective truths, but “ways of seeing” (p. 38). The author suggests, “when narratives present ‘ways of seeing’ that sensitize us to some of the richness and nuances of meaning in our world, they promote the achievement that Arendt and Ricoeur call *understanding*” (p. 38). In addition to the knowledge we gain from this perspective, understanding is how we come to know the world around us and our place in it. Ethnography, in this way, promotes human connection. Stone-Mediatore’s work has been particularly useful to this project as the author critically investigates and provides insight to working with marginalized communities. Documenting and sharing the stories and experiences of marginalized groups aims to reveal inequality and oppression, where researchers also run the real risk of reinforcing categories of difference and identity. Close engagement with Stone-Mediatore’s work has been crucial to understanding the ways in which I can productively engage with Romani people and communities, so that I do not reinforce stereotypes and incorrectly establish categories of identity and difference. Stone-Mediatore offers a different approach to narrative: that is, ways of reading, writing, and engaging that urge researchers to employ methods of storytelling that lend itself to understanding experience and narrative as knowledge. In the case of marginalized groups, there is a tendency to resist or reject narrative as knowledge. As a response, Stone-Mediatore challenges us to think differently in our

approach and engagement with storytelling that honors and elevates the voices and experiences of the marginalized.

### **Preparations for fieldwork**

My academic training up to this point prepared me for extensive time in the field, including completing courses in qualitative methods as well as having past experience traveling and conducting research in different internationalized settings. My interest in the Czech Republic began with my involvement as a graduate assistant in an undergraduate educational abroad program to Prague in the Spring of 2016, the contacts I made there, and my discussions at that time about current challenges facing Romani communities. I visited the Czech Republic again that summer. In the Fall of 2016, I applied and was granted a Fulbright Scholarship and I acquired the necessary documents, including a visa, for a year-long stay in the Czech Republic. To prepare for living in the Czech Republic, I also enrolled in a Czech language course through Indiana University. This course provided a foundation in understanding and speaking the Czech language, where I was able to navigate basic conversations in Czech. In addition to acquiring a basic knowledge and use of the Czech language, I prepared for data collection by ensuring I traveled with properly functioning technology. I traveled with multiple recording and storage devices to safely record and store the collected data. This project utilized several different methods of data collection including in-depth interviews, observations of public events, and analysis of mediated spaces such as Facebook pages as well as online digital services and archives. I ensured that I possessed the appropriate understanding and documentation of these data prior to entering the field.

**Fieldwork.** Research began with an initial visit to the Prague office of Romea.cz – the not-for-profit journalism outlet focusing on Roma-based news in the Czech Republic – in March

of 2016. Soon after meeting in the Czech Republic, I followed up with the director and members of the NGO via video conference calling. From there, I was introduced to Gabra, an activist, who then put me in contact with other scholars and activists working with and within Romani communities in the Czech Republic. After a few months spent learning more about some of the social and political tensions within the country, I traveled to the Czech Republic in the summer of 2016, to personally meet with the people I had been in contact with. In addition to meeting with scholars and activists, I spent a significant time of my days observing daily routines in the Romea office, learning about the NGO's news gathering and dissemination processes, outreach programs, and organizational challenges. Romea was an organization that often came up in discussions with activists, and it helped contextualize their views for me to observe the organization first hand. In addition, my work with credible organizations like Romea, who I have been working with prior to data collection in the country, served as a voucher of my efforts in the country. These connections helped establish a network, which allowed for data collection to take place when I returned to the Czech Republic on September 17, 2017 to begin the roughly year-long stay. Fieldwork concluded July 30, 2018, but as an ethnographic project, communication and engagement with participants continued beyond July 2018.

Fieldwork took place in various cities throughout the country, including Prague, Ostrava, and Brno, where I lived for the duration of data collection. Brno is the second largest city in the country, with a population of approximately 250,000 (from the country's 10.5 million population). I chose to live in Brno because of the institutional support provided by the Department of Media Studies at Masaryk University. Additionally, Brno is home to a large number of Romani communities. There are also a number of organizations serving Romani communities based in Brno, including the Museum of Romani Culture, Drom, and Roma IQ

Servis. These organizations provide a number of resources to Romani families within the region and served as valuable resources in my research. As I review later and as discussed more extensively in Chapter Five, key activist events also occurred in Brno.

**Arriving in Brno.** I arrived in Brno on September 20, 2017 to an unusually cold and gloomy fall day. My first few days were spent tending to logistical tasks, meeting with faculty at Masaryk University, searching for an apartment, and registering with the Foreign Police. In all of these interactions I became noticeably aware of how people felt about Roma and my perceived difference – I will discuss more about this at the end of the chapter. My housing inquiries were often met with apologies that these apartments were already rented (even as they remained available for weeks/months online). In other cases, I was told directly that the landlord does not wish to rent to “foreigners.” Academic settings, at times, echoed these experiences. After learning that some of my interviews were conducted in English, a faculty member suggested that I was not speaking with “real Gypsies,” as real Gypsies do not speak English. This type of comment was common and unfortunately, at times, expected.

During my first few days in the city, I was warned about “bad” parts of the city, where people referred to Roma-majority neighborhoods. One neighborhood in particular, Cejl—nicknamed the Brnox—is a neighborhood in Brno with a large Roma population (a Czech artist controversially created a guide to Brno, where she named this neighborhood the Brnox after drawing ill-judged parallels to the Bronx in New York City). Historically a Jewish neighborhood, the area surrounding Cejl street became home to many Slovak Roma (the majority of Czech Roma were murdered during the Holocaust) following the Second World War, as the country searched for a new labor force. Today, the neighborhood is gentrifying. There are high-rise buildings being constructed next to small concrete buildings with chipped facades. The sites



of new bakeries are in stark contrast to run-down buildings just a few meters away. Countless travel websites warn visitors to avoid this area of the city, particularly during the night. What the websites and people warning me to stay away from this area fail to consider are the decades of discriminatory policies, tense relations between locals and police, and isolation from other parts of the city including segregated schools and lack of career opportunities. Understanding the efforts of activists in Brno included spending extensive time in these neighborhoods. I met with activists, organizers, and other community members in this neighborhood, where public events and activities took place.

## **Interviews**

This dissertation was designed in accordance with the U.S. Institutional Review Board guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects and received Board approval. To maintain the anonymity of those participating in this research project, I have changed the names of interviewees in this research employing typical Czech names that are found among community members. I conducted consent verbally with individuals, so as to minimize unequal power dynamics. As a researcher who has worked with minority communities and non-native English speakers and with interviewees who do not speak English at all, I am sensitive to these concerns. For those who did not speak English or felt more comfortable speaking Czech, an interpreter accompanied interviews. Furthermore, my past experiences with minority communities has provided me with an awareness of the things that I may take for granted as an American (“Western”) researcher. I carefully reviewed the participant consent orally, so as to not assume literacy and the pressure from an “American researcher” to sign a document that people may not understand. Prior to the interview taking place, participants were encouraged to ask questions about their involvement in the research including the voluntary nature of the interview, ensured

confidentiality and explained how the data were to be used. I also set realistic expectations with organizations and participants about the research as well as my involvement in various efforts. My aim is to understand, observe, document, contextualize, and interpret interviews, observation sites, and the other places I investigated in this project. I remained transparent about the ways in which data are collected and presented, ensuring participants that they will have access to published materials and any findings.

During my year in the Czech Republic, I met with a number of people working in and alongside Romani communities. For this project, I conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for list of semi-structured interview questions). The people I spoke with occupied various positions within their communities as organizers, activists, artists, journalists, students, directors of large (trans)national organizations and so on. The interviews ranged in time from approximately 40 minutes to two hours. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with several of these interviewees. All but five of the interviews took place in person. In the case of these five interviews, three were conducted over video call and two over the phone, as these specific interviewees were currently outside of the country or found this method the most convenient to them. All but one interview was audio recorded, as the interviewee did not agree to audio recording the interview.

I met with interviewees through purposive snowball sampling, meaning I was connected to people through a network of shared contacts. After interviews, I asked interviewees if there are others that may be interested in speaking with me about their work. My information was then passed on. I was introduced to Jana—a young Romani woman working on various activist efforts—through a mutual contact and we spoke for several months prior to my arrival in Brno. Once I arrived in Brno, she was the first activist that I met with in person and she was an

important source in connecting me to other activists. From there, I met with a number of people working at local NGOs.

I was introduced to some people via email or in person at different gatherings. A majority of introductions took place over Facebook messenger and I quickly learned that this was the preferred method of communication. Several of the people I spoke with discussed how they use Facebook professionally and/or for their activism. One activist shared with me, “through the Facebook you can do the video chat, so why do I have Skype? I don’t use Skype anymore. And, donors call me on Facebook. You know? [laughs] Now it’s really easy situation for me because when we have Facebook and lot of people really use it.” This method of connecting with people also comments on the uses of Facebook in particular for communities and is discussed in the following chapters, especially in Chapter Five.

### **Observations**

In addition to the interviews conducted, I also engaged in observations of public events. Some of these gatherings were celebratory events, while others were organized calls for justice. There are specific places and events that I attended, including the March Against Holocaust Denial on February 15, 2018; March Against Violence and Racism on March 17, 2018; the formal renaming of the Eugen Horváth Park on March 27, 2018 (the first public space in the Czech Republic to be named after a Romani person); International Roma Day (a week-long event) beginning on April 8, 2018; the recording of the pilot TV show on April 9, 2018 (extensively discussed in Chapter Four); Khamoro Festival taking place the week of May 26; and Ghettofest on June 9, 2018. Moreover, I regularly visited the Museum of Romani Culture and a local café run by a local NGO working with Roma in the city of Brno. Some of these gatherings were politically oriented demonstrations, for example the March Against Violence and Racism in

Prague, while others were celebratory events, such as the public gathering to mark the renaming of a park in Brno after the Romani musician, Eugen Horváth. The latter was a celebratory event marked by speeches from the musician's family, dancing, and food. Not all of these observations are directly discussed in this specific project, but I have noted them here as they inform my overall understanding of culture and community organization among Roma in the Czech Republic.

### **Specific methods of data collection**

Throughout my time in the Czech Republic, I took careful and extensive notes. I kept a document with fieldwork notes, including thoughts and reflections on interviews, my observations of different public gatherings, and other daily activities. I also kept a personal journal, noting my interactions and reflections on my experiences living in the Czech Republic.

My observational notes included both descriptive information, for example, date and time of meeting/event, number of people in attendance, conversations taking place, conflicts and collaborations, quotes, and so on. These notes also included reflective information such as my thoughts and questions that formed as I observed what was taking place. I was able to supplement these notes with audio-recordings and pictures, which added to my fieldwork notes, as I looked back on my observations as well as my experience and place within the observation site. Preliminary analysis took place during this stage, when I further reflected on my position and the process of meaning-making (my gender, perceived ethnicity, nationality, and class all play a role in this conceptualization and is further discussed below). This also contributed to the revelation of emergent themes in the research as I reflected on the connections, allowing me to follow developments in more depth.

**Data analysis techniques.** Data analysis included transcription of interview data and in some cases, translation and transcription of interview data. Interviews were then uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative software analysis tool. Multiple and thorough readings of the interview transcriptions allowed me to induce themes from the data itself. I engaged in “careful, line-by-line reading of the text while looking for processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences” (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 780). Allowing themes to emerge from the data, I read through transcriptions several times, employing an open-coding process by clustering keywords and topics, which led to the further development of themes and subthemes. This process of categorization helped manage the data. As an ethnographic project, interview data was accompanied by interpretation of other data, including observations of public demonstrations and mediated interactions. It was also a conscious decision to not correct the grammar in quotations, so that I may duplicate exactly what was said or written by the people I interviewed.

**“When, where, how am I (so and so)?”**

Trinh (1992) suggests that ethnographers ask “when, where, how am I (so and so)?” (p. 157). This question suggests that the ethnographer constantly reflect on their identities. The ways in which we are read and the ways in which we express these identities change depending on the spaces and places we occupy. As an Afghan-American woman, my experiences in the Czech Republic varied based on the people I interacted with and the spaces I engaged in. The Czech Republic is a relatively homogenous country, meaning that my physical appearance immediately positioned me as an outsider and this position presented advantages and disadvantages to the data collection process. While this posed a challenge within non-Roma communities, routinely surveilled in public spaces (for example: security guards monitoring my actions in shops), my experiences as a woman and as someone whose physical appearance immediately marked me as

an outsider, I was able to connect with several of the Romani people I met during my fieldwork. I was often read as Roma in public spaces—as one activist stated, “I thought you’re ours! Yeah, I thought you were Roma”—and, as further discussed below, this led to important conversations and connections with several of the people I interviewed. In this way, I occupied an interesting position.

Early ethnographic research defines the insider/outsider status as two distinct experiences, where both have their advantages and disadvantages (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, and Muhamad, 2001; Sherif, 2001). For example, an insider may have direct access to a community or understand local cultural codes. On the other hand, outsiders may use their unfamiliarity with a community and potentially ask taboo questions, where their outsider position may not offend the community, as they are seen as a naïve outsider. In reality, the insider/outsider status is incredibly complex, where researchers may simultaneously be both insider and outsider.

During the interview process, I began by asking interviewees to tell me more about their experiences, background, and their work—how they became involved in Romani-focused topics. From there, I asked a number of questions, allowing conversation to go in new directions. As each interview came to an end, I once again opened up the conversation for interviewees to ask questions. In most cases, the interviewee would begin by asking about my (ethnic) background (if it was not something that had already come up in conversation). In several of these interviews, I felt that this became a moment of genuine connection. I explained my background as Afghan-American, which is a complicated term for me. Similar to others with hyphenated identities, my experiences as an Afghan-American woman are complex. Although I was born and raised in the United States, I feel stronger connections to my Afghan identity. But, again, these feelings and

expressions are situational. For example, in Afghanistan I am read as and, at times, feel stronger connections to my American identity. Similarly, my experiences growing up in a Californian city with a large Afghan population and then living and traveling to places with few Afghans has influenced my experiences and identities. I find myself searching for others who could relate to my experiences in all of the places that I visit and live. I would explain these experiences to the interviewee, where we would further discuss the root of this feeling. I shared my experiences, where I have become accustomed to comments such as “your English is so good” or that “you look so exotic.” These types of comments made throughout my life serve as constant reminders of my not belonging. The complicated relationship I have with my American identity has been in large part to denial of this identity from others. As I explained this, a nod in agreement or smile would appear on the person’s face. Our experiences are incredibly different, but that we understand what it means to be both an insider and outsider in our respective societies.

One activist and I shared a laugh over the question of “where are you from?” He responds with a laugh about non-Roma being surprised by his command of the Czech language saying, “I have this problem here!” The idea that he speaks as the Czechs do, but doesn’t “look” like the Czechs, further denies him claim to different identities. In a meeting with two young Romani men, one says directly during our interview, “you look Gypsy” to me. After the formal interview concludes, he asks if I’ve experienced any discrimination while living in the Czech Republic. I begin by sharing with them my experiences of constantly being followed in stores. As I share some recent experiences, the two young men give each other a look, look back at me and smile. The two other non-Roma people who have joined us give a shocked reaction. The three of us, the two young men and I, look around and exchange a look, “yes, this is a reality.”

This exchange illustrated some of the ways in which shared experiences with discrimination, as unfortunate as they were, led to a mutual understanding between myself and some of the people I spoke with during my time in the Czech Republic. Another activist commented, after asking about my background and discussing racial tensions in the US,

We had US as example of best practices [for how people of different races and ethnic backgrounds may coexist], but we could see the situation is always the same. People are racist and it depends if you are in the minority or majority and that's it.

These quotes demonstrate the ways in which we discuss marginality and ultimately a driving factor in my work, to understand the intersections of oppression to better combat the systems that create and reproduce inequality.

While my perceived difference (outsider to Czech society) created connections with several of the people I spoke with, I always remained aware of my identities and position as a researcher. I was dialed into the power dynamics at play, where I occupy a position as an American-educated and trained researcher. The Roma are generally a closed group with a rightful skepticism of researchers and I expected a certain level of hesitancy from people willing to participate in this research. The Roma are an “over studied group,” as one of the participants put it, where Roma have been the focus of many research projects, but have gained little in return for their labor and time in these projects. I understand the interview and my participation in different spaces as a privilege (an invitation by the people I created connections with) and not a right, as I believe the latter has led to the exploitation of Roma by researchers. It was of the utmost importance to be transparent about my work.



## **Summary**

This research employs an ethnographic approach to better understand activist efforts among Roma in the Czech Republic. Three visits to the Czech Republic, including a year-long stay, as well as connections developed through snowball sampling cultivated activist contacts. Interviews with participants and observations of various public gatherings contribute towards this understanding, where I am able to capture how participants describe their thoughts, motivating factors, and experiences in challenging the structures that continue to suppress Romani voice and experience. Meaning is created through interpretations of these different experiences and engagements. It is with this perspective that I present the findings of this research.

## **Chapter Four**

### **“Creating a new Roma identity”: TV production as an alternative site for identification and identity negotiation**

This chapter explores media production by Romani activists and organizers that challenge the stereotyped depictions of Roma in the media. Romani voices are the central driving force within these productions, challenging the exclusion of Roma from the media as well as the focus on solely negative media representations. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the production of an online Roma-centered TV platform in the Czech Republic, as a response to the invisibility of Roma in mainstream media, where activists and organizers are coming together to create a space for Romani voices and experiences with the hope that these representations will challenge the exclusionary and stereotyped depictions in media to provide a more nuanced understanding of Romani experiences. There is a significant amount of research on media representations of Roma (for example: Munk, 2007; Vidra & Fox, 2014; Schneeweis & Foss, 2017), however additional work on the responses by communities to these representations as well as the possibilities that diverse representations serve for Roma in particular contexts is needed, and this chapter will contribute to the development of this work.

This chapter begins with a brief review of media representations of Roma and Romani identity, as discussed by the people I spoke with throughout this year to set up the focus on television as a site for analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the current ways in which activists discuss representation and empowerment, considered important factors contributing to changing the situation of Roma in the Czech Republic. The discussion then turns to a brief illustration of the current Czech-Roma media environment, illustrating some of the challenges

and opportunities within this space. This section is followed by conversations about the current media environment, where activists identify some of the affordances of media production by Roma for Roma. Analysis in this area focuses on the development of an online-TV production by Romani activists to combat the perceived failings of the current media environment. Discussion around this production illustrates the ways in which activists attempt to provide a new Roma identity to help Roma see themselves in a different light as well as challenge stereotypes held by the majority. The production of Roma-centered TV as a site for identity construction holds transformative potential, including the ability to unify based on language and cultural celebration of music and food. But, there exist challenges within this space, including the potential of further marginalization due to the placement of this platform outside the mainstream purview.

Additionally, this chapter discusses challenges between different groups attempting to provide similar services as well as the potential cooptation of this space by sponsors and distributors. Through interviews with activists and organizers working in this area and specific focus on a recording of a pilot television program, this chapter examines the celebrations, challenges, and contradictions of this production to better understand the importance of media as a site for identification and negotiation.

### **Media representations of Roma**

Scholarship in the area of Roma media representation examines how media present stories about Roma and communities and the ideological implications of these representations. Media typically present Roma through long-enduring cultural stereotypes, for example, the “lustful Gypsy woman,” “myth of nomadism,” and the “poor but happy Gypsies” (Pusca, 2015, p. 329). Richardson and Ryder (2012) argue, “the negative images used to portray Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in some sections of the media serve as a tool to highlight their ‘otherness’

and their so-called deviancy from societal norms” (p. 171). The media create and recreate categories of difference, as Roma are presented through stereotypical portrayals that serve to reproduce societal inequalities. Furthermore, Roma are presented in the media through a limited framework, one that not only limits the diversity of representation, but that also emphasizes problematic behavior and associations (Kroon, Kluknavská, Vliegthart, and Boomgaarden, 2016). For example, the classic opera production, *Carmen*, tells the story of a Spanish soldier “seduced” by a Romani woman. The same tropes of the “lustful Gypsy woman” found in *Carmen* are also visible in countless other texts, including Esmeralda in the famous novel (and other mediated adaptations of the story), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Schneeweis and Foss (2017) argue, “the media have portrayed Gypsy women both as oppressed and as free spirited.” These dichotomous representations are dangerous and further objectify Romani women. This also positions Romani women as culpable in the violence inflicted upon them (which typically happens in these stories), as they are somehow responsible for their deaths and other abuses against them, suggesting people could not help but fall for the enchanting beauty of Romani women nor their desire to control (to have the woman for themselves or kill her). These limited and damaging representations continue to exist in contemporary media—horror films, music videos, and countless other media texts—as discussed in the literature chapter. These representations have serious implications for governmental, economic, and social practices:

Negative perceptions of a cultural group have real-world implications. If people regard Gypsies as violent and aggressive (as perpetuated in the media), they may be more likely to discriminate against them in employment, housing, event rental, air travel, and other important interactions. Stereotypes of Gypsies as “swindlers” could negatively affect potential business partnerships or lead to heightened security in retail stores. Messages

about Gypsy traditions that include acts considered “deviant” by the dominant American culture (i.e., marrying one’s cousin) likely further ethnic *othering*. As violence against the Roma continues in various European locations, nothing prohibits the manifestation of such hatred on this continent, especially amplified by contemporary conflict around immigration (Schneeweis and Foss, 2017, p. 1164).

In an interview with a local activist, she reinforces this dominant and damaging representation, saying, “if you have crime-related information, they always mention it was Roma somehow.” The result of such representation has real world implications for Roma and non-Roma alike (see research on the forced sterilization of Romani women by Albert & Szilvasi, 2017 and other abuses against Roma, for example, the physical assault and destruction of Romani homes in Ukraine in 2018). I am not attempting to draw a direct relationship to media representations of Roma and violence against Roma, rather, these examples illustrate the current experiences of Roma, where those perpetuating crimes and abuses against Roma justify their actions, suggesting that Roma are unfit in their societies, a notion perpetuated by media.

### **Roma identity**

As discussed in the literature review, Roma identity is an incredibly complex topic. This complexity came out in interviews with Roma activists in the Czech Republic. Themes expressed included the challenges of Roma migration especially in the Czech Republic, the multiplicity of Roma identity, and the ethnocentrism of media representation and production. In one of our conversations Jana, an activist heading the media production, says,

And this is, this is the thing with identity, with this total crazy Roma identity, we have, like, we are officially Czech, but by majority of Czech, we are not felt as being Czech. And, uh that’s one thing and other thing is also in Roma community, how Roma

community feel or don't feel that Roma people are or are not Czech. I think this is something, so intimate thing, the identity is such intimate thing.

This sentiment is shared by many Roma in the Czech Republic, negotiating an identity that is situated between repeatedly being denied Czech-ness and acknowledging aspects of Roma identity, which is presented negatively and unfortunately define whole communities. Roma identity is diverse, but often presented in media and other sources through a single and stereotyped perspective, one which continues to operate based on historically complicated ideas that do not apply to the lived experiences of Roma today. Jana continues, "And also when we come to the topic of identity because identity for centuries was created by something which is not now reality anymore." She explains that experiences that many associate with Roma communities has changed significantly, yet these assumptions still influence how non-Roma think of and interact with Roma in the Czech Republic:

During the last centuries, last century, Roma, most majority of Roma left their traditional way of living and, uh, moved to, from Slovak to Czech Republic through one or two generations between the huge difference of living, of working, on everything. Like all those people had to absorb and also somehow be able to [pause] to learn, you know? To learn how to live a different way and um a lot people did that, a lot of people were successful, a lot of people, of course, don't. A lot of families don't and um this is something important to think of when we get to the situation which is now.

Jana comments on the experience many Roma feel (feelings that are also described by other migrant and displaced populations) – the pressure to learn and adjust to profound differences – but also the specific difficulties of Roma migrating from Slovakia to the Czech Republic after WWII and the ways in which Roma had to adjust to changes in the new country. There are deep

divisions between the Roma and majority ethnic Czech that traces back decades and continues to this day. She adds,

And that's the main problem because the Roma community and the Czech community are really, like, disconnected very much and you see it in schools, kids are not going to school together, people don't go to work [together] that much because Roma have complicated access to work, and they have, for example, very often it's happening when Roma come to discotek or something, they say they can't come, you know? People... they don't spend time together from kids to adult age. And this is really creating this disconnection. And you can see it also in this public space and that's the most important thing that Roma, we are a topic for mainstream discussion or public discussion, but we aren't understand as an integral of the topic, you know?

It is interesting to note that Jana refers to Roma and Czechs as two distinct groups, illustrating how Roma do not feel Czech and/or are made not to feel Czech. She discusses the ways in which Roma are excluded from Czech society in systematic ways: school segregation, housing, employment, specific public spaces, and even in discussions about Roma. This is a particularly important point, as Roma have not been active (not entirely by their own choice) or at least univocal in the construction of Roma identity. This is not to suggest that Roma are uninterested in such constructions, rather it is an incredibly complex situation in which Roma have historically been denied access to these discussions and also takes into account the complicated ways in which Roma identity is addressed within diverse Romani communities. This continues today, as Roma are viewed as a topic of discussion, but only in ways that further marginalize communities. Relating this relationship to media, Jana says, “but, in media and in public discussion what I feel is the main problem, which is something like discourse, we need to change

that we are not just a topic.” When Roma are presented in the media, as a group, they are talked about rather than engaged in dialogue, or spokespeople are chosen who reinforce, rather than challenge, Roma stereotypes. Discussing the ways in which Czech media include Romani voices in broadcasts, Jakub says,

Now we don’t have, we don’t have voice in our media. It’s everything is about us, without us or if, if some Roma are in some debate [on television], so it’s, it’s uneducated Roma with strong, for example, with strong pronunciation, because in Czech, in Roma language, we have other accent, yeah? And, when you speak Czech and you have Roma accent, it’s really comic for non-Roma, you know? So this typical, stereotypical Roma, they are in television because media really, they have really fear from educated Roma.

This perspective illustrates the way mainstream media attempt to present Roma as uneducated – as in for example an exaggerated Roma accent or the cultural connotations of such an accent – and further, suggests a malicious intent to devalue this experience by making fun of Roma. He continues,

They don’t give the voice [to] educated Roma who can be the partner in the debate, but they, like, give you the place for uneducated [Roma]. On one side it’s uneducated Roma [and on the other side] really educated non-Roma, we say gadje, and the other side all educated, educated or politicians, mayors, and then Roma and it’s horrible. This is not good, not good for us.

This has implications for Roma and non-Roma relations, as Roma are constantly excluded from engaging in discussions that are important to not only Roma, but Czech society as a whole. Jana says, “And it’s not just a Roma problem. It’s a problem of society, of generation. So, we are not a topic, we are part of the whole problem, which is, which has this different layers and



perspectives.” Acknowledging the multi-layered issues that have contributed to tense relations among Roma and non-Roma in the Czech Republic, Jana raises the important point that societal concerns for Roma should be concerns for all Czechs, Roma and non-Roma alike. Changing this relationship is important as tensions among Roma and non-Roma continue to exist. A recent report released by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018) found that out of the nine Member States surveyed (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain), the Czech Republic had the largest portion of respondents saying that they do not want Roma as colleagues or neighbors. The Czech Republic has experienced the most significant reduction in perceived discrimination, dropping from 33% in 2011 to 19% in 2016; however, the level of discrimination in the Czech Republic remains one of the highest of all countries surveyed. The report examines discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, housing, as well as harassment and hate-motivated violence. Again, the Czech Republic had the largest number of survey respondents, 56%, who “experienced some form of harassment that they felt was due to their ethnicity in the 12 months before the survey” (p. 20). Greece ranked in second with 50% of respondents experiencing harassment based on their ethnicity and Bulgaria with the lowest percentage at 12%. The Roma in the Czech Republic continue to experience some of the worst hiring and recruiting practices, leading to low levels of employment, as well as other discriminatory practices such as school segregation, and unequal access to healthcare. There are a number of organizations working towards changing this situation, but they are met with significant challenges. This chapter focuses on a group of activists working together to constitute change through media. They have decided to combat the under/misrepresentation of Roma in media through the development of an online-TV platform to provide an alternative space to see oneself and to be seen.

## **Representation and empowerment**

The topic of pride and empowerment comes up throughout interviews, as people describe the ways in which communities lack feelings of pride. There are efforts employed by activists to build “empowerment” within communities. Empowerment, however, has become a hollow term, as most social work groups and initiatives work towards Romani empowerment, but have failed to define what is meant by empowerment. In one of our conversations, Marek says,

It’s ideal of social work, empowerment, that should do the empowerment of people, but the normal procedure and the reality is different and empowerment of people is very hard. It takes a very long time and it can be, uh, it... can’t be put into blocks of Excel, Excel blocks, and emails, and datas... Empowerment is a long process of changing, uh, changing identity of humans, so this is what I’m trying to do now, to empower the people to be able to solve their troubles themselves.

Empowerment has become a box to check, something to be quantified for reports. Moreover, empowerment in this way also places the onus on Roma, “empower the people to be able to solve their troubles themselves.” It is important to note that the structures responsible for contributing to the current situation make challenging this position difficult. Marek, though, raises important points about empowerment as a process of “changing identity,” to see oneself through a different perspective in order to change one’s situation. According to the organizers, media in this way play an important role, particularly in seeing oneself differently. Media become sites for self-identification. For non-Roma audiences, there are countless media representations that audiences may identify with. The Roma, however, have few options that reflect diverse experiences, which carry serious implications. The invisibility of Roma in mainstream Czech media function to further marginalize Roma, rendering their experiences and

lives unimportant. This notion demonstrates the status conferral function of the media, which Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) describe as the media enhancing the “authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status” through media coverage (p. 235). This recognition via media coverage suggests to audiences that people, groups, policies, and views are worthy of public discussion. The sheer lack of coverage of topics related to the Roma illustrates that mainstream Czech media do not consider these stories and by extension, these lives, significant topics of public discussion.

For these reasons, representation becomes a powerful site of resistance. Representation encourages individual and collective identity formation, where groups engage in a process of understanding how they are viewed by non-Roma, but also the ways in which Roma see themselves. The development of diverse portrayals of Romani reality encourage identification, which become a potential resource for identification with a larger community. Ethnic/minority media reflect a more diverse understanding of Romani experience, thereby providing people an alternative imagination and potential of Romani life and experience. This type of media encourages Roma to see their identities and experiences in others, contributing to a sense of shared identity. These feelings of self-expression and self-affirmation help people associate aspects of their identity to a larger community. Seeing oneself in the media provides communities a point of reflection, beginning a process of identification and negotiation, where people may engage with diverse representations to (re)create identities. Ethnic minority media contributes, even if only at the symbolic level, to the empowerment of Romani communities with social and political implications. This process of identity construction through engagement with mediated representations contributes to what Marek and the organizers of the media production refer to as creating a new Roma identity, seeing oneself through a new perspective. To do this,

they must operate in an already existing media structure that offers both potential growth but also constraints and frustrations.

### **Czech-Roma media environment**

The current Czech-Roma media environment is quite modest. The most notable outlet is Romea.cz, a news-based organization serving as a watchdog to mainstream media outlets and providing an alternative source of information for communities with a specific interest in Roma-related content. Romea is primarily a news outlet, but they also contribute to community development, for example, providing educational scholarships for Roma youth. The outlet is respected both nationally and internationally. This dissertation project evolved from first meeting with Romea in March 2016, where I spent over a week in the summer of 2016 at the organization's office observing daily routines and learning more about their newsgathering and production practices. I conducted several additional interviews with Romea's staff during the year I spent living in the Czech Republic.

Romea.cz, in a sense, dominates the Czech-Roma media environment. However, the organization appears open to collaborations as evidenced with their work with the newly established Norwegian online television channel for Roma, *Nevimos Norvego* (Votavová, 2018). Within the country, there seems to be interest in collaboration, but also a bit of competition. Jana and her colleagues suggest there is a void in the media environment, whereas Romea believes it already serves communities in an online-TV capacity. This discussion is further discussed in conversations with directors of the outlets below. Other media platforms include the periodicals, *Romano hango*s and *Romano vodi*. There is also a radio presence, but the availability of an entertainment-based TV production, according to Jana, does not exist.

## Media production

Activists like Jana and Jakub recognize the potential of media in addressing concerns and challenging one-dimensional portrayals of Roma. Jana says, “so, I think that topics of Roma identity is crucial for the whole community, for anyone who is thinking about media, like, this sense of creating something.” These activists also note the challenges in combating this situation, specifically at that level of production, where there are few, if any, Roma who work in mainstream media production, especially in decision-making positions. Jana who had worked for a prominent media production spoke of her experiences:

When I worked for Czech televisions, we worked under the reduction in Ostrava. So, it was a Czech director, Czech person with camera, and Czech editor, so we get to Roma family and very often it happens that Czech people don't feel those things which are important in Roma environment, in Roma communities how to act with each other, you know? Just different community. Just different, uh, in Czech it's not that typically, we don't have so much different communities, we are not multicultural or we are now, of course, but the space in the Czech Republic, the majority are still Czech and the minority very small [are not], so Czech people are not very [pause], they just don't know how to adapt when it comes to acting with someone who is a different culture, so very often we get somewhere to shoot something and I felt the huge um [pause] like mistakes they did there.

This speaks to the dilemma of the disconnect of a completely non-Roma-based production culture attempting to represent a culture about which they have little knowledge or exposure; in other words, outside of their worldview. She goes on to speak of one experience where the local media production team interviewed an elder from a Roma community, where one of the

members of the production team offended an older Romani man because of the ways she interacted with him (for example, the invasion of personal space and not knowing the ways to engage in conversation with community elders). Since these production teams lack Roma representation, they also lack the cultural sensitivity to engage with Romani communities and topics. Jana sees this in other areas of the media saying,

This is happening also when it comes to communication by Czech journalists with Roma... I've seen it so many times and this is very small thing, but representing the whole topic on a different level, you know? That we are missing the connections and that the communication... I just don't have a better word for it, but its dysfunctional. The channel by media for communication, it's mainly dysfunctional.

The tensions between Roma and non-Roma therefore become visible at the level of media production and interaction. Furthermore, as noted earlier, previous mediated constructions of Romani identity have historically been shaped by non-Roma and this largely continues to be the case. As Jakub mentioned, "it's everything is about us, without us," where the media continue to exclude Romani voices, again, "we don't have voice in our media." Activists are demanding an opportunity to present their own identities and extend discussion on this topic by commenting on how Roma want to challenge negative media representations. One of the activists stated,

And this is something very often you can hear, very often from the Roma community that we want to more influence how it looks, like, you write about us or you speak about us in just a certain perspective which we don't like.

She is referring to the ways in which media cover topics related to the Roma and how communities want to challenge the representations that do not present Romani lived experiences. Again, this concern is rooted in the lack of representation of Roma in media production, which

results in the failure to present the complexities of Romani experiences and instead relies on limited and damaging representations. Jana raises this specific concern about the lack of Roma in media production.

I would say that it should be like... more open-minded people in media. I think that is very important. The same like institutions, or in schools 'cause in the end you get to the point that people represent institutions, people represent media, people create this all.

And what they have in their minds, is what we see that...but we would need more people who are able to think of the topic with open mind on the decision making level.

Jana signals towards the importance of diversity in ways of thinking to help cover various topics respectfully and with knowledge of lived realities. Tensions between Roma and non-Roma may transfer over to media coverage, as people may carry their misconceptions and prejudices into media production, as Jana suggests with her comment about the need for more open-minded people in the media. Ivana points to some successes with employing “open-minded individuals.” Talking about a high-ranking employee at Czech Radio, she says,

He's the editor of news and that's really great because he has direct influence on how the radio informs about Roma, so for example he teaches, he really teaches... his employees because he's the boss, not to use the term Gypsy, but to use the term Roma. This is the direct influence you can have. So we just know that it is very important to get together to work together and to think together.

For these activists, it is crucial that media productions employ Roma and allies to Romani communities who are able to present topics in an appropriate manner. In response to the damaging depictions of Roma in mainstream media and the lack of Romani voices at the production stage, activists are finding alternative spaces to produce content primarily for Romani

communities, and with the hope that such content will encourage intercultural awareness between Roma and non-Roma audiences and perhaps even serve as a resource for political and social engagement. Televisual media delivered through digital formats have offered new opportunities and challenges for Roma-created cultural representation.

**Media for Roma by Roma.** During my first meeting with Jana in early October of 2017, an online-streaming television service was just an idea among a few activists. She says,

For us, it's important to be able to show that also we have different perspectives. And this is something that is a bit missing in a communication between media and Roma. So, I think this is something really important and that could be possible to reach by having some tool like that online TV.

An online-streaming service would provide Romani activists a space to create their own media content and to offer a perspective that is missing from mainstream sources. Jana acknowledges the online streaming television service produced by Romea.cz, but suggests the vision is different from what her and other activists interested in creating a Roma-produced streaming service are seeking:

Like Romea is doing really great job, like, I am happy they are here and they are role model for a lot of other countries. That is truly like a reliable agency, stable, and for many mainstream media they are like source... So, it's really good we have that. But, still they are... they have a focus on certain topics... they are not focused on the video production. And, I would say that having this video production is for Roma people to watch is very important because for many Roma read... [pause] many goes and reads what Romea has written and discuss it—things like that, but still I think to have a video channel where people can just sit [gestures hand in front of her face] and watch and



listen—it's much easier to get this information than from reading a very long text, you can very often have on Romea. You know, it's all commentaries and text, which are sometimes very specific or scientific in a way, so using a lot of words that are complicated for people to understand who don't have this high education or just don't speak with this NGO-language, you know?

Marek agrees with Jana that Romea covers the news really well, but that they do not provide entertainment programming. He says, “we want to make it fun, we want to make the lifestyle, so that's why we want to go on our way.” He also suggested that the structure of Romea does not involve Roma at the decision-making level. This project headed by Jana would have Roma in important decision-making positions.

Jana's comments about the accessibility of media content for Romani communities are also noteworthy. This goes beyond physical access to the platform, although certainly activists repeatedly comment on the availability of internet services. Rather, Jana observes that the programming needs to be produced in a way to engage particular communities. The services provided by Romea, the activists argue, may be symbolically inaccessible to audiences. These activists are seeking entertaining media content to connect with audiences, to provide a fair representation of Roma life. Jana and I speak about the impact of entertainment programming and how she believes that entertainment media, at times, are more effective than other activist efforts. She says, “Very often, very popular formats on TV, for example, are great space to show something and sometimes it happens, you know? For example, we have this reality show, um say like exchange of wives?” I respond with a question, “*The Wife Swap*?” Jana continues,

Yes, you know it, great! This format, so I don't know the people who do the show, but what I can feel when sometimes I see there must be someone who is like open-minded

because I've seen two or three times there Roma family, working, like being the better family [laughs] than the second [non-Roma] wife. You know? It's the format. So, um, what I've seen, okay, one episode of this great show can make much more than, uh, than strong um like a lot of activist initiatives towards journalists from news. You know?

I add, "The experience of just seeing it?" And, she responds, "Yeah, because so many people are watching this, so, so many people and those people perceive it, like naturally perceive it, it's not like we are doing this for Roma people to be able to get somewhere." A television program such as *The Wife Swap* presenting a Roma woman as a good mother and, in this case, a "better" mother than the non-Roma woman may challenge strongly held stereotypes about Romani motherhood and perhaps by extension, Roma in general. Jana suggests that viewers may be more receptive to this type of content, as an entertainment program that does not have an explicit political agenda, but implicitly, it may challenge viewers to think about their biases. Unlike a newscast or politically motivated message, Jana believes entertainment media, specifically reality shows like *The Wife Swap*, may serve as a better platform to engage Roma and non-Roma communities. Jana describes her work as the "Roma topic." She acknowledges the work she does with local and transnational organizations, but does not see them as work for the organizations inasmuch as work for Roma more generally: "I'm doing it for Roma topic in the end. That's really my work." Having experience in both Czech media and Roma-related NGOs, she believes it is important to bridge the two.

**Creating the space for Roma voice and media.** Hackneyed media depictions have affected the Roma and communities are calling for more visibility and representations that are created by Roma. Early in our conversations, Jana discussed the need for a mediated space:

Opening with fact that we need, we want to discuss, we want to communicate, we need space for us, like Roma, we need it for us. You know? Understand that. But, we are opening as a space to discuss, to communicate, to be in touch because we miss it, because you [non-Roma] don't wanna communicate with us. You don't want to, or part of you don't want to communicate with us. We want, like, the opening space.

In this quote, the need for Roma-produced media both for the Roma and for communication between Roma and non-Roma is emphasized. As noted above, this includes more than Roma-based news. The Roma have been denied a space in mainstream media, which has led to a narrow range of stereotypical portrayals and an emphasis on ideologically problematic messages. As mainstream media have made their position clear, a group of young Romani activist-intellectuals are coming together to create media with their voices and experiences central to the production structure and programming content. They want projects that emphasize entertainment genres, and are accessible in a way that Romea, with the organization's focus on news and (as the activists see it) "NGO-language," does not provide.

I met with Jana in April to discuss developments on the TV project, where she tells me that the group of Romani activists she is collaborating with are making progress on the online-streaming TV platform. They have been meeting with investors to finance the project and working through the type of programming they hope to include on the platform. The structure of the program involves Roma in decision-making levels with Jana as the director. The platform will also have one finance manager and program manager, the latter position filled by Marek. There will also be roughly three board members on the platform.

During one of our last in-person conversations, Jana tells me that the production is working with four distinct sources to provide financial support. They are in conversation with a

US-based philanthropy organization committed to addressing social inequality issues related to the Roma in the Czech Republic; the Czech Ministry of Culture; a Czech foundation developed by a Czech mathematician and anti-corruption campaigner who encourages projects specifically related to dealing with social issues; and Pepsi, the soft drink company. I ask for clarification about the Pepsi connection and Jana mentions that one of the organizers has a personal connection at Pepsi, who has helped fund other projects at a local organization. These financial ties also become an important site of investigation, as the oversight with which these organizations and companies may have on content – or the potential for self-censorship given the pressure to keep sponsors content – should be monitored. The role of a corporate sponsorship with this level of significance and branding goals introduce a number of implications. On the one hand it may boost the quality of the production and the reach of the platform with both increased funding and cross-promotion. On the other hand, such support from a large corporation may come with potential conditions, including influence over the content to have it fall in line with the sponsor's promotional goals. As with most minority media projects, groups rely on the resources of government and government-related agencies. The Ministry of Culture may provide limited funds. As the organizers are finding, developing a sustainable project is a real challenge.

After I left the Czech Republic, I continued following developments on the TV project through conversations with the platform's director. Jana provided a feasibility study in October 2018, where the group developed a detailed business plan for the platform. In the study, they write that funding would come from personal savings, grants, EU funds, sponsorship, donations, crowdfunding, loans, contributions from the Employment Act, and other entrepreneurial activities, including sales from advertising. In a follow up interview, as it turns out, Jana suggests that Pepsi is no longer a potential funder; the volatility of such early funding sources is part of

the economic dilemma for alternative media. In any case, the organizers acknowledge that the business structure is not set up for profitability. Instead, these funding sources would help get the TV project off the ground.

The feasibility study was a topic of discussion while I was still in Brno, as Jana and I discussed the ways in which the group would learn more about what is needed to create this project as well as audience interests. As the project's momentum grew, the organizers began to think more concretely about the types of shows they hoped to include on this TV platform. They were interested in music programs showcasing the talents of Romani artists as well as a show on "invisible superheroes." One of the activists described the invisible superheroes show as an opportunity to cover powerful stories about Romani lived experience. Jana says that many members of the local Roma community have inspiring stories that have never been told. This program hopes to make more visible the lives of everyday Roma. Communities are seeking fair representations based on lived experiences. This is not suggesting that negative representations should be replaced with positive ones, but rather portrayals reflecting Romani diversity should be included in media. As an added benefit, producers of this show hope that it may build pride in communities through the presentation of everyday people being seen as superheroes in their communities, challenging the limited representations of Roma frequently found in the media like the "poor but happy Gypsy." In a conversation with Marek, one of the activists working on developing this production, I raise the concern of negative media representations of Roma in Czech media. He tells me that he plans to develop a sitcom-style show—which he has already run as a theater production—to combat these representations. "The next steps will be, we want to shoot it. It has to be a normal sitcom like *Friends*, also *My Family* in the UK, no, I think it was in UK serial uh *Step by Step*, you know, this kind." It is interesting to note that Marek refers to

these productions as “normal sitcoms.” The organizers want a place at the mediated table: to provide a site for recognition and inclusion—a place to see oneself reflected fairly within a framework that often excludes Romani lived experience. At the surface, this may appear trivial, however, this sitcom-style program could hold transformational potential for communities. I ask Marek to explain the topic of the sitcom, to which he responds:

Oh, the topic is that we are creating a new Roma identity. This is it. The people will do some, they will, they will face against normal, uh, normal situations, normal situation...

The identity will be that they are Roma, this is my philosophy.

Marek’s comments touch upon several important points about the purpose of this production 1) the idea of “creating a new Roma identity,” which is further discussed below and 2) presenting Roma in roles that depart from stereotypical portrayals navigating the same situations as non-Roma, which functions to normalize Romani lived experiences. Marek continues on the topic of this program saying,

That we will make young children see this and be proud of them, ‘ah we have Roma serial at the TV and I want to be same, uh, same famous like her’ maybe and this is, I believe, this can bring the inspiration for the young people.

I ask, “Having that representation?” He responds, “Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Marek also raises another point about one of the goals of the production, which aims to instill a sense of pride through identification with characters and experiences.

### **“Creating a new Roma Identity” through streaming TV**

This media production by Romani activists for communities challenges the ways in which Romani identity is traditionally constructed, that is, for example, by governments, non-Roma, elites, and mainstream media. This method allows for the production of a Roma identity

from the ground-up (by Roma) rather than the top-down by also using the conventions of entertainment television.

**Types of programs.** Speaking about the intersection of media and identity, one activist suggests,

I think this video channel would be great to get the discussions and the topics we have... and what is more important... it's joined with the topic of the identity, like, to get those people feeling that there is an important and strong identity they have and which can be reflect by the information they can have from that media. I don't know, like, the special, special Roma music show, for example, or Roma history show or regular show about how our kids are great and showing children like talented children, series like that. So, these very small things, which can, which, I think, could be popular if done good [laughs].

What this quote illustrates is that a Roma-originated television service would be multi-genred and serve different sectors and demographics of the Roma audience; this would help build a Roma identity (or identities) with not just one vision, but different ones, reiterating an earlier quote from Marek about “creating a new Roma identity.” When planning the streaming service, there are specific programs that the organizers envisioned for the online platform. Initially, the group discussed musical programming, debate/talk show, cooking show, and a scripted drama. The group, though, eventually scaled down the types of programs to concentrate on the quality of the production. In one of our last conversations in April, the group decided to focus on a musical program and a cooking show format, although, as profiled in a later section, their pilot episode where they tested production used neither of these, but instead a talk-show format, a genre that is likely less complicated than a musical program (that would require more elaborate sound

equipment) and a cooking show (that needs a kitchen-staging area). The selection of music and food programs illustrates the ways in which the organizers would like to present and think through Romani identity. Music is a significant part of Romani culture and identity and through which the organizers would like to present a more nuanced portrayal. The communist era stripped away the culture and creative professions of Roma and left them with few career opportunities following the fall of communism, so the production of a music program aims to revitalize this aspect of Romani culture. In addition to the musical program that focuses on aspects of Romani cultural identity that have been suppressed, the organizers are developing a cooking show that follows a host making traditional dishes while speaking Romanes. The organizers stress the importance of having a program in the Romani language, as discussed below; this creates both opportunities for unity while also creating challenges about accessibility.

**Language.** Part of “creating a Roma identity” is also reclaiming parts of Roma identity that have been forcefully removed. Language is an important aspect of cultural identity and for the Roma, a highly complex topic. Similar to the word Roma, which serves as an umbrella term for a diverse group of people, Romani or Romanes is the language spoken by Roma. There are several varieties and dialects of Romanes including Vlax and Sinti Romanes. Other examples include Dom (Syrian gypsies) who speak Domari and Lom (Armenian gypsies) who speak Lomavren (Hancock, 1993, p. 26). There are also Para-Romani varieties, where local languages are integrated into Romani: Caló is a variety of Para-Romani found in the Iberian Peninsula (Matras, 1993). However, in general, most linguists agree on the Indic origins of the Romani language and with Indo-Aryan roots, rendering some of the different dialects mutually intelligible.



The Romani language, however, has experienced considerable suppression, a history that highlights its significance. The Hapsburg Empire of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century attempted to control otherness in various ways, where some of the most forceful methods of assimilation were placed on Roma. For example, “The Roma were no longer allowed to set up tents in the woods; rather, they should be urged to farm the land in towns in scarcely-wooded areas” and “Roma were not allowed to marry among each other” (New, 2014, p. 171). Prohibitions on language were part of these controlling techniques. The punishment for using the “Gypsy language” was 24 strokes with a cane (New, 2014). Civilization and citizenship, in this context, meant the expulsion of Romani identity. Language purity was a key focus for the different ruling classes throughout Europe. New (2014) argues,

Speaking a 'degraded' variant of Czech or German or Hungarian, and degraded through an admixture with a language that many might not count as a real language, marks Roma as culturally, racially, and socially not-Czech, not-Austrian, not-Hungarian, not-European. And in most national contexts, 'not' translates automatically to 'less than' (p. 168).

Within this process, the use of Romani language declined. New (2014) refers to this phenomenon as “language loss,” where a number of factors, including social exclusion, has led to fewer people and communities speaking Romanes. Many of the people I spoke with mentioned that they may understand Romanes, but are not able to speak the language. For example, in the home, they may understand conversation among older family members, but speak Czech primarily.

Language, of course, plays an integral role in the expression of identity and serves as a resource for identity negotiation and community formation. Matras (2015) notes

Yet despite the absence of centralisation and territorialisation, the promotion of Romani is a key element in the consolidation and politicisation of Romani identity, and language serves as a key argument in attempts to legitimise demands for Romani political representation and for protection from discrimination and exclusion (p. 299).

Use of the Romani language is a political act. As the removal of Romani language by those in power demonstrates a top-down imposition, use of Romanes becomes a way to challenge this structure from the bottom-up. Activist groups utilize Romanes in their efforts to influence the ways in which Roma see themselves as well as outside perception. In this regard, language becomes a resource for collective identity formation, where activists incorporate Romanes into efforts to help build connections and reclaim parts of a shared identity.

The group organizing the online-TV production discussed the importance of the Romani language in their broadcasts. Language in this way brings communities together through one aspect of shared Romani identity that is not presented in the media. The organizers of the platform interviewed Roma to understand audience interests. They found a significant number of people prefer programming in the Romani language. One activist noted,

70% really want Romani language, it's a huge thing and I was surprised that people who don't speak Romani or just a bit or just understand and don't speak, all of them, I talked to, even though they don't speak well or just understand, possibly, they want to have it in Romani language. So, the importance of language as a core of identity is huge and I think it's really a common point for all the different groups, like different groups by age, by economics- economic situation, by uh, education, you know? Like the Roma nation is so divided that the language, let's say we have in common, even though there are

differences. So we would like to work with that idea a lot and find a way to support this really Roma product by language.

Jana acknowledges the different dialects and levels of comprehension. The organizers, however, see this as an opportunity to provide educational services to audiences as well, where viewers may acquire more of the language from their engagement with the proposed media content. In this aspect, the inclusion of Romani language in broadcasts functions to bring audiences together over a shared sense of identity and build community. There is a clear yearning for this type of representation, as a majority of the people surveyed want programming in the Romani language. When I ask Jana if the people she interviewed are seeking a particular type of program in Romanes, she responds, “Well, many of them said that it would be great for them to hear their language somewhere.” Communities are searching for some type of representation, to see their lives reflected in the media with which they engage. This type of representation also serves a political purpose in that it aims to produce a Roma identity, as Marek suggests, to create visibility and acceptance in one’s experiences. Romanes functions as a marker of identification with a group and shapes the way people see themselves as well as their position within the group that may contribute to other efforts. As discussed below, the use of Romanes in a television program can help build Roma identity even across national borders.

In the feasibility study that Jana has shared with me after I returned from the Czech Republic, the creators of the platform have decided to shoot the music and cooking program in Romanes with Czech subtitles. The study also reveals that based on audience interests, they would like to create a soap opera drawing on the Shakespearean classic *Romeo and Juliet*. In this adaptation, a young Romani man falls in love with a young ethnic Czech woman. The premise of the show is that Romeo, the young Romani boy, teaches his love interest, Julia, Romanes. The

different topics covered include dating, shopping, and educational conversations around introductions and holidays. The creators of the platform categorize this program as both a soap opera and language course. In this way, the entertainment program will also serve as an educational resource for many Roma who are looking for this type of representation of Romanes in media as well as desires to learn the language. The programs on the platform serve as a site for identification—seeing one’s culture represented in the media—and a site for reclaiming aspects of Romani culture that have been forcefully removed or stereotyped.

**The television audience as Romanipen.** As illustrated in the conversations, people may use the terms group, community, or nation when referring to Roma as a collective. It is important make a distinction between identity and the terms group, community, and nation. As McGarry (2017) suggests, there is a tendency to collapse differences between identity and group. Drawing from Brubaker (2004), McGarry argues that ethnic identity may exist outside conceptualizations of a group. This is significant, as conflating the two may lead to generalizations made about a whole group. With minority groups, individuals may experience both the stereotypes that are ascribed to the entire group and, due to their marginal position, difficulty in challenging dominant narratives. At times, the terms group and community are used interchangeably and examining the way people employ the terms provides some insight. Several of the people I spoke with attach ethnic identity to the use of the term community. For example, Marek suggests, “... one unique community. We are Roma.” Similarly, Jana includes ethnic identification in her use of the term community, “... how Roma community feel or don’t feel that Roma people are Czech or are not Czech,” and “Roma community and Czech community are really, like, disconnected.” There is explicit inclusion of ethnic identity. Further, community may also include geographic spaces, as Lenka suggests in the following chapter, “community

environment,” meaning the physical spaces that community members inhabit. Community is also employed to refer to different members more broadly, for example activist communities. Groups, on the other hand, suggest smaller collectives, where members share values and vision: Ivana says, “... within the group... we discuss...” This is more of a closed collective that requires some sort of opt-in or invitation to participate. This is the case with Facebook groups and also becomes clear with the activist groups, typically made up of a few members with the same goal in mind. Groups may transform into communities and vice versa as identification and participation in them is negotiated. In conversations where individuals may use the term nation, they elicit more nationalistic views, such as the creation of a “Roma nation/state.”

Given the diverse experiences, there are different conceptualizations of “Roma identity,” which also impact understanding of group, community identities, and affiliations. Furthermore, Roma are frequently defined by their shared experiences of persecution, as most constructions of Romani identity focus on negative ties. There is also the idea, as Marek puts it, of a “pure Roma,” represented as a poor Roma person, or stereotypical images perpetuated in the media. These representational differences, the organizers believe, only further divide communities, separating Roma into poor/rich, educated/uneducated and so on. In response to this, the activists and organizers are attempting to bring communities together through a reconceptualization of what it means to be Roma, to be part of a Roma community, group or nation. The idea of “Romanipen” comes up often in conversation. Romanipen (or Romipen) is generally understood as “a shared frame affiliation among Roma” (Alliance Against Antigypsyism, 2017). Activists are working with communities to better understand how people think through what it means to be Roma. Ivana says,

Like, what does it mean to be Roma? And, it is always very interesting to speak to Roma about this. And they are always keen in this discussion—in this kind of discussion. And, within the group... we discuss it also, we find out that maybe the Romipen means to survive everything [laughs] because in our history, you can see that we were persecuted all the time, but we survived, under every condition, we survived and if I would like to be more nationalistic, I can tell, that ‘hey, look, how big success or advantage or what’s the word, we made despite the fact that we were so much restricted. So, maybe this is the Romipen.

She continues, “You know? Always to find a way to survive and endurance. And, endurance is typical for us.” Rethinking shared Romani identity through the lens of survival rather than persecution helps to reconceptualize the past and contributes to rethinking the present as well as the future. Ivana goes on, “But, the fact is that, we too much focus on negative things and don’t see the positive things.” I agree with the point she makes and she continues,

But, maybe, to remember Holocaust, you will present some personal stories and then you can see that those Roma who lived here, they were, some of them were lawyers—they were part of the society and maybe what we should get used more is, not to stress that they were killed, but to stress out who they were these times and how they lived and that they were part of the society.

It is from this framework that activists and organizers are attempting to create a new way to think about identity. Ivana says, “we are still in the phase of trying to find out who we are,” negotiating these experiences with particular attention to rethinking how the past influences current conceptualizations of identity.

Roma-based media production is one avenue to understand and present shared cultural identity. The organizers are looking for ways to produce representations that more completely reflect Roma experiences that can serve diverse communities in the hopes of building and strengthening ties. Marek says, “we want to be for every Roma, yeah. And, I think fun and lifestyle is for everybody without, without difference in the nation, yeah. And this is our philosophy. We want to be here for everyone.” There are differences within communities that are multiplied outside of domestic borders. But Marek and his colleagues want to create a space, where Roma may engage with diverse images and experiences. He believes that entertaining media content, for example, the programming they are developing, is interesting for everyone and will help communities see the similarities rather than the factors that attempt to divide Roma. The organizers would like to serve diverse communities and bring groups together through a media production that offers a different perspective, connecting people through shared experiences, realities, and desires to connect, for example, through language. This contributes to a reconceptualization of what it means to be Roma, of Romanipen. Musical programs and productions in Romanes contribute to a revitalization of shared cultural identity through elements that connect communities.

The online-TV platform is a Romani driven and centered production in the Czech Republic, but use of the Romani language becomes one way to connect communities beyond the Czech Republic, where a possibility of this production traveling across borders contributes to different collaborative opportunities. In our conversation, the transnational potential of this project becomes clear.

We will always have to face the fact that we—even though we are online, so we don’t have boundaries or barriers like in space, in online space—we are still in Czech Republic

and speak Czech, so we would like to, uh, we would like to engage people, can go for this language even if they don't understand Czech and even though this is very complicated, the language versions can be different, I think with this format language lessons, we can make a topic of it, you know, touch people, let them engage in comments, so I think there is a potential in this

The organizers of the platform are interested in providing audiences representation of Roma experiences and culture, educational resources to learning Romanes, and bringing together communities. This final aspect is particularly interesting, as the group of young Romani activists are attempting to work through factors that have long separated Romani groups. They acknowledge a need to come together through differences to work towards changing Romani experiences in the Czech Republic and working alongside larger communities throughout Europe. The use of the Romani language serves as a tool to reach communities outside of the Czech Republic, where those who do not speak Czech may still locate ways to connect to a larger community based on a shared understanding or relationship to the Romani language. As Matras (2015) notes, “Romani serves as a binding factor for individuals of different geographical and family network backgrounds—as a kind of bottom-up, transnational vehicle of communication and as an expression of identity” (p. 296). There are challenges within this process as well, for example, the possibility that those speaking a different dialect or non-Roma may not be able to engage with the content. But the organizers do not consider this a significant concern, as their main objective is to provide points of identification for Romani viewers, where they hope that a connection may be established regardless of how well audiences understand Romanes.



The production promises a more nuanced perspective of life for Roma in the Czech Republic, departing from the solely negative or positive representations to present more diverse portrayals that audiences see themselves in. For the organizers, reaching the younger generation is particularly important, in an effort to present images that viewers may identify with that may also serve as a source of inspiration. Continuing from a previous conversation with Marek about the importance of Roma representation for Roma youth, I ask him about the people and communities they hope to reach with the programs and he responds, “Target audience is very open, but mainly it is oriented on Roma youngsters from 12 to I don’t know, but this is the priority, that kind of target group.” First and foremost, according to Marek these are programs for Roma, where he hopes that more diverse representations will help with identification and thereby contribute towards creating a new Romani identity or at least providing a space to negotiate more complex identities than provided by media. Non-Roma are not denied access to this space, however, it is primarily a space for Romani viewers, as an alternative space that responds to the limitations of mainstream media. The activists hope to produce an identity that Roma and youth in particular, can identify with, be proud of, and hopefully want to embrace.

Marek’s partner in this project provides her views on the imagined audience for the production:

I can imagine being a person from the majority, who has nothing to do with Roma, don’t know nothing, don’t know [TV] personality, nobody, you know? And, watching this, you can be very silently watcher of something you are not used to and then you just see, you just, you’re just watching communication and interviews about things you weren’t even thinking is possible, sometimes.

For Jana non-Roma viewership is encouraged, where viewers may engage with topics that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. She continues,

And, that for me, that is starting point for any other communication. Any person, like, this can do it like, future or just, I see that we are open, we create a possibility to something which is not happening now, so we are opening something, like you mentioned, cracking, opening an egg, creating something which is not now and it's possible. It is possible to have it.

Jana's comment touches upon two specific points 1) the possibility of this production in creating a space for Roma to engage with content, a space that she believes has not existed before and 2) that the production may open up other forms of communication, perhaps even encouraging intercultural awareness and dialogue among communities, Roma and non-Roma alike.

The grand vision for Roma-produced and targeted content, though, was very much in its infancy during and immediately after my fieldwork in the Czech Republic. However, I did have the opportunity to witness a "trial run" production shoot of a pilot program. It generated energy among many of the participants and offered unique voices a forum, but it also displayed the rough-and-tumble nature of alternative media production and the need, at times, to compromise visions for the practical concerns of available human and physical resources, time constraints and economic realities.

### **Pilot program and episode**

The organizers had long planned to record a pilot episode for the online TV platform, and they scheduled the recording during a week of celebrations and remembrance to mark International Roma Day. On April 9, 2018, members of the community were invited to a

recording of a talk show, a format that may not have been in their top two genres for the initial vision of the service, but that the organizers hope to include in the TV platform at some time.

The recording is quite exclusive, as audience members were asked to RSVP to the event and explicitly told to not share any details from the recording immediately; I was fortunate to be one who received an invitation. I arrive at a busy café and I take a seat behind the bar to keep distance from the large camera cranes in the small room. The café, run by a local NGO that works with Romani communities in the area, serves as a cultural space within the community, bringing together Romani artists including musicians, performers, and photographers. For this occasion, it serves as a TV studio.

I see Marek from across the café and he waves. He is busily running back and forth, setting up the room. He stops to chat for a moment, sharing with me that there are currently four other groups working on a similar TV project for Romani communities. He says that their production will be “better.” There is a sense of competition to get the project off the ground first. There are interesting tensions within this mediaspace already that I begin to notice. The number of people and groups working towards producing media content for Romani communities demonstrates the need and desire for this media content. But, this space also illustrates how tensions transfer to media production. One of the organizers appears completely uninterested in collaborating with other groups. Through our conversations, he mentions that non-Roma have coopted different projects and spaces created for Roma and it appears that he would like the decision-making positions of this project reserved for Roma. Jana’s view on collaborating with other groups differs. She is interested in working with other groups, but believes their respective visions do not align with one another at the moment. This of course includes the most established Roma-media organization, Romea. After I speak with organizers at Romea, it becomes clear that

a collaboration would be difficult. Jana and the group of organizers have an ambitious vision for the media project, something of which Romea was critical. Romea has dominated the Roma mediaspace in the Czech Republic and has had great success on an international stage with their projects, for example, Romea was the recipient of the European Spirit Award in 2016 (Albert, 2016). For Romea, the media project purposed by Jana and the group of organizers does not seem feasible in its current form. Building a sustainable business model to support this project will be a significant challenge from their perspective, something Jana and the group are aware of, but nevertheless are committed to moving forward with the project.

Back at the pilot recording, we are asked to silence our phones and refrain from sharing any details of the recording, as the project is completely under wraps. I ask Marek when the pilot will be available and he says in about a year because funding remains unclear. I imagined that the pilot would be made available to potential funders, but it becomes clear that there is an urgency to get the production off the ground as soon as possible. Instead, the talk show will be ready to broadcast once funding becomes available.

Jana walks by once more and asks members of the audience to put their phones on airplane mode, as they prepare for the recording. A young man takes the seat next to me as Marek also asks audience members to turn off all mobile devices. As I learn later, the young man sitting next to me in the audience will actually be a guest on the program, perhaps displaying the sometimes-compromised nature of this early production and its lack of resources (such as a green room for talent). Marek makes eye contact with me and translates into English his announcement about mobile devices. I smile and nod (my position as a non-Czech speaker now made public), as the young man sitting next to me leans over and asks if I understood the instructions. I tell him that I was able to pick up the gist of the conversation. We chat briefly about language

comprehension and understanding some of the directions given in Czech, as Marek continues speaking to the audience with instructions. Marek provides further directions, saying that once he claps, the band will begin playing music and the audience, made up of about 30 or so people, should begin clapping.

The talk show was conducted in Czech and so I had a limited understanding of the conversations taking place. I was able to pick up some of the conversations and paid close attention to interactions between the host and guests as well as audience responses. To supplement my understanding of the pilot show, I conducted a follow-up interview with Jana to better understand how the production team felt about the recording, including discussions of what worked, what they would do differently, and her general thoughts on the interview segments. I have incorporated these conversations into my observations of the pilot show recording below.

The musical duo begins playing music along with applause from the audience. The camera pans over to the front of the room to Jana sitting on a black leather couch. She introduces herself and the talk show. Her first guest is a comedian and they spend about fifteen minutes sharing stories. She tells me later that the comedian is a local star, a popular figure in the community, who many recognize. Jana also mentions that his personality and the light-hearted nature of the interview would be of interest to audiences. From there, the production team takes a five-minute break. One of the three cameramen walks over behind the bar and attaches the microphone to a young woman, who will be the show's next guest. The young woman is an actress with a local theater production and has been selected as a potential actress in one of the scripted shows the production team is planning. As production resumes, there are a couple of takes as the music and guest entrance do not sync. Finally, the young actress is interviewed by

Jana. The young actress is active in the art community and part of the younger Roma generation, bringing a different perspective to the show. The young man seated next to me, Pavel, is the last guest on the show, something of which I was unaware until he was called up. Pavel comes from a well-known musical family, where his father is a famous musician. He works with Roma youth and spoke with the host about some of the projects he is currently working on. Jana describes him as an academic, noting that Pavel is a native Romanes speaker and has studied the language in college. This is an important aspect, as language is a central factor to the media production. In a follow-up conversation, Jana suggests the segment with Pavel was “too academic.” This was visible during the recording, as Jana switched from Czech to say in English, “so you speak English, too?” To which Pavel laughs and says “yes.” I interpreted this as a way to lighten up the mood.

From there, the show comes to a close. The young man returns to his seat next to mine and continues conversation about being bullied as a child because of his Romani background. He says that as an adult, people do not automatically read him as Roma because of his light skin complexion and eye color, but that he experienced a great deal of discrimination as a child. Pavel’s story is similar to that of many Roma and such experiences perhaps further signal his willingness to participate in Roma-produced media.

The visibility of these experiences is important to viewers. Pavel’s presence on the production may help others relate to shared experiences. Furthermore, having this type of representation presented in the media serves as a site for recognition that helps validate experiences not present in mainstream media. The interview with the comedian and actress also illustrate possibility to viewers, as they are able to see Roma in a different perspective and in

successful positions that are not oftentimes presented. As Marek suggested, it can be a source of inspiration for young viewers.

Reflecting on the recording experience, it was clear that this was pilot production. The production team had high-quality equipment, but there were some hiccups during the filming. The makeshift studio was located on a busy street and filming and audience attention was interrupted several times by loud police sirens and trams riding past the café. Since the café provided food and drink, there was a constant background noise of ordering and serving throughout the recording. In a follow-up interview, Jana discusses her decision to hold the pilot recording at the café, and notes that there were multiple reasons for the choice, including aesthetic, economic, and cultural. She says:

I like the place, how it looks like, it's just nice, very beautiful visually, so it's really great to do it in a place like this. Also, for us, it's easily acceptable through the contacts we have here, so we didn't have to pay additional money for rent, for the space, so practical reasons, too. And, also, this is a space people know, going with Roma people, even there were more ideas where to do it, I really insisted there and I'm happy for this.

The café is indeed a beautiful space, painted murals cover the walls, and the musical theme is found in the different items that decorate the space, which also serves as a recording studio for local artists. There are also the practical advantages to recording the pilot show at the café, including the fact that the space was accessible to organizers and that they did not have to pay additional fees to use the space. This is particularly key for a production just starting out. Most importantly, this is a space that communities are familiar with and feel comfortable in. During my time in Brno, I frequented the café and enjoyed musical shows and other events. In one of my visits to the café, there was a birthday party, where families brought food to the café. A young

woman and man approached me at the bar to share a slice of cake from the celebration. It is a welcoming space and some of the few places that communities can, in a sense, call their own, there is a familial type of feeling to the space.

Although the production will need support to raise to the standard of a professional TV recording, the goal of the production is important to keep in mind. The quality of productions is a concern for minority/ethnic media producers, as they do not have access to the same resources as mainstream outlets. It is unclear how this production will stand up against competitors, but what is clear, is that there is a demand for this type of production as evidenced by the number of groups hoping to provide Romani communities entertainment programming, as well as the people seeking this type of content.

### **Challenges of Roma media: Reification of marginal position?**

There are specific challenges to establishing and maintaining this production, including considering the possibility that this platform may actually do the opposite of what it intended, and even further marginalize Roman. Competition in the Roma activist community, resistance by mainstream media, and financial resources also present obstacles for Roma media production.

If one aim of the production is to create intercultural awareness, then non-Roma viewership is required. As Jana mentioned, non-Roma are encouraged to watch this program, but the placement of this platform in an alternative space outside of the mainstream media landscape makes it a difficult task to achieve. Given that the platform will be online and that audiences will have to know about the production to be able to access its content, the chances that non-Roma viewers will happen to come across the production, as may be the case with mainstream broadcasts, will not be as likely. Moreover, non-Roma who engage with this content may already have an interest and/or investment in topics related to the Roma. The possibility of confronting



stereotypes and assumptions about Roma by non-Roma – especially those non-Roma whose ideas may need confronting – through interaction with these alternative messages becomes a significant challenge, as unsuspecting viewers will less likely happen to come across the production. If Roma are seeking inclusion to the public space via the media, then the question becomes whether a production outside of the mainstream media space could potentially further marginalize Roma in Czech society. If television is meant to create discussions that extend to the public space, then productions should be made available in the mainstream. That is, Roma should be included in mainstream media. However, that is not the case.

And, so, what perhaps needs to be highlighted is another goal: the importance of this production to Roma. The primary concern for Jana, Marek, and their colleagues – even more than educating non-Roma – is the representation of Roma for Roma. The opportunity to see oneself reflected in the media, as a means to provide visibility that in turn may contribute towards feelings of belonging. In a society that continues to exclude Romani experience, this representation matters. These two goals likely, then, cannot be accomplished fully by the level of production currently envisioned by Jana, Marek and the others; it would require a longer and more systemic intervention.

At any rate, there are other issues. For example, this media space is full of tension, as the alternative space in which Roma media is situated also raises concerns about the fragmentation or “balkanization” of media, that is, the division of media into distinct arenas that do not cooperate with one another. This seems like a possibility, as evidenced by the relationship between the group of activists working on this online-TV platform and Romea. There is concern that the two separate outlets could fracture audiences and communities, but it also appears that the two outlets are providing different content to audiences. Jana and Marek both cite this as the

reason they are not interested in collaborating with Romea in the current moment. It is also important to note Marek's comment about the potential rise of four different media productions and how their online-TV production will be "better." The competitive dynamic also demonstrates some of the contradictions and tensions within this space. There is a desire to bring communities together, but also in a very specific way. This raises concerns about the authority over the construction of images and voices and the ways in which this may further exclude certain experiences. As a result, the production of competing media ventures may reproduce some of the challenges that activists have already experienced around bringing diverse groups together and may contribute towards further separating groups. Ideally, the groups could collaborate on a media venture, but as the conversations illustrate, there are ideological differences in the ways in which the groups approach the topic of media production.

In the larger context of Czech media, Roma are further removed from public discourse, as the media production exists within the periphery. This poses real challenges, but perhaps rather than see this fragmentation as a problem, it may be more useful to understand the division of media, which results from a number of reasons beyond ethnic, cultural, and racial concerns, as an opportunity. The Roma have been denied voice and authority over the construction of images in mainstream media that represent Romani lived experience. Communities feel that these damaging representations impact the ways in which Roma see themselves and how others see them. In this regard, there is no other option but to create their own space. The fragmentation of media, in this case, becomes a useful tool, or at least forces activists to think creatively. Furthermore, concerns related to the fragmentation of media is a concern for those in power. The exclusion of Romani voices from the mainstream elevates the power and authority non-Roma have over the production of Romani representation. Media are sites to negotiate power. To give

Roma a voice within this space, to contribute time to Romani-related topics, would be giving voice and power to Roma. To tell the stories of the Roma without their input is to continue to silence their voices. The reality, as described through the numerous conversations with activists and organizers, is that mainstream outlets are not interested in collaborating with Roma or presenting diverse representations of Romani lived experience. Thus, it becomes important to have a space for Roma. This online platform may still exist on the margins, but it is nevertheless a space for Roma.

There are other challenges presented in minority media production, namely access to financial resources and support to develop quality productions. Creating and maintaining a sustainable production is a real concern, as the consumer power of the group plays an important role in potential sources of funding. In other words, are advertisers interested in reaching this consumer group? If not, then other sources of funding – foundations, the government – could be sought, but that often may put organizers in a perpetual state of fundraising. My observations of the pilot talk show saw some evidence of the lack of funding: choosing a practical talk show format rather than front listed genres like cooking and music; a noisy set chosen in part because of cost that was not particularly TV friendly; a “make do” quality that had talent sitting with the audience; a series of technical issues that caused a couple of false starts. Such qualities can be positive: they can add a “cinema verite” feel to a production and emphasize its authenticity. But if a goal is to mimic professional entertainment productions, then this costs money.

And, even if advertisers are interested in such Roma-based programming and consumer groups, there is the issue of how much advertising influence or presence to tolerate; would too much advertising start to dilute the message – or, worse, even propagate a potentially destructive or hateful message? This dilemma goes behind finding sponsors like Pepsi for production, but

also includes distribution. The organizers have considered YouTube as a website to host their programs, as it is more cost effective than producing their own website, but some of the issues that may arise from using this website have kept the organizers from using YouTube. A discussion of YouTube was provided in the literature chapter, nevertheless, it is important to again mention here the platform's commercial structure about which organizers are weary. In a study analyzing racial stereotypes, Harlow (2012) explores the potential of YouTube in challenging the status quo and providing an alternative space for minorities. The scholar argues that, despite the potential of YouTube for alternative and non-stereotypical racial depictions that

... YouTube instead to a large extent strengthens the racial hierarchy as emphasized in the mainstream media. Indeed, YouTube does give a voice to ordinary citizens to make their voices heard, as the majority of the most-popular videos were uploaded by ordinary users and featured amateur-made content. But these citizen voices did not necessarily serve to contest media power (Couldry & Curran, 2003) or critique the status quo.

YouTube is at best a corporate wolf in user-generated sheep's clothing. To a large extent, then, ordinary users were not able to reappropriate the digital technologies for social change, but rather, internalized the corporate logic and coproduced racially stereotypical ideologies in an online world (p. 299).

The structure of YouTube, which allows for niche content, rewards commercial interests given that, as Papacharissi (2002) suggests, the internet exists within a capitalist era. Therefore, entertainment content that attract advertisers are the ones that garner the most audience attention, resulting in the reproduction of inequalities found in mainstream media sources and thereby challenging the notion of YouTube, in particular, as an alternative site for minority media production and expression. In addition to these pressures to attract large audiences through

popular (or populist) content, there is also the advertising and promotional architecture of YouTube, where videos may be embedded in pages with marketing content that flows against the ideology of the posters' videos. This perspective is echoed by the organizers I talked with, as one suggested:

I think that we decided already that we will go for our own website, even though it's a more expensive decision, but it's still strategically better... You have no control and no money from that [YouTube] and also no control, so what can happen quite easily, you have your video and somehow it's gonna happen that there will be an advertisement or spot for the Okamura [far right politician known for his explicit verbal attacks on Roma] party or something like that we would really like to uhh, we don't want to face that.

The organizers would like more control of the content that viewers engage with, specifically when they may not have control over the advertisements. They are concerned that political messages contrary to theirs, for example, messages related to Tomio Okamura and other politicians with hostile views towards Roma, may appear in this space. Furthermore, the organizers have more control over the program. Jana mentions,

We can work much better with the visual identity of TV... what it looks like, what's gonna be the way we see ourselves... we understand ourselves as Romani TV for Roma done by Roma, but there is still a huge amount of people who can watch us.

It is key to create a platform, as the potential cooptation of this space by distributors and advertisers is a real concern. The nature of the programming content is entertainment based, however, the aim of the production goes beyond simply entertainment. This production is presented as a response to the shortcomings of mainstream media and the inaccessibility Roma experience in their attempts to produce Roma-centered media content within mainstream media.

Most importantly, this is a political project. The organizers hope to bring together communities to challenge antigypsyism broadly.

### **The importance of ethnic minority media for the Roma**

The online-TV platform is a significant undertaking. The activists believe in this project and hope that possessing some authority over the production of Romani representation will work towards changing the negative experiences for Roma in the Czech Republic. Drawing from Appadurai (1996), Shi suggests “where there is [media] consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency which when collective can become the fuel for action” (2005, p. 57). Ethnic minority media attempt to create a sense of belonging, a collective, which may in turn become a source of action. The current online-TV program is in its infancy, but the possibilities are important to consider. We need to explore the full range of representation. Yes, there are clear challenges and tensions, including the potential of further marginalizing Roma, but the fact that Roma and their lives are absent from mainstream media, the creation of a space to produce diverse media representation is important to the survival of Roma. For too long, those in power, in this context non-Roma, have controlled the narrative. Mainstream media producers understand the control that images may have and the purpose these images serve in maintaining systems of ethnic/racial domination. The constant presentation of Roma as criminals in media only further complicate relations, as people view Roma through a one-dimensional framework. Furthermore, there lies the risk of Roma internalizing these messages. hooks (1992) argues,

Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves (p. 5).

Creating alternative mediated spaces to engage with topics related to the Roma is an intervention into the structures that continue to oppress the Roma people. The production of an online-TV platform challenges these structures and the authority they have assumed over Romani life. In this respect, the production of Roma media is a political act to liberate Roma from the hold of these oppressive structures. The activists and organizers working on this project see the transformative potential of claiming authority over the narrative by providing alternatives that challenge the limited ways in which Roma are presented. These mediated representations confront biases and urge reflection in the hopes of transforming perceptions of Romani experiences. Representation is powerful. Transforming the images that represent Romani life and experience is crucial to challenging and transforming the systems that have contributed to the oppression of Roma. In a society that has undermined Romani life and experience, claiming Roma as part of one's identity is a deeply political act.

This is a difficult task, as so many have been conditioned to deny or distance themselves from this part of their identity. Jiří speaks of the ways that some Roma abandon their Roma-ness to achieve access to different social and economic classes.

We speak about Roma problem like the discrimination, but there is also another problem of Roma identity because many people who are Roma, you know, it is as a consequence of the communism, if you were successful, you already... weren't Roma. You were Czech, not Roma. You are exception. You are not like them [Roma]. And many, many, the successful people are ashamed of their origin, so they don't share their origin that they are Roma. Many Roma people are ashamed... They speak languages, they have good jobs, but they don't want to say that they are Roma because they, uh, are afraid of

the discrimination and they are afraid that their children would have worse conditions in schools, somebody could say something.

For Marek, who works on the online-TV platform, he echoes these points, saying,

And, this is something what, uh, social work can't solve. That the lack of... I know many Roma that don't feel they are really Roma identify. They told me that 'I'm not that poor Roma, they are on the street, I'm different. I'm living somewhere else and I'm not talking with any Roma.' Gadge [non-Roma] tell me, 'I'm not Roma.' And, this is the problem. And that troubles, that this is the challenges for me, to put to, put the this cultural, uhh, cultural sense and identifying with this culture together, to put this people together and feel and, and, and, give them to feel that they are one unique community. We are Roma.

To be Roma in the Czech Republic is to be denied the same experiences, rights, and privileges as other Czechs. Marek's comments also illustrate the ways in which non-Roma do not consider him Roma because of this social and educational status. Challenging this position is done through intervening in the structures that have conditioned communities to see themselves through the lens of the oppressor. A number of parallels can be drawn to Black experiences in the United States to those of the Roma in the Czech Republic (for example: Matache & West, 2018), so hooks' work becomes particularly useful to think through. hooks writes, "loving blackness as a political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (p. 20). Similarly, the Roma experience severe discrimination in their daily lives. In one of our conversations, Marek says,

I fear Roma ... have the existential troubles, the existential problems. They, uh, have a lack of access to work, a lack of access to good education uh and it's, it's because of



segregation or so because of discrimination also. And, this is, uh, this mess [lets out a deep breath and laughs] this mess made from many troubles connected to existential things that they need the money for, for feeding their children. There is no place to build it up, um, confidence of nationality and cultural confidence- that this is our culture. This is what we are. This is who we are. This is what we do.

For Marek and his colleagues, they want to change the way Roma see themselves through more diverse representations. Bringing back the topic of empowerment, the activists believe the identification and affirmation afforded by media representation encourage people to see their lives and experiences reflected in a more balanced manner. This identification helps realize a full range of possibilities. These representations and diverse experiences allow Roma to see themselves through a different perspective, one that is not available in mainstream productions. The hope is that this type of representation will help viewers feel part of a larger community and work towards changing some of the existential problems they experience.

For Roma, this means claiming power and authority over one's image. I am cautious about describing this as *reclaiming* power, as Roma have never held such positions. Instead, activists are at a critical juncture given the current political moment. Jana, Marek, and the others I have spoken to are part of a new group of activists locally referred to as activist-intellectuals with innovative ideas and initiatives related to changing the experiences of Roma in the Czech Republic. The activists collaborate with large domestic and transnational organizations working towards the fairer treatment of Roma. A few of the young activists have political desires and see the importance of media in the construction of Romani identity. They view the alternative space to produce Romani identity as a liberating process that will contribute to the creation of a new Roma identity produced by Roma.

## **Building community**

The Roma are marginalized because of their shared ethnic identity, therefore, responses to this marginalization and oppression—from the perspective of the activists—is working to change this reality through a reconceptualization of Romani identity. Identity is a complex topic, particularly with the diversity among Roma along cultural, religious, linguistic, and familial ties. The heterogeneity of the Roma, which many scholars have seen as an obstacle for developing a collective identity, is reconsidered in this context. While experiences of marginality serve as a source of connection among diverse groups, the response focuses on different forms of expression. Rather than focus on content that continues to discuss negative experiences, the organizers focus on representations beyond the marginal position of Roma in the Czech Republic to help communities see themselves through a different perspective. The TV project illustrates one of the ways activists are organizing to bring communities together and reclaiming aspects of Roma identity that have been forcefully removed and honoring aspects of cultural identity that have persisted through the different powers and structures that have aimed to divide Roma. The musical program illustrates the importance of music to Romani culture. Moreover, the use of Romanes aims to revitalize parts of Romani cultural identity. The online-TV platform provides different sites for identification, recognition, and affirmation. The fluidity of identity encourages constant reconstruction and the online platform allows for a diversity in identifications and experiences.

What is most inspiring from this project is the way in which the group of activists developing the online-TV project are circumventing the traditional structures that have denied Roma voice and assumed authority over the construction of Romani representation. These groups have attempted collaboration with mainstream productions, but given little if any

authority over the narratives and stories produced. As a result, the activists have located an alternative space online, where they are able claim authority over the stories and perspectives presented. This allows producers to create more diverse portrayals that allow for entertainment, but more importantly, reflection. The power that lies within this authority over the construction of representation is transformational for Roma. The online-TV project hopes to reach and reflect diverse experiences. This reconstruction of Romani identity is a call to action, where media production becomes one source of creating communities around diverse expressions of identity.

Quotations from activists throughout this chapter demonstrate the ways in which they are creating a space for communities to construct alternative narratives and representations. The online-TV platform provides a place to negotiate individual, community, ethnic, national, and transnational identities. This production is instrumental to feelings of belonging that may help Roma see themselves in a different light. That is, through their own construction of what it means to be Roma. This understanding of Roma identity may also contribute towards working on changing the position of Roma in Czech society, as communities are able to imagine a wider range of possibility.

### **Summary**

At the center of this project is understanding the possibility of media in serving as a site to negotiate identity and build communities, which in turn may work towards the mobilization of Roma in challenging the structures and powers that have contributed to their marginalization. This chapter does not suggest a causal link between identity construction via the media and mobilization, but rather illustrates the ways in which communities are working towards mobilization through a reconceptualization of what it means to be Roma, that is how Roma see

themselves and how non-Roma see them. Identity, here, is viewed as central to changing Romani reality in the Czech Republic.

The organizers operate the production under the premise that media representation will contribute to a new understanding of Romani identity. There exists a dialogical relationship between identity construction and the production of the online platform, where identity informs the content of the platform and vice versa. As Ivana suggests, “we are still in the phase of trying to find out who we are.” It is the hope of the organizers that the media production will help in this process. This is not to say that a homogenous ethnic identity is the end goal, but rather that there needs to be diverse representation of Roma identity.

The concerns of framing mobilization around a shared ethnic identity suggest that building a collective around that which marginalizes Roma, that is, their ethnic identity, will serve to further exclude them from Czech society. Moreover, strengthening ethnic identity, as Ruegg and Poledna (2006) suggest, may further deepen divisions among Roma along educational lines. However, these concerns are challenged in the current moment. The people I spoke to throughout this year provide a different understanding of their Roma identity. Yes, there exists a bond among Roma (however weak or strong that may be) given their shared history of persecution and experiences of marginalization, but that the organizers hope to reconceptualize what it means to be Roma and depart from the only negative experiences that have traditionally created ties. These activists have chosen to focus on media production as a site to create a new Roma identity and build feelings of belonging.

The media production is part of a larger effort, as the activists also speak of their political aspirations and work in communities to change the marginal position of Roma in the Czech Republic. Representation matters, as the case in the renaming of a park in the city for Brno after

the Romani musician Eugen Horváth. It is important to see one's life and experiences reflected in diverse spaces of engagement, including public space as well as in media. The mobilization of Roma has been a topic of research and concern for decades. There have been successes along the way, but arguably, the challenges have become more prominent. This chapter does not attempt to provide solutions or suggestions for Roma mobilization. Rather, it documents the current social and political moment in the Czech Republic, a moment that activists are optimistic about. There is an energy among activists and their allies in this moment, who are finding successes in their efforts.

The online-TV platform is part of this larger vision of providing Roma alternative spaces of identification, celebration, and belonging. Here the organizers are trying to use a traditional form of media (TV, even if distributed digitally) as a familiar form to strengthen Roma identity. The following chapter examines other online spaces, namely Facebook, and ones that are more obviously digital, that serve as additional sites for identity negotiation and belonging for Roma in the Czech Republic.

## Chapter Five

### **“The Facebook is a state of Roma”: Negotiating identities, building communities, and place-making online**

“And, this is our space, this is our space. The Facebook is a state of Roma. Yeah, it’s ours, absolutely.”

I ask Marek to clarify what he means by state, a mental state of being or a physical state? He responds, “physical... like a space, state, yeah. And, this is what I want in the future, our Roma place, state.” Listening to Marek, the young activist working on the TV production discussed in the previous chapter, the longing in his voice is clear. “And, this is what I want in the future...” He wants a place, a place where he is welcome, where he belongs.

Like many of the people I spoke with, Marek wants a feeling of place that many Roma are denied. Several of the people I spoke with discussed a complicated relationship with their Czech-Roma identity, as several do not see themselves as Czech. Jiří, a young Roma man who is currently abroad in Hungary for an educational program, said that his Czech identity only became visible when he left the Czech Republic, and that he does not identify as Czech (the interviews with Jiří were conducted over audio and video conferencing). He told me,

I also have a Czech friends, but I never can say that I am Czech. Even I am Czech citizen, I am here, I am here in Hungary, I watch Czech news every day, I follow, I shocked what happen in the politics. I care about my home. Czech Republic is my home, but I am not Czech.

Jiří does not see himself as Czech because of his experiences as a child:

I only don't want to be Czech because since my childhood, nobody in the Czech Republic gave me feeling that I was Czech. I came to the kindergarten and the second day, when the mother of one my friend... my friend the next day he told me Jiří, I can't play with you, you are gypsy, little gypsy and can't play with you. And I didn't know, I didn't know. I didn't understand, so I came home and ask my mom [let's out a little laugh] 'mom what it means little gypsy?' And, she told me, 'who told you that?' yeah so since the moment.

These negative experiences with non-Roma children continued, "I changed the school, as I said and you know I wasn't well accepted in collective of the pupils, you know? Of my schoolmates. I was everyday confronting, who am I?" Others spoke about their decision to not present their Roma identity due to threats of physical and emotional harm. One young man states, "I was facing day-by-day racism and hate speech and comments." Stefana, a young Roma woman working for a Czech NGO, spoke of the students she works with saying,

They are ashamed, so the students don't say that 'I am Roma.' And, they pretend that I'm Italian or something. Which is crazy, they say like I'm not Roma and many of them don't share this identity. They are not proud because society tell us that it is not good to be Roma.

And, this is a really important point. Many Roma in the Czech Republic may not publicly identify with this part of their identity due to antigypsyism, which again is described as,

The specific racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as 'gypsies' in the public imagination. Although the term is finding increasing institutional recognition, there is as yet no common understanding of its nature and implications. Antigypsyism is often used in a narrow sense to indicate anti-Roma attitudes or the

expression of negative stereotypes in the public sphere or hate speech. However, antigypsyism gives rise to a much wider spectrum of discriminatory expressions and practices, including many implicit or hidden manifestations. Antigypsyism is not only about what is being said, but also about what is being done and what is not being done. (<http://antigypsyism.eu>).

Antigypsyism contributes to feelings of being denied Czech identity, which further complicates notions of belonging in the Czech Republic. As discussed in the previous chapter, some Roma may deny certain aspects of their Romani identity to access different social and economic classes. Moreover, Roma may not acknowledge their Roma identity for fear of bullying or further social exclusion. This social exclusion is extended to other aspects of lived experience for Roma in the Czech Republic.

The people I spoke with illustrate how Roma in the Czech Republic occupy a liminal space. In many cases, this experience of not fully feeling Czech is displayed in daily interactions with non-Roma. In response to the question of “where are you from?,” one activist said he responds by saying that he is from the Czech Republic. He then says, “Plzen” (an Eastern city in the Czech Republic) when asked once more. When pressed by the same question, implying, “where are you *really* from?” He says with a laugh, “Okay, India! If you need this 10<sup>th</sup> Century [history lesson] we went from India to Europe.” This account illustrates how Roma, who have lived in Europe for generations continue to experience feelings of not *really* belonging. Living in the Czech Republic, where people may have mixed backgrounds, they experience feelings of in-betweenness and are viewed as outsiders to Czech society. One person discussed how a group of friends were asked why they were supporting the Czech national hockey team – “why are you watching Czech ice hockey team? You are Roma” – suggesting that Roma and Czech identity



are somehow mutually exclusive. As a result, they are in this in-between space, searching for moments and places of familiarity, togetherness, and belonging.

What, then, can ameliorate these feelings of spatial alienation? Can media, especially social media, that integrate into lived spaces and can be with someone constantly through mobile media, offer avenues for solidifying feelings of belongingness among the Czech Roma? Marek's statement that "...this is our space, this is our space. The Facebook is a state of Roma" comments on both the materiality and the emotionality of an online space, as it becomes a place full of meaning and belonging. Fay (2011) writes, "Arguably, nothing has changed our understandings of place and belonging as much as the emergence of the internet and communication technologies" (p. 19). With this notion in mind, this chapter explores the ways in which online spaces transform to places of collaboration, activism, and resistance, how social and digital media are both the emotional spaces and manifestations of "material" space. The discussions in this chapter illustrate the potential of online spaces, Facebook in particular, to serve as transformative places, an additional/alternative symbolic/digital home. The notion of home is associated with feelings of belonging and online spaces emerge as one of the sites that encourage this type of identification. Online spaces are not the only sites in which people may experience belonging, but as Czech society continues to exclude Roma, this chapter examines how Roma may locate online places to work through feelings of spatial alienation. At the same time, as the chapter will explore, there are tensions and contradictions of these digital spaces that may involve issues like the lack of resources and the fragmentation of community – and of communal space – by such variables as age, language and technological access and literacy.

This chapter begins with a discussion around the development of a Facebook group by a Romani activist in the Czech Republic to provide people a place to express frustration and

concerns. The group's page illustrates the different affordances and limitations of online spaces, particularly of Facebook, for communities. The chapter then turns to an examination of Facebook for campaign use, focusing specifically on one activist's efforts to combat unconstitutional education segregation. The arguments within these sections illustrate how Facebook operates as a contradictory space, simultaneously encouraging expression and community as well as potentially limiting expression, for example through the monitoring of group activity. The chapter continues with a broader look into media use online through analysis of digital media production by Roma, examining how activists denied access to media production in mainstream Czech media created PSA-like videos to share on the Internet. After examining the utilization of different online spaces by different activist groups, my analysis turns to a discussion of two specific public demonstrations. This analysis includes observations of the two demonstrations and accompanying Facebook event pages, discussing some of the tensions among activist groups/organizers as well as some of the challenges activists/organizers experience in reaching communities.

At the core of this chapter is the focus on Romani voice, identity, and experience and the ways in which media help provide a space to express these views or further deny Roma authority over their voices and experiences. As such, the remainder of the chapter focuses on the transnational aspect of activist networks utilizing different online technologies, for example, the development of an online mapping platform. The people I spoke with over the year describe how they feel excluded from Czech society through violent acts of racism, discriminatory housing segregation, and are denied access to quality healthcare, work, education, and media, as evidenced in the previous chapter. These spaces form our understanding of identities, alliances, and sense of belonging. As Roma are continually denied space and claim to these places,

communities are searching for places to call their own. With this in mind, I discuss the potential of social and digital media in serving as an additional or alternative site of home, a place to negotiate identities, claim place, and find communities of understanding. This chapter aims to provide insight into activist efforts with a specific focus on the ways in which activists/organizers engage communities, including some of the challenges, outcomes of campaigns and demonstrations, and collaborations across borders to create place for Roma.

### **Community building through Facebook groups**

The people interviewed include activists, community leaders, and community members. Analysis of media engagement among these communities illustrates the different affordances and limitations of social media as well as opportunities to establish greater connections for mobilization efforts. This section provides a practical discussion of social media use for change.

Facebook groups are online communities that can be either open, meaning a public forum where anyone with a Facebook account may have access to the content of the page, or closed, which means that users need to be invited or request access to the group page. There are a number of Roma-related Facebook pages in the Czech Republic and beyond (as these online spaces typically transcend national borders), both open and closed, that range in focus from youth empowerment, LGBTQ, advocate groups, scholarly communities, and so on. These online spaces become sites for negotiating identities, communities, and exploring the possibilities of alternative/additional home/place-making. The following section explores some of the ways in which individual members and communities have created online places to engage in community building efforts.

Danika, a Romani woman I met in the Czech Republic, is part of a group of young Romani activists. I initially met Danika at a café after being introduced to her by a mutual

contact. I continued speaking with her at informal gatherings. The following excerpts are gathered from a formal interview, where I spoke with her and a colleague and I was accompanied by an interpreter. Danika works as a public relations specialist in a socially excluded community, and therefore has a keen awareness of the affordances of online engagement. She created a Facebook group (the name of which has been omitted to protect the privacy of group members), to share her personal stories and experiences with discrimination in the Czech Republic. The group includes over 550 members, as of January 2019. Most posts are written in Czech with the occasional English found on the links shared that originate from international news agencies. The Facebook group was created by Danika as a way for her to start a conversation and also provide her community a space to talk through issues. For Danika, the Facebook group encourages people to share stories that build connections and communities. On the page, Facebook users share various types of information with a specific focus on discrimination. There are videos about the damages of racism and discrimination, such as the sharing of links to YouTube videos that show people talking about race, for example a link to a video including images of children with light and dark skin complexions holding hands, accompanied with the description “no one is born hated by others because of their color, their origin or religion. Say NO to racism!” Another user attached a link and wrote, “to think... it’s all about labels.” The link is to a video by the title, “I am NOT Black, You are NOT White” with the description, “these labels were made to divide us” and includes additional links to “more inspirational videos.” Many contributors to the page post educational content as well, including videos and links to sources about the Holocaust and the reality of Lety, a concentration camp for Roma during World War Two, later becoming the site of a pig farm and is further discussed below.

I ask Danika to describe some of the ways people may connect with one another and she responds with the following example, “Well, statements, negative statements, made by politicians. This connects them.” In 2018 there were several public events in response to the dangerous rhetoric of politician Tomio Okamura, who has openly denied Romani reality during the Holocaust, suggesting, for example, that the Roma were able to freely leave the concentration camp in Lety, Czech Republic. Experts suggest this type of rhetoric contributes to anti-Roma sentiment in the Czech Republic (Bikár, 2018). Okamura’s comments have galvanized communities both online and offline. Online, people shared news stories about Okamura’s statements and organized offline gatherings, such as the candlelight vigil organized in Brno, discussed later in this chapter. Danika says that discussions on the page focus on social and political events “then there is about social reform, now there is huge debate about distributing social security, in meal tickets, for example.” She mentions, “then there are under some status, negative comments from majority that mobilizes this community to react,” meaning people come together to respond to negative comments on the page. For example, debates that extend over to online spaces like recent discussions around social reform and the distribution of meal tickets has created divisions, where some may express their views online. I ask how members of the group respond and she says, “when there is a comment from someone from the community that is negative, well they reply... more people at once, defending themselves.” In this way, group members come together to combat the negative responses to posts. Danika says that the response is collective, as they react to these posts together. She provides recent comments made by Czech politicians as an example of the types of statements communities respond to as well. Furthermore, Danika suggests, that when there are conversations around positive role models, communities like to comment on the page and in a sense, claim the role model as one of them.

In listening to the way Danika describes the Facebook group, I begin to realize that this space is more than just a venue to share memes or post about upcoming events. The online community is a space to discuss politics and share personal experiences with discrimination to build connections and alliances through shared experiences to combat antigypsyism.

Although certainly this is a political space by its sheer existence and the serious nature of items shared and discussed on the page, there are also lighthearted posts, including memes poking fun of the far-right politician Tomio Okamura. Indeed, humor functions to work through serious issues while allowing members to express themselves in different ways. And there are also positive posts. The uplifting tone, for example, when members post about educational successes are important characteristics of this space, as it may serve to uplift members, who may often engage with demoralizing stories that could remind them of the lived experience of antigypsyism that seems like an uphill challenge. In March of 2018, a local park in the city of Brno was named after Eugen Horváth, a famous Romani musician. As previously discussed, the park is the first public space to be named after a Romani person in the Czech Republic. This type of representation is incredibly important for Roma as illustrated on the group's page. Activists and community organizers wrote about the importance of this space, as one of the "positive changes" for Roma and inviting communities to a celebration during the park's ribbon cutting ceremony. Similar to the physical spaces that are beginning to emerge as a result of the hard work of activists calling for representation, these online spaces serve as sites to engage in public discussions, celebrations, and create places of reflection, identification, and community.

**Inclusion, affect, and organizing.** As the conversation with Danika outlined, Facebook allows people to connect with one another to share experiences, an important aspect in building a sense of community and belonging (see again: Zayani, 2015; Faris & Rahimi, 2015). The need

for this online space derives from the denial of belonging in the Czech Republic, as evidenced by the comments made by people about their Czech identity, and the way that Facebook has been used by Romani activists has, perhaps surprisingly, been seen as more inclusive than one may have expected (although, as discussed later, fissures in the activist community are also evident about the use of Facebook). Moving beyond the ways of providing communities with a place to bond, Facebook has also been instrumental towards creating campaigns to combat antigypsyism. This section extends from the previous discussion of community building online to examine strategies employed by local activists and community organizers to combat antigypsyism. As discussed below, different modalities of affect that Facebook allows – that include the sharing of trauma and prejudice, but also more positive, humorous, and upbeat posts – are important to such efforts.

Certainly Facebook is a contradictory space with clear drawbacks for political activity – for example, the potential cooptation of the site by oppressive governments and corporations (Youmans & York, 2012) and manipulation by right-wing extremists or those in service of such political forces (Fuchs, 2016; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). However, discussions with activists illustrate how Facebook still may be used as a tool to challenge the structures that have excluded Roma from various aspects of Czech society by creating a communal environment where different levels of common experience may be shared and that can be inclusive in surprising ways. People like Danika have created mediated places where Romani communities may come together to share stories of success, experiences with discrimination, discuss ways to challenge negative experiences, and thereby create a community to fight injustice. This community, as suggested by the different people interviewed, is quite inclusive. The range of age, education level, and economic class of users are examples. Danika discusses her surprise with how

Facebook has spread throughout generations. She talks about how some users write poorly, “older person with no education at all,” but that they are determined to be part of the conversations online. Danika says there is a clear gap in education, but that she sees people of different educational backgrounds and ages using the platform. Petr, a community organizer, echoes this point while discussing how to engage with different Romani communities for Roma-related initiatives:

If we are talking about higher class, they read books, they read newspapers, they are buying newspapers, so maybe to attract those people, the way could be different. They watch the news on the TV and that, but if you want attract the middle class or the lower class, the interesting is in the Roma community, the people using the internet or the Facebook a lot, even the uh what’s the name, the people who can’t write or read, you know? We have experience with the old people, old grandmothers have Facebook and she just knows what buttons to press and that’s it. If you tell, uh, send this photo or something, she is not able. She will say ‘okay, when my son will come or husband, I don’t know.’ But she is using the Facebook, she’s looking on the videos. Of course, she can’t read somehow, but the writing is horrible, you know? You can’t even, you know, recognize what she wrote, but she’s writing, reading, watching the videos. Watching the focus. She’s using... because the, the integration of Roma to stay in touch with the families, so used to use the Skype a lot, but after the Facebook introduced actually those calls, so they are using the Facebook and messenger even for talking and live streaming, so that’s good, you know?

In US contexts, the elderly can use Facebook as a way to create social bonds (Jung & Sundar, 2016). In other context, in which there may be significant ethnic inequality and delegitimation –



and in even the more specific context of a geographically diffuse Roma population – such affordances may become even more important. It is not critical that such users understand how to maximize Facebook’s use or to be a skilled poster, but rather the very basic skills and access that allow integrative participation is key. In a society that has purposely and at times violently denied Roma the right to participate, to create their own identities, to be heard, the online place becomes a site for collaboration, activism, and ultimately, a place of resistance. For these reasons, community leaders and activists are employing different methods to reach more people online and develop spaces that encourage collective engagement.

Such spaces may be cultivated online but also be moved offline, as especially emphasized by Petr, the community leader from a Czech city with a large Roma population. After living abroad for a number of years, Petr returned to the Czech Republic and grew frustrated by the ineffective efforts of Roma representatives. He works with a small team on different issues in the local city and focuses primarily on providing quality education for Roma children by challenging school segregation. In organizing around this issue, Petr found that Facebook could be used not just for online community building, but also for offline organizing, a potential affordance noted by other scholars studying social justice efforts in other contexts (Harlow, 2012). On November 11, 2017 Petr and his colleagues organized a public gathering of over 2,000 Romani people to call for equal access to quality education. The event, Petr explains, coincides with the tenth anniversary of the *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* decision, a legal ruling about a case involving the misdiagnosis of 18 Roma students from 1996 to 1999, which led to them being placed in “practical schools” (schools for children with learning challenges). The decision ruled in favor of the 18 people, stating that the individuals were denied the right to education. Petr says

that activists and NGOs mark this date every year with an activity to remember the landmark decision.

Every year actually all the activists and NGOs actually remembering that name and every year they are making some events... Last year, it was, we made event..., but realized it wasn't enough because it was only us, our parents..., so it was not enough because still the other Roma and public didn't know what the DHK [is].

He goes on to say that what most people know about the ruling is incorrect information from the press and so they wanted to create more awareness around school segregation and exclusionary practices in a public gathering. The event turned out to exceed their expectations and one explanation given by Petr for this was the role of social media:

I tell you in the beginning we didn't expect it to be 2,000 people. The higher number was 1,000, but I think it was actually good strategy, it was like a good timing. Also, using the Facebook, the social media. Also, we visited not just [the local city] to invite the parent because obviously it would be people from around [the local city], we didn't expect it would be some, lot of people coming from Prague or other cities.

I ask Petr to expand on some of the ways he used social media for this campaign. He said the organization that he leads had purchased a webpage, but that the URL was long and complicated, "we didn't expect people to write that complicated name in the, in the web browser, so it should be only the links, so the main target was actually the Facebook." Through Facebook, he was able to enlist the help of local popular figures to attract interest from viewers. He elaborated,

We make also the videos from the, the popular singers, you know, and he was explaining what is the DHKs and we inviting the Roma to come and it was like, 'come and make a

change, you know? Come, this is the future of our children.' I think it was very successful.

Petr says that people are interested in interacting with entertaining content online, specifically videos, some of which he has created himself. One of this videos, Petr claims, garnered over 40,000 views in a week, and he notes how Facebook's ability to incorporate upbeat messages and positive affect can be useful for mobilization (a conclusion also supported by Gerbaudo (2016)). I ask Petr,

And so kind of thinking about that, a lot of the people I've been speaking to have commented on what you've said about Facebook being used for fun...seeing as how you've been very successful, having petitions and videos being viewed online, what are some of the ways in which you are able to use this space, like, online social media for information as well?

Petr explains,

Yeah, you know actually on the Facebook, the information must be like, it must go to the extreme like. It can't be just like one of the information or basic information like, it must be ironic, it must be sad, it must be, you know, funny to attract the attention. So, it's not true that the Facebook is useless for mobilizing or for all these activities. It is actually, we can use the Facebook, but the way we have to work with the Facebook is specific. You have to actually, you have to not, actually, uh, invent something new, but you have to work with the situation we have, you know? So, okay, so what people like? The first question is, what people like? Fun? They like some extreme situation, so okay, let's give it to them, so uh when we want them to invite them to the meeting, let's use the best artist, the best known artist to transmit the information... if they like fun, okay let's show

them some fun. When we posted the videos, it was not the best resolution video, it was made from the phone, the resolution was not very good. It was not the best cameraman, so it was shaky, you know, but it was real people, one thing, you know. Why they are laughing? Why they are so friendly? So they listen, this is the way, how to attract the people, I think. That's my opinion, my experience.

Petr finds that the best way to connect with communities is to know their interests and to provide entertaining content (“fun,” “laughing,” “friendly”) that can also be educational, a theme that was emphasized in the previous chapter in terms of cultivating entertainment genres for Roma television. Production values were seen as less important: in fact, low production values (“shaky”) may have been a way to build credibility by enhancing the authentic and grounded message of the video (from “real people”). Facebook has been a useful resource for Petr, specifically in organizing this public gathering calling for equal access to education.

Although this section of the chapter documents media engagement among activists and community members and appears celebratory of social media in the discussion thus far, the idea of Facebook as unambiguously positive for Roma activism and community is challenged later in the chapter to fully understand the nuance of online spaces for Roma.

**Traditional media meet social media: Roma representation online.** In the previous chapter, Jakub spoke extensively about the lack of representation of Roma in mainstream media. He is the director of a Roma performing arts organization, which has a large LGBTQ focus. Jakub, an actor himself, created the organization after a particularly difficult time for Roma in the Czech Republic. “Six years ago... there were many anti demonstrations against Roma... And, it was horrible, so I was thinking, ‘what should I do?’ And, after that I said, what can I do is theater, like activist, activist theater.” Employing the method of the theater of the oppressed – an

explicitly political theater developed in Brazil and derived from the ideas of Paulo Freire (Boal, 2000) – Jakub and his colleagues set out to change the way people think about the Roma through art. It is also interesting to note the interactive nature of this type of theater, a type of engagement that can also be found in social media.

After several successful projects, as noted by Jakub, he says that they were interested in other mediated representations of the Roma. In doing so, though, Jakub and other Roma media activists struggle to find a balance of access, reach, cultural legitimacy, and authenticity/agency, a dilemma that also was explored in the previous chapter. Jakub argues that mainstream media rarely have an interest in covering Roma, and, when compared to other Eastern European countries and even despite media policy, it is a struggle to place Roma issues in the Czech media, such as the television networks.

Czech Television, we have bit problem with Czech Television because a law about minority and they must have some time in Czech Television, for example, Christians have some time, minority, like all minority have some time in popular [media]. There is one program, but Roma they don't have, yeah. So we fought here, for year we fight with Czech Television because it's not normal because, for example, in Slovakia where I help with International Roma Day too, two or three years ago, they have every year,

International Roma Day livestream in Slovak Television, it's live.

In fact, International Roma Day is an event some Czech media outlets will cover, and this is an opportunity to place Roma voices. Jakub says,

International Roma Day is the only holiday, so on this day, all media want to be our voice, you know? So for us, it's really big chance to say what we want to say, not what

non-Roma say [laughs]. This day is really about us, with us. Not about [pause] about us without us. So, we can say our topic. What we want to say, what we want to change. He points to the ability of media to disseminate information more widely than individual actors, “they [media] can influence a lot of people.” But, still, mainstream media continue to create barriers for Roma to produce their own stories, including economic justifications for exclusion:

They want from us money and I don’t want to pay for Czech Television for the evening which they need to have. It’s... it’s really important for our society and they, so every year lot of lot of meetings with Czech TV. Half year they promise us, ‘we will be’ and in March they say, every year, that they don’t have money for this.

In response to this, Jakub and his colleagues have created an alternative space for Roma to watch coverage of International Roma Day and other events. These spaces, although perhaps without the immediately wide reach of mainstream television involve Roma-produced content on social media:

So, we have our open livestream on YouTube. And, lot of people saw our livestream, so it’s also good, but television is television. I think that more influence is our YouTube livestream than Czech Television because more people can saw it, you know? Because Czech Television, you have to have television. Yeah and lot of people are on Facebook on computer or notebook, so it’s easy, but we want Czech Television because it’s other level, you know. The Czech society show us that it’s important, it’s other questions in this, so I think that it’s really important for us to have Czech Television.

Activists, then, work toward two goals. One is lobbying Czech Television and other outlets to cover these events and discussions. This offers the potential for large audiences and can potentially encourage dialogue between Roma and non-Roma communities. Moreover,

mainstream coverage, as Jakub suggests, illustrates that Romani lives and experiences are valuable and worthy of coverage when they are included in the news. But, according to Jakub, and discussed in the previous chapter, such lobbying efforts may not be successful: these outlets are often not interested in covering such topics. Excluding these stories in the media further exclude Roma from Czech society. As a result, there is a second goal: communities are locating alternative spaces to tell their stories. Established social media like Facebook and YouTube, despite activists concerns about the commercial nature of the platform as discussed in Chapter Four, have become a valuable space to distribute Roma-produced content.

For the 2016 International Roma Day, the production team that Jakub is a part of developed an online campaign to combat negative stereotypes, using a PSA-like video aimed at challenging negative stereotypes about Roma, a video that was widely shared on Facebook. The organization created a 50-second video titled, “My žijeme jinak” roughly translated to “That’s not how we live.” The video follows a young man walking through a street acting out different stereotypes that people have about the Roma. A passerby hands him money and he says in Czech, “allegedly I take money from the state.” He continues, “they say, I’m a boozier” and takes a shot of alcohol. “Medicine?” he asks, “free of charge!” “Public transport? For free as well.” He is greeted by a group of friends, as he says, “they say my family is huge and noisy!” Continuing he says, “it’s in our blood... we’re animals” and growls into the camera. Taking a serious tone, he says, “I’ve heard you believe it, but the truth is different.” The video turns to a white screen which reads, “Mezinárodní Den Romů My žijeme jinak” (International Roma Day, That’s not how we live) with an accompanying hashtag #PrayForPrej. The video and accompanying campaign materials challenge viewers/readers to question stereotypes of Roma embedded in Czech society. Following the format of the video, one flyer reads, “Prej mam velkou rodinu. Fakt

tomu věříte? My žijem jinak. #PrayforPrej, translated to mean, “I have a big family. Do you believe that? We live differently.” According to Jakub, it is important to challenge these stereotypes not only for non-Roma viewers, but also for Roma.

On March 27, 2017, the production team developed another video for International Roma Day. In this video a young woman who appears ethnically Czech is standing in an elevator. A man enters the elevator and the woman clutches her purse close to her body. The two actors play out the different biased thoughts running through their minds. For example, after entering the elevator, the man stands in front of the woman and says, “every time a Rom enters the elevator, the gadje holds her purse as if it were her life.” The woman responds, “every time I ride in an elevator with a Rom, I feel like he thinks I’m a white cow.” After a few hostile displays are exchanged, the two actors finally make eye contact and laugh. The 1:04 video is titled “Můžem spolu,” translated to “We can together.” The aim of the video is to call attention to the stereotypes and biases Roma and non-Roma have about one another, Jakub says, “it is about prejudices that we have, like Roma and non-Roma. Because Roma have some prejudices too.”

After analyzing the video data, the video’s creators found that many non-Roma engaged in this conversation and shared the video online. However, motivations for sharing may be unknown, and could even be related to anti-Roma views. Jakub speculated that non-Roma may have shared the video to say that Roma have prejudices, disregarding the prejudices of non-Roma against Roma in a one-sided interpretation of the video.

I want to say that non-Roma share it because they are bored with campaign which speak about that only non-Roma have only prejudices and stereotypes..., but we have prejudices too. Yeah and your prejudices and our prejudices are not good. The same thing. Yeah? So maybe this is the reason why non-Roma really share lot of this video.



The videos emphasize the misconceptions that non-Roma may have of Roma and vice versa. “My žijeme jinak” or “That’s not how we live,” explicitly challenges stereotypical views that people may have of Roma. The second video, documenting the interaction between a Romani man and non-Roma woman, encourages viewers to reflect on the stereotypes they both have internalized.

Jakub and his colleagues are working to provide different perspectives in hopes to diversify the way Roma and non-Roma think about their identities and experiences. The above PSA-like videos overtly confronts stereotypes about the Roma. The second video focuses on stereotypes from different communities. On January 6, 2017, Jakub and his colleagues published another PSA-like video about five Roma who are part of LGBTQ groups and their experiences coming out.

The video opens with a young man sitting in a theater-style room saying in Czech, “I was filled with stage fright” and then the shot cuts to another man overlooking a park as he says “it was like before an important exam.” In the next shot, a woman sits on a park bench and says, “when I said it for the first time, I was afraid. What the reaction is gonna be like.” A man sitting in a production studio looks at the camera and says, “some people can’t even move.” Followed by another Roma man who appears to be in a car repair shop with a big smile on his face, as he says, “it was so amazing!” The background music becomes uplifting and a Roma man in a chef’s coat says, “I could finally sleep in peace.” The video then begins to cut between the different speakers as they speak about their experiences, “That... I can’t even describe it...it was just amazing!... it’s such a relief!.... I was so happy to say it out loud. Everybody knows now...you just feel free. Because I wanted to tell everyone!” As the video comes to an end, the speakers look directly into the camera saying their names and declaring their sexuality as bisexual, gay,

lesbian, as shots intercut with each person identifying as Roma. The video ends with one person looking directly into the camera and declaring, “human being.”

Jakub and many others who identify or work in the area of Roma LGBTQ rights describe the three ways that Roma LGBTQ face discrimination: for their ethnic background as Roma within Czech society; for their sexual orientation within Czech society; and for their sexual orientation within Romani society. Máté (2015) suggests that, “Roma LGBTQ people are subject to particular forms of oppression at the intersection of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia” (p. 97). Jakub emphasizes how the short video encouraged dialogue in Romani households, where several people discussed the challenges of coming out, where they may be disowned by their families. He says, “some people wrote us that, this video changed their life because they, they say at home that they are gay or lesbian and it was, it was good.” He acknowledges the value of online spaces to create connections:

We have lot of project for Roma LGBT. We have online consultants, so we were thinking, ‘how do people who need our help, will know that we are here?’ because a lot of, really, a lot of Roma are on the internet. Lot of, lot of, lot of, and this spot I think is really strong, really good and for example Microsoft, I think, saw it and they write that they want to give us money because this is really strong and really good. It was small money, but it was really good.

Nedda, the only woman in this video, discusses reactions from friends, family, and strangers.

I think my mother didn’t see it at all. My best friend called me after she saw it and she cried. I didn’t understand why she cries, she knew my whole story. She said it was okay, and she reassured me that the camera adds 10 kg and I shouldn’t mind. I was pleased by that. My uncle saw it too, he didn’t have an idea that I engage myself in such a project. It

has happened to me once, that some guy who wanted to help with something at my work came to me and watched me really oddly. I thought we know each other from the past and he said to me that he saw me on the TV. I thought he must be mistaken, but he claimed he saw me the other night on the TV and he praised me for what I do. And he was [ethnic] Czech. I was really surprised that someone watched the show, it was broadcasted around midnight. He was very nice to me; I was really pleased. He said he was a fan, he started to follow us and even shared it on the social network. That was really nice. On top of that at the place I wouldn't expect this to happen at all.

These reactions demonstrate the ways in which online spaces are providing a venue and an opening to discuss difficult topics, find communities of understanding, and produce diverse representations that reflect diverse experiences.

As these videos go viral on Facebook, I ask Jakub if these types of campaigns target a younger generation since it is online and he responds, “definitely, but not only young people—for all family, it's grandma [laughs] mother, yeah, sister, they all, they all are on Facebook. It's new Roma medium now” (also relates to Petr's comments about generational engagement with Facebook). This idea – that Facebook is the new Roma medium – stands out as a fascinating assessment of the social media platform. The perceived prevalence of the platform, as discussed by the organizers, and type of engagement has made Facebook an attractive resource for activists (also noted by: Harlow, 2011; Petray, 2011; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014). Organizers like Jakub acknowledge the potential of reaching large numbers of people through social media and enlist the assistance of professionals in developing content to inform conversations and encourage people, both Roma and non-Roma, to reflect on their positions. The producers of

these videos suggest Roma are the target audience, but that they also create videos to foster greater intercultural awareness through dialogue with non-Roma.

As Danika, Jiří, and Petr all point out, there are specific divides within communities that may impact the ways in which they access information, for example issues with literacy. However, Facebook appears to alleviate some of these challenges, as a resource that is more accessible to communities through its multimodal characteristics, including videos that make heavy use of both visuals and orality, and its ability to be shared. As Jakub mentions, “it’s new Roma medium now.” For Danika it was important to bring people together over shared experiences and to create a community online. Petr expands on this point by utilizing online spaces, namely Facebook, to create visibility around efforts that combat discrimination in access to education. He is interested in building a sense of belonging through online connections that may encourage involvement in social and political issues. Jakub is interested in overcoming the limitations of venues for Roma productions by creating alternative places to engage with Roma media. These efforts are part of a larger plan to combat exclusionary practices that have denied Roma a place in Czech society.

As discussed earlier, activists and community organizers are also utilizing Facebook to encourage community involvement, specifically as it relates to participation in public gatherings. This is not to suggest a causal link to activist efforts online and their translation to offline activities – for example, engagement with Facebook pages and posts will automatically lead to increased activism – but rather this section describes the ways in which activists utilize Facebook in their efforts. This section illustrates the ways in which communities are engaging in these online spaces and the ways in which they are locating spaces of resistance to tell their stories and build communities. Offline activities work alongside online efforts to create place, as described

by Petr. Similar to the previous chapter, where communities are locating alternative places to produce their own stories and representations, the online space, specifically Facebook, becomes a site of identity negotiation and community building. In the following section, the relationship between online activities and public gatherings organized for and by the Roma is explored further. It is a complicated relationship, as different organizational modalities intersect with the affordances of social media to create sometimes different results. As the two examples illustrate below, it may also still be early in the life of social-media symbiosis with the organization of public demonstrations, especially in a population as diffuse as the Roma.

### **A tale of two cities and their public demonstrations: Social media, participation, and generational tensions**

During the year of fieldwork, I learn about most public gatherings such as demonstrations through Facebook invites and public posts. These involve many kinds of public events, including counter-demonstrations. For example, I came across a planned public demonstration in response to Tomio Okamura, a Czech leader with Czech-Japanese-Korean background who has become the face of the far-right. I mention his ethnic background as it comes up often in conversation, suggesting that he is an outsider himself, yet represents a portion of Czech society that holds extreme views against those perceived as outsiders. Media profiles emphasize the politician's ethnic background as well (see for example: Morkowitz Bauerova, 2017; de Goeji & Lyman, 2017; McLaughlin, 2017). Okamura's baseless claims and racist remarks have hit a chord with those fearing the wave of immigration throughout Europe as well as among those aware of his fearmongering strategies, weary of an increase in antigypsyism. There were a few public gatherings and demonstrations among Roma and allies in early 2018. I attended two separately organized demonstrations, one in the city of Prague and the other in Brno. In addition to

observing the public demonstrations, I followed along the Facebook event pages for both demonstrations. The differences in organization become clearer through my analysis of the two Facebook pages and attendance of the demonstrations. Below I talk about the public gatherings and argue that social media integration varied in the two demonstrations.

On March 17, 2018, I attended a demonstration in Prague against racism, violence, and the denial of Roma victims in the Holocaust (March Against Violence and Racism). The event was organized as tensions within the country continued to escalate with the rise of far-right politics including antigypsyism and anti-immigration rhetoric.

It is a cold day in Prague. The snow turns to slush over the grass, as flurries continue to fall. I make my way from the train station to Klárov Park, a small grassed area off the Malostranská metro station. The demonstration was originally set to take place at the Office of the Government, but citing security concerns, organizers of the demonstration decided to move to Klárov. Little cafes and restaurants surround the area, which is busy with groups of people speaking different languages. It is Prague after all and tourism is always in season. I approach a small crowd that is beginning to form at 1:00pm local time. There are a number of people talking amongst one another. There are families with young children and conversation seems lively. There are a handful of police officers patrolling the park area, where more people begin to join the demonstrators. There is a man holding up a large sign which reads “Oligarcha, Babiš, neonacista, Okamura, Autoritář, Zeman” and a bracket around it which reads, “Fašismus,” meaning that fascism is created by the oligarch (Andrej) Babiš, the neo-Nazi (Tomio) Okamura, and the authoritarian (Miloš) Zeman. The crowd begins to grow with people waving Roma, Czech, and EU flags. The EU flag is particularly important for Roma, as it represents attempts to create more equal treatment of Roma in Europe. Far-right leaders have been calling for a

“Czexit” or Czech exit from the EU (similar to Brexit) and people like Okamura refer to the EU as a dictatorship because of the EU migrant redistribution system. The Czech Republic has only accepted 12 people from the 1,600 required by the EU, however fear of immigrants settling in the Czech Republic have become a real issue, even as the number of people coming into the country remains negligible (Wintour, 2017). Refugees, immigrants, and Roma, though, continue to be placed in the category of “outsider/other” and the target of such hate groups, which has inspired Romani activists and organizers to respond.

At the public demonstration, large blue tents are propped up in the grass, where organizers and musicians gather. The Romani musical group Bengas will later perform the Romani anthem to which a handful of people dance along. A circle begins to form and a number of older Romani men begin speaking. They appear to be community elders. It quickly appears that while there are a fair number of women at the demonstration, the speakers are all men. An activist I know is also in attendance and later explains that the young Romani activist-intellectuals were absent from the demonstration. Gabra said,

This was organized by more or less traditional Romani men from the older generation who consider themselves the spokespeople for their communities. They run the gamut on the political spectrum, but it is safe to say that they probably think it’s normal for the presence to be all male. They also have zero expectations of their messages having any weight.

This is an unfortunate truth: the demonstration continued, but appeared to lack a clear goal. Admittedly, my position as an outsider who is not fluent in Czech impacted this observation, but even as an outsider, it was evident that the gathering lacked a specific call to action or smooth organization. While speakers approached the microphone to talk, a couple of members from the

demonstration holding megaphones would start speaking. One older man walked throughout the crowd, wearing a neon construction-like vest and Roma flag wrapped around his body. He chanted “stop Okamura,” “Okamura out,” and “Okamura is a nightmare,” which had a very clever rhyme in Czech, loudly into the megaphone and the crowd would pick up for just a moment, but his chant would become lost in the speakers’ voices. This would happen throughout the demonstration as attention would be on the speakers and quickly interrupted by a chant that some would join, others would laugh, and some just ignored.

At around 2:15pm, the speakers were interrupted and the crowd began to disperse from the center of the park. As I tried to make sense of the abruptness, Gabra said that they just received a message that fans of Sparta, a Prague soccer club, will be marching towards the stadium. The moving group is known to be a loud and at times, an unruly crowd, and they became a potential threat to the demonstrators. Quickly, a significant number of demonstrators move to the corner of the street, lining up against the wall as if they are waiting to get into a theater. A number of people stay in the grass area near the blue tent, but there’s a sense of confusion. There’s a helicopter hovering above and it seems like the soccer fans will descend on the park area soon. I begin to wonder if it is a false alarm, an excuse to end the demonstration. Organizers are talking amongst each other and there is a bit of confusion. A few minutes later, the group of demonstrators reconvenes, but the crowd size has decreased significantly.

As the speakers continue, we are once again interrupted at about 2:40pm. It appears that the sports fans marching towards the stadium was not a false alarm, as several police officers in full riot gear begin to walk down towards the street, walking parallel to the park. There is a significant number of police officers guiding a jolly group of Sparta fans. I am stunned by the number of police officers containing the group of a few hundred through the street. They are



followed by a number of police cars and trucks, one of which makes an announcement over the intercom about maintaining peace and the plan for an immediate response by police to those who do not abide by the law. The sports fans made it difficult to hear the speakers at the demonstration and their presence made everyone hyperaware of the threat of a physical clash. However unlikely, given the heavily policed area and distance between soccer fans and the demonstration, the threat seemed real. The speakers resumed and I watched as a police officer quickly made his way through the crowd in the park. He met with another police officer who was walking towards two stragglers from the sports crowd. They appeared intoxicated and the officers were speaking with them pleasantly, but trying to guide the two quickly towards the stadium, in what I interpret as a method to control a potential confrontation. A couple of more police officers stood close by to ensure a safe distance between the two men and the demonstrators.

Attendees tapped their feet on the ground, to wake up their frozen toes and continued to listen to the speakers. Jožka Miker of Konexe Organization made a few statements towards the end of the demonstration saying, “Let's not allow history to repeat itself and concentration camps to be built again,” and “We are for a united Europe. Let's not allow this country to leave the European Union. That is the basis of our freedom” (Ryšavý, 2018b). The time approaches 3:00pm, the official end time of the demonstration, and the names of Roma who have been murdered in the Czech Republic are read aloud to a solemn crowd. The crowd size continues to dwindle and the demonstration ends shortly thereafter.

I make my way back to the metro, walking slowly through the slushy snow to wake my frozen legs. I begin to think through the gathering I just observed. I am particularly struck by the interruption of the demonstration by soccer fans and the impact it had on the gathering. Clearly

the weather could have affected the number of people who returned after the Sparta fans made their way to the stadium, but there is also the real threat of physical harm, which the Roma are all too familiar with. The number of fans far outnumbered the demonstrators and a clash, while unlikely given the number of police containing the crowd, created a situation in which demonstrators were put in a place of danger. I continued to think about how a peaceful demonstration against antigypsyism was interrupted by joyful fans, oblivious to what was taking place so close to them. This is the dark reality of this situation, which encapsulates the current state of affairs in this country. There are people calling for equality, to have rights to quality education, healthcare, career opportunities, to be seen as equal citizens, only to be interrupted by a crowd looking to enjoy a soccer match. While this type of inequality exists all over the world, the ways in which this played out at the demonstration speaks volumes. As soon as the security concern was announced, a large group of demonstrators moved down the street, almost hiding from the crowd in what I gather is an all-too-familiar feeling for Roma – being pushed out and made to feel that their experiences, their suffering, is unimportant. It was heartbreaking to witness. The group of demonstrators gathered are calling for justice and they are forced to back away because of some rowdy soccer fans. I cannot shake this feeling. The Roma are too often accused of being apathetic in social and political matters, but to be socially and politically active in this country means putting your life on the line.

I think back to a conversation I had with an activist in Brno about the low turnout of Roma in public gatherings. He speaks about a recent candlelight march in the city of Brno, saying,

And there was a very little number of Roma... I hoped that more Roma can come, but it doesn't happen and this is the problem, this is the challenges for me. How can I take them

together and make them feel that there is something possible? We can change something.

Yeah, because Roma don't feel that the change is possible because every day they are facing against the racism, discrimination, and the borders to access a normal life.

He goes on to say,

People don't believe that when they, uh, when they will get to the streets there, it's safe to be in this big group. They are not feeling safe. They are afraid that neo-Nazis will come and beat us, uh, yeah they are afraid and nobody will come alone, only as, uh, the autonomic individual. Many of Roma are, they identity is as a family.

The candlelight march that Marek is referring to took place one month prior to the demonstration in Prague, on February 15, 2018, one in which I also was present. The aim of the march was similar to that of the demonstration in Prague with a specific focus on calling for the removal of Tomio Okamura after his remarks denying Roma genocide during the Holocaust. In comparing my observations of the two public gatherings, there are stark differences. Brno is a very different city than Prague, a college-town-like small city and this was reflected in the group that gathered for the candlelight march on that cold February afternoon. The group appeared to be made up of young professionals and college students and there also appeared to be more non-Roma marchers at this gathering than the one in Prague a month later. And, as I will argue, although the activist hoped for more Roma participation, the Brno event was more focused than the one in Prague, and may have benefitted from a coordinated use of social media.

The February march began at 4:30pm local time at the Moravské Park square, which is close to Masaryk University. Romani music was playing through the speakers that were set up at the center of the square and a few Roma flags were held up by marchers. A nice sense of community was immediately felt throughout the crowd, as a man handed out cups of hot ginger

tea to marchers with groups forming among the young crowd. There were about five people making their way through the crowd, collecting signatures for a petition demanding Okamura step down and a few others who handed out half-page fliers outlining the program for the march. There was a clear plan for the march. Attendees gathered at the square; a local activist spoke for a few minutes and provided instructions for the march. Candles were to be lit and the crowd would walk towards Náměstí 28 října (The Square on October 28), where a Holocaust memorial stands in the middle of the square.

As the skies grew darker, the crowd began lighting candles to prepare marching towards the memorial site. A number of police officers guided the marchers, blocking off traffic to allow for the safe passage of demonstrators. At the end of the fifteen-minute walk, the group arrived at the memorial site, where a large black granite cube stands honoring the victims of the Holocaust. Marchers gathered around the structure, greeted by a number of speakers including Petr Vokřál, the mayor of Brno; journalist and activist Alica Sigmund Heráková; the director of the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, Jana Horváthová; and Robin Stria, a local activist (Bikár, 2018). The march had clear aims: collecting signatures for a petition, marching through the streets in a public display that demanded attention including stopping traffic at a number of busy intersections, and occupying a space – the Holocaust memorial site – to make a pointed statement rejecting the dangerous rhetoric disseminated by far-right politicians.

Some aspects of organizing were facilitated by a focused message disseminated in advance over social media, a strategy which seems to be in contrast to the later Prague demonstration. A Facebook event page was set up a couple of weeks leading up to the march, where organizers expressed their disapproval of such statements being made by politicians and urged people to attend the march. The page suggests 280 people attended the event and 1,200

were interested and perhaps following along online. The three event organizers responded quickly to discussion posts on the event page and provided further information on the gathering. The Facebook page created for this event focused on the dissemination of technical information. Most conversations on the page leading up to the event focused on people asking for clarification, for example the time or location of the meeting. Other posts on the page were people commenting that they will not be able to attend the demonstration, but that they send their best to demonstrators. Unlike the earlier discussed public gathering organized by Petr that protested the “practical schools,” this event was organized on social media with a more “serious” tone that focused on logistics. The discussions on the Facebook page were limited to mostly informational content about the demonstration. The type of uplifting techniques employed by Petr were not nearly as present in the organization of this demonstration.

Having spoken to the three organizers during my fieldwork, there is a difference between the group who organized the demonstration in Brno and those who organized the Prague demonstration. The three people who organized the march in Brno are part of the “young Romani activist-intellectual” group with a progressive vision and understanding of political movement. The demonstration in Prague was organized by Europe Roma and Khamoro organizations and received additional support from the Association of Romani Representatives of Liberec Region and Other Regions, Romodrom, the Romani Democratic Party, the Union of Vlach and Konexe (Ryšavý, 2018). Organizers of this Prague event similarly set up a Facebook event page to which 243 marked that they will be attending (the actual number seems to have been far less than 243) and 1,400 people expressed interest in the event and may have followed along online. The event page listed the speakers of the event, but appeared to lack the same type of direction and emphasis on logistical detail as the march in Brno. This could perhaps be a

result of the number of organizations collaborating on the demonstration in Prague. Arguably, they may have more resources and reach a larger number of people, but the vision of the organizers was perhaps different from that of the organizers of the Brno demonstration. As suggested by Gabra's earlier comment, the organizers of the demonstration in Prague are part of a community of elders. While these specific people may have a major role within their respective communities and may influence those who attend the gathering, it appeared that their aim was to voice frustration with politicians whereas the march in Brno had specific political aims: collecting signatures and creating a spectacle that would create awareness around their campaign and garner public interest and media coverage.

Furthermore, the march in Brno provided diverse voices, as women and people of different ages spoke to the demonstrators, where the demonstration in Prague seemed to have not been viewed as particularly successful. One of the people I spoke with after the demonstration in Prague said that this would be the last Roma-organized demonstration that she will attend. In an email correspondence, Ivana said that she was disappointed that there were so few protesters writing,

I am not sure it was due to the weather... It was the same as usual, Roma are not able to come together to protest. I was taking part in several events like this and it is always the same.

I mentioned the march in Brno in my response and the differences I observed between the two public gatherings and then asked her why this would be the last Roma-organized demonstration she attends; to which she responded:

In case the event is organized by the "old school" Roma leaders, it is always like it was on Saturday: a lot of debatable and contradictory statements. I think it is due to more

reasons: 1) they have problems to express themselves in Czech language which is not their mother tongue 2) they are still in the position of “we are discriminated against and you, Gadze [non-Roma or a person lacking Romanipen], are the worst” - they still did not understand that this rhetoric is old fashioned and not accepted. They are still not able to formulate their civic rights are violated. 3) although they complain on discrimination they also discriminate and are not sensible to the matter of participation of all groups, not only men 4) many of them are kind of they are egoists and like to speak in public, they are building their cult - this is really strange, as they are, at the same time, committed to helping the Roma

She clarifies, “I will attend future events only in case younger Roma leaders will organize it, or events organized by non-Roma.” The generational gap is clear. There are significant challenges for the elders within the community, as noted by Ivana’s comments. The mindset among the older generation of activists is seen as incompatible with that of the younger activists. The Romani activist intellectuals of the current generation speak Czech and are able to voice concerns in a way that is understood by the majority, helping create a larger network of allies. Furthermore, these young activist-intellectuals have a sophisticated understanding of newer resources and technologies, which includes the use of social media.

This use of technology is also, in fact, criticized by elders in the community, further illustrating some of the generational tensions. The demonstrator wearing the neon vest and Roma flag during the Prague demonstration wrote an opinion piece on Romea.cz following the demonstration. The headline reads, “The gadge turned out in person for the Prague demonstration, Romani people only express their criticism on Facebook.” In the article he writes:

I regret that many Romani people on Facebook are criticizing the demonstration against racism that took place last weekend in Prague. That demonstration was about you, about us Roma. That demonstration was about all of us. I am really sorry that these Romani people are criticizing the fact that so few of us were there, but each person who dislikes the low turnout should realize that if he or she had come to the demonstration, there would have been enough of us there. I can't believe you all had to go to work on a Saturday. Moreover, many people confirmed they were coming - and then didn't show up. It was cold that day, but I went there with my children and we froze outside for the demonstration. We were freezing there for our freedom. We were there because we want something to change. People came there all the way from Brno - Czech people, nobody gave them any money for that trip, they came on their own, by bus, and with their children. How can you expect anything to change if you cannot manage to participate? I see all these posts on Facebook about all the parties you manage to go to. That's fine, go have a good time, but take an interest in other things too. What kind of a life do you want for your children here?

The piece comments on several important points, primarily expressing frustrations with the low turnout of Roma to the demonstration. The questions posed perhaps are designed to create feelings of guilt, but also to ask members of the community to reflect on their political participation. He also hints towards the ways in which people are more active online than offline suggesting that Roma are not politically involved in changing their realities. His position, though, fails to discuss some of the reasons why Roma may not participate in public gatherings, particularly the threats of physical danger as discussed. The dispersion of demonstrators that day



following announcement of Sparta fans marching towards the stadium illustrates the real concerns that demonstrators may have of physical harm.

The two events were organized following the remarks made by the Czech politician Tomio Okamura about the Roma during the Holocaust. Both the demonstration in Prague and Brno had a similar goal, to call attention to the ongoing discrimination that Roma experience in the Czech Republic. The event in Brno, organized by the group of young activist-intellectuals focused specifically on commemorating the victims of the Romani Holocaust, whereas the event in Prague appears to have a broader focus, a protest against racism and violence. Discussions on the Facebook page dedicated to the demonstration in Brno focused primarily on social media users posting about the status of their attendance, some writing that they will not be able to attend due to various reasons including work, school, childcare duties and so on. One user wrote, “I cannot, but I am there in spirit.” Others writing, “I am with you.” As people posted questions about who is organizing the event and the nature of the demonstration, the organizers were quick to respond. Responses detailed the identities of the three individuals organizing the event and the speakers, who included non-Roma, such as the mayor of Brno. Organizers also reinforced the idea that this is a peaceful demonstration and urged demonstrators to bring candles instead of signs.

The demonstration in Prague followed a similar format in organizing the event via Facebook. Several of the posts leading up to the event focused on people asking for a program of the upcoming demonstration. A photograph of a printed document was uploaded and posted in response to questions about the event’s program. While there were a few people who often posted and responded to posts, there were more people and/or organizations posting on the event

page. From my experience following along the event page, it was difficult to pinpoint the primary organizer(s).

In my reflection of the two demonstrations, there was a clear aim defined by the organizers of the event in Brno, whereas the event in Prague lacked the same type of direction and organization. The demonstration in Brno, for instance, began with volunteers collecting signatures and discussing the reason they gathered everyone. The two demonstrations utilized similar resources, specifically with informing people about the demonstrations via Facebook. However, the event in Brno appears, both within their Facebook event page and public demonstration, to have a distinct identity: one characterized by commemorating the victims of the Holocaust through a peaceful candlelight vigil. The details of the demonstration were outlined in the event's page and leaflets with this information were passed out at the beginning of the demonstration. Details of the demonstration in Prague were scattered around the event's page. Adding to some of the confusion was a location change three days before the demonstration in Prague.

The response to the two events was quite different as well. The organizers for the demonstration in Brno discussed how turnout was a lower than what they had hoped for, but contributed it mostly to the short notice (the first discussion post on the page was written on February 9 and the event took place February 15). One organizer, in a sense, had already anticipated a low turnout among Roma, commenting on his past experiences organizing events. In response to the demonstration in Prague, a demonstrator wrote the op-ed about the lack of Roma and, in a sense, shaming people for not attending. Similarly, a Facebook user had commented on the event's Facebook page before the demonstration, curious of the number of Roma who will attend, suggesting that Roma should not "sit at home" and "show them that we

are not afraid,” urging people to attend, but skeptical of the number of Roma who would be at the demonstration. Even though both demonstrations focus on calling attention to the experiences of Roma—including commemoration of the past—the two demonstrations differed in their organization and execution. The Roma activist community is small and connected. What became clear in my analysis of these demonstrations was some of factors that divide activist groups. The generational differences between the “young activist-intellectuals” and the “elders” contribute to some different and, at times, competing visions for Roma activism. The absence of the younger activists was felt at the demonstration in Prague, an observation that was also made by activists in Prague. In contrast, the demonstration in Brno departed from the structure of centering the voices and experiences of the elders. This was demonstrated by the diversity in speakers both in gender and age.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Roma have been denied authority over the construction of Romani identity, their voices silenced. Roma have been denied a place within traditional television media, which has translated to other aspects of life. Online spaces serve as sites to confront the “existential problems” that Roma experience. Furthermore, throughout conversations with community organizers and activists, we discuss the ways online spaces are being used alongside different efforts to document Roma experiences and the potential in online spaces in providing a platform to speak their truth. Roma throughout Europe experience similar discrimination, so the structure of online communities also opens up transnational collaboration, as organizers encourage communities to utilize online spaces to raise awareness and call for justice. The next section addresses how digital media can document and create activist connections, but also explores some of its limitations.

## Mapping injustice

I spoke with Lenka, who directs a large transnational organization, with a presence in Brussels, focusing on changing Romani experience through policy via video conferencing along with another member of the Czech activist community. The organization Lenka now works for conducts research, organizes campaigns, and provides educational resources to local activist groups and spaces for transnational networking. The organization is committed to highlighting personal stories and experiences. In one of our conversations, Lenka says, “storytelling would help the policy building.” In this regard, Lenka believes that it is important to include personal stories to effect policy change, privileging the voices and experiences of Roma.

Lenka’s vision is a “bottom-up approach,” assisting Roma at the local level by providing resources to local activists and community members, so that Roma may be part of public discussions and decisions that will affect them. Lenka explains:

This is a big tool because it’s very local, it’s the local people deciding on what’s going to happen around them, but we also see that Roma are not part of it. So, uh we are trying to make sure that Roma knows about the process and they can step in. We are empowering the Roma to use the process, but we are also working with the local action groups and training them in how to access the Roma, and making sure that they involve them in the work.

One key way of involving Roma is to have a digital space where they can tell their own stories, especially in the documentation of inequality, prejudice, and hardship. While still working in the Czech government and before she started at her current position, Lenka developed the idea for an English-based, online mapping platform to document discrimination and acts of racism against Roma:

It's my idea project, ah, so the story behind it, really coming back to when I was working in the Czech government, for the ministry and back then, we had a lot of anti-Roma riots happening in the Czech Republic, so they were almost every weekend in two, three different cities, Neo-Nazis were marching in the streets against Roma and somehow, I saw a pattern in it, but also I saw that, we don't have enough information, how the actual situation in each locality it is. We don't know what happened. I mean we have, we have in Czech Republic, we have Romea.cz, which is a perfect uh kind of journalist, perfect for Roma news organization, but at the same time, I always wanted to put it on sort of, on a map, you know? So when we look back, to see like, yeah, but in this half a year, the number of those incidents, we call it back then incidents [the term used on the platform to mark experiences with antigypsyism] increased and these are the types of incidents and this is not only the ones, but there is also other things happening, or we have, you know, antigypsyism in this form here, antigypsyism in that form there. So, somehow there was an idea to bring this, you know, on one place and to also involve people in actually using the media in a different way, the social media in a different way, back then when use not taking pictures in their bathrooms in front of the mirrors, but to take picture from their community environment and see what are the good projects or situation that is there. Because we see so many postings are happening, bad thing, not so many good things are happening and there's so much complain that the money are not reaching out, they are not well spent, the situation is not changing, but we didn't know, we didn't see the image, we didn't have anything that we would be able to hold in our hands, so this was the initial idea and then when I came to [the NGO where she currently works], I shared the idea, so

it's from the whole European perspective, so not just the Czech Republic like incidents in different towns and cities.

Lenka's motivation for developing a response is similar to Jakub's following attacks against Roma in the Czech Republic. On the interactive online mapping service, people were encouraged to mark experiences with antigypsyism. This became a way to inform communities of the lived realities in these locations and raise awareness. Furthermore, this documentation provided tangible data to use in policy reform. Lenka says,

So, we came with the idea of having, sort of like blocks that you can hit on the map, but back then it was like an individual uploads... people can upload to the map. So there was always address and a picture, but also some texts involved. And, practically, we worked for many years, also being supported through many different projects, like the first year, we even got support from Amnesty International, uh for uh for training young Roma civic journalists, I think that was the kind of the name and we involve really like, we train, I think from each country, about five people to kind of create a core group and understanding you know, the social media, knowing to use Facebook, Twitter, but also to have basic writing skills, you know and also the kind of safety in the whole thing.

She continues,

We have to say, 'what is our aim?' what do we want to achieve and who are the brave people and how we can support them with all things turn down against? I think this is something because such a safe net does not exist in Europe. We have nobody to call for, for a kind of security issues of our own because our own states and our own authorities are turning against us. And this, and this is serious.

Lenka raises important concerns about the state's complicity in addressing these matters. The online mapping platform becomes a resource to combat the inaction and/or discrimination Roma experience from authorities, too. This service becomes an alternative place to raise awareness, where Roma may alert others about experiences with antigypsyism. As the authorities are of little assistance to Roma (and in some cases exacerbate bad situations), communities are taking protection into their own hands through a crowdsourcing of experiences.

Users may access the public website, where there are keywords listed under the tab "blogs." These keywords include, for example, "youth," "activism," "antigypsyism," "call for action," "events," "people and lifestyles," "Romani remembrance," and "roots and culture." Visitors of the site may click on specific keywords, where pins pop up on the interactive map linking users to news articles in specific locations. For example, clicking on "youth," a pin pops up over Brussels, Belgium on the map linking users to the news article "How is antigypsyism affecting young Roma people nowadays?" Users may also explore country scorecards, which are self-reported analyses of experiences for Roma in specific countries. Hovering over each country, users may explore individual reports on four dimensions including "commitment of your municipality," "participation and cooperation," "situation," and "change." The four dimensions result in a percentage rating. As a public website, visitors may explore the different resources on the site, but in order to create a new tag/blog documenting experiences with antigypsyism, users are required to create an account using a Facebook, Gmail, Hotmail, Outlook, Windowslive or Twitter account, which may possibly create barriers for some users. As Witte and Mannon (2010) suggest, requiring users to have an email address or accounts may be a barrier to access for people hoping to utilize the platform. The number of respondents for each incident is quite low. For example, the cities Rokycany and Ostrava in the Czech Republic have

only one respondent each. Other cities and towns, for example, Slaný and Bruntál, also have one respondent for the survey and Prague has two respondents. Most countries have a similar number of respondents. There are few locations on the map with double digit respondents: Bijeljina in Bosnia and Herzegovina have ten respondents, Berat, Albania with eleven respondents and the Turkish province of Hatay with twenty-one respondents. However, most locations, Bucharest, Budapest, Berlin, and several other locations on the map have one, maybe two respondents. These low numbers present a limited view of experiences and this is something that Lenka acknowledges as well. It is clear that the vision and purpose of this platform is important, and Lenka along with other organizers running the site continue to explore how to better implement the platform. The Facebook page includes over 2,600 followers and people who have liked the page. The organization's Facebook page operates as an extension to their website, where educational and career opportunities are advertised as well as other ways to connect with Roma transnationally. The interactive map does not appear in recent history of posts and this may reflect some of the challenges the creators have had with the platform in appealing to users, as well as the fluid nature of online Roma activism. Facebook appears to have a friendlier interface and a website that users may already be familiar navigating.

Browsing through the platform's website, it appears that there is a specific type of user on the platform, highly educated and English-speaking. I ask Lenka about the people using the online mapping service. She responds, "Yeah, I don't know for some [haven't looked at] the statistics. I think the typical kind of user is the NGO-activist." This raises concerns about the platform working for diverse communities. I also note levels of inactivity on the website and Lenka mentions that they want to restructure the platform. I ask her, "So, thinking about like restructuring the platform, do you find in this newer version, new vision, keeping like the



mapping service, or are there certain things that you would change? Change from incidents to neutral to positive types of stories [and so on].” Lenka says, “So, uh, we want to keep the mapping platform. It’s just that, for example, we have the local scorecard there. I don’t know if you go through it.” She continues,

And, we see that it doesn’t work perfectly, so it’s quite long and we see, it’s a good tool for us, to see on the national level what is the situation in the different countries to be able to zoom out, but the local activist, it’s hard for them to use it as a tool... So, and, we want to have it as a tool for activists, so for them to make sure that they can, for example, you feel you are not lonely. You have the problem with the mayor in your city, but it’s happening in other places and maybe you can connect through it and discuss and find some strategies, but again it needs so much of the, kind of personal uh, how to say, engagement.

While there are issues with the effective implementation of the service, Lenka and her colleagues are committed to developing a tool for local communities to use in their efforts. Lenka mentions that the website’s Facebook page has more activity, where page administrators and community members engage with one another. The most important aspect of the online mapping service, as mentioned by Lenka, is the way in which this service may serve as a site of recognition and community building. The aim of the platform is for people to be able to find others with similar experiences – unfortunately in their experiences with antigypsyism – and to locate communities of understanding as well as support to combat this situation.

The aim of these organizers, I have gathered from my interviews and observations, is to create a place in which Roma belong, where they may find others with similar experiences to combat injustice. This search for belonging and activities in online spaces and associated public

engagements create meaningful connections that contribute to a process of (re)discovering shared experiences that help think through identity and community. In a society that has denied Roma feelings of belonging, the online environment is a resource to build communities of understanding that may ultimately challenge the structures that continue to oppress the Roma. Nevertheless, there are significant obstacles the organizers encounter in reaching critical mass. Through an exploration of the platform and conversation with Lenka, it is clear that the organizers are working on a number of projects and they do not have the time nor the resources to allocate to reanalyzing and restructuring the platform. As a result, the platform remains stagnant, as few updates and interactions take place on the website and accompanying tools, for example, the interactive mapping service. This struggle for resources, of course, is a theme in many of the Roma media activists – as we saw in Chapter Four about the online television activity.

The documentation of such experiences with antigypsyism serves to connect communities around shared experiences that organizers hope will contribute towards challenging the structures that continue to oppress the Roma. In addition to documenting current experiences with antigypsyism, it is also important to record shared histories, as another digital project focusing on oral histories illustrates.

**Memory.** Memory plays an important role in understanding and acknowledging collective pasts and experiences to make intelligible the present and to understand one's place within a culture and society. Similarly, memory plays a role in understanding notions of belonging. In the Czech Republic, Roma are absent from historical discussions; in a way that erases their existence from the past and minimizes their contributions to Czech society, as discussed by organizers below. This is reflected in public spaces as well, where Roma are denied

the same type of memorialization, specifically as it relates to the Second World War, where most of the Czech Republic's Roma were murdered. Lety, a concentration camp for the Roma, is a prime example, as activists fought for decades to reclaim the space as a site for memorialization. After the holocaust, the land was used for a pig farm, a symbolically profane use of space that denied Roma the ability to set up a proper memorial site in the location. In 2018, activists were successful in finally getting the government to hand the land over to become a site to remember the tragic history of Roma in the Czech Republic.

The denial of public spaces to mark Romani history complicates geographies of belonging. Additionally, the ways in which Roma are unwritten from Czech history further complicates Roma and non-Roma relations. With this in mind, a group of scholars and media practitioners have created "The Memory of the Roma" project. The Memory of the Roma is a digital archive collecting oral histories of Roma, some of whom lived through Lety.

In March 2018, I spoke with two individuals, Vendula and Ambroz, working on the project to understand the aim of the digital archive. Vendula's academic training focused on Gypsy Studies and she has worked with Roma children for the past 20 years. She conducted a similar project collecting "memories of witnesses" and developed teaching materials for schools to educate students about Roma history. Ambroz works on the technical side of the production, as the camera operator. I meet Vendula and Ambroz in Prague and upon arriving to the office, I notice Ambroz working diligently on putting together equipment for a recording. Vendula says that Ambroz is going to interview one of the few living survivors of the Lety camp and Ambroz apologizes for not being able to contribute as much to the interview. Nevertheless, he is with us in the room for about one hour and joins the conversation as he packs equipment.

I ask how The Memory of the Roma project was developed and Vendula responds, “There’s some database of witnesses, memory of nations and there are not a lot of Roma people collected... just one percent, I think there was 300 memories, but only three Roma.” Ambroz says, “Roma are part of Czech nation, it have to be recorded too.” Vendula goes on, “and they was angry [laughs] that there was only three Roma, so he wanted to collect [the stories].” I ask the two about the purpose of the project. Vendula responds, “First, it’s even the Roma people don’t know about their history just because not uh not always people tell the stories to their children, especially about uh Second World War because it’s very.” She stops mid-sentence and it is clear that she is referring to the trauma associated with reliving these experiences through storytelling. She continues,

I heard more times when the witnesses was speaking with me, their children was [makes a surprised expression] like, what? so, so first it’s to conservate for other generations and the second is we publish it in website, so that everybody can see it and know something about it. Because in Czech schools you can, they don’t teach anything about it, so they are no, few materials, just only materials that exists it’s about Roma genocide, but about the communism, nothing. They don’t know anything thing about it. The situation of Roma here is the is result from what, what was during the communism because there were different politics to assimilate them, and it, and the consequences are very big, I think.

This project serves as documentation of the lived realities of Roma, the hardships experienced throughout the decades and also as a reminder of Romani contribution to Czech society. As Vendula mentions,

it's to preserve for other generations... so more people know about the history because when you don't know the other people, you don't understand them, so for the better understanding it's uh important to know each other and yes... another aim is to show that the some Roma they was in the resistance or they are, they was helpful for this society [laughs] so that's to show that they are part of our [Czech] society.

Vendula continues,

another aim is that now, the Roma are really, are not considered as a part of our society. Before, before the Second World War, it was a little bit different. He [Roma] was part of the society, not really insider, but uhhh people uh took them something like which is uh important in the society or useful. So the aim is to show that before it wasn't like that, it is possible to live together.

As Vendula mentions, the digital archive serves as an educational resource for Roma and non-Roma. Roma are often viewed as not part of Czech society and these profiles attempt to show that Roma and non-Roma were able to coexist at one point, however brief the period. This production also aligns with the aims of the activists in the previous chapter of allowing Roma authority over their own stories, including privileging issues involved with language preservation. Evka, a young Romani woman who works with Ambroz and Vendula, joins our conversation and in this moment we are talking about the technical aspects of the project, the language used to capture the oral histories. Evka says a third of the interviews are in Romanes and others are in either Czech or Slovak. Evka says,

Roma language is not really vital now, yeah. Too many young people don't understand the Romani language, it's not many people in television, nowhere, yeah it's not really vital and as well in this narrative, we have as well, different dialects of Romani languages

because we have ethno-dialects and different languages like Roma language from Slovakia, but as well Vlachika Roma has as well theirs language. The second thing is uh because not too many personality stories are made with the people and they don't know this stories, some of them we have a narratives like Roma, but in the museum or Roma Studies in university, the other people can't to hear that, because it's only for them, you know? It's secret, it's not for everyone and this way is better because everyone can hear this.

Evka says that most of the interviews are conducted in either Czech or Slovak, as Romanes is not spoken by many Roma (the discussion in the previous chapter explains this process language loss). Evka makes an important comment about the accessibility of the digital archive. Unlike other resources that are only made available to scholars and those with access to museums and universities, the digital archive can be found online and made accessible to the public. Later in our conversation, Evka brings up the importance in documenting these stories, as Romani history has mostly been passed down through generations orally.

What is important is to keep our history, you know, because in Roma culture, history, we mostly speaking, you know, we keep our history through the language, through the speaking, we don't have too many writing from Roma about theirs history. It's everything oral history.

This also raises important points about cultural transitions in the documentation of Romani lived experiences from oral to written and now visual histories. The digital archive and the online site hosting the memories become relatively permanent places for Roma to engage with the experiences of the past.

**Memory project.** The homepage for this website features a slideshow of photographs of people interviewed with their names written across the screen, accompanied with a few words in Czech to describe the individual and the oral history collected, for example surviving a concentration camp. Visitors of the site may scroll down the page to find links to other oral histories that are presented with small photographs of each person and brief bios. At the top of the page are four links: home, memories, about the project, and contact. The memories page includes 36 stories that are currently available.

The online archive becomes a site for recognition and remembrance. As discussed by Vendula, Ambroz, and Evka, these oral histories are important for Roma and non-Roma to acknowledge Romani experiences. This online space holds these memories for generations of Roma to engage, as physical sites of remembrance and memorialization are limited and at times inaccessible. The documentation of these stories are important for communities and the construction of Roma identity, as histories influence identities. These oral histories, like the photographs decorating the walls in a home, tell stories of the past. Memories are critical to the production of individual and collective identities.

### **Homepages and home: Locating places of belonging online**

Home, according to Blunt and Dowling (2006), is a complex geographical concept that includes both a place and a set of feelings. According to Fay,

... perhaps one needs to realise that home exists only in the inbetween, thereby suggesting that there is no such comfort as a given, original home. What is offered instead is an understanding of home that is not comfortable, yet nonetheless filled with a sense of belonging” (p. 27).

This notion of home includes both the material and emotional, as home transcends geographic boundaries and becomes a complex place to create meaning and a sense of belonging to a larger collective. Drawing from Ahmed (2004), Fay suggests that the ways and extent to which people come to believe that they have feelings in common with one another will help establish a collective. In this way, home is both a feeling and a place (physical or symbolic). I stress the importance of symbolic home here, as physical homes may not always be experienced. People may not have a fixed place of origin nor may they have the ability or desire to have or return to a homeland. Brah (1996) refers to feeling at home, as “achieved by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security” (Fay, p. 37). The reality of Roma in the Czech Republic illustrates the ways in which communities are often denied claim to geographic/physical homes, including quite literally through forced evictions and segregation from Czech society through discriminatory housing practices. These experiences produce feelings of existential anxiety, as individuals and families constantly experience dislocation and displacement. In response to being denied a claim or made to feel as if communities do not belong to a place, people are looking for alternative sites to locate and process feelings of belongingness.

Scholarship in this area illustrates the affordances of social media as well as the drawbacks of this space. For example, marginalized groups may benefit from utilizing social media in their efforts. Online spaces are helpful in the construction of communities, as demonstrated in the case of bloggers in Tunisia (see again: Zayani, 2015). Similarly, Witteborn (2015), suggests that online spaces are critical to forced migrants in producing identities and communities. There are clear advantages to marginalized groups; however, there exist drawbacks, for example the limitations presented by corporate-owned spaces and the cooptation



as well as surveillance of communities online. This chapter illustrates the tensions within this space, arguing that online spaces provide an alternative and/or additional home to communities as well as a site for organization.

**Productive nostalgia.** The longing that Marek refers to in the beginning of this chapter, “And, this is what I want in the future, our Roma place, state,” comments on a deep desire to belong. Unlike many displaced groups that may have a recollection of a physical home they have left (forcefully or through their own volition), the Roma do not have a place recognized as a Roma “homeland.” Nevertheless, this longing desire may be productive in helping community organizers and activists think through ways in which Roma may locate places in which they may feel at home. Blunt and Dowling (2005) discuss productive nostalgia as a potentially liberating process arguing, “nostalgic desire for home is oriented towards the present and the future as well as the past” (p. 213). A return to a homeland or creation of a homeland for Roma (a more nationalistic view held by some Roma) may not be possible, but locating places of belonging are important and therefore online spaces become important to consider as they provide communities alternative and/or additional places to experience home.

The manifestation of a physical home (read: nation/state/homeland) may not be experienced, however, the production of home through alternative means is critical to the survival of Roma. Memories of the past and hopes for a future where Roma experience places of belonging is necessary to continue fighting for justice.

**Transcending borders & geographical distances.** Online spaces have provided Roma, who are dispersed throughout the region (and world), a place to connect, as social media platforms and the different online resources allow communication to transcend borders. Roma, who are divided along geographic space, may utilize online spaces to transcend geographic

borders and locate communities that may contribute toward feelings of belonging, as discussed by Lenka. The fragmented structure of the internet is a valuable resource to communities that have a fractured sense of home. Shohat (1999) suggests that “new media can be an imperfect means by which dislocated people who lost their geographic home retain their home imaginary, while also struggling for a literal and metaphorical place” (p. 226). Online spaces are imperfect – some of these drawbacks are discussed below – but these mediated places also provide a way to think through feelings of belonging. Shohat (1999) discusses the development of Gawat Izzawi, a cyber café for Iraqi exiles. Mindful of drawing hasty comparisons, there are insightful contributions from Shohat’s research on diverse and displaced Iraqi communities. Shohat (1999) writes,

The desire for a multicultural Iraqi nation is channeled through cyberspace, which in this sense provides an imaginary home. For Arab-Jews, abruptly disconnected from the Arab world, relocation to the United States, Brazil, Canada, and Europe requires a medium whereby such dialogic interactions can be enabled and revitalized. The Net intensifies this process, mediating between diverse regional communities that otherwise wouldn’t meet because of both physical and ideological borders (p. 229).

Similarly, Facebook groups, online mapping services, digital archives, and other online resources aim to connect Roma to a larger community. These places transcend geographic borders as well as what Shohat refers to as ideological borders. There are factors such as cultural, religious, and linguistic differences that, at times, have divided Romani communities. Online spaces attempt to overcome these ideological differences and provide a space to negotiate identities, both individually and collectively.

**Imperfect places of engagement.** As mentioned in the literature review, for all of the affordances made possible through social media, there are also a number of tensions within this space that require investigation. There are fears that the same tools helping communities can be used against these marginalized groups by repressive governments and groups attempting to maintain power. One of the activists I spoke with expressed her concerns about learning more about the role of social media as a resource for Roma. She suggested that perhaps this “research proved that some specific way of using online media is very powerful” and that these findings can be used by fascists rising to power in Europe. These are warranted fears, but the reality is that fascists throughout Europe are already utilizing media in their efforts (Doroshenko, 2018; Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). Furthermore, the aim of this research is not to prove how powerful social media are, but describe engagement in these spaces. At any rate, there are real concerns about the ways in which media are utilized.

As a formative space for identity and community, it is important to also consider the inequalities of these online spaces, too. Even though many of the people I spoke with discuss the prevalence of communication technologies, there still exists inequalities in access both in the material sense and level of engagement. Again, this was the case among several Roma, where language proficiency and age were a few of the factors contributing to level of engagement. Shohat (1999) argues, “while computer networks do radically redefine our notions of place, community, and urban life, one cannot separate this fact from the ways in which cybercommunities are entangled in unequal material realities” (p. 223). For example, most of the users of the online mapping service are described as already invested in activist efforts. In this way, social media may reflect and extend power relations to different online environments.

There are also practical issues with social media. Lack of resources may mean that digital media sites are slow to roll out, are under developed, may not reach a critical mass of users, or may be transient. Social media also do not solve the language issue, as web developers look to balance preserving and legitimizing Romanes and its dialects with the accessibility advantages of having a site in English or Czech. Also, the advantage of providing a space for people who are not literate comes with some drawbacks. Jiří says, “you can share good news and also bad news, but I mean like... the news about Roma which aren’t factual... which aren’t true, which are lies and which are bias and it’s very bad because people are sharing it.” The spread of disinformation is a real concern (see: Crosby, 2018; Schultheis, 2017). The news server Romea.cz has extensive coverage of viral hoaxes targeting Romani communities as well as disinformation circulating among non-Romani communities elevating anti-Roma and anti-refugee sentiment. One news report covered the circulation of a story claiming that “a Saudi Arabian cleric has issued a statement saying that Muslims are allowed to eat their wives if they are hungry” (Heková, 2017). This began as a satirical story made by a Moroccan blogger, which quickly spread among Czech senior citizens as a legitimate story. Embedded within this message is the attempt to present Arab men and by extension, Arabs and Arab culture as barbaric—something to be feared and controlled.

This message is in line with concerns about immigration to the country. The fear that Roma and refugees will “take over” the country has stoked deep seated resentment towards Muslims, immigrants, and Roma. During the 2017 presidential campaign, the now reelected Miloš Zeman, capitalized upon this notion, presenting his opponent, Drahoš, as a danger to Czech society. Zeman’s most prominent slogan “stop migrants, stop Drahoš” made Drahoš’ name synonymous with immigration. Other slogan’s from Zeman’s campaign included “this

country is ours. Vote for Zeman.” Drahoš’ response focusing on Zeman’s Russian connections ultimately proved ineffective in combatting the toxic campaign stoking fear and resentment of an ethnically diverse Czech Republic.

Similarly, Roma are targets of disinformation. In 2016, a viral story alleging the marriage of young girls to adult men by members of the Hamas organization became a popular story. The image, however, was of a wedding, where the young girls were part of a bridal party accompanying the men as bridesmaids, a local tradition (Ryšavý, 2016). The lack of skills to critically engage with media content came up in several of the conversations. Marek says, “And, also the other part, the other part is the Roma are, uh, not well, uh, educated how they can, uh, work with the information, so it’s very easy to let them believe the lies, uh, and that’s bad.”

With such concerns, media literacy has become an important topic. Stefana who works with Romani recipients of educational scholarships, says that teaching Romani youth how to present their identities online is an important skill:

I remember also we did at this camp [similar to a workshop], like how to represent ourselves on media, social media, so we educated Roma people... how to promote themselves on social media. So, I think it was very successful from us and also we did the presentation about the hoax. Also about this, this fake news, how to recognize them, how to and I also want to have some workshop, how to write the comments, like when you on Facebook and they like, they say something racist or something like this comments or how to like write the good comment on it or how to just uh I don’t how to say, when you are fighting and somebody is pushing you and you are back [back against the wall] protect, to protect yourself, something like that, yes, so we want to do this. And but in the end, we just said you know the best way to do it, don’t do it. Because you cannot, on this

internet it's free to say something and sometimes it's not very easy to... it's not for everybody to invest your time, your energy, to argue with the stupid people.

Social media “influencers” may not be local, may represent hate groups, may be trolls, or may even be bots. Ivana, a community organizer, acknowledges the importance of social media for discussion, but is weary of those who may participate in these discussions.

It is also good platform for discussion, but this is really tricky because you don't know how many people are directly in the discussion. Not only those who write something, but those who read something uh and you don't know if they are in Czech Republic or if they are in UK uh as outsiders or like this and uh but it can influence very much the public opinions, these kinds of discussions.

She says that these people from the outside may “fragment the movement” and “influence the Roma public opinion.” Another concern of Ivana's includes the potential overload of information. She elaborates that

Social media are, like, we are speaking about Facebook or no, because Roma don't use any other tool. Facebook is very strong tool, but I think that this starting uh not to be, because there are so many Roma, there are so many friend group, Facebook groups, I am involved in, I don't know 15 or 20 or something like this. And I also manage some of these groups and I can see that people are not reading and not checking these posts so carefully because they are overwhelmed... there are so much things and many of them repeat and repeat and you know you can see 100 times the same thing so I'm not sure that there is some future for using Facebook, but I don't know what can be other tool.

In the different Facebook groups that I have been invited to, I see the concern that Ivana has about cross-posting on the different groups' pages. Perhaps the same information posted on

multiple pages has made people uninterested. Ivana admits, though, that she does not fully understand the best way to connect with communities online.

I know that Facebook was used to unite people, for different initiatives in the past, so I know. I think that if what we now use it, like uh, use it correctly, we would have had some good outcomes and good results and be able to use it for some for the enhancement of the movement, but we are not able to do it right now [laughs] we really don't know how because there is no problem of the technology because Roma, they have, everybody has notebook or tablet.

As, Ivana and others mention, material access is not as significant of a concern as the media literacy skills people lack. Her comments also illustrate the disconnect between different activist groups. Ivana admits that Facebook would be a useful resource if used “correctly.” While there may not be a proven way to use social media for different efforts, there are activists in the country reaching various levels of success with employing different strategies to engage people and communities in campaigns, as the case with Petr, who looked to create and maintain community through different affective modalities on Facebook, including humor.

### **Social media as additional/alternative homes**

There is a growing body of research examining the potential of online spaces serving as additional and/or alternative homes to displaced groups (for example: Bonini, 2011; Shohat, 1999). Livingstone (1999) argues,

We can, with our media, take something of home with us: the newspaper, the video, the satellite dish, the Internet. In this sense, and it has become a familiar trope of much recent theorizing on the new information age, home has become, and can be sustained as,

something virtual, as without location. A place without space, to compensate, maybe, for when we live in spaces that are not places. When we cannot *go home* (p. 92).

Such analysis has yet to explore the nuance of media engagement among Roma communities, who similar to other displaced groups, may lack feelings of belonging in their “home” countries. Unlike other displaced groups, though, notions of home are complicated for the Roma, where there may not be a physical home that one has left or one to return to. For the Roma who have lived in places like the Czech Republic, they are home in the physical sense (described by Jiří), as they have lived in the country for a number of years, even generations. However, the feelings of being Czech are not fully experienced, as discussed by the people in this research. Roma, though, *do* experience discriminatory practices: housing and schooling segregation as well as broadly by politicians, governments, and media. As a result, Roma lack feelings of home in both the material and immaterial sense. This section further interprets the different ways in which online spaces are utilized and how these spaces transform into places of meaning for Roma, where they locate sites of belonging and community. Media provide additional and/or alternative places to experience feelings of home. The relative safety and sense of belonging afforded by online spaces encourage people to locate alternative sites to see themselves, to be seen, and to imagine future possibilities. Online spaces, Facebook in particular, transform into places of identity negotiation and formation, where identity construction is closely linked to the construction of homeplaces.

The notion of home is multi-scalar, meaning that home is “politically, socially, and culturally constituted, but lived and experienced in personal ways” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 32). Home helps constitute identity, as a place where an understanding of self develops. Feelings of belonging or alienation are experienced through interactions with others in the home, city,



country, and understood through power relations. In this sense, home is a place to understand oneself. Home is part of identity formation, as bonds with family, friends, and communities create affiliations and a sense of belonging or, at times, alienation, which similarly help understand one's identity. These attachments, collective memories, nostalgia, and the search for belonging contribute to identity formation. Home, as argued by Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Fay, 2011; Shohat, 1999; Morley, 2000; and many others, is lived and experienced through the material sense of time and space, but also in an immaterial way, for example online, "a place without space" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 92). As the interviews illustrate, online spaces have become a way for Roma to understand and form identities, particularly so in the denial of home in the material sense. Similarly, Facebook and other online places become sites to articulate Romani identity. "The internet can foster new, transnational communities of identity and belonging – a virtual geography of home" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 207). The platform designed by Lenka and her colleagues illustrates this point, as the group attempts to create a place whereby individual members and communities are able to find others with similar experiences to work through the hardships Roma experience on a daily basis.

Identities also form online, where communities discuss and reflect on their experiences. In a conversation with Jana she mentions a Facebook discussion around the use of the word *cíkan*, a derogatory term used to refer to Roma. The label has been reclaimed by some Roma, but many protest the use of the word. In an online discussion, people discussed using the term in public places. These discussions, while they may appear ordinary, contribute to the understanding and production of Romani identity. The mutability of online spaces also serves as a central location to the formation of identities that, similarly, are in a state of constant fluctuation.

## Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have documented the ways in which people negotiate their Czech-Roma identities. Interviews illustrate how Roma are often denied authority over the construction of their identities, their Czech-ness, claim to physical spaces, and generally made to feel that they do not belong, both in the material and symbolic sense. These feelings are a response to the systemic ways in which Roma are marginalized in Czech society and which have contributed to the existential problems that Marek refers to during our conversation. This chapter illustrates some of the ways in which individual activists and community organizers utilize media as a resource to combat the structures that create these feelings of spatial alienation. Petr created a campaign utilizing uplifting videos to gather communities in a protest calling for access to quality education. Similarly, observations of public demonstrations analyzed the ways in which activist/organizers utilize Facebook event pages to call for justice. Within this analysis, I also note the importance of examining the drawbacks, challenges, and tensions within these online spaces, specifically among activist groups.

An important part of this analysis focuses on voice, who has the authority to tell stories and in what spaces? As Lenka suggests, storytelling is an important part of change, where she believes digital media can be a valuable resource, particularly in creating larger networks connecting activists. The development of the mapping service, which Lenka admits was more viable in theory than in practice (as mentioned earlier, Lenka and her team are reworking the platform), is a site to claim voice and place. There is a power given to people in being able to tell their stories and by finding communities around these shared experiences. These places encourage communities to respond to and navigate the existential problems the activists comment on.

The need for ontological security is a real issue. In a society that continues to push Roma further and further to the margins, the development of places to claim as one's own become incredibly important in the fight for social and political justice. Online places have become an important site for organization and engagement, as Roma are responding to the limitations of mainstream media and the denial of their voices and place in Czech society. As Lenka mentions, there is no safety for the Roma. Communities and institutions are failing the Roma and I reiterate that social media are not the solution to addressing these injustices. What this chapter argues is that social media are not perfect and that they should not be seen as the panacea in the fight for justice. On the other hand, dismissing social media altogether is not useful either. Specifically, this chapter describes the ways in which activists, organizers, and community members utilize online spaces as a potential resource in ameliorating feelings of spatial alienation. It is not my intention to cast social media as completely useful or useless to communities, but rather to capture the nature of its engagement among communities. What emerges is a fascinating utilization of digital and social media by activists, where I highlight the tensions as well as the potential advantages within this space. The findings suggest digital and social media may provide alternative sites to negotiate identities, locate communities, and process feelings of belongingness that may contribute to challenging unjust structures within the Czech Republic.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

This research began with a curiosity in understanding media engagement in challenging the structures that oppress Roma people. As I became more aware of the lived experiences of Roma in the Czech Republic—the explicit and implicit methods of spatial alienation from Czech society—I set out to understand how organizers and activists were challenging this situation. Initial conversations and observations of organizations working with Roma led to an understanding of the challenges organizers and activists may experience in working in and alongside communities. When I returned to the U.S., after my second visit to the Czech Republic, I continued to critically interrogate relevant literature to understand some of the advances and challenges of those working in the area of Romani rights have encountered. Scholars, policymakers, and media continue to debate the “Roma situation,” and in this discussion particular voices and experiences are privileged. In examining questions related to voice, it is also important to consider the voices and stories considered valuable, the ones that others listen to. The Roma have been using their voices, but may not always be heard, and so the question becomes, what new forms do these voices take? What strategies do Roma activists use to try to amplify these voices both to the Roma and non-Roma? Using ethnographic methods including first-person observation and in-depth interviews, this research draws from the experiences, stories, and hopes of those working towards a more just world to better understand the challenges Roma experience in combatting unjust structures as well as the possibilities for a better future.

## Media in the Czech Republic: Key findings

Mainstream media in the Czech Republic remain a hostile space for Roma. It is not just that Roma are covered: what Roma are concerned about is that mainstream media are so predetermined to stereotype the Roma – or to give easy access to those stereotyping the Roma – and to frame it as conflict-based entertainment content that the game is lost even before play starts. In 2018, Romea was invited to debate on the Czech television program *Máte slovo* (*You Have the Floor*) to discuss President Zeman's allegation that 90% of Roma do not work and other falsehoods about the abuse of social services. The news organization declined the invitation to appear on the debate program citing the program's tabloid-like approach. *Máte slovo* has invited a number of guests to discuss the topic, including the press spokesperson for President Zeman, which illustrates the tensions within this "debate." A press release issued by Romea states,

This discussion program turns everything into a tabloid scandal and the upshot is it that it makes communication impossible - its concept is to reduce everything to an attempt by those participating to humiliate, out-argue, and shout down their interlocutors. We refuse to contribute to the filming of this degrading entertainment program, which exploits people's despair and misery and does not meet the basic standards of journalism, such as having a moderator who is able to respond when interlocutors make allegations that are untrue. This program incites aggression among those of different opinions and offers no constructive solutions (Albert, 2018).

As this example illustrates, the current media environment in the Czech Republic is a toxic space for Roma and their experiences. Declining the invitation to appear on the television program ties back to comments made by Jakub about mainstream media, where he suggests, for example,

highly educated non-Roma are usually pitted against uneducated Roma in debates. This type of arrangement of guests is a deliberate move, where Romani experiences are devalued and worse, Roma are potentially humiliated.

Clearly, mainstream Czech media have made it a point to not take seriously the voices and experiences of Roma; whether this is in response to commercial or other ideological forces, Roma are not fairly represented in Czech media. The chapter reviewing literature on media representations of Roma illustrates the ways in which media are compliant in the inequitable treatment of Roma by reproducing long-enduring stereotypes of Romani people. Discussion around the current Czech media environment further supports this notion, where this exclusion and continually stigmatizing mainstream media content have prompted a response by activists to reclaim the narrative around Romani experiences.

Chapter Four focuses on the development of an online-TV production to present diverse Romani experiences. This alternative space attempts to respond to the limitations of Romani experience in mainstream media productions, and further, to serve as a site for identification and identity construction. As my analysis illustrates, there are clear challenges to this type of production, including financial support and logistical concessions. The platform where such a program may air involves balancing issues of the ease and access of existing outlets such as YouTube versus that site's commercial incentives and architecture. Moreover, there is the possibility that a production airing outside of the mainstream may further exclude Roma from Czech society. But, as interviews with the organizers of this production suggest, one of the main goals of this production is to provide a space for Roma to see themselves and to imagine diverse possibilities for their futures. The creation of a Roma identity through media programming, as described by Marek, is a way combat the negative portrayals of Roma in the media. This

alternative production is an intervention into an unwelcoming media environment. As efforts to engage with mainstream productions have been on the terms of mainstream outlets, which often reproduce stereotypes or ridicule guests, this production challenges mainstream outlets by producing more diverse voices and experiences, even if it is only for Roma or those interested in Romani experience and voice.

Mainstream media in the Czech Republic reflect the general exclusion and hostility towards Roma in public spaces. Given that several of the people I spoke with comment on mixed feelings and experiences with their Czech identities, where they are denied claim to this aspect of their identity, my findings demonstrate how activists are locating alternative spaces to work through these liminal experiences. Online spaces, and Facebook in particular, have emerged as important sites to express aspects of Roma identity, including experiences with antigypsyism. As Danika mentions, Facebook groups have become a place to discuss lived experiences and to locate communities of understanding. Furthermore, online spaces become a place to combat antigypsyism, notably through the organization of offline events. Community organizers like Petr discuss the methods employed over social media to attract people to a specific cause, where he was able to bring together over 2,000 people together to call for equal access to quality education. As the analysis of the two demonstrations illustrates, there are varying levels of engagement with social media by organizers and activists. The use of social media was embraced by the group of young activists organizing the demonstration in Brno. The organizers of the demonstration in Prague also utilized social media in their organization, but in different ways and, perhaps, with different degrees of success. Furthermore, the use of social media was criticized by community members, illustrating some of the generational tensions within this space and the different ways that are utilized and embraced by activist groups. In Chapter Five,

social media were not presented within either a celebratory or cynical framework. Social media have been used to raise awareness, provide a space to express oneself, connect with others, and organize. But social media may also present a number of challenges to groups, a continuing reality this is important to consider to not fall into the trap of presenting social media as a completely positive space for engagement. There are challenges with trolls, the spread of disinformation, and the ever-present decision about language and technological divides. Even in specific platforms such as the one created by Lenka and her colleagues, there exist issues in utilization.

Social media utilization among Romani activists is a microcosm of the general experiences of activists. There are specific ways in which social media encourage connection, but there exist tensions within this space. I imagine media literacy programs will be a significant area of focus for those interested in working with Roma. For example, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) has rolled out a strategy for promoting digital literacy, however the extent to which Roma will be the recipients of this initiative is unclear. This is a concern for the activists and members of NGOs that I spoke with, where a couple of the organizations are already focusing on workshops to help with Roma youth media literacy.

### **Identity & belonging: Key findings**

This dissertation began with a quote from a young Romani activist, suggesting one of the most important factors in helping Roma imagine diverse futures lies in rethinking identity. He says, "...We can be doctors; we can be lawyers. We can be anything... we should create our identity new." This dissertation does not provide a new conceptualization of Romani identity, as that simply is not an aim of this project. Developing a definition of a "new Roma identity," from



my perspective as a researcher, risks reproducing homogenizing concepts or categories of difference. Furthermore, I believe producing a conceptualization of Roma identity is reductive, further minimizing the diversity in experience. So, it is not my intention or goal to produce a conceptualization of Romani identity, rather I have explored how Roma think of identity or, at least, how Romani activists talk about identity. It is important to note here that these activists do not represent the voices or interests of all Roma; such generalizability would be reductive of various efforts. The focus on identity emerged from conversations with activists and organizers, as we discussed the challenges facing Romani communities.

The activists I spoke with highlight identity as one of the most important factors in changing the experiences of Roma in the Czech Republic. Marek discussed how Roma can be anything they want to be, but that there are challenges in seeing oneself represented in diverse experiences. He suggests, “we should create our identity new.” The desire to create a new identity is to separate oneself and one’s community from negative connotations. There are challenges here, as identifying or being identified as Roma, at times, has meant not being Czech. This is especially the case with state practices that have continued to distance people and groups who are viewed as a threat to national order and in the Czech Republic; this applies to Roma. Some of the activists and community members I spoke with discussed the ways in which being Roma – that is, their ethnic identity – was not the only aspect of their identity, it was simply another aspect, but that this identity is the one that is highlighted in situations that question their Czechness. The challenge is creating an identity around being Roma *and* Czech. It may appear that some of the activists rely on limited conceptualizations of Roma identity that typically exists around ethnicity, but it is because their perceived “difference” from Czech society is based on their very ethnicity. To understand what it means to be Roma, in this context, also requires an

understanding of what it means to be Czech. The point is that there is not one idea of identity that the Roma are connecting to or attempting to hold on to nostalgic constructions of identity. Instead, hundreds of years of forceful removal of Romani culture and tradition has led to this moment. The history of the Czech nation has informed the current experiences of Roma, where the different laws and practices of forced assimilation has led to the loss of different experiences, cultures, and traditions. This moment is a negotiation of past and present conditions in the Czech Republic, which include understanding of mixed and hybrid cultural traditions.

This is a moment of negotiation. As Ivana says, “we are still in the phase of trying to find out who we are.” The television platform, Facebook groups, and digital archives are spaces to think through these experiences and identities. These mediated spaces are sites to understand the past, to negotiate the present, and to imagine future possibilities. As various state and institutional practices have forcefully removed Romani traditions and histories, these spaces become sites to work through aspects of identity that have experienced such suppression. A television program focusing on music is a way to think through histories and identities. It is not to say that a television program focusing on music or cooking are the only ways to experience Romani identity, but that the programs are subversive sites that may contribute to the negotiation of identities.

Interview data and research illustrate the challenges of constructing a collective identity among Roma, specifically because of the heterogeneous nature of groups. What becomes interesting, then, is the desire among the activists I spoke with to create a collective identity. There are specific ways in which the activists and organizers hope to achieve this, for example, creating places to negotiate these identities online as well as the production of an online-TV platform that focuses on Romani traditions and language. Jana and her colleagues mention the

use of Romanes may help to bring diverse communities together over a shared language. The group of activists acknowledge the challenges in bringing communities together, specifically around language, which varies among groups. However, based on their survey of community members, they suggest Roma are searching for this type of representation in the media. In a media environment that has excluded or ridiculed Romani voice and experience, Roma-created and produced representation serves as an important site for identification by legitimizing and providing space for Romani voice. As Roma have been denied voice in the production of their own experiences, the online-TV platform provides Roma authority over the narrative. This type of representation begins a process of identification and negotiation that may contribute to (re)creating identities, an aim of the activists. Identity is also reframed in this perspective, as it does not focus solely on shared experiences of persecution, but potentially looks beyond, as Marek suggests, to a new identity.

There are both exogenous and endogenous factors that may challenge the construction of a new Romani identity, but through interviews and observations of different spaces, I have been able to understand the potential sites of identity formation. For Roma, who experience hostile responses to identity construction in specific sites—including mainstream media—communities are locating alternative sites for this process of identity negotiation. These sites of identity negotiation contribute to understanding feelings of belongingness, too. As Roma experience varying levels of dislocation and displacement within Czech society, the possibility of social media in providing a site to process these experiences and locate communities to combat these feelings are important to consider. The findings demonstrate how social media contribute towards working through these feelings of alienation, specifically with the production online-TV

to provide more diverse representations, Facebook pages dedicated to building communities of understanding, and other online places created to establish transnational connections.

## **Implications**

This research examines media engagement among activists in the Czech Republic and as an ethnography, it does not attempt to generalize findings. However, there are specific findings that may be valuable to scholars, activists, and policymakers working in the area of Romani rights transnationally. As Genzuk (2003) suggests,

Ethnography enhances and widens top down views and enriches the inquiry process, taps both bottom-up insights and perspectives of powerful policy-makers “at the top,” and generates new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity. Through such findings ethnographers may inform others of their findings with an attempt to derive, for example, policy decisions or instructional innovations from such an analysis (p. 2).

This dissertation illustrates the affordances and limitations of media engagement among Roma in the Czech Republic and may contribute to further understanding the role of media for marginalized groups more broadly. As a marginalized group experiencing dislocation, displacement, and feelings associated with statelessness, social media, although a contradictory space, provide communities places to share and negotiate experiences of belonging. These findings may be useful for those working with and within Romani communities in different countries. Further, the research illustrates how feelings of home (that is, belongingness) may be experienced in different mediated spaces and may be valuable for communities that have experienced a loss or lack of home in both the material and immaterial sense. Mediated spaces

are complex and, at times, contentious. This dissertation demonstrates, though, a key affordance of this space is providing a site to engage communities in meaningful ways.

### **Limitations**

As with any project, this dissertation has its limitations. One factor in particular that has impacted the research was my inability to speak Czech fluently. As mentioned in Chapter Three, I completed an introductory Czech language course, which allowed me to speak basic Czech and was incredibly useful while I lived in the Czech Republic. However, holding conversations in Czech, specifically on complex topics such as identity and belonging, was something that I was not able to do. When interviewees preferred to speak Czech, I was accompanied by an interpreter and while I was fortunate to continue these interviews with assistance from interpreters, I understand the nuance that may be lost in translation. This linguistic limitation is also a reflection of my position as an outsider to Czech society that impacted my interpretation of events and experiences. In addition, there may have been other activist efforts and activities that I was not privy to. There are a number of activist groups and organizations throughout the country and region working on topics related to Romani rights. This dissertation examines the work of activists collaborating on a specific project, the online-TV platform, and the work of individual activists throughout the country and their specific efforts. Therefore, there may exist other efforts and groups working outside the purview of this area that I was not aware of and may contribute to future research.

### **Further Research**

My year in the Czech Republic yielded data well beyond what has been integrated into the dissertation and there are aspects of this research that I would like to explore in more depth. For example, some of the generational tensions in the organization of public demonstrations

raised important questions about the generational and gendered dynamics of Romani activism. As discussed by Ivana, women's voices and experiences were welcomed in the event organized by the young activists in Brno and was different from the demonstration organized in Prague. Future research in this area may further explore the specific generational and gendered dynamics of these spaces.

Additionally, discussions around the digital archive have prompted important questions about the documentation of histories. As one of the participants described, histories have largely been passed down generations through oral traditions, the addition of written and now visual documentation becomes a fascinating phenomenon to explore, particularly in understanding histories, lived experiences, and imagined futures.

This project is related to other interests stemmed from historical analyses, specifically that of images employed in social movements among Romani activists in the Czech Republic. I have engaged in exploratory examination of images employed by activists throughout the years and the representations these images serve in understanding Romani social movement. Moreover, in many of the interviews, several of the activists spoke about inspiration they drew from American civil rights leaders. A recent scholarship campaign used images of Martin Luther King, Jr. with the words "I have a dream..." to draw support. Furthermore, there is a fascinating Romafuturism movement in the Czech Republic—drawing from Afrofuturism—that rethinks the past to work towards a more hopeful future. One of the members working on this project defines Romafuturism as,

A way to see ourselves directly, a way to reject a distorted history of the Roma, one that was not written by Romani people, and to begin to look at that history through our own eyes, through the eyes of the Roma, to change and redefine it and thereby to also become

aware of our own position today, to reject inequality in all areas of life and to look at the future differently. That is a future that non-Roma and Roma will form together (Votavová, 2018).

This project may also contribute to better understanding current activist projects and the ways in which identity and community are understood. The inspiration and connections to other marginalized groups with different lived experiences may provide insight to challenging oppressive structures.

### **Final Thoughts**

This dissertation is an exploration into questions related to identity, belonging, activism, and media, among the Roma in the Czech Republic. As an outsider, I was welcomed to different spaces that allowed me to better understand, interpret, and contextualize some of the experiences of those working to confront and challenge the structures that oppress Roma in the Czech Republic. There are a few key findings that I believe contribute to better understanding the current challenges organizers and activists experience and the possible sites of resistance that emerge from the work they are doing. In particular, this moment is highlighted by the work of a group of young Romani activists. Jana, Marek, Jakub, Danika and others utilize different mediated spaces and community organizing strategies to raise awareness around the lived experiences of Roma in the country. Furthermore, they connect their work within communities and organizations to create larger networks of connection. The activists understand the importance of a collective, specifically in challenging an unjust system. For these reasons, they identify specific sites that may help combat antigypsyism.

As an initial exploration into the topic of media engagement among activists and organizers, this dissertation documents the specific efforts and outcomes of those engaged in

challenging and changing the lived experiences of Roma through the utilization of televisual, online and social media engagement. This project describes and interprets the specific efforts and dynamics of media, particularly the tensions, affordances, and limitations of these mediated spaces in understanding identity, community, belonging, and activism. My dissertation explores a specific phenomenon through ethnographic approach to help better understand some of the ways in which communities are challenging unjust systems. It is my hope that the findings of this research contribute to further examination of practices and strategies employed by communities calling for justice in the Czech Republic and beyond to help combat the systems and structures that continue to silence, exclude, and oppress the marginalized.



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## **Appendix**

### **Semi-structured Interview Questions**

- How would you describe the experiences of Roma in the Czech Republic?
- Can you tell me about how you became interested in activism/community organizing?
- What are the issues that motivate your activism?
- What are your daily experiences like?
- What are some of the ways you collaborate with Romani communities?
  - o Can you tell me about specific projects/campaign you've worked on?

Thinking about how you learn about and get involved in different events/causes:

- How do you learn about the different efforts taking place and the organizations/activists promoting these events?
- What role do media play in learning about these events/causes?
- How has the internet changed the way you connect with activists/community members/organizations?
- What role do media play in your own activism?
  - o How do you use (social) media to communicate with activists/community members/organizations?
  - o What are some of the causes that are important to these groups?
- What types of communities and groups are you a part of online?
- How have social media complicated interactions?



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## **Recent Peer-Review Journal Articles**

**Hatef, A.** (2017). From under the veil to under the knife: Women, global beauty, and cosmetic surgery in Afghanistan. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2017.1359200>

**Hatef, A. & Luqiu, L. R.** (2017). Where does Afghanistan fit in China's grand project? A content analysis of Afghan and Chinese news coverage of the One Belt, One Road initiative. *International Communication Gazette*. Advance online publication.  
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Liebler, C., **Hatef, A.**, Munno, G. (2016). Domestic violence as entertainment: Gender, role congruity and reality television. *Media Report to Women*. 44 (1), 6-11 & 18-19.

## **Recent Teaching Experience**

Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University

*Mass Media and Society*, COMM 100, Spring 2019

*International Mass Communications*, COMM 410, Fall 2018

*International Mass Communications*, COMM 410, Summers 2017, 2018, Online course

*World Media Systems*, COMM 419, Fall 2015; Fall 2016 - Spring 2017

## **Recent Grants & Funding**

J. William Fulbright Scholarship for Study/Research	2017 – 2018
Don Davis Program in Ethical Leadership Research Grant	2018
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Marlowe Froke Graduate Scholarship	2015 – 2016