

## CHAPTER 8

# Ascribed representation: Ethnic and religious minorities in the mediated public sphere

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This chapter explores how people of ethnic or religious minority backgrounds perceive and experience the conditions for accessing public debate, and more specifically, unpacks the role of ascribed identities and ascribed representation. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with individuals with a minority background, in addition to previous empirical studies, and shows that accessing public debate is not perceived as a challenge in itself. However, the conditions for access, most notably, who they are allowed to be in public debate can be a barrier for participation. Public participation is associated with a risk of becoming reduced and fixed to their minority status, and becoming a representative of their (assumed) minority group. In order to ensure a diversity of experiences and

perspectives in public debate, it appears necessary to create a space for individual rather than group representation for minorities.

## Introduction

Not all people have or wish access to public discourse. But if specific voices, perspectives and experiences are systematically absent from public debate, it can become a democratic problem. To gain a better understanding of the boundaries of free speech, it is therefore relevant to examine the possibility of accessing public debate for individuals, in particular for minorities, whose voices are often not equitably represented (cf. Retriever, 2015). This chapter explores the conditions for participating in public debate in Norway for people with an ethnic or religious minority background, and examines one aspect of these conditions in particular: being ascribed the role of representing the group they (seemingly) belong to.

Many of the traditional media outlets have become concerned with presenting a diversity of voices including minorities (Bangstad, 2013). However, minorities who are granted access to the media often experience being *ethnicified*. They are ascribed and fixed to an identity as an ethnic other, and this one aspect of their identity comes to determine how they are portrayed and what topics they can address (see Bangstad, 2013, 2014; Eide, 2010a, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016). At the same time, there appears to be space – at least for some individuals – to transcend ethnic and religious categorization and develop individual identities in public debate (Midtbøen, 2016).

The questions asked in this chapter are: What is the role of ascribed identities, and *ascribed representation*, in relation to participation in the mediated public sphere for people of ethnic or religious minority backgrounds? And how are these issues

dealt with by (potential) participants? The analysis is based on an empirical investigation of ten potential, and two experienced, participants in public debate, all with diverse ethnic and religious minority backgrounds. In addition, the analysis draws on previous empirical studies of active media participants with a minority background (Bangstad, 2013, 2014; Eide, 2010a, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016). The chapter concentrates on participation in the mediated public sphere, i.e. traditional media outlets where editors and reporters act as gatekeepers (e.g. Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, see also Ihlebæk & Thorsen, Ch. 5 this book). This is still considered a forum for public debate which has more impact and higher legitimacy than others (e.g. Carpentier, 2011), and issues of ascribed identities and ascribed representation become particularly relevant here, as the individual is at the mercy of editors and reporters when it comes to access and how they are portrayed.

The study adds to the literature on minorities in the public sphere in two ways. First, it contributes to broadening the understanding of the barriers for participation by also examining the experiences and perspectives of people who are not (yet) an established part of public debate. Research on minorities' perspectives on media participation in Norway has so far concentrated on experienced media actors (Bangstad, 2013; Midtbøen, 2016). Although these actors describe challenges and barriers in accessing the mediated public sphere, they have in fact already overcome the main of barrier of access.

Second, the chapter unpacks the role of ascribed identities and ascribed representation for minorities' participation in public debate. Inspired by Phillips (2009) the chapter introduces an analytical distinction between group and individual representation, and highlights the fact that while ascribed representation poses an obligation to represent a certain group in public,

it also creates an obligation towards the group, to represent them in a manner they recognize and accept. By analyzing the experiences and perspectives of people who are not a part of public debate, while also drawing on empirical studies of experienced media actors, the chapter contributes to knowledge about the conditions securing minorities (un)equal access to the mediated public sphere.

## **Minorities in the mediated public sphere**

The presence of minorities in the mediated public sphere has been studied in several ways. In media studies there is a long tradition of examining how minorities are represented and portrayed in the media. These studies show that immigrants and other minority groups are often ascribed stereotypical attributes based on their group membership (see Cottle, 2000b; Gullestad, 2006; Hall, 1997; Retriever, 2015). Recent studies, however, indicate that there are tendencies towards more complex portrayals of minorities in the news (Cottle, 2007, 2000b; Retriever, 2015). Others have studied the presence of minorities in the media. Studies of Norwegian media find that people with immigrant backgrounds are underrepresented in news media (Retriever, 2015), also in news about immigrants (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014, see also Cottle 2000b).

Despite underrepresentation, there appears to be an increasing presence of minority voices in Norwegian media, and some of the main media institutions have publically declared that they aim to increase the share of immigrants in their outlets (Bangstad, 2013; Midtbøen, 2016). A few studies have examined the experiences of these ‘minority voices’ in Norway (Bangstad, 2013, 2014; Eide, 2010a, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016). The studies show that the active media

participants experience being *ethnicified* or subject to culturalization by reporters (Eide, 2010b). This media ethnification takes the form of a ‘one-sided, dominant media focus on a person or group as an *ethnic other*, an emphasis on her difference (from a presumed ‘us’), based on her being (more or less) visibly different or on a tacitly presumed *background* that differs from the mainstream’ (Eide, 2010b: 66).

The profiled media actors experience Norwegian media as being mostly interested in them in their capacity as minorities, and in relation to minority-related topics, like religion, immigration and integration (Eide, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016). Thus, certain topics and ways of presenting oneself seem to grant more ready access to the mediated public sphere.

The empirical contributions differ in how they interpret the possibility for minority actors to create a space for themselves as individuals rather than as representatives of a group. While Bangstad (2014) implies that race, ethnicity and religion have wide-ranging significance, Midtbøen (2016) argues that there is a space for individuals with a minority background to transcend ethnic boundaries to the extent that they can participate in public debate as individuals, regardless of their minority background.

## Ascribed identities and ascribed representation

The empirical studies of minorities in the Norwegian mediated public sphere illustrate the importance of ethnic boundaries in shaping the experiences of minority participants in public debate. Fredrik Barth’s (1969) influential work emphasizes the relational nature of ethnic boundaries. Ethnicity, but also identities more generally, concerns both *self-identification* – one may

see oneself as a member of a particular ethnic group – and *ascription* – others may identify a person or a group of persons as a member of a particular ethnic group (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1997 p. 53). The boundaries between ethnic groups are defined, not by objective or ‘real’ differences between groups, but by what are considered to be *socially relevant* differences. However, not all people are able to choose how they are categorized (Jenkins, 1997). Visible markers of difference, like skin colour, can lead to immediate categorization and the ascription of an ethnic identity, regardless of how one understands oneself. It is not possible to opt out of this categorization because the identity is simply ascribed, the visual marker of category membership poses an external obligation to adopt the identity in question (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Jenkins, 2014).

Alba (2005) emphasizes that all boundaries do not operate in the same manner, and makes a distinction between bright and blurred ethnic boundaries. When ethnic boundaries are bright there is no ambiguity in who belongs to the ethnic group. But when boundaries become blurred, the location of the boundaries is indeterminate or ambiguous, at least for some sets of individuals (Alba, 2005). Ethnic boundaries are thus not given once and for all, but are rather the result of everyday boundary-making processes – both internal and external to the group – that are dynamic and can change over time (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1997).

When boundaries are bright, ascribed identities can become essentializing, in that certain traits are seen as fixed and shared for all members of a certain group, whereas individual variation and change are disregarded. Essentialism means that one trait, for instance your skin colour, or ethnic or religious background, comes to determine the whole definition of your identity, and you become reduced to that one trait, regardless of how you

identify yourself (cf. Hall, 1997; Mansbridge, 1999). When individuals are seen solely as members or representatives of a specific group, ascribed identities can entail imposed or *ascribed representation*.

In the context of political representation, Anne Philips makes a distinction between a corporatist representation on the one hand, where ‘individuals serve as the authorized representatives of their group and are regarded as its authentic voice’, and on the other hand, ‘looser measures that seek to increase representation of people sharing the markers and experiences of these groups’ (Phillips, 2009 p. 168). Philips warns that when individuals are seen as representatives of a group, it invokes a reified understanding of *the* group, *the* culture, or *the* community that is being represented. This type of representation – which I will refer to as *group representation* – can reinforce essentializing tendencies, especially if it is imposed. Insisting that ethnic or religious minorities represent ‘their group’, regardless of whether they take on this role, implies that there is an essential quality to being, for instance, Jewish that all Jews share, and that gives them common interests despite what might divide them (cf. Mansbridge, 1999 p. 637). In the extreme, this implies that any person of Jewish background represents all Jewish people, regardless of their political beliefs, gender or other differences (cf. Mansbridge, 1999 p. 638).

The ‘looser’ type of representation that Phillips addresses can be termed *individual representation*. This type of representation allows for the multiplicity of identities and the unique interests and experiences of the individual to be recognized. Although categories such as ethnicity and religion do not determine individuals, these categories have substantial material and discursive significance (cf. McCall, 2005). An individual’s minority status will thus – to some degree at least – shape their interests

and experiences, making it a democratic necessity to have individuals with different group attributes represented in public debate and in the decision-making process (Phillips, 2009 p. 168). Individual representation means that individuals are allowed to participate with the full spectrum of their experiences and traits (for instance as an economist that happens to be Muslim), without being reduced to one aspect of their identity (i.e. being seen only as a Muslim).

This chapter explores the perspectives of individuals with an ethnic or religious minority background. Ethnic and religious identities are not always easy to disentangle. They often overlap, and are to varying degrees conflated in public debate. Alba (2005) argues that while race is a bright and salient boundary in the US, religion, specifically Islam, plays a parallel role in the European context. The category 'Muslim' has become racialized, so that religion, ethnic origin and skin colour largely become conflated, to the extent that dark-skinned individuals with immigrant backgrounds are immediately categorised as Muslim (see Midtbøen, ch. 7 for a striking example). In contrast, the category Jew is much less salient, and often less visible in the Norwegian context. In this chapter, I do not unpack the distinctions between ethnic and religious categories, but I treat them as minority statuses that can become salient in different ways.

## About the study

The chapter is based on qualitative interviews of people with an ethnic or religious minority background, who are *potential* – but not established – participants in public debate. Because the aim of the study is to capture potential barriers to participation in public debate, it was important to identify individuals for whom participation is somehow experienced as a relevant option. It is

not obvious how to define this criterion, but I operationalized it as individuals who are relevant for public debate either through their (formal or informal) position in an organization, the ethnic community or professionally, or more generally through their social commitments (e.g. being highly engaged in issues such as gender equality, immigrant integration or religious rights).

The study includes twelve interviews: ten in-depth interviews with people of ethnic or religious minority backgrounds in Norway and two more informal interviews with experienced media actors with minority backgrounds. The main sample consists of five women and five men, within a wide age range (from 17 to 55 years). The participants have different kinds of minority backgrounds. Two have a Norwegian-Jewish background. Six identify as Muslim, with immigrant backgrounds from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia. The remaining two have an immigrant background (Tamil and Turkish), but did not declare a religious affiliation. All but two of the interviewees have grown up in Norway.

The participants were recruited through the two experienced media actors, and through already established networks in different minority communities with subsequent snowball sampling. I made an active effort to get participants from different sources. Seven of the interviewees have (or have previous experience from) formal positions in organizations built around an ethnic/religious community or dealing with minority issues. The rest have an informal position in the community or a strong social commitment that makes media participation a distinct option. The *potential* participants in public debate recruited for this study all turned out to have some sort of experience with the media, either as sources or through participating in the opinion pages of a newspaper. Still, none of them should be considered as experienced media actors, neither did they understand themselves as such.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the topics of the interviews were to some degree adjusted to the situation of each individual. Generally, the interviews covered the following issues: Experiences with actual participation in public debate (both in traditional and social media), experiences and perceptions of the conditions for accessing public debate, and perception of the possibility for them to express their opinions.

## Ascribed identities as part of the game

How do ethnic and religious minorities perceive the possibility to access the mediated public sphere? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the studies of experienced media actors find that they do not consider *access* to the media a challenge in itself (Bangstad, 2013; Eide, 2010a; Midtbøen, 2016; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016). However, the interviewees in this study, who do not have much experience with participating in public debate, perceive that they too have access to the media and public debate, in case they should wish and try to participate. The interviewees consider the Norwegian media to be interested in people of minority background, describing them as having ‘quotas for people with a minority background’. They regularly witness others with a minority background in the media, and the presence of well-established and visible media actors with a minority background reinforces the perception of Norwegian media as accessible for minorities.

Although access is not seen as a great challenge, ‘[...] the way you reach out, that can be a small problem’, as one of the interviewees puts it. In other words, the *conditions* for access can be problematic (cf. Bangstad, 2013; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016). And a central ‘problem’ of access is that the gatekeepers of the media – editors and reporters – are often

interested in them only as minorities, and not in their other capacities. One of the interviewees describes an illustrative situation:

[A major online newspaper] calls me and says: “We need some people who are not visible, but who are competent and want to be visible”. And I say that I’m an economist. I can talk about my topic or I can talk about career and education, if you’re interested in that. And he says: “Yes, [this person] said that all Muslims are terrorists. What’s your comment on that?” I say that I can’t comment on this in the media. It has no relevance. Okay, I have a Muslim and Pakistani background, but I don’t feel that I’m a spokesperson for that topic, and I’m not going to comment on it.

Although the reporter extended a seemingly open invitation to contribute to the public debate, it soon became clear that he was not interested in the interviewee in his professional capacity, but as a representative of Muslims. Another interviewee explains that gaining access to the media is unproblematic as long as you stick to minority-related issues:

As soon as I have something to say about Islam, Muslims, something like that, ISIS, it’s so easy to get access. Journalists love to write about it. [...] As soon as I play my minority card or religion card, there’s no problem getting an issue in the media.

The interviewees have a clear perception that their minority background is what interests the media, and shapes what topics they are most readily granted access to address. This conditional access to public debate is also described by more experienced media actors, who point out that Norwegian media are mostly interested in minorities engaging in specific – and minority-related – topics, typically questions related to religion, integration and immigration (Eide, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016; Midtbøen &

Steen-Johnsen, 2016). Thus, they experience being interesting primarily as representatives of their minority group.

Furthermore, the interviewees state that not all positions are equally attractive to the media. Bangstad (2013) argues that the Norwegian media include and privilege the voices of individuals of Muslim background who engage in criticizing Islam, while they often exclude Muslims who are not prepared to engage in such critique (see also Gullestad, 2002). The interviewees in this study perceive that it is polarized views – including critique of one's own group, but also for instance extreme religious beliefs – that easily gain access, whereas positive stories and nuances are more often excluded.

The interviewees see the focus on their minority background and the privileging of polarized positions as part of 'the game' of media participation. These experienced conditions for access partly reflect common journalistic conventions. The use of 'cases' is a common feature of present-day journalism. It means that individuals are used as an illustrative example of the issue at hand, portraying them as representatives of a group to show that their story has relevance beyond themselves as individuals (Hågvar, 2016 p. 292). Using polarization, at the expense of nuances, to create debates is also not specific to minorities in the media (e.g. Ihlebæk & Thorseth, ch. 5). Still, such common features of journalism can contribute to reinforcing the tendency towards reducing media participants to the minority aspect of their identity.

It is not only the gatekeepers of the mediated public sphere who ascribe identities, and have a one-sided focus on their minority status. The interviewees also believe that, within the general public, visible minorities inevitably become reduced to their minority status, regardless of whether it is relevant to the issue at hand, in particular in the discussions in the comment sections. One interviewee describes the response to a news

article about his outstanding educational achievements: ‘There was a lot of focus on religion, which wasn’t even mentioned [in the article]. And there was a lot of focus on ethnicity, which didn’t have anything to do with it, right?’ Although he found his ethnic and religious background to be of little relevance to the news story – and in fact these characteristics were not highlighted in the article – his Pakistani and (assumed) Muslim background were made ‘bright’ in the discussions that followed.

Although accessing public debate in itself is not seen as a great challenge, the conditions for access frame *who* you are allowed to be in the public sphere. The interviewees have a clear notion that participating in public debate entails having a minority identity ascribed, regardless of how they wish to identify themselves. Put crudely, this happens – indirectly and directly – through which topics they are seen as eligible to discuss, through what positions are available to them, and through how they are received by the general public.

## Ascribed representation as a barrier for participation

Some of the interviewees find the conditions for access detailed above – and the ascription of identity that comes with it – highly problematic. The challenge, as the interviewees describe it, is not so much that they are ascribed a minority identity regardless of how they present themselves. It is that they are *reduced* to that identity only. They articulate a concern that by participating in public debate, they risk becoming ‘*the* Minority’ for the Norwegian public. For instance, a participant with a Jewish background describes her main reason for not wanting to participate in public debate: ‘Although you might want to participate a tiny bit, you don’t want to become, well, the Norwegian Jew’.

Another interviewee with a Jewish background has a similar reflection. Although she feels that she has something to contribute to the public debate, she does not participate because she is reluctant to become a ‘public Jew’:

I agree that the voice [that I represent] is perhaps needed in some way or another, but I don’t want to assume that role. And that’s mostly about... What is it mostly about? I think it’s mostly about somehow taking on the role of a public Jewish person.

The interviewees imply that participating in public debate means, not only being ascribed a Jewish identity, but being positioned as representing Norwegian Jews. Both interviewees with a Jewish background are white and come from families who have lived in Norway for generations. Thus, they do not stand out as visible minorities. The question of whether or not to participate as a *Jew* in public debates is for them, therefore, also a question of whether they wish to draw attention to their minority status.

However, the fear of becoming *the* representative of ‘their group’ is not limited to the non-visible minority interviewees. Also those with an immigrant background, who are dark-skinned, and therefore more visible minorities, articulate a concern for becoming *the* Muslim in Norwegian public debate. As one of the experienced media actors in the study explains: ‘If you go out [in public] you become a representative of Muslims.’ While several of the interviewees explicitly refer to the fear of becoming ‘*the* Muslim’, no one mentions the fear of being reduced to a representative of their ethnic group. I will return to the specific role religion seems to play later in the chapter.

When Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen (2016 p. 25) describe the ‘curse of representation’ for their media-active participants, they refer to how the participants experience being limited with

regard to what *topics* they are invited or even permitted to discuss. However, for the interviewees in this study, who are in the periphery of public debate at best, there seems to be more at stake. They problematize being ascribed a public minority status in itself. When they talk about the fear of becoming *the* Minority in public, it implies that their religious or ethnic identity is not only made visible, but that it comes to define them entirely. This means being ascribed a role as what I, following Phillips (2009), have termed group representatives. They are seen solely as members of a specific group, speaking on behalf of that group. The contrasting form of representation would be to be able to participate as individuals, with distinct experiences and interests that might be shaped by their minority status, but without being reduced to being only a minority.

Although the participants understand the risk of representation in broader terms than what topics they gain access to talk about, topics also matter. Those who wish to participate in public debate in order to communicate their experiences and perspectives as a minority can get caught in the tension between representing an individual with a minority perspective and becoming a representative of the group. One of the Jewish participants articulates this tension when she explains why she does not want to participate in debates about anti-Semitism or the conflict in the Middle East:

[...] the debates where I have something I wish to say, are often debates in which I don't want to... At the same time as I want to get to say what I want to say, I don't really want to get the stamp that you often get if you participate in those kinds of debates. [...] It's those debates where I often sit and bite my tongue about things I would like to say, but don't dare to say. Or choose not to say. It's not really that I don't dare, but that I don't want the kind of attention you get. Or the attention I think you maybe get.

The attention she is afraid of getting, is partly related to her notion that her opinions go against the established positions in Norwegian society and that they will therefore be challenging to voice. But it is also about the type of representation she thinks comes with participating in these debates, namely being cast as ‘The Young Norwegian Jew’, as she articulates it. Thus, she believes that it is not possible merely to be a voice that represents minority perspectives and experiences in the public debate, without being cast as *the* Minority. As Eide (2010b: 73) finds in her study of experienced media actors: ‘If you (sometimes) speak as or on behalf of a [minority] group, you are deemed to *be* that group’ [emphasis in original]. For some interviewees the concern about being ascribed a position as *the* Minority is a substantial barrier to participation in the media and public debate. But why are they so reluctant to risk ascribed representation?

## Feared consequences of becoming The Minority

What is perceived to be at stake in ascribed representation centres around a concern for three types of consequences: 1) hateful reactions, 2) ascribed opinions and beliefs, and 3) professional consequences.

The interviewees worried about negative reactions and hate speech as a consequence of public participation, a concern that is also present among the experienced media actors (see Bangstad, 2013; Eide, 2010b; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016). Some have experienced negative and frightening reactions after participating in public debate, while some have witnessed others receiving negative comments, hate speech, and even serious threats. There is a shared perception that people with a Muslim background are especially at risk of getting such reactions

(see Fladmoe & Nadim ch. 2 for analyses of experiences of receiving hate speech among people of immigrant background). One of the interviewees explains:

I know several people who found this to be a great strain. Everybody who writes and has a Muslim background, no matter how well they write or how badly they write, they experience the same thing. These trolls. [...] I've warned the whole youth group: "Just don't spend time reading that, it'll only make you want to go and kill yourself".

His dramatic wording probably reflects how degrading he finds the comments you can find in online debates and comment sections. For some, the fear of these kinds of negative reactions is their main reason for staying away from public debate, as one interviewee describes: 'I'm not one of the strong ones who dares to be in the media and receive online hate and the many strange comments you see in the comment sections, regardless of what article you're reading.' Others, however, describe degrading comments as an unpleasant aspect of public participation, but not as something that would hinder them in participating altogether.

A different type of consequence is more directly related to ascribed identities, namely ascribed opinions and beliefs. Categories, such as 'Muslim', 'Jew', 'immigrant', are imbued with meaning. In being ascribed an identity you are also being ascribed certain attributes, opinions and beliefs (cf. Duveen & Lloyd, 1986). One of the experienced media actors explains that Muslims are automatically seen as orthodox, and are expected to comment on, or denounce, any negative act that is done in the name of Islam (see also Bangstad, 2013; Eide, 2010b). Another interviewee explains that you 'have to use a lot of energy on positioning yourself differently than people perhaps assume'.

However, ascribed identities and ascribed opinions are significant mostly because the interviewees see them as a clear threat to their professional lives. A recurring concern is that being cast as *the* Minority will overshadow their professional competence, to the extent that it will have consequences for their career. For instance, the two participants with a Jewish background work in different fields, but both assert that becoming ‘a public Jew’, as they phrase it, will impair their professional credibility. One of them says: ‘I also feel I choose not to take that position in public debate to not close any doors – in my professional life’.

Another participant, who has a Muslim background, elaborates on this concern:

Once you say something about religion in the media... I don't feel I have anything whatsoever to gain from it, no matter how positive my statements are. Because of the extreme secularism [in Norwegian society], it will backfire on me. And it will backfire against what is typically my professional competence. And that makes me very conscious of saying anything about religion in the media, for example. Because I don't want it to overrun my professional competence. That you become defined as the Muslim in [the company] instead of the economist in [the company].

Interestingly, the concerns about the consequences of becoming a hyper-visible minority are expressed in relation to religious minority status, but not in relation to an *ethnic* minority status. This might reflect the prominent position and ‘brightness’ of religion as a boundary in current public debate (cf. Alba, 2005; Alba & Foner, 2015). As the interviewees point out, in a highly secular context like Norway, the role of religion in the public sphere is contested. There is an implicit hierarchy of worth, and perhaps a hierarchy of rationality, of religions, where Islam seems to be at the bottom (cf. Bleich, Stonebraker, Nisar, &

Abdelhamid, 2015), being portrayed as a threat to liberal societies and rational thinking (cf. Huntington, 1996). Although one could assume that the position of the Muslim is more stigmatized than that of other minorities, it is noteworthy that the interviewees with a Jewish background appear equally reluctant to take on the role of a public representative.

## Strategies to deal with ascribed representation

There are different strategies to deal with the risk of ascribed representation and essentialization. As I have shown above, for some of the actors on the periphery of public debate, the answer is to avoid participation in the mediated public sphere. Another way this is handled is by strategically playing by the rules of game, playing the ‘minority card or religion card’ as one of the interviewees phrased it. A young interviewee, who is engaged in politics, describes using this strategy:

I think there are two ways of seeing it [the media’s focus on minority background], and I only see it as an advantage. Yes, yes, okay, so maybe I’m there because of my skin colour, that’s why I’m on that news story on NRK [The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation]. But I’m in. So I don’t see it as something negative. If that’s what gives me the opportunity, then of course I’m going to use it, right? I mean, we all have our qualities and attributes so we can use them.

She sees how other young people struggle to be heard, and although she recognizes that it can be problematic that the basis for her participation is her skin colour, she argues that her minority status gives her an opportunity that she should embrace. Similarly, Eide (2010b) finds that some of the experienced media actors with minority backgrounds engage in *strategic*

*essentialism* to obtain media attention and recognition. This implies complying with the conventions of the journalists and temporarily downplaying internal differences, and accepting a simplified and essentializing image of the group (Eide, 2010b; Spivak, 1996). This can be understood as a form of *strategic* group representation.

While strategic representation, or ‘playing the minority card’ means accepting ascribed representation, most of the interviewees in this study, and the experienced media actors studied by others (Bangstad, 2013, 2014; Eide, 2010a, 2010b; Midtbøen, 2016), problematize and contest this condition for participation. Some of the interviewees portray ascribed representation as more or less inevitable – either through an emphasis on how the readership reduces everything to religion and ethnicity, or through their perception that the mediated public sphere is only interested in them as minorities. While others hold that there are ways to circumvent this, and actively try to negotiate and challenge this condition for media access.

The main strategy of challenge is avoiding minority-related topics (see also Midtbøen, 2016). As one of the interviewees describes: ‘So I’ve been conscious about this, right, everything I’m going to comment on or things like that, should be directed at my professional competence, and not background.’ He deliberately does not talk about religion, integration or related topics. By strictly participating as an expert in his discipline, he argues that he can avoid the minority label. This strategy is even more pronounced for the interviewees with a non-visible minority background.

One of the interviewees with a Jewish background explains that she occasionally participates in debates or interviews on television and in the printed press through her work. However, she is very reluctant to participate ‘as a Jew’:

I've sometimes been asked by editors or others to say something about how it is to be a Jew in Norway, how one, as a Jew, sees the conflict in the Middle East and things like that, where I have said no. On the one hand, I feel that if I were to comment on that, I would have wanted a much more professional perspective on it [...] But when it becomes a personal matter, I don't feel that... Or I don't want to speak about my personal experiences in the media.

Her standpoint is very similar to that of the interviewee described above. Both emphasize that it is fine to speak about religion or the experiences of the minority group, if this is your area of expertise. But it is not relevant for them to participate as a member of a minority who speaks only in the capacity of being a minority. The difference between the two interviewees is, however, that one is not a visible minority and is thus freer than the one with a more visible minority background to choose and control the extent to which her minority background is emphasized.

Nevertheless, avoiding minority-related questions can come at a cost, because they might not be granted access on the terms they insist on, in the form of individual representation. Several of the interviewees say they have tried to gain attention on non-minority related issues, without success, while others do not consider themselves competent enough in their professional field to wish to take a public role in that capacity. Midtbøen's (2016) study of experienced media actors, however, finds that some individuals are in fact able to transcend ethnic and religious boundaries, and participate in public debate based on individual merits and preferences, on their own terms. He finds that second generation immigrants particularly, born and raised in Norway, seem to be able to challenge and overcome ethnic boundaries.

To sum up, this study reveals different strategies employed by ethnic or religious minorities in the face of the risk of ascribed representation: *avoidance* – sidestepping the risk by avoiding

media participation altogether; *acceptance* and strategic accommodation to the conventional conditions for media access by emphasizing their minority status, thus accepting group representation; and *challenge* by insisting on individual representation.

## The legitimacy to represent

So far I have examined the question of representation in terms of who participants in the mediated public sphere are seen to be by those outside the minority group (e.g. the media and the general public). However, representation does not only concern your role externally, it also concerns how the group you are supposedly representing understand and identify you (cf. Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1997). People have different positions within a given group, and a challenge with (being ascribed) group representation is the question of with what legitimacy one can take (or be given) such a role.

One of the interviewees articulates how speaking as a minority can also pose challenges within the community:

We are so few who say anything [in the media] [...] that you can be a bit frightened of the reactions from the community. Or you can be a bit sensitive to them. It increases because you're the only one perhaps who says something. Because suddenly you're supposed to look after everybody's standpoint. And that's not possible, right? Here you have people from the far right to the far left, and everything in between. You can't make a statement that everybody can support. And then you might get an uneasy feeling that people in the community think you've done a bad job with your statements. And you definitely cannot be bothered with that. The people you're supposedly in the same box with don't agree with you or think you've done a bad job. Then you perhaps might as well not do the job.

The interviewee implies that it is difficult to insist that you participate in the public debate as an individual, also for the community itself, when there are few others with the same background visible in the media. Also within the group, you are seen to become a group representative – or at least as trying to take on this role. Furthermore, she points to a central difficulty in taking on such a role: There is no unified standpoint to communicate, and you only risk disappointing people.

An important factor in how the interviewees relate to the question of representation is their understanding of what position they speak from. Some have formal positions that allow them to easily take on the role of a group representative that they think is seen as legitimate in their own community. Others find the position of a group representative problematic precisely because they feel they lack such legitimacy.

For instance, one of the interviewees used to be the spokesperson of a mosque. Now that he no longer has this role, he is reluctant to participate in public debate. He explains this in terms of how time-consuming and straining it is to get the media to portray ‘their cause’ in a proper manner. He does not, however, seem to question his qualification to speak on behalf of his mosque or on behalf of Muslims more generally.

In contrast, another interviewee feels she has no legitimacy to represent or speak on behalf of the others in her community. She used to have a central role in an ethnic organization, but she explains that she was essentially excluded after asking critical questions. She believes she has a lot to contribute to public debate, but it is not an option for her to speak without a position to speak from:

You have to get in a position where I am the spokesperson for [the ethnic group], speaking for their issues. That’s the only option I can see. And how I’m going to get to that position, it’s actually not easy.

It is not an option for her to participate in public debate unless she somehow has a mandate to represent her community, even though she thinks many in the community agree with her standpoints. Because she has felt the consequences of speaking against people she considered to be on her side, she is very cautious about what she says in public. Her story illustrates the fact that limitations on minorities' access to freedom of speech not only come from the majority society or the conditions for accessing the mediated public sphere. Internal social control mechanisms are also a factor, as people strive as much for acceptance in their own community as in public. Ascribed representation poses an obligation to represent a certain group in public, but it also creates an obligation towards the group, to represent them in a manner that they recognize and accept.

## Discussion and conclusion

As immigration and diversity have become an integral part of Norwegian society, and are no longer new phenomena, do ethnic and religious minorities still face specific barriers in accessing public debate? This chapter has explored the experiences and perspectives of individuals with an ethnic or religious minority background who are (potential) participants in public debate. While access to the media is not seen as a challenge in itself, the conditions for access, that frame who they are allowed to be in the public sphere, are considered to be more problematic. The interviewees experience public participation as coming with a risk of not only being ascribed a minority identity, but being fixed and reduced to that attribute only. They articulate a fear of becoming *the* Minority in Norwegian public debate, ascribed a position as a representative of 'their group'. Being ascribed group representation is seen as problematic both in what it communicates to the

outside world (e.g. undermining their professional competence) and in what it communicates to the community they are supposedly representing (e.g. the legitimacy they have to do so). The analysis suggests several strategies to deal with ascribed representation: avoiding participation in the mediated public sphere, accepting the rules of the game and using one's minority status strategically to gain access, or challenging the conditions for media access by strictly avoiding minority-related topics.

When discussing ethnic and religious minorities' access to the mediated public sphere, it is important to keep in mind that only a small fraction of the general population ever participate in public debate. And those who do are subject to a news media logic that does not necessarily leave much room for nuance and complexity. Nevertheless, as Cottle (2000a p. 21) argues, the question is not whether the news media values are exclusive to reporting on minorities, because they clearly inform other news stories as well, but to what extent they figure disproportionately when minorities are involved. The experience that the media ascribes an identity and presents you as belonging to a group is not specific to ethnic or religious minorities (e.g. Eide, 2010a p. 75). However, not all identities become equally fixed on all individuals (cf. Skeggs, 2004). Ethnic and religious identities appear as identities that – perhaps to a greater extent than other identities – can reduce the individual to only that attribute, reflecting the brightness of ethnicity and religion as symbolic boundaries in contemporary Norway and Europe (e.g. Alba, 2005). Thus, ascribed group representation appears as a challenge particularly for minorities' participation in public debate. This suggests that symbolic boundaries, in terms of ethnic and religious distinctions, translate into social differences (e.g. Lamont & Molnár, 2002), in terms of differential access to public debate and to the exercise of freedom of speech.

While the media perform an important role in the public representation of symbolic group boundaries, and thus contribute to reinforcing such boundaries, it can also affirm diversity and provide important spaces in and through which imposed identities can be resisted, challenged and changed (Cottle, 2000a p. 2). This study, together with the literature review, suggests that the ‘old story’ of ascribed identities and minority-specific barriers for participation has not lost its relevance. At the same time, Norwegian media seem to become increasingly conscious of how to handle diversity, and the empirical investigation provides examples of how individuals challenge the conditions for access, and both expect and demand to participate in public debate on their own terms, in the form of individual representation (see also Midtbøen, 2016). However, in a democratic perspective, it is not only important that individuals with a minority background can participate in public debate, it is also vital that the perspectives they have as minorities are voiced. It is not only a matter of which individuals participate, but to what extent a diversity of experiences, perspectives and interests is represented in the debate. The challenge is therefore to create conditions that allow individuals with minority backgrounds to participate in public debate, not as representatives of a minority per se, but as individuals who have unique experiences and perspectives, shaped by their minority status.

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