

Catalan Audiovisual Council Guidelines on the News Treatment of Immigration

Barcelone, April 10th, 2002

Guidelines addressed specifically to the authorities

1. Independently of the general quality of the treatment they have to give in their approach to the phenomenon of immigration, it is important that the authorities in general, along with those with specific briefs on immigration and related professional bodies (working in security, prevention, assistance, services, etc.) fully assume their role as a source of information.
2. This role as a regular source of information in the public dissemination of news and messages about immigration and immigrants, calls for the authorities to accept specific responsibility for facilitating the work of the news media.
3. Authorities and professional bodies must make it a priority to provide precise, detailed and proven information to the media, as well as reasoned and contextualised news stories.
4. In general, it is important to avoid sensationalism and the unnecessary dramatisation of situations, and procure to not lead the audience into simplification or the making of condemnatory presumptions, or to spark prejudices of a xenophobic or discriminatory nature.
5. Authorities and professional public bodies are the first link in the news chain responsible for tackling immigration fundamentally as an issue and not inevi-

tably and imperatively as a problem. While they should not shirk from mentioning problematic situations, tensions or contradictions that may arise at any given time, they should bear in mind that immigration has been practically a permanent social and historical phenomenon in most of today's societies (with many countries having either received immigrants or seen their own people migrate abroad). Immigration does not in itself constitute a threat and can be tackled from many positive points of view in terms of social enrichment and enhancement.

6. Authorities and professional bodies should be particularly careful about and scrupulous with their use of language as it can channel discriminatory stereotypes and should establish forms of expression that respect the dignity of people and groups of immigrants and their social and cultural circumstances.

7. There should be coordination between the press and public relations services of the different administrations.

Guidelines addressed especially to broadcast news companies

1. Public and private companies in the audiovisual news industry, as part of their social responsibility, should collaborate with governmental policies of including immigrant populations. They should take an active role in the dissemination of information and knowledge about immigration and its contexts that constitute strategic and basic elements for an advanced and efficient management of diversity. They should help establish a climate of social dialogue.

2. It is important that media companies use their broadcasting capacity to facilitate basic information on immigration to both the indigenous population and especially the foreign population, which is often in a precarious situation in terms of accessing the most basic instrumental information.

- 3.** Companies should establish professional criteria and internal procedures to guarantee they do not have to resort to biased sources or sources that do not provide opposing points of view. Companies should foster self-regulation and create applications and mechanisms that check the quality of the news treatment of issues related to immigration.
- 4.** It is important to promote the adoption of specific codes of ethics on the treatment of immigrants and/or develop in-house guidelines that minimise the effects of stereotypes, automatic formulas and discriminatory language.
- 5.** Depending on how big they are and the extent to which it is possible, companies should promote specialisation, training and regular refresher courses for staff involved in covering stories on immigration.
- 6.** Companies should also invest resources in diversifying sources and provide journalists with the time and work conditions that allow them to deliver more complex, contextualised and better informed stories.
- 7.** Companies should avoid employing too many resources and using strategies that give too much attention if they only make events or conflicts directly or indirectly related to immigration seem bigger than necessary. They should remember that artificially sensationalising events can often promote stereotypical and simplified views.
- 8.** Similarly, it is important to not use elements that are merely anecdotal, automatic or superfluous to stories and not of significant news value. Instead, companies should strengthen the presence of expert opinions from people who can facilitate comprehension of the deeper reasons behind the event.
- 9.** Without affecting selection procedures based on merit, suitability and appro-

priateness, the composition of newsroom staff should tend to reflect the diversity and plurality that exist in society.

Guidelines addressed especially to broadcast journalists

1. When reporting immigration-related stories, it is absolutely essential to include the participation of immigrants as a news source to complement other usual sources, which are generally linked to the political or legal worlds. The principles of contrasted, relative and diversified sources also refer to official sources.

2. Similarly, when preparing stories on issues relating to immigration, immigrants and immigrant associations must especially be guaranteed their right to freedom of expression.

3. Intimacy and privacy are universal rights that must be applied independently of countries of origin or the conditions of people involved. Close-ups of the injured or dead should not be broadcast, even if the story comes from a country far from the media organisation's sphere of reference. Attributing an exotic or alien character to people or events in order to justify a relaxation of self-monitoring or self-regulation guidelines in the treatment of news stories, is not acceptable under any circumstances and even less in a society becoming increasingly multicultural.

4. Rights and principles relating to people's intimacy must be scrupulously applied to stories on immigration. Invasive footage or close-ups should not be filmed without the express authorisation of the people involved. Hypothetical added difficulties of comprehension between the media and immigrants means that extreme care should be taken to guarantee that people's wishes are not disregarded. This recommendation and the previous one should be particularly observed when minors are involved.

5. The use of discriminatory language is to be avoided, along with language that could involve generic prejudices. Terms and expressions such as *illegal*, *undocumented* or *without papers* should not be used automatically to define or qualify people in a non-regularised situation.

6. Further, the automatic adoption of stereotypical attributes that involve discriminatory evaluations are also unacceptable. For example, systematically referring to people who follow a particular religion as 'fundamentalists' should be avoided.

7. Special care should be taken with the terminology used in news headlines and summaries, as their brief form can often lead to a lack of precision or the promotion of stereotypes.

8. When reporting stories relating to immigration, technical and journalistic resources that pursue a primarily sensationalist function should not be used.

9. Emphasising references to matters such as the origin or skin colour of people featuring in news stories is not usually relevant, not strictly necessary to understanding what has happened, can help reinforce prejudices and can be an implicit, key factor in negative or condemnatory interpretations. These types of references should be employed after applying responsible, considered and critical criteria in order to ensure they strictly serve the requirements of detailed, precise and complete news.

10. Further, and without having to give up naming groups altogether, it is not acceptable to identify an ethnic minority or particular group of immigrants with a particular illegal activity, as the audience can end up considering this to be an attribute or characteristic of the group in question.

11. Contextualising news stories related to immigration and providing documentation on the situation of the countries of origin of immigrants involved can improve the quality of the information, facilitate audience reflection and contribute to breaking stereotypes.

12. These stereotypes have been established through the abusive and systematic reduction of references in stories about countries, regions or continents to war and misery, illustrated with images that lack any illusion to daily life not related to death, conflict, hunger, extreme poverty or catastrophe. This has led to a single model of life and progress from a Euro-centric point of view. These types of reductions must be fought and abolished and a more complete, complex, open and plural view of non-Western societies provided.

13. The repeated broadcasting of archive footage to illustrate news stories unrelated to the images should be avoided. Any archive footage broadcast must always be clearly labelled as such and meet relevance criteria.

14. Immigrants who take part in the news stories of any media company must also always be duly and conventionally identified with their name and (where applicable) the professional, civic or any other characteristic they want to use for identification purposes. Media companies should never have unaccredited people speaking on the air, unless they have explicitly requested anonymity.

15. The use of statements or any other expression or material of a racist or discriminatory nature, even if historical or erudite, must be duly identified and attributed, providing references on authorship and the context in which the statements were made, as far as possible.

16. Whilst taking into account the effort made by many social and civic groups, professional collectives and newsrooms to be very careful with the language

they use in order to eliminate discrimination or patterns that contain hallmarks of a xenophobic nature, it is also important to avoid using paternalistic attitudes that can end up distorting reality and, paradoxically, cloak ethnocentric positions.

Final guidelines for general consideration

- 1.** When developing and broadcasting information on immigration and immigrants it is essential to introduce previous considerations of a general nature which are very often ignored. It is important to introduce elements of reflection into news discourses that make it possible to contemplate immigration as a common phenomenon of the displacement of a group of people and not a threat. Other elements that can be introduced are ones that make it possible to show something as simple as the fact that the condition of being an immigrant is by its very definition transitory and, if it is often prolonged, it is because of the precariousness of political, social and cultural mechanisms for including immigrants into society.
- 2.** It is important to avoid the automatic association (whether explicitly or implicitly) of immigrants and violence, marginalisation, disorder or delinquency, without contextualising the issues or analysing their causes in depth.
- 3.** It is important to strengthen positive information involving the immigrant population without prejudicing truth or suggesting the construction of a false reality. Authorities, media companies and journalists have a duty to tell the truth and serve the right to information of the whole population, but they also share the social responsibility of promoting coexistence in a context of freedom, plurality and community spirit.
- 4.** It is important to avoid an apparently pragmatic and merely utilitarian view of immigration that refuses to appeal to values and presents it as a transitory

social requirement in the face of low birth rates among the indigenous population or needs of the labour market.

5. It is also important to remember that the guarantees involved with freedom of expression also completely and without any type of exception include immigrants, both as subjects and objects of news stories.

6. Finally, the Catalan Audiovisual Council feels that it would be useful to hold regular working sessions between organisations that represent immigrants, authorities involved, professional groups and associations relating to the media and media companies, in order to evaluate the news discourses that predominate in relation to immigration and develop proposals to improve procedures.