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MEDIA AND OTHERING : HOW MEDIA DISCOURSE ON MIGRANTS REFLECTS AND AFFECTS SOCIETY'S TOLERANCE

Denitza Kamenova[*]

ABSTRACT

The ability of media to create powerful images, which seep into the logical thinking and unconscious mind of the audience, is very important and delicate, especially when linked to questions regarding the attitude towards the Other and the perception of Otherness. This article deals with a problem which has not been sufficiently addressed by researchers so far – how the creation and representation of the Other-migrant (especially illegal migrants, refugees and asylum seekers) affects society's attitudes and tolerance towards Otherness. Thus, two examples are also considered – the case of one highly contested cover page of a French magazine and the case of severe Othering in Bulgarian media discourse towards Syrian asylum seekers and refugees.

Key words: media, migrants, Othering, Otherness, refugees, society

Listen with ears of tolerance,
See through the eyes of compassion,
Speak with the language of love.
Djalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own
Article 13 (2), The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Introduction

While "human migration is as old as history" (Dahrendorf, 2004), one could easily end up with the contrary perception, if based only on media discourse. Very often (consciously or unconsciously) this discourse provokes

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emotions and reflections which help the sparkling of an increasingly rightist and securitarian debate. Sometimes this debate can evoke the famous 'threshold of tolerance' (as in France), in other cases it can demonstrate the lack of information and experience to address this sensitive issue and how this lack would lead to extreme examples of hate speech and discrimination (as in the case of Bulgaria and the Syrian refugees).

Media's ability to create powerful images that touch not only the logical thinking, but also the collective subconscious of their audience is undeniable. In this way they play a very important role in the genesis, the development and (sometimes) the expression of attitudes, reactions and behaviour in society. When one comes back to the question of the Other, this reality becomes even more important because the media has the ability to shape attitudes in society, which is reinforced by the fact that, in its majority, this same society does not have a direct contact and experience of Otherness (especially when it comes to the Other-migrant). So the role of media in the process of creation and formation of the "thinking of" and "reacting to" this Otherness becomes even more important.

The situation becomes even more complex and interesting when one adds to it the so often forgotten question of the ethical responsibility of media and the logic of the market, influencing the choice of what to present and how to do it.

1 Postmodern media between psychology, multiculturalism and responsibility

"Journalism has a great and underestimated cultural power" (Blaagaard, 2012, p. 210). If the first part of this statement of **Bolette Blaagaard** could be considered as trivial, the second one hides in itself a lot of potential and deserves to be analysed. This goes for each one of the two words: "underestimated", but also "cultural" (unlike the so often highlighted political force which at the end eventually ends up by losing its own lustre).

What matters in such an idea as the one states above, is rather the concept of journalists, forgetting or underestimating so often their own strength to influence public opinion. If one adds to this phenomenon the certain level of confidence they rejoice and the level of unconscious influence they have on their audience, the certain level of potential danger hidden in this amalgam is not to be overlooked.

According to social psychology, "*a non-negligible part of our social learning process passes through the media […]. According to the social psychologist William McGuire (1986), the major social function of media is 'to influence the cognitions, attitudes or behaviour of the receiver in the desired directions'*" (Marchand, 2004, p.27)[1]. **Pascal Marchand** develops this idea, basing it on the cognitive response model, according to which "*changes in attitude, occurring after an exposure to a persuasive message, are based more on the consequences that one draws (in terms of favourable / unfavourable arguments) than on the mere memorization of its content*" (*Ibid.*, p. 32)[2]. It is also important to note that throughout the whole process of 'consumption' of the news, in the reader's/viewer's mind (conscious and unconscious) a deep inner dialogue between the message he receives and his previous knowledge, attitudes and subsequent behaviours is taking place. Also what counts is not only the length, context, the presentation of the message and its attractiveness and authenticity, but also the level of trust and sympathy that the reader/viewer has in this source of information, in this media. In a world marked by an economic crisis, a growing fear of Islam, a closing-in-oneself, the media discourse on migration and migrants becomes more and more stigmatised, stereotyped and stamped by a securitarian approach towards the Other.

Migrants are increasingly seen as a potential danger – for "our" work, "our" social system, "our" security, "our" national identity. But the everyday truth is quite different. Very few people of the so-called majority have a real daily contact with migrants to be able to rely on their personal knowledge and experience in the process of forming their own perceptions and attitudes towards them. Therefore, following the laws of social psychology follow, social contacts with family, friends, etc., and the information obtained by the media are (aside our personal experiences) the two main sources for creating our attitudes. Although very often "one may observe that individuals are prone systematically to overestimate the effects of media messages on others but to

[1] According to the original text: « une partie non-négligeable de l'apprentissage social passe par les médias […]. Selon le psychologue social William McGuire (1986), la fonction sociale majeure des médias est "d'influencer les cognitions, attitudes ou comportements du récepteur dans des directions voulues" ».

[2] According to the original text : « le changement d'attitude après l'exposition à un message persuasif provient d'avantage des conséquences que l'on en tire (en termes d'arguments favorables/défavorables), que de la mémorisation que l'on fait de son contenu ».

underestimate it on themselves, us: this is what is called the generalized third person effect" (Marchand, 2004, p. 42)[3]. This effect might lead to a double danger: not only individuals are likely to recognise the media reality as their own, but they also tend to underestimate this process which reduces the level of self-reflectivity. Media for their part very often forget/neglect/abandon their responsibility towards these processes and follow the logic of the market and expectations of that same society, instead of adopting a more responsible discourse marked by a greater tolerance and respect for the Other; a much more difficult and risky in terms of sales and popularity choice, we must admit.

2 The role of the media in identity formation

Media discourse and Othering are very important because of a last aspect, too: media's role in the formation of identities, especially when it comes to group relations like "we – the others" and the knowledge (often indirect) of the Other and his perception towards us. But this is also a two-way process and reflects heavily on the Other and his own feelings, attitudes, identity, and especially the experience of being accepted or rejected.

According to cognitive psychologists **Hauf** and **Forsterling**, the knowledge of the Other and also the feeling of individuals *"[...] of being perceived in a particular way may be constitutive of their becoming that way – thereby adopting, or appropriating the mental organization other impute on them [...] perceiver's beliefs about targets can shape the targets' mind if these beliefs create target behaviours that are internally attributed"* (Hauf & Forsterling, 2007, pp. 3-14). In the case of media this reflects a strong two-way process – as representatives of the "majority" become aware of the Others and construct their attitude towards him in a large proportion through the role of media and their messages, similarly the Other comes very often into contact with his own image, built by the "majority" again through the media. The Other (or representatives of a minority) is at mostly conscious about majority's stereotypes towards him. From this follows the "stigma-consciousness" as defined by **Snyder** and **Klein** (Klein & Snyder, 2007).

This kind of stigma-consciousness can lead to three types of behaviour

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[3] According to the original text: « *on peut observer que les individus surestiment systématiquement les effets d'un message médiatique sur les autres (eux, ils, on) et le sous-estiment sur eux-mêmes moi, nous : c'est ce que l'on appelle l'effet généralisé de tierce personne* »

and strategies that the target will employ to deal with the perceiver, according to the authors. The Other may engage in "*stereotype compensation by putting forward an individual image of self that is radically different from the stereotype of the group [...]. Alternately, a target may attempt* stereotype change *by putting forward a different image of the target's group than the one held by the perceiver [...]. Or a target may engage in* stereotype enactment *by overtly accepting the stereotype and displaying behaviours that are consistent with it*" (Klein & Snyder, 2007, p. 54). The question remains if the Other is exposed to a constant Othering media discourse and receives messages of rejection, which of these three types of behaviour he will be most inclined to adopt?

3 Has Multiculturalism a place in the media?

The place and possibility itself of multiculturalism in traditional European nation-states is highly contested – from the explicit opinions of the impossibleness to adopt it in its full form, through some more optimistic moods to end up with the ascertainment that the model of multiculturalism itself has failed in its efforts to 'cure' racial inequality even in his own country of origin Canada (Reitz, 2004). Nevertheless the 'multicultural reality' in postmodern societies is obvious and in such an open and globalised world the need for a tolerance model as the 'live-and-let-live' becomes very tempting and sometimes – the only one left. To put it in the words of lord Parekh: "*For some (multiculturalism) means treating each cultural community as a world unto itself and involves cultural relativism. For others including myself, it means that no culture is perfect and that it benefits from a critical dialogue with others, and involves a rejection of relativism*". (Parekh, 2008, in Blaagaard, 2012, p. 217).

Very often the media act as "backups" of the national community, of the group-bearer of the main culture and of the shared sense of "we". As **Bolette Blaagaard** states, "*In support of the national community, journalism constantly and overtly builds on the ideas that there is a common 'we', a common frame of reference, to which a news item implicitly refers. Often that frame of reference follows the boundaries of the nation-state or a slightly wider (or at times narrower) ethnically or religiously defined community. This allows journalists to reproduce social imaginaries through repetition of cultural constructions and memories excluding minority groups*" (*Ibidem*, p. 215). But the concept of "we" can be very "slippery" because it encompasses in itself still its own opposition – the reality of others.

This outlived media-model needs to be overcome. In today's societies there is a multitude of faces, voices, cultures – and each one of them hides in itself the potential to give something to the other. It is exactly this space of cultural diversity that the media need to accept and respect and above all to keep in mind when dealing with Otherness.

4 France and the example of the "true cost" of a cover

France has walked along the path from the formation of a considerable community of migrants and the so-called "ressortissants" to the problems with integration, rejection, clashes to the so pessimistically-realistic idea of 'vivre ensemble'. It is true that "*The politics of immigration, integration and the fight against discrimination always evoke strong passions. They affect citizens at the heart of their strongest and most contradictory values*" (Weil, 2005)[4]. But also, according to **Weil**, France "*has, for over a century, a unique experience of immigration in Europe. Yet, faced with cultural diversity, the country tends first to forget, or even to violate its own principles, before giving in to their application in the worst possible conditions*" (*Ibidem*, p. 8)[5]. According to **Weil** the real crisis begins when the country forgets the main right, earned through the blood of so many French people – equality. From the point of view of the media, another logic could be also added – the market-driven one.

One interesting example that illustrates these two logics can be given (although it can be considered as separate by some, it is quite significant): the example of a magazine cover. With its strong message of Othering it has managed to raise a real debate between new and traditional models of communication and also between the idea of a moral principle and the requirement of the market; an example which could be compared to a play in three acts (Kamenova, 2013).

As it often happens in the outperformed space of the Internet, reactions to the event burst before the event itself had happened. On the 14th November

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[4] According to the original text: « *Les politiques d'immigration, d'intégration et de lutte contre les discriminations réveillent toujours de fortes passions. Elles touchent les citoyens au cœur de leurs valeurs les plus fortes et les plus contradictoires* ».

[5] According to the original text : « *a, depuis plus d'un siècle, une expérience de l'immigration unique en Europe. Et pourtant, confrontée à la diversité culturelle, elle tend d'abord à oublier, voire à violer ses propres principes, avant de céder à leur application dans les plus mauvaises conditions* ».

2012 the French weekly *L'Express* puts on his cover the headline: "The true cost of immigration"[6]. The negative connotation of the message is made even stronger with the help of the visual choice for the cover – a photo of a woman wearing a burqa, holding the hand of a child and entering into a Social bureau for Family Allowances. The subtitle reinforces the general message: "Numbers which disturb".

The first act of this "play" starts even a day before the actual publication of the magazine: in the internet. The editor-in-chief of *L'Express* **Christophe Barbier** loads up in the social networks the cover photo as an announcement the evening preceding the publication, without the idea of the controversy that will follow (or on the opposite – with the intention to provoke).

The same night a real debate begins with very critical reactions regarding the magazine, its editorial policy, its dangerous flirtation with xenophobia, etc. But the reality is even more complex: all this debate is a false debate, a faux-débat, or at least – a substituted one, because the next day, when the magazine is put on the market, it becomes clear that the published story on the internal pages states and defends a completely different idea of the message suggested from the cover.

"*The subject never ceases to arouse controversy and inflammatory statements. However, the survey of* L'Express *shows: immigrants are an economic asset and do not dig social deficits. A reason in plus to address the real causes for the blockage of the integration in the French way*"[7] (*L'Express*, 14.11.2012). This is the first line of the editorial, presenting the leading article and signed by **Barbier** himself.

Instead of calming the spirits, the publication of the magazine ignites even more the debate by adding to it another element – about the authenticity and fakeness of the message. The debate is summarised in a very brief but well targeted way with a single tweet of the journalist from *Le Monde* Alexander Lechenet: "But why make a cover which says the opposite?"

Logically follows the question: is such a hyper-stylisation (in the sense of Lippmann, 1914) instead of creating news leads to a distortion and caricature of

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6   «*Le vrai coût de l'immigration*».
7   According to the original text: « *Le sujet n'en finit pas de susciter polémiques et déclarations enflammées. Pourtant, l'enquête de* L'Express *le montre: les immigrés sont un atout économique et ne creusent pas les déficits sociaux. Raison de plus pour s'attaquer aux véritables causes du blocage de l'intégration à la française* ».

the message with the sole purpose of the media to be sold and denies the deontology and the ideas of journalism as such? The conflict between the double logic of the media: the economic logic and semiotic logic (as in Charaudeau, 1997) seems predetermined in favour of the first.

The development of the story takes even more the silhouette of a play. Attacked not only by the virtual space but also in the "real" space of his own newsroom, **Barbier** decided to organise a meeting for his colleagues to explain his reasons. The dramaturgical effect is reinforced by his decision to broadcast the meeting online on the magazine's website.

This step seems not enough as the debate continues and enters an ideological phase. Two days after the publication of *L'Express* and one after the much publicised web-conference, the editor-in-chief of one of the main representatives of the competition, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, **Renaud Dély**, came with a caustic comment on the discussion platform. **Dély** warns that one "*should not confuse the commercial interest with a shipwreck in a dangerous kind of populism, illustrated by some recent covers, which go even to the flirtation with xenophobia*" (*Newsring.fr*, 16.11.2012). **Barbier**'s reaction is immediate. He uses the same platform to replicate: "*What nourishes xenophobia is this Parisian press – including* Le Nouvel Observateur *which is a good example – that tells to people that there is no problem... by confronting the problem, by showing what [the people] say (there are too many immigrants), and responding in a pedagogical way, we provide a more effective response to xenophobia, much more than by taking legal postures*" (*Newsring.fr*, 16.11.2012).

The more a message is tending towards the emotions of individuals and not so much to their rational thought, the more chance it has to be memorised, to evoke reactions and to have a more profound impact on the individual and his attitudes. Such is the case with the cover of *L'Express*: through a visual message (which always has more access to emotions because it accesses the subconscious more easily), it directly affects the fears of Otherness. When the subject is the Other, the power of media to influence becomes very important and easily palpable, not only because of the sensitivity towards the issue, but also because of the fact that for a large majority of people the media not only reflect but also are the 'creators' of this very Otherness, of knowledge of and the attitudes towards it. And this is precisely one of the case in which the cognitive function of media is most visible.

The third act of this play could be summarised by a simple "*Mea (non) culpa!*" Despite the criticism and even the attacks, **Barbier** not only shows no

signs of regret, but also gives no explanation for his decision. And his professional logic is presented in an indisputable manner: "*The society is becoming more and more rightist...* L'Express *cannot disconnect itself from the audience. The cover targets the emotions. It is inside of the magazine that we address the brains*". And also: "*We can no longer afford to have sugary covers, for example, a cover on the same topic, but entitled 'Immigration: a chance for France', as suggested by a journalist from our newsroom, would not have made this 'negative buzz'*" (*Telerama.fr*, 15.11.2012).

With these remarks **Barbier** demonstrates in a much highlighted way the lack of balance in many of today's media and the predominance of one of the two mentioned above approaches: the market-driven one, even regarding issues, so sensitive as immigration and of the question of the Other. But the choice of such an editorial line hides many potential hazards in itself: to start with the neglecting of essential journalistic values, passing through the damaging of the image of journalists and journalism in the eyes of one's readers, who already are very critical to their work and to go to the possible results of the decision to 'play' the tolerance card towards the Other.

5 Bulgaria: an example of an extreme Othering discourse

In his article "Immigration dialectic in the media and crisis as transformative moment" **Herald Bauder** (Bauder, 2012) identifies three dimensions of the dialectical question how to write for migration and migrants. The first one refers to the journalistic practice of presenting opposing viewpoints; the second is referring to the relationship between discursive practices and material circumstances and how the practice of language generates material effects like stereotypes and vice versa. The last one relates to the "*Hegelian process of identity formation […], the interdependence between national and immigrant identities. In the context of media reporting of immigration, national identity serves a reference point for the debate of immigration. Immigrants are often the negation of the national self*" (Bauder, 2012, p. 32).

But sometimes reality can be anything else, but deontology. Just a few titles from the chosen example – the discourse related to the Syrian refugees in Bulgaria: "*Villages in the region have spiked because of the Syrian refugees*" (*Nova TV*, 29.10.2013), "*There are already Syrian refugees with AIDS and syphilis in Bulgaria*" (*24hours*, 5.9.2013); "*Syrian refugees started a black*

market for legal addresses" (*Monitor*, 12.9.2013); "*Syrians bring poliomyelitis in Bulgaria*" (*19minuti*, 30.10.2013); "*A street in the capital cries out because of the immigrants*" (*19minuti*, 17.10.2013). Sometimes, as in this case with the Syrian asylum seekers in Bulgaria, we see the total distortion of logics such as **Bauder**'s: There is a lacking of different voices, the construction of stereotypes has entered into its full phase, the Othering discourse has attained monstrous dimensions and the Other is perceived only as a danger.

What is also important to note is that the logic of the market (which has been shown with the example above) binds in a very important way with the simple logic of ignorance. Bulgaria has a long tradition of relations with traditional minorities. Otherness, created by migration (which sometimes could be the most visible Otherness) was not so important in the last decades. With the crisis related to "Syrian refugees"[8], the lack of knowledge and experience of much of the journalists regarding migration, refugees, and international regulations has become very visible. This lead to a highly populist and sometimes even extremist and xenophobic discourse.

Before this crisis situation in Bulgaria, the Other-migrant had a place in the media only on very rare occasions; today this has become one of the main characters in the news. Just a few figures for illustration: if for the period April 2009-April 2012 the articles dedicated to issues related to migrants in the press, TV, radio and Internet information sites were 812 (*Proway Communications Agency*, 2012). But only for the period of a month – between 16.9.2012 and 17.10.2013 when the issue was recognised by the authorities and became a media subject – they are already 8 439[9] (*Sensika*, 17/10/2013).

And even if, with time, some voices for more sensitivity, responsibility and the need of more nuanced information were born, there is still a very visible repetition of the discourse which makes the messages sustainable in their negative suggestions.

Syrians who come into the country represent *"a wave and a threat"* (according to 1 082 of 8 439 articles online, dedicated to the issue – *Sensika*, 10.17.2013 and many others in the printed press, for which there is no such precise statistic) – ("*The city center has become an attractive place for a group*

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[8] I am intentionally referring to the most often used word by the Bulgarian media and society, but if the strict terminology and legal regulations are followed, most of Syrians in Bulgaria are still asylum seekers who have not yet a refugee status.

[9] The survey is only for articles on the Internet information sites.

of illegals […].The invaders are still coming and with the increase of their number the first more serious clashes in the capital has started. Yesterday it became clear that France is ready to take only 500 refugees. The question is – did we, Bulgarians, showed to be more humane or we just found ourselves more stupid? " (*19minuti*, 17.10.2013). *19 minutes* is using a very pejorative word for the migrants, very difficult to translate – "*nelegali*" (the closest version, but still much milder is "illegals").

Also, they *"carry diseases and hide a danger for Bulgarian citizen"* (950, *Idem*): "*Some days ago the international news agencies reported that polio is becoming an epidemic in Syria", says 19 minutes. This news is enough for the newspaper to make the following conclusion: "With the influx of refugees in Bulgaria, the disease may return in our country [...]. Health experts warn that no one is checking the health status of the little Syrians entering the country. The incubation period of the disease is up to three weeks, which makes it even harder to detect it*", concludes the article (*19minuti*, 30.10.2013).

They represent a danger to everyday security. "*Because of the many refugees who have neither job nor money, supermarket employees in the area of Women's Market are crying out from thieves".* The newspaper explains that *"most of them steal bread and other groceries. 'They can pay a product, but to steal another"* quotes the newspaper a "supermarket employee". Another interviewee explains*: "Some Syrians are in the business of selling false addresses. It is obvious who they are because they walk in Tsar Simeon Street with a beer in their hand and a lit cigarette, something that the rest of their countrymen could not afford"* (*Monitor*, 12.9.2013).

And they represent a danger to national security ("*Members of Al-Qaeda are entering the country with the flow of refugees from Syria and the state is unable to take action against them*", warns *factor.bg* and quotes the retired Col. Ivan Boyadzhiev for whom "*It is clear that Turkey deliberately re-directs the refugees to our country with the sole purpose to destabilize us*" (*factor.bg*, 24.9.2013).

Another major aspect in these articles is the "cost" of the refugees for the country and it reflects the discourse adopted by the majority of politicians in the country – both from the majority or the opposition.

Such a construction of negative media images is showing in a very drastic manner the process of non-acceptance and rejection of Otherness. Or as **Bolette Blaagaard** states in her article "The (Multi)cultural obligation of Journalism" in relation to such media editorial decisions: "*In support of the*

national community, journalism constantly and overtly builds on the ideas that there is a common 'we', a common frame of reference, to which a news item implicitly refers. Often that frame of reference follows the boundaries of the nation-state or a slightly wider (or at times narrower) ethnically or religiously defined community. This allows journalists to reproduce social imaginaries through repetition of cultural constructions and memories excluding minority groups" (Blaagaard, 2012, p. 215). But in cases such as Bulgaria's, the rejection of refugees, with their even bigger and visible Otherness (so often considered as dangerous) becomes even more important.

In cases of such a negative discourse the imminent question arises: to which extent suggestions made by the media influence the attitudes in society and do they reflect them? This question is implicitly shown also by some of the media materials themselves. Some of them are showing the extreme reactions of parts of the Bulgarians, especially in the small villages and neighbourhoods near refugee camps. In a reportage called "Villages in the region have spiked because of the Syrian refugees", *Nova TV (29.10.2013)* explains that "*80 wagons piled between Plovdiv and the villages of Benkovski and Voysil startled the residents of these places. People are afraid that the metal houses in the area will be turned into a refugee camp for the refugees from Syria. Some more extremely tuned residents are even preparing a rebellion if Syrian refugees settle in the metal houses. But there are people who are willing to help the Syrian citizens*", acknowledges the media (*Nova TV,*9.10.2013). And even if the question of the deep connection of affecting-reflecting remains very complex, media's responsibility, especially when dealing with such sensitive issues remains indisputable.

After the first reactions related to the case analysed here (which are nevertheless predominant), voices began to rise (even if they are too scattered and weak); voices trying to balance the discourse towards refugees. Questions such as: what is the true situation of the refugees and in what conditions do they live, what is the responsibility of the State? The work of volunteers who help especially women and children appear more and more often. The Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria also tried to balance the discourse and make it a little more responsible by organising a roundtable dedicated to the image of refugees in the media and how to write and present the issue in a more responsible way (18.10.2013). And even if such an isolated activity is far from providing the necessary balance, at least it demonstrates the positive sign of self-reflexion which awakened in some journalists.

Conclusion

Journalism does not consist of communicating raw facts. Journalism requires stylising the facts before publishing them. This "golden" rule of journalism will turn a century (Lippmann, 1914), but it is as if it is not yet fully conceived not only with all the possibilities it hides, but also with the responsibilities and the potential hazards that go with it. The green light that such an idea gives journalists sometimes leads to a hyper-stylisation which loses healthy proportions. But that reality tends to prove in fact two other "great truths of journalism", also attributed to **Lippmann**: that news and truth are not the same thing and (especially) that the facts we see depend on where we are placed and the habits of our eyes.

Many faces, voices and realities exist in postmodern societies, even if sometimes we are not used and prepared for them, they also have the right not only to be seen, but also respected. And this choice belongs not only to the media – it is an act of choosing, performed daily by each one of us. It begins with the simple choice who and what to read/watch/listen/believe and eventually ends up with the construction of societies in which we want / or will be obliged to live in. Because, again according to Lippmann, if we do not put our own ideas into question, they will become part of the eternity.

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