THE BEAMS CHRONICLES
A LONG STORY CUT SHORT
THE BEAMS CHRONICLES
A LONG STORY CUT SHORT
TV fiction, visual and performing arts, music, sports, popular books, and comics comprise the fabric of our everyday media lives. What is the nexus between the representations of the most widespread cultural productions and stereotypes and public opinion, including racist and discriminatory attitudes? And how can awareness of such pervasiveness be raised, to kick-start critical thinking and counteract such attitudes?

And again, are stereotypes a one-directional “habit” of some parts of society towards the “other” or do they belong to human nature and serve many purposes, strategies, and power struggles? These were some of the main questions for which the project BEAMS has tried to provide answers and find some concrete solutions.

BEAMS’s intent is to address popular media and their agency in societal trends, behaviors and discriminatory attitudes in the relationship between “mainstream” and minority groups. While information media have been recognized as the most powerful source of public opinion when it comes to their representation and stereotypes of minorities, the center stage of BEAMS is represented by cultural and media productions which exceed information and news, and range from entertainment to cultural and artistic production.

BEAMS looks at the complex process of stereotyping in a multi-directional way, that is, self-stereotyping and minority-to minority, in addition to typical “mainstream to minority” stereotyping.

The voyage of the 16 BEAMS partners started early in 2013, leaving the shore with the idea of investigating the link between a broad definition of popular culture, stereotyping and attitudes towards different groups that can become full-blown discriminatory, and xenophobic and racist behaviors against the Union Law.

All in all, the journey has led us to many ports and we accomplished many results. To the hundreds and thousands of persons on board the most significant one is a heightened capacity of citizens and stakeholders to linger beyond the first glance and “see” how our society, reality and understanding of fundamental rights evolve—and consequently to devise ways to prevent or counteract racist, xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.
A long story cut short

BEAMS means desk and field analysis, listening and discussing with people, and fostering critical thinking with regard to stereotypes, attitudes and discrimination that not only go against the Union Law, but also hinder the actualization of the Fundamental Rights of Citizens in Europe. It has meant the analysis of books, cartoons, the internet and social networks, popular magazines and tabloids, movies, music, reality shows, TV programs, news, photography, advertising and theatre. Over 40 movies and documentaries, 20 songs, 2000 pages of books and magazines, 10 hours of interviews and much more have been selected from larger numbers to analyze stereotypes, their frequency, valence, and resistance over time.

Better understanding of how popular culture and ethnic stereotypes are perceived and how they influence public opinion and discriminatory attitudes or behaviors occupied nearly 50 meetings and reflection and discussion groups organized by BEAMS partners, involving over 1000 people, migrants and minorities... for a total of 6000 hours of reaching out, listening and making sense of how society reacts to the representations (and self-representations) of minorities and migrants.

Finally, BEAMS moves from analysis and confrontations on the stereotype-discrimination nexus to awareness raising and action against prejudice. It has done so by devising, implementing and evaluating educational and creative workshops and activities with groups of citizens, addressing especially youths, but also creating bridges with community groups and local stakeholders: 22 pilot actions, involving about 1200 youths, 40 educators, and about the same number of artists and other experts, over 1200 hours of educational and awareness raising activities, mixed with artistic and cultural workshops. As a result, dozens of new cultural products, engaging and challenging the fixed representation of stereotypes and thought-provoking videos, artistic productions, photos, performances, TV shows, short films, anti-discrimination campaigns, posters, and video spots, have been produced and shared in 24 local events, in which over 2000 people attended, participated, and were actively engaged.

A hit, a very palpable hit!

William Shakespeare - Hamlet
The *Journalist's Order of Puglia* underscores the important role played by the national and local media newspapers, television news and documentaries in the creation of the ‘Albanian stereotype’ following the massive migrations after the fall of the Communist regime in 1991.

The students of the Master’s in Journalism have taken a journey back to Albania 20 years later to see how the country has changed.

Likewise, in Madrid, the press has been the most relevant media, which started to set up the stereotypical image of the Romanian Roma who arrived in Spain in the late 1990s – also in comparison with the historical presence of the Spanish Gitanos and other ethnic groups.

The *Comunidad de Madrid* after the research has organized training of young Gypsy people as intercultural agents for the awareness-raising activities in schools.

In Slovakia, *Society Development Institute*’s analysis of photographic material shows that, while some photographers portray Roma people as part of the common public life in Slovakia, journalistic pictures still illustrate Roma people as unemployed, illiterate, drunk and aggressive. The documentarians use the method of reporting in front of the camera, and some titles are staged documentary as well. Filmmakers choose the “tear-shed” themes and humorous elements, depicting Roma as a minority incompatible to anchoring in the majority cultural stereotypes and unable to break its marginalization and segregation.

In this regard, BEAMS partners, in most of the awareness-raising activities, have given value and made a heavy use of storytelling, artistic and cultural approaches rather than using pure information as strategies and expressive forms to reflect and change racist or discriminatory attitudes.
Entertainment and artistic productions are stereotype-rich, but multifaceted, more fluid and less unambiguous in determining opinions and attitudes – according to the findings of BEAMS and compared with information media and news– because the producer-consumer relationship is built on different and more open grounds.

On one hand we have news – supposedly “facts” – and on the other fiction, art, entertainment as starting points of more complex cognitive and affective processes.

These media reflect, for better and for worse, the complexity of our societies and realities; films and fictional narration make such representations more complex and many-sided but, at the same time, they are instantly recognizable and internalized. These features are their weakness, but also their leverage power when they are understood and used for raising awareness on notions of reality, identity, diversity, and, in our case, against prejudice and discrimination.

Through creation and appropriation of widespread forms of cultural productions such as videos, performing and visual arts, mixing styles and genres, citizens of all ages can do and generate cognitive and emotional processes of awareness of the self, the other, the world and they build bridges towards a more advanced, non-discriminatory and cohesive society, as you will read in the following pages.
Some concrete examples have been analyzed in Hungary by Mènedek, where the creation of a Facebook fictitious group against the danger of “bears” poked fun at an extremist group rallying against a shelter for migrants. In Veneto, the young participants in the awareness-raising actions have repeatedly used humor in various forms to convey anti-discrimination messages.

In the Netherlands TV comedy series and shows have found a way to balance the dangerous thin line between joke and reinforcement of prejudice, showing a self-awareness of the migrant comedians on the position they take in Dutch society. In the Open Meetings organized by MiraMedia participants agreed that events and developments in society did not negatively influence the way ethnic minorities were portrayed in TV drama, sitcoms and Comedy shows. The content of the programs anticipated the changes in society by making everyday problems visible and by addressing political debates in a comical way.

A different situation has been investigated in Romania by Fundatia Dezvoltarea Popoarelor, where TV soap operas targeting a broader audience (both Roma and non-Roma) are still focused on the spectacular (and slap-stick, humorous) dimension of Roma culture, neglecting a deeper reflection on social challenges that Roma people need to face on a daily basis. There is a strong connection between media agendas, which place Roma community in negative contexts, and entertainment shows inspired by sensitive issues associated to Roma people. This mix contributes to the consolidation of cultural and social stereotypes on Roma community. The targeted TV shows (both TV soap operas and news magazines) answer to different media consumption needs and habits rather than challenging them.

In the Czech Republic, the TV series “Nestling”, produced by the Czech public television (two episodes have been produced by the BEAMS project), uses a hybrid genre, the so-called “docu-soap” to show real-life stories with a narrative structure that spreads out like in a feature series over several episodes, where the naiveté of children (incidentally, Roma) acts as a formidable mechanism of identification of the audience with individual characters and their perception as “normal” friends who experience and react to the same impulses as they themselves do, rather than seeing them as “Roma” or ethnic children.

The young Moroccan Rachid, when interviewed by 2050, repeatedly uses humorous stances to assert the “normality” of getting a degree in engineering while working as a street vendor in Turin against the media frenzy created on the “exceptional” nature of his achievement.
TO TRULY LAUGH, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO TAKE YOUR PAIN, AND PLAY WITH IT!

Panem et circensis?

Are migrants and minorities a laughing matter? Not really. The use of humor as a powerful weapon to act but also to counteract, portray, ridicule, resist but finally to convey deeper-than-laughter messages of various types has been a recurrent theme of both the analysis and the awareness raising actions of BEAMS. Several theories show the positive effects of humor on cognitive and affective processes, which explain its extensive use in popular culture as a strategic way to deal with the self and reality and to trigger new evaluative stances, based on the fact that humor is often counterfactual. Comedy, archetypes and humor, including racist or denigrating humor, represent a static or fixed image of individuals or specific groups, but at the same time their messages can be and are interpreted in relation to social norms, personal prejudice and values. In this regard, humor - more than other expressions - has the potential, albeit not always with positive social consequences, to be used as a mechanism to encourage further critical thinking and discussion on and against discrimination.

Charlie Chaplin
Vienna Institute for Cooperation and international Dialogue focuses its collection of stereotypical images mainly on sports where the most widespread stereotypes attached to Black athletes are linked to a certain physical disposition ("having football in their blood", "running faster"). This "positive racism" is even used by black football players for their own end (e.g. publicity). DAS BIBER youth magazine uses stereotypical images showing majority to minority, minority to majority stereotypisation and self-stereotypisation to encourage discussions about stereotypes and racism towards migrants/minorities within Austrian society.

In Venice, the Luzzatti High School engaged 22 students, 14 of migrant origin, who developed the script and produced a 4-story video, based on personal experience. The group never met before, and through artistic work the students have become “actors” and created a strong team spirit, overcoming personal prejudices.

Music, and in particular rap and hip-hop videos, have been the focus of analysis of Migrants Resource Centre: whilst a few of the videos arguably offer crude and possibly de-humanising representations they are at some level engaged in the act of resisting stereotyping. The form such resistance takes is variable, sometimes subtle, and can be complex. Some of the videos put up a resistance to stereotyping that involves self-stereotyping as a form of defiance. Others attempt to substitute positive for negative stereotypes.
Positive and negative valence, what impacts?

The approach of BEAMS has underscored the role of media in reinforcing social, cultural and economic hierarchies, which are simplified and made evident by stereotypes and archetypes widely used at individual and group levels to make sense of reality and define, maintain or challenge societal structures.

As it happens in information media, commercial and economic reasons strongly affect creative choices, and rarely do they dispute the general sentiment. Although to a lesser degree than in information media, negative representations in popular culture exceed by far the positive ones: the poor, thieves, slackers, ignorant or – especially in the case of women – prostitutes, helpless etc... depending on the ethnic origin. These prevail over positive, often romanticized representations of many migrant and minority groups.

Positive imagery and representations of minorities and migrants do exist (the romantic Gypsy, the generous Mama, the entrepreneurial migrant,...), once again more as an archetypical representation rather than an actual one, a representation “out of time and space”. Even when there is a positive narration, it is unclear how it positively affects public opinion and attitudes of openness and how profoundly it overcomes prejudice.

But BEAMS’s analyses highlight the complexity of stereotyping in other respects. Antagonist and subverting stereotypes, self-stereotypes and ironic self-representations in the media praxis, especially strong in ethnic media and cultural production, give deeper meaning to resistance and power struggles among different groups.

This has become especially evident in the analysis of stand-up comedians of ethnic origin, in music, and in minority publications.
2050 has collected around 400 photographs by professional photojournalists. The importance of “tagging” in the digital era has produced in Italy a growing demand for stereotypes in photojournalism and also the reduction of a human story or of a complex situation to a simple set of words. Nevertheless, when looking closely at the visual representations of young migrants (the second generations), these images are important and they mark a point of transition in the photojournalistic representation of migrants in Italy. The result is a polarization of visual stereotypes among the first and the second generation.

Sucar Drom in Italy looks at successful movies and songs, as they offer a wider variety of production types and genres, thus presenting the polarized image of Roma and Sinti cultures that goes well back in time hundreds of years in Europe. Very positive or very negative once again: on the one hand, they are labeled as “gypsies and nomads”, as thieves and therefore as dangerous individuals, also thanks to the news and right wing politicians; on the other hand, they are seen as “free and captivating” devoted to music, celebrations and fortunetelling; this view is widely promoted by the artistic and the cultural productions.

In Germany (ACLI) and France (Cap Solidarité), TANDEM PLUS analyzes humanitarian communication for fundraising. NGOs are inspired by corporate business communication and use all the tricks of the trade to “heighten the sense of guilt and frustration to trigger donations” in this field. The campaigns take out of context, deprive all detailed information about the identity of the people and places; other campaigns use the metonymy that fixes the gaze on the effects only, not on the cause of this misfortune. The stereotypization of messages from developing countries to fund humanitarian aid has a strong impact also on the perception of migrants by the French and German public opinion: infantilization of the subject: they are waiting for us, have to learn everything from us, their poverty is unavoidable, they can do nothing and are dependant, they cannot solve problems, we have to support them etc.
**Stereotypes: a resilient polarization**

In the BEAMS experience, two main lessons on stereotypes in popular culture and how they affect attitudes, do not refer only to the face-value representations of migrants and minorities (positive or negative), but rather to two more specific features which can be described as polarization and resilience. Polarization refers to representations that confine migrants and minorities in specific roles or places, such as defining Muslim migrants in acts of prayers, black athletes as wild and strong, African children as scantily dressed, poor and underweight, or migrants arriving on overcrowded boats, Roma living behind closed doors, existing only within domestic walls or slums. In the same way, the “normality” of a house, interactions and everyday gestures is still represented as an exception, iconographically marked by economic success by the few “who made it”.

Resilience is the resistance of stereotypes over time, their fixity. Stereotypes rapidly change, mostly towards the negative, in the presence of specific events (see the “Arab man”, after 9/11, as an example), but remain strongly fixed to it and take a long time to evolve or alter. It is mostly this feature of rigidity that sticks over time and creates a cognitive gap between representation and reality, both in popular productions and in public opinion. It is these timeless and unchanging depictions that regulate perception and consequently prejudice and attitudes.

Having said this, BEAMS has also identified good practice in popular culture production which excludes radicalism but tend to reflect how society, groups and individuals cope much differently than the way they are represented. It is on this strength that the pilot actions have developed and built pathways to overcome prejudice and discriminatory attitudes.

*Albert Einstein*

*It is harder to crack prejudice than an atom*
An increasingly intense use of communication and of visual elements to depict themes of migration and integration can be found in the institutional communication of Municipalities in Italy: posters, photos, images used by the cities on the occasion of public initiatives represent an instrument for the formation of pieces of popular culture, due to their strong social-cultural impact on citizens starting from the local level. Cittalia has found examples of bad / stereotyped / discriminatory public communication still very widespread in Italy, but examples of good communication or communication that tends to avoid stereotypes also exist.
All generalizations are dangerous, even this one

Alexandre Dumas

One is all and all is one: undifferentiating individuals, discriminating groups

One thing is clear. Stereotyping is a human process to simplify and make sense of the composite reality that surrounds us. Popular culture mirrors and amplifies such dynamics by means of artistic styles and practice, commercial and artistic choices. Media and cultural productions are embedded in social values, local communities, sense of identity and appurtenance, and in this regard they are influenced by and influence public opinion, heftily contributing to public discourse on and of migrant and minority groups.

The relation between popular culture’s perpetuation of specific stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes is perceived, at times, less univocal than the representation of information media. It contributes, however, to a generalization - us vs. them- which heightens differences and conflicts between different components of our societies.

When tackling stereotypes as a source of prejudice, generalizations and un-differentiation remain the greatest dangers in terms of discriminatory attitudes, racism and xenophobia. This has also been a recurrent theme that emerged in all analyses, and a central topic of the educational and awareness-raising actions.

It is the dehumanizing process of judging individuals according to their ethnic or national appurtenance before or instead of seeing, interacting and understanding the individual, her/his unique story, which leads to the worst kind of discrimination.
“BEAM(S) ME UP, SCOTTY”

Captain Kirk - Star Trek

Epilogue

We are at the end of this journey, but a lot remains to be done in our societies in the fight against racism and discrimination. The experience of BEAMS teaches us that it is only when we start to see the whole picture, the all-around nature and identity of individuals, rather than the flat mask of racial, ethnic and national stereotypes, that we can start another voyage, one that leads us ahead and within the reality of a European society, where fundamental rights and duties are equal for everyone, and everybody’s potential is recognized, valued and accepted. Finally, BEAMS’s most relevant message rests in the importance and power of approaching this awareness-raising and anti-discrimination work creatively and of working to create and empower our own forms of media as a means of shifting the tone of the stereotype - discrimination nexus.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This brochure is the result of two years of joint work, discussions and exchange among a group of committed people. The author wishes to thank all partners of the BEAMS project for their passion, creativity and professionalism that have made it possible to achieve such excellent results: Stephanie Abis, Matteo Bassoli, Serena Boldrin, Alessandro Braccini, Giulia Buciol, Marco Buemi, Marina Castellaneta, Emily Churchill Zaraa, Anna Lucia Colleo, Simone D’Antonio, Roberto Fabian, Michael Fanizadeh, Antonino Ferrara, Gabriele Guazzo, Alice Gyemant, Nicoletta Iannarelli, Ed Klute, András Kováts, Norbert Kreuzkamp, Alessandra Landi, Anca Lazar, Lorenzo Liguoro, Patrizia Loiola, Federica Lombardo, Giovanni Manisi, Francesca Meneghello, M. Asuncion Molina Ventura and staff, Claudia Morini, Spyros Papastamatiou, Romilda Patella, Gyorgy Peteri, Linda Pischedda, Andrea Pogliano, Radim Prochazka, Sandra Rainero, Anne Rocheteau, Javier Sanchez, Marilinda Scarpa, Angela Sima, Galya Terzieva, Helene Trauner, Sara Wickert, Kamila Zlatuskova.
And the many educators, artists and experts that have been involved in all activities.

This brochure has been produced with the financial support of the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

To know more about the project, please visit the website: www.beams-project.eu.
PARTNERS

Veneto Region – Migration Policy Unit – IT
UNAR – National Anti-Racism Office – IT
Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation – AT
General Directorate of Immigration – Community of Madrid – ES
Cittalia – ANCI Research Foundation – IT
Sucar Drom – IT
Migrants Resource Centre – UK
Foundation of People’s Development – RO
Produkce Radim Prochazca – CZ
Order of Puglia Journalists – IT
Society Development Institute – SK
Mira Media – NL
Menedek – Hungarian Association for Migrants – HU
Association 2050 – IT
Tandem Plus Network – FR (EU)
Veneto Lavoro – IT

www.beams-project.eu