Communicating anti-racism

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Conclusion

The summarized results above suggest the following answers to the three main questions that were posed in the introduction of this dissertation. The first question addresses the reception of the various forms of anti-racist campaigning that were investigated.

Reception of anti-racist communication campaigns

The diversity in reception that was found is to some extent related to differences in the theoretical approaches and methodologies between the different chapters. As was mentioned in the introduction, however, these different studies were intended in the first place as an exploration of the possible role of communication for anti-racism in general. With these cautions in mind, it is possible to draw a general conclusion about the forms of reception that can be identified across the chapters.

The results suggest that four forms of reception can be discerned in the cases studied in this dissertation. The most common form of reception of the six campaigns can be labelled as ‘assimilation into common sense’. Such assimilation can be defined as audience reactions in which the content of the campaign is perceived as entirely consonant with common sense understandings. As a result, it leads to the uncritical reproduction of everyday talk that does little to challenge racism or the context in which it is reproduced. Audience reactions to the campaign ‘Stand up Speak up’ by Nike, for example, showed that the message of the campaign was generally assumed to be in complete accord with common sense understandings of racism. While they sympathised with the message that ‘racists’ needed to be kicked out of soccer culture, the common sense idea that racism consists solely of intentional and malevolent acts of aggression and exclusion towards ethnic minorities was reinforced through the campaign discourse. Audience members were reassured that they were part of an innocent majority that had no responsibility for racism other than excluding ‘racists’ from the soccer grounds. Another form of assimilation was found in the dominant reactions to the multicultural drama series West Side that were discussed in Chapter 6. The majority of viewers responded to this programme by engaging in impersonal moralizing discursive repertoires about the ‘powers of the media’ and/or the ‘problems of a multicultural society’. The analysis demonstrated that, compared to rarer performances of cultural citizenship, these reactions did not constitute critical discussions about
the role of cultural difference in everyday life and therefore did not constitute a contribution to the anti-racist struggle as it was defined in the introduction. Similar processes of assimilation were also found in the campaigns that sought to facilitate communication between racial, ethnic and religious groups by organizing intergroup encounters. In these cases, the dominant discourses of the organizers were analyzed as generally serving the interests of the current status quo as they failed to stimulate critical negotiations of the current role of cultural difference in everyday life and reproduced certain unhelpful (essentialist) assumptions about the meaning of cultural difference. Participation at these events was made conditional upon this dominant discourse. As a consequence, the discursive practices of organizers and visitors at these tournaments reproduced rather than challenged a racialized context that is conducive to racist social exclusions.

Apart from these processes of assimilation, three other kinds of reception can be distinguished. Although these occurred less frequently, some of them do suggest that some of the potentials of communication for anti-racism identified in the introduction could be empirically observed. First, the reception of anti-racist campaigns could take the form of resistance to the preferred reading of a campaign. The clearest case of such reactions was found in Chapter 5 where two campaigns for urban cosmopolitanism were discussed. Instead of agreeing at least superficially with the message of the campaign, as was the case in the Nike campaign ‘Stand up Speak up’, the campaigns ‘What are you doing for the city’ and ‘We are Londoners, we are one’ were greeted with suspicion and sometimes even explicitly rejected. Citizens from London and Amsterdam both felt ill at ease with the notion of an inclusive urban community of equals as it directly contradicted their own everyday experiences.

Second, another form of reception that was found was the individual changes in cognition that corresponded with the preferred reading of the campaign. In Chapter 4, the experimental study demonstrated how exposure to the multicultural drama resulted in reduced perceptions of ethnic threat among viewers. These changes in perception were directly related to the content of the programme as it allowed and seduced viewers to identify more with members of the Muslim community in the Netherlands and less with the white majority. Such cognitive changes in the perception of ethnic threat were in accord with the aim of the programme of changing the meanings that viewers accorded to cultural difference.

Third, a final form of reception that was found consisted of negotiations between members of the audience of the campaign, which can be labelled as the performance of cultural citizenship. As was argued in Chapter 6, discussions about the multicultural programme
Side resulted, in a minority of the cases, in critical, personalized negotiations of the role of cultural difference in the lives of viewers themselves. Although they occurred relatively infrequently, they were qualitatively different from the majority of audience reactions that were described earlier as assimilation. This mode of reception is theoretically significant and suggests that anti-racist communication may be used to facilitate the performance of cultural citizenship. However, it is unclear whether the scope of these reactions is sufficient for practical purposes. This issue is addressed in the paragraph below in which the second question from the introduction is answered.

The effectivity of communication campaigns for anti-racism

The second question posed in the introduction to this dissertation concerned the effectivity of communication campaigns for anti-racism. As was argued in the introduction, the goals of anti-racist communication campaigns can pertain to two separate issues. First, such campaigns could be used to communicate and popularise the notion of a racially, ethnically and religiously inclusive community. Second, it involved the stimulation of the performance of cultural citizenship.

With regard to communicating and popularising a sense of inclusive community, the results of this dissertation suggest that an isolated communication campaign alone clearly does not suffice. On the one hand, the quantitative analysis of the reception of the multicultural television drama series West Side showed that certain preconditions for a sense of an inclusive community could be achieved through communication. In particular, this analysis showed that perceptions of ethnic threat could be reduced through exposure to mass media communication. However, perceptions of threat depend on many other factors antecedent to the viewing experience. Moreover, even if strong reductions in perceived ethnic threat could be produced, this would still not be sufficient to speak of the communication and popularisation of an inclusive community. Results from Chapter 5 further problematize the notion that communication campaigns may directly institutionalize new senses of inclusive community. The resistance to the campaigns ‘We are Londoners, we are one’ and ‘What are you doing for the city’ clearly indicated that the notion of an urban cosmopolitan community of equal citizens is currently too far removed from the lived reality of the city to be an effective message in a mass media campaign. At the same time, results showed that urban dwellers could and did identify as a member of a cosmopolitan urban community occasionally. Such performances of urban
cosmopolitanism did, however, require the exertion of a considerable amount of discursive effort especially among racial, ethnic and religious minorities. The fact that such performances did occur under certain circumstances suggests that there are clearly opportunities and potentials left to be explored. However, it is also clear that the stimulation and popularisation of an inclusive sense of community is not a simple matter of devising an ideal imagined community and communicating this notion from the top down.

The second goal of communication campaigns for anti-racism was defined in the introduction as the stimulation and facilitation of the performance of cultural citizenship. In this respect, the case studies in the chapters above suggest a more optimistic conclusion. Their results show that communication campaigns can be useful to seduce people to participate in the negotiation of the role of cultural difference in everyday life. Moreover, some campaigns may reach people that would otherwise be unlikely to participate in such practices. This is most evident in the case of the Amsterdam World Cup where ethnic minority communities participated in unusually high numbers. It is also evident in the audience reactions to the multicultural television drama series *West Side*. Both campaigns, which crucially involved forms of popular culture that are practiced and consumed across racial, ethnic and religious divides, had audiences composed, at least in part, of groups of people that generally participate less in formal political debates, such as ethnic minorities. At the same time, however, not all discourse about the issue of cultural difference produced by the campaigns should be regarded as performances of cultural citizenship. In both the audience reactions to *West Side* and the discussions generated by social projects like the Amsterdam World Cup, the majority of the negotiations appeared to do little to critically renegotiate the role of cultural difference in people’s own everyday lives. Instead, their discourse either reproduced essentialist discourses about multicultural diversity or simply constituted an episode of moralizing rhetorical self presentation. Such discursive practices fail to engage with the ideological dilemmas and problems that the current role of cultural difference in everyday life produces and therefore do not constitute a significant contribution to anti-racism. Nonetheless, the results suggest that although it occurred relatively infrequently, communication campaigns can stimulate and facilitate the performance of cultural citizenship in two ways. First, they can facilitate viewers’ awareness of ideological dilemmas in their own everyday lives. Such awareness may, under certain circumstances, lead to discussions and negotiations of the appropriateness of the role of cultural difference in particular domains of everyday life that can be considered cultural citizenship. Second, and related to this, highly involving communication
campaigns, like a multicultural television drama series, may provide people with resources to engage in the performance of cultural citizenship as it offers examples of everyday life situations and dilemmas. These shared representations that can be used as illustrations of one’s own position or discussed for their adequacy and appropriateness in various shared social contexts.

Given the documented assimilation of and resistance to campaign messages, and the relatively small cognitive effects and infrequent performances of cultural citizenship, the communication campaigns such as those investigated here will not have a significant impact on racism in isolation. However, the fact that desired anti-racist effects were found suggests that the significance of the impact is not necessarily an issue of technical sophistication of campaign methods. It is also clearly a result of their limited scope and a general failure to follow up on their outcomes by more powerful social actors.

With regard to the issue of scope, the multicultural television drama series *West Side* is a case in point. This programme, which suffered from relatively low ratings, is among a select (although, admittedly, increasing) number of television programmes that consciously seek to subvert the dominant (visual) discourse on Muslims and cultural difference in general through Dutch television. While the effects of watching two episodes may be small, these findings suggest at least the possibility that increased exposure to such shows may repeat and cultivate this impact (cf. Gerbner et al., 1994). The question of effectivity of this campaign strategy is therefore only partly a technical issue. Technically speaking, new programme formats, narratives or representation styles may increase the effects that were documented in Chapter 4. However, their societal impact will depend on the extent to which they become a common feature in the media landscape and people’s everyday media diets. Part of the question of the effectivity of communication campaigns is therefore a question of scope that is determined by economic viability and the political will to invest in such changes in the media landscape.

With regard to the issue of following up on the effects of communication campaigns, the connections between effective anti-racism and politics also come into view. It was noted in Chapter 6 that the performances of cultural citizenship that were facilitated by watching *West Side* would have little societal impact in and of themselves. But rather than being ineffective, these performances of cultural citizenship beg the question of their mediation into other social spheres. Moreover, it is important to ask what kinds of influences the outcomes of such negotiations are allowed to have on everyday social practices and decision making processes in places of power. For instance, such shows might generate focused discussions about the
appropriate role of cultural difference in particular social contexts (such as the soccer club, the classroom or the work floor). Furthermore, the question of effectivity is not only related to the content of such a discussion but also crucially to its democratic character (i.e. does everyone involved with the issue participate?). It also depends on the extent to which it is allowed to have an impact on the social practices or policies that determine the role of cultural differences within such a context. Formulated in this way, the question of the effectivity of communication campaigns for anti-racism again connects with issues of power and political will.

**Anti-racist praxis**

The final question posed in the introduction pertained to the ways in which these results might inform anti-racist praxis. Three main points can be distinguished and will be discussed below.

First, it is worth emphasising that common sense knowledge of racism already contains the assumption that it is immoral. As a consequence, any communication campaign that seeks to communicate the immorality of racism without specifying which kinds of discourse, behaviour or representations should be considered ‘racist’ is merely restating the obvious. Moreover, such an approach does not address the racialized context within which social exclusions based on racial, ethnic or religious differences become meaningful behavioural options. It also does not address those factors which prevent or problematize the democratic negotiation of the role of cultural difference, such as masculine codes of honour in soccer culture (see Chapter 2). It may be more constructive to use such mass media communication campaigns to contest common sense knowledge and redefine the kinds of discourse, behaviour or representations that are considered ‘racist’ in various domains of everyday life. However, such a communication strategy would be much more controversial and difficult to achieve than those that merely reproduce common sense knowledge of racism. The redefinition of what constitutes racism will invariably result in strong political opposition as it will involve problematizing other social practices and social domains that heretofore were not considered ‘racist’. Moreover, many people who comfortably consider themselves part of an innocent and unresponsible majority will be pressed to reconsider their own role (or lack thereof) in the negotiation of the role of cultural difference in everyday life. Perhaps more fundamentally, it is unlikely that any definition of ‘racism’ will suffice indefinitely and settle the issue once and for all given the social historical contingencies of racism. Therefore, communication in anti-racism is more likely to be effective in the long run by facilitating an *ongoing* negotiation about the appropriate role of cultural difference in various domains of
everyday life. The top down approach to the redefinition of what should count as ‘racism’ or an inappropriate role of cultural difference in everyday life forecloses this necessary ongoing democratic negotiation and struggle over the role of cultural difference in everyday life.

A second conclusion concerns the role of communication in the popularisation of a sense of community that is inclusive of racial, ethnic or religious differences. The results of this dissertation demonstrate that the top down dissemination of an ideal sense of inclusive community may also not have the desired impact. In Chapter 5, the idealized notion of an inclusive urban community was not found to be equally accessible to urban dwellers of different racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds because it contrasted with everyday racialized constructions of urban identity and belonging. The adoption of such an inclusive sense of community (termed ‘urban cosmopolitanism’ there) is better understood as a situated and contested social practice. These findings suggest that the popularisation of a sense of inclusive community is not a case of the unproblematic communication of the ‘deeper truth’ of fundamental sameness or equality of members of a community. Such a notion is contradicted by common sense, everyday experiences and structural socio-historical and economic inequalities between different racial, ethnic and religious groups. Without redress of these inequalities and the ways in which they contribute to the continued racialization of society, the notion of a community of equals has little relevance for the lived reality of audiences. Future research on (future) campaigns for inclusive senses of community is required to determine to what extent other forms of representation might be devised that can avoid the forms of resistance and assimilation that were documented here. However, it is clear that any top-down dissemination of the meaning of equality, like that of difference, cannot hope to settle the issue once and for all. Moreover, communication campaigns in this domain should therefore avoid presenting such an inclusive community as a pacified utopia that is somehow beyond all forms of inequality and intercultural tension. At present, the role of communication for the communication of an inclusive sense of community needs to be defined in more modest terms. This means shifting focus to the reinforcing democratic negotiations about the role of cultural differences in everyday life and the ways in which it forms an obstacle or potential to developing a sense of inclusive community.

The third point about the implications of the results of this dissertation concerns the facilitation of the performance of cultural citizenship. This dissertation has demonstrated that not all forms of interpersonal communication about multicultural society should be regarded as a
performance of cultural citizenship. Many of the discussions among the audience of the multicultural television programme *West Side*, for example, remained distanced and abstract as viewers exchanged readily available discursive repertoires about the power of the mass media and multicultural integration. As a result, they failed to address the ideological dilemmas that they were personally facing in their everyday lives with respect to cultural diversity. Organizers and participants of the projects for intergroup encounters discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 mostly reproduced dominant discourses about intergroup contact and multicultural integration. Significantly, this occurred despite interpersonal contact with members of other ethnic groups. These results therefore suggest that merely getting people to talk is not a sufficient goal for anti-racist communication campaigns. It is important to focus these negotiations on critical experiences in daily life and provide the necessary context and resources to discuss these issues constructively. The social projects for intergroup encounters showed that they generally failed to supply such a context. The case of *West Side* illustrates how popular culture with multicultural content may be considered such a resource. However, it is clear that much research still remains to be done on the ways in which critical performances of cultural citizenship may be stimulated and facilitated.

**Opportunities**

A number of factors can be discerned that determine whether the potential of communication campaigns outlined in this dissertation can be realized. First, there is room for improvement in the domain of technical sophistication of campaigns. On the one hand, this concerns theoretically driven issues such as the kinds of discourses and representations of diversity that are most in accord with theoretical understandings of the problem and causes of racism. On the other hand, it also concerns adaptation of techniques to improve processes of media involvement and reception. For instance, the processes that determine the impact of multicultural drama television are yet to be fully explored. Future studies may lead to knowledge that can be used to develop formats and content with stronger effects than those reported in this dissertation.

Second, realizing the potential of communication campaigns for anti-racism involves increasing their scope. This might involve producing more or longer running campaigns that increase exposure to campaign content and the likelihood of the performance of cultural citizenship. It might also involve finding new ways of changing discourses and representations of ethnicity in non-campaign media. In both cases, the extent to which such an expansion in scope
can be realized depends on their ability to coexist with the commercial interests of the media. In this respect, a trend is already visible of increased representation of racial, ethnic and religious minorities on television in non-stereotypical ways. It may therefore seem that separate communication campaigns are increasingly superfluous as commercial media are developing these kinds of programmes out of commercial interests rather than any anti-racist agenda. However, while such a development is in principle welcome, it does not immediately imply that anti-racist engagements with mass media communication can be abandoned altogether. While some minorities are being represented more positively, specific groups, most notably Muslims, may continue to appear in predominantly stereotypical ways precisely because this serves commercial interests (Shaheen, 2003). Moreover, commercial interests are not identical to anti-racist ones and do not guarantee the further development of technical sophistication of anti-racist media formats and content. The issue of scope therefore also depends on the political will to further invest in anti-racist communication.

Third, communication campaigns need to be embedded in a wider anti-racist framework. Such a framework is necessary in the first place to ensure that the impact of campaigns on the performance of cultural citizenship is increased. This point applies in particular to the veritable ‘discursive explosion’ about the multicultural society and integration of ethnic and religious minorities that has occurred over the last 15 years in the Netherlands. While discussions on this topic abound both in everyday life and in the media, the terms under which they are held limit their critical potential. Prins (2002) has called the current climate of debate one of ‘new realism’ that is characterised by the need to disrespect earlier taboos based on politically incorrect notions of ‘tolerance’ in relation to ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Instead, the people are urged to speak from the heart (or their ‘underbelly’) about their ‘true’ opinions about Dutch multicultural relations. In this climate, discussions about multicultural society fail to develop into critical negotiations because the notion of ‘speaking one’s mind’ about the ‘true’ reality of multicultural society forecloses a mutual exploration of exigencies and dilemmas that people from different backgrounds face in their everyday lives. Such discussions can easily remain lodged in claims and counterclaims in which a person’s opinion is expressed but not itself open to discussion. Communication campaigns therefore cannot merely aim to facilitate discussions about cultural diversity but must also seek to produce what Stevenson has called a truly communicative society (Stevenson, 2003). In such a society, citizens have respect for the experiences and opinions of others and are willing to adjust their own standpoints based on their experiences in critical
negotiations with others (Stevenson, 2003; Jaggar, 1999). The current climate of debate implies that there is a clear pedagogical aspect to the stimulation and facilitation of cultural citizenship that involves inculcating the values of respect for (but not uncritical acceptance of) the difference of others. Such a notion of respect crucially entails the willingness to scrutinise and possibly adjust one’s own opinions in these matters (Jaggar, 1999). Without additional efforts to produce contexts that are conducive to the performance of cultural citizenship and citizens equipped with the necessary skills, campaigns for the stimulation of the performance of cultural citizenship may end up producing moralistic discourses like those documented in Chapter 6. Such efforts might consist, for example, of an engagement with these campaigns by other actors such as schools or community centres. A show like *West Side*, for example, could be used to reflect with pupils on the role of cultural difference at their school and to bring up and negotiate some of the dilemmas that they might be facing in this regard. Communication campaigns could also be embedded in a wider anti-racist framework to guarantee that such performances are responded to by authorities and policymakers. In the example of viewing *West Side* in school, for instance, the performances of cultural citizenship that are witnessed there could be used to adapt school policies or to inform school authorities about the ways in which the culture at the school may be altered to challenge racialization and racism. The suggestion of embedding communication campaigns in pre-existing structures such as schools, community centres or sports clubs again illustrates the ways in which the realization of the potential role of communication for anti-racism depends on the political will to do so.

**The limits of communication**

In conclusion, it is worth to briefly reflect on the limits of the potential role of communication for anti-racism. The exploratory character of this dissertation does not permit generalizations to be made on the impact of all contemporary forms of communication in anti-racism. Moreover, communication initiatives with regard to anti-racism and cultural diversity continue to develop, and it is unclear what kinds of future directions they might take, how far technological sophistication will advance or to what extent socio-historical developments will transform the reception context of such campaigns. Nonetheless, the chapters in this dissertation have delineated a number of crucial errors that can be avoided in devising anti-racist communication campaigns. Moreover, a number of positive recommendations have also been formulated above. The success of communication campaigns depends on their embeddedness in wider campaigns.
and on the political will to address structural, social and economic inequality. Without some of the additional efforts that lie outside of the realm of communication, such campaigns may end up providing symbolic solutions for material problems and therefore leave this infrastructure intact (Werbner & Modood, 1997). Yet, at the same time, symbolic exclusions are not independent of socio-economic exclusions, and it would go too far to dismiss all anti-racist communication campaigns as worthless unless they occur in an entirely consonant political climate. In such a scenario, all social and political actors already agree upon the problem of racism, and its solutions and communication and negotiation becomes irrelevant to anti-racism. This dissertation has also demonstrated how communication is crucial in the ongoing process of (re)defining what is meant by racism and what processes are implicated in its reproduction. Through ongoing negotiations of the meaning of cultural difference in everyday life and the dilemmas that it produces, the interconnectedness of symbolic exclusions and socio-economic inequalities can be explored, politicised and put on the political agenda in ways that may not have been done before.

Mass communication campaigns and projects that facilitate interpersonal communication may not be the ultimate solution to problems of racism, discrimination and social exclusion. However, the cases discussed in this dissertation demonstrate that they do have a unique role to place in the antiracist struggle. As developments and knowledge in this area continue and our ability to harness the potentials of communication grows, both anti-racist theory and practice will surely stand to gain in strength and efficiency. Whether it will then also be adequately put into practice is another matter that deserves a dissertation all on its own.