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Media Coverage on Migration: Promoting a Balanced Reporting



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Suggested citation: Triandafyllidou, A. (2017) 'Media Coverage on Migration: Promoting a Balanced Reporting', in McAuliffe, M. and M. Klein Solomon (Conveners) (2017) *Ideas to Inform International Cooperation on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*, IOM: Geneva.

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Anna Triandafyllidou

Executive summary

Migration and asylum policy is as much about reality as it is about perception – perception by policy makers/ politicians and by citizens/voters of what is happening and how it can be managed.

International migration and asylum seeking are complex phenomena depending on a number of factors and conditions – social, political and economic – which go beyond national borders and jurisdictions, and are highly dynamic and interactive. Media reporting more often than not privileges simple black and white accounts of such complex phenomena, subjugated to dominant discourses on who belongs and who are the ‘aliens’, the ‘outsiders’. What remains untold are the positive stories of migration and asylum (that do not make headlines) as well as the ways in which news are constructed through specific media routines that tend to ignore the perspective of migrants and refugees themselves, and which actually de facto exclude migrant journalists from the media industry.

While the recent refugee emergency has attracted widespread media coverage and public attention, it should not prevent us from looking at migration coverage in the media in the long term highlighting persisting problems not only in media coverage but also in migrant involvement in journalism as well as journalists equality and diversity training.

Media coverage on migration reflects to a large extent the different migration histories and experiences of European countries as well as their wider context of implementing equality legislation. Thus media outlets in old migration host countries such as the Netherlands or the UK provide diversity training and may have ethnic quotas in recruitment. This is not the case in recent host countries like Greece or Italy let alone EU countries with little migration such as Poland.

While political leadership in promoting a view of migration as a structural feature of human history and of modern societies and giving a positive tone to the national ‘migration narrative’ is of paramount importance, a number of measures can be taken to ensure balanced coverage of migration issues and increase migrant journalist participation in mainstream media.

Our suggestions are five

There is a need for monitoring coverage and preventing stereotypical, negative expressions referring to the ethnic origin of suspects, for instance, in crime reports or emphasizing the legal stay status of a person.

Monitoring of the type of issues reported in relation to migration and an effort to ensure a balanced reporting that covers different aspects of migration. For instance include in prime time reporting not just issues of border crossing and dinghies washed out in the Mediterranean shores but also issues of housing, religion, employment, examples of successful artists, professionals and entrepreneurs.

Ensure that a variety of sources (and most of all migrants themselves) is included in the coverage and seek to provide for explanations, evaluations and complex accounts or mention consequences and remedies of specific issues, rather than simplistic generalized reporting.

Recruitment of migrant journalists needs to be prioritized through appropriate traineeship and study to work schemes.

Equality and diversity training is important and should be mainstreamed: provided to all journalists and media professionals at Universities but also as part of their lifelong learning if they are freelancers.

Introduction

Migration and asylum policy is as much about reality as it is about perception – perception by policy makers/politicians and by citizens/voters of what is happening and how it can be managed. Buonfino¹ spoke about the politicisation of immigration looking at how immigration is framed within political discourse, almost always in relation to economic concerns or security issues.² Governments and other political actors tend to construct migration as a problem, or crisis. They then compete in showing that they are ‘in control’ of immigration. Eventually a strong negative framing of immigration prevails under the overall perspective that migration is a problem to be addressed, a liability to be mitigated, a challenge to be ‘tackled’ rather than a positive phenomenon that opens up real possibilities.³

The politicisation of migration is inextricably linked to its mediatisation. Mediatisation involves the ways in which events and issues are represented in the media. Such representation is not just about diffusion of information but rather includes specific professional and institutional practices of what constitutes ‘news’ and how it is reported. What is most important today is that as the media, both traditional and social, become ever pervasive in our everyday political and social lives, “mediated reality matters more than any kind of actual or objective reality.”⁴

International migration and asylum seeking are complex phenomena depending on a number of factors and conditions – social, political and economic – which go beyond national borders and jurisdictions, and are highly dynamic and interactive. The mediatisation and politicisation of migration and asylum serves to produce simple black and white accounts of such complex phenomena, subjugated to dominant discourses on who belongs, who is the national ingroup and who are the ‘aliens’, the ‘outsiders’. What remains untold however and unexplained are the positive stories of migration and asylum (that do not make headlines) as well as the ways in which news are constructed through specific media routines that tend to ignore the perspective of migrants and refugees themselves, and which actually de facto exclude migrant journalists from the media industry.

While the recent refugee emergency has attracted widespread media coverage and public attention⁵, it should not prevent us from looking at migration coverage in the media in the long term highlighting persisting problems not only in media coverage but also in migrant involvement in journalism as well as journalists equality and diversity training.

An additional challenge comes today from the social media which either become a source of information and commentary in and of themselves or act as mediators by diffusing specific news items at the expense of others. Without neglecting the very important role of the social media today, this Policy Paper focuses on traditional media as these can be responsive to both incentives and regulations. This is not the case for social media which largely depend on personal use and personalised ‘communication bubbles’ that ‘cookies’ create automatically on the basis of our past usage and preferences. Discussing the social media coverage of migration is also an important topic but goes beyond the scope of this work.

1 Buonfino, 2004.

2 Watson 2009, Bourbeau 2011, Krzyzanowski and Ledin 2017.

3 Martin-Rojo- Martin and Van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999.

4 Strömbäck, 2008: 239.

5 Triandafyllidou, Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2017.

This policy paper starts by outlining some main features of media reporting on migration documented in a recent research project⁶ on migrant representation in the media, on migrant recruitment by media outlets, and policies and practices adopted by media outlets to promote equality and fight stereotyping or discrimination. The findings presented here refer to give European countries, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, and the UK, covering thus countries that have a long experience of immigration (such as the Netherlands and the UK), a relatively recent experience as hosts (Greece, Ireland, Italy) and hardly any experience of immigration but rather being emigration countries (Poland). The policy paper is concluding with suggestions on how to improve migration reporting through monitoring of media content, encouraging recruitment of migrant journalists and promoting training in equality and diversity issues.

Migration in the news

The last decade has seen the emergence of a number of important initiatives promoting diversity awareness in the media. Among those we single out the Media4Diversity project, the Camden principles for freedom of expression and equality, the Ethical Journalism initiative and the Charter of Rome for reporting on migrants and refugees, and the Toolkit on Diversity for public television broadcasting, and last but not least the MEDIVA project. Despite these initiatives (which are largely transnational covering several countries and media) and the positive trends observed in favour of a comprehensive, diversity sensitive coverage, migrant-related news-making practices remain bound up with several challenges.

News on migration are gathered when something sensational and worth reporting happens. And this is usually something ‘bad’ related to migrants or migration. Coverage on migration is often dictated by the more general political agenda and by for instance upcoming election campaigns. Nonetheless there are several journalists who are concerned about the quality and even-handedness of their reporting who go beyond the political agenda to cover issues that they see as worth reporting because people want to know more about them.

The issues reported often cover personalised, emotion-laden stories that can interest a wider public (stories that show the ‘human’ and ‘everyday’ aspect of migration such as families reunited, children excelling in school, people fleeing conflict and losing their spouse, parent or sibling in the process, or of course also stories of trafficking and prostitution). Such stories include stereotypical accounts of migrants in general and women migrants in particular. They tend to conform to three stereotypical representations of the migrant (woman) as victim, hero or threat.⁷ While such representations can be positive they tend to highlight the personal (and highly gendered) dimension at the expense of the structural factors behind migrant integration and participation in the destination country and the real life issues they face. They thus tend to act against the normalisation of migration and its mainstreaming in terms of welfare, employment or general political participation issues.

The MEDIVA project documented that journalists seek to consult migrants, migrant communities, NGOs and other non state actors which they consider most reliable for migration related issues. The rule of thumb is: you want to talk to people who are directly involved. However, accessing such ‘alternative’ sources of information instead of for instance national news agencies, government authorities or academic experts, is expensive – you need a dedicated journalist. In addition journalists need to build trust with relevant networks to have access to such firsthand sources. Actually experts can play this role as people who can function as gatekeepers to migrant voices. The concern that migrant voices are not heard as much as they should even for issues that are of direct concern to them remains.

In addition, media outlets do not cover immigration as a topic continuously. Media tend to flood the media space with instant coverage when something dramatic happens but quickly drop the subject at ‘normal’ times, thus prompting the public to think of immigration in the “problem/conflict/difficulty” framework.

⁶ See the MEDIVA project, <http://mediva-project.eu/>.

⁷ Hennebry et al. 2017.

The coverage of migration related issues by the media is also bound up by wider trends transforming the journalistic profession. Editorial budgets are reduced and professional full time journalists tend to be replaced by freelance reporters working for several outlets and selling their work on a piece by piece basis. This leads to both more diversity in terms of coverage and more dynamism in terms of sources but at the same time prevents journalists from covering issues that are not at the top of the news agenda (as they will be unlikely to sell their stories). In addition it makes it less likely that migrants will be involved in the profession because they do not have the necessary social networks to get into the freelance market while they also need to prove employment to renew their stay permits. All in all the journalistic profession may not look very attractive or indeed a viable professional option to them.

Special features of the coverage

An important feature of media reporting on migration related issues the organization of the 'story' on the basis of an opposition between a positive 'us' and a negative 'them'. Migrants are frequently represented as group rather than as individuals. They are often attributed characteristics of threat, or associated with problems, in particular crime and conflicts and even individual responsibility about specific actions is culturalised, attributed to the cultural features of the specific migrant group. By contrast similar issues reporting on 'native' individuals focus on individual responsibility, behavior or ideas rather than cultural attributes. Indeed migrants are more negatively represented than non-migrants in similar news contexts.

Interestingly, local media, that are closer to their local audiences tend to include more positive reporting on migration including everyday stories that would not hit the headlines of national media. Such positive examples, are more often than not found in large cities and in quality newspapers (that had reporters specialised on the topic and allowed for background reporting and investigations) and in Public Service Broadcasters. Editorial policies of specific media outlets and their strategy for setting news agendas play an important part here in shaping the coverage.

In general, second and third generation migrants are more visible, more often quoted and their portrayal is more balanced compared to that of new immigrants or refugees. However, the quotation of minority or migrant sources is overall still quite limited, but is a little better in quality newspapers and the local press. Migrants as main actors in the news are usually represented in niche programming and entertainment than in prime-time news and talk shows.

Muslims are generally represented in stereotypical, negative ways, associating for instance Muslim men with religious fundamentalism and representing Muslim women as victims of an oppressive, backwards culture. Although in specific instances there was room for more balanced portrayal, investigative and background reporting, and debate, where the position of Muslims was concerned, in most media studies the predominant picture is that of Islam as a threat to security, the culture and fundamental values of the West. This has also led to a general shift in meaning away from civic or political participation towards conflict and geopolitics when migrant issues are discussed. Thus in several cases, particularly in recent times there is a blending of foreign reporting about international conflicts and national news agendas with migration related issues leading to the further securitization of migration coverage.

Recruitment practices in the Media industry

While many studies have documented the often biased and stereotypical coverage of migration in the media, few studies have tried to dig into the root causes of such coverage, beyond ideology, and into the journalistic practices and routines of media outlets.

There is clearly a significant relationship between the country where the media outlet is located and the implementation of formal anti-discrimination measures in recruitment although a quarter of the respondents did not know whether such measures existed in their media outlets. Within the context of the MEDIVA project, Over half of the journalists and media outlet managers interviewed in the UK and half of those in

the Netherlands reported the implementation of anti-discrimination measures in their recruitment practices. None of the respondents in Italy and Ireland was aware of such measures being adopted by their companies. Yet, this should not be interpreted as indicating that the surveyed media outlets in these countries were not open to a diverse range of job applicants.

None of the journalists and media professionals interviewed in Ireland, Italy and Greece was aware of a diversity monitoring practice applied by their companies. In the UK, respondents spoke of an application process that required all applicants to complete and submit an equality and diversity form. Country regulations would sometimes impede the monitoring of diversity. It was explained that in the Netherlands, the question of an applicant's ethnic background figured on employment forms but it was optional whether it would be answered or not. Diversity monitoring was further obstructed by workers' contracts. Freelancers would only be registered if they had worked with a company for over a month. Migrant workers would rarely be recorded because of the nature of their contracts.

With regard to recruitment practices and questions about ethnic or religious bias, some of the senior media professionals interviewed insisted that they were mostly focused on getting the best person for the job rather than ticking ethnic minority quotas. They seemed to suggest that they were thus neutral and equally open to migrant applicants. Indeed a senior Greek journalist suggested that migrants and ethnic minorities might be partly to blame for the lack of diversity among the media workforce. They were seen as lacking confidence and hesitant to apply for media jobs and this contributed to the lack of diversity in the industry.

Barriers to migrant employment in the Media

However digging further into the issue, we identified important barriers that obstruct the employment of migrants as journalists in mainstream media.

First of all, nepotism and lack of host country experience were seen as additional barriers specific to migrants and ethnic minorities. The media in the Netherlands and Ireland were still seen by our respondents as a 'white bastion' that was difficult to break into. New people who were hired tended to come mostly from the same schools and replicated the existing workforces.

There were country differences in how interviewees interpreted the level of migrant aspirations to work in the media. In the Netherlands, a country with long traditions of immigration, careers in the media were not articulated as popular among young non-Western origin migrants. Preference was given to careers in medicine, law, economics and business management as these were sectors seen as offering more security and status. This career preference might have been rooted in past experiences in the origin country.

Low demand for jobs and an excessive supply of highly qualified people, coupled with an 'enormous amount of competition' as other general barriers to media employment. On top of this changes in the journalistic profession including more freelancing were seen as part of the problem.

Cultural differences may pose additional barriers to migrant applicants in the media. A Dutch reporter of Surinamese Hindustani origin talked about wearing a headscarf as creating an additional difficulty to getting work in the media industry.

Diversity in the Media workforce: Can we talk about discrimination?

Equality policies in the media were implemented very unevenly in the five countries studied. None of the media professionals and journalists interviewed in Greece, Italy and Poland gave an affirmative answer to the question about the existence of equality policies in the media outlets they worked for, compared to all interviewees in the UK, half of those in the Netherlands and slightly over a quarter in Ireland, who reported the implementation of equality policies by their companies. Several respondents in Italy mentioned that equality principles were observed at an individual level, referring to written documents to guide journalists in their work.

There were larger disparities in migrant employment when the figures were put in a country context. All respondents in the UK and the Netherlands reported the employment of migrant workers in the media. Several interviewees in Ireland reiterated the lack of diversity in Irish media. Only four respondents in Italy spoke of migrant recruitment in the media but in very small numbers. Ethnic media in the sample were more likely to rely exclusively on migrant labour with the relevant linguistic skills (Albanian newspapers in Athens; ethnic radio stations in Poland).

Migrant journalists were more likely to work as freelancers or on short-term contracts in all the countries surveyed. It should be noted that this did not necessarily imply discrimination as project-based work was a common feature of employment in the radio and television.

Ideas for a more balanced reporting on migration

Media coverage on migration reflects to a large extent the different migration histories and experiences of European countries as well as their wider context of implementing equality legislation.

First of all there is a need for monitoring coverage and preventing stereotypical, negative expressions referring to the ethnic origin of suspects, for instance, in crime reports or emphasizing the legal stay status of a person.

Monitoring of the type of issues reported in relation to migration and an effort to ensure a balanced reporting that covers different aspects of migration. For instance include in prime time reporting not just issues of border crossing and dinghies washed out in the Mediterranean shores but also issues of housing, religion, employment, examples of successful artists, professionals and entrepreneurs.

Reporting also for instance on migrant integration issues needs to include a variety of sources (and most of all migrants themselves) and seek to provide for explanations, evaluations and complex accounts or mention consequences and remedies of specific issues, rather than simplistic generalized reporting.

Recruitment of migrant journalists needs to be prioritized for instance through appropriate traineeship and study to work schemes.

Equality and diversity training is important and should be mainstreamed: provided to all journalists and media professionals at Universities but also as part of their lifelong learning if they are freelancers. While in the NL and the UK journalists did receive such training, this was not the case in Italy, Ireland and Greece. There is a need also to monitor existing trainings, assess whether they meet their objectives and what best can be done.

Useful Links

Media4Diversity project

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=512>

Media Diversity Institute

<http://media-diversity.org/en/>

Camden principles for freedom of expression and equality

<http://ethicaljournalisminitiative.org/en/contents/camden-principles-on-freedom-of-expression-and-equality>

Ethical Journalism Initiative

<http://ethicaljournalisminitiative.org/en>

Charter of Rome for reporting on migrants and refugees

<https://www.cartadiroma.org/>

Toolkit on Diversity for Public Television Broadcasting

<http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2008/diversity-toolkit-factual-programmes-public-service-television>

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