“We Can Do It”: A Test of Media Solidarity and Political Nerve over Migration

Michaela Maria Müller

Before the beginning of the refugee crisis in summer 2015, reporting in the German media on migration and refugees was neither coherent nor comprehensive. In terms of sheer numbers, approximately 15,000 news items about refugees were published between 2009 and 2015, according to a study by the Hamburg Media School.¹

How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration? 
A study by journalists, for journalists and policymakers 
Migration media coverage in 17 countries from 2015 to 2016
ABOUT EUROMED MIGRATION IV AND THE STUDY

“How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?”

This is a Chapter of the Study “How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration?” carried out and prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network and commissioned in the framework of EUROMED Migration IV (EMM4, 2016-2019). The objective of this project, financed by the European Union and implemented by ICMPD, is to support EU Member States and ENI Southern Partner Countries in establishing a comprehensive, constructive and operational dialogue and co-operation framework, with a particular focus on reinforcing instruments and capacities to develop and implement evidence-based and coherent migration and international protection policies. In order to achieve this objective, EMM 4 builds upon the results of the first three phases of the project (2004-2015) and tailors its activities around two pillars: the first pillar facilitates effective North-South and South-South regional dialogues and co-operation in the four main fields of migration and international protection-related matters (legal migration; irregular migration; migration and development; international protection and asylum). The second pillar focuses on capacity-building by applying a new outcome-oriented approach that includes sub-regional activities, tailor-made national training programmes and targeted technical assistance packages for committed partners. Both pillars are supported by a horizontal and cross-cutting thread aimed at accumulating evidence-based knowledge and establishing effective communication in order to contribute to a more balanced narrative on migration.

Find the entire study at www.icmpd.org/EMM4migration_narrative

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Following the sinking of a boat in the Mediterranean, one narrative predominated: The event was described from the start as a “tragedy.” As the story developed, journalists covered the numbers of victims, their countries of origin, and suspected causes of the disaster. In-depth investigations into the reasons for migration, however, were absent in the media.

This may be attributed to the fact that migration and refugees were treated exclusively as problems for Europe's external borders, while their domestic political import was ignored – a perspective that in retrospect has proven to be shortsighted.

That changed in 2015. The number of reports in the media rapidly increased. In that year alone more than 15,000 news reports were published. Between July and September 2015, during the height of the refugee crisis, some newspapers published up to seven articles per day.

The Summer of 2015

On 17 June 2015 Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán announced plans to build a fence, 175 kilometers long, on the border with Serbia to keep refugees from entering Hungary illegally. As a result migrants and refugees who had already made it to the Balkans on their route to Europe stepped up their efforts to get to the border before it closed. Up to 5,000 refugees per day began arriving in Hungary, where they were housed in reception centres or slept at Keleti train station in Budapest while figuring out how to continue their journey to other European countries. Basic necessities – accommodation, water, food, medicine, clothing, and diapers – were lacking.

The situation was little different in Greece or Italy. Images of poor castaways made their way from Europe to the rest of the world.

The atmosphere elsewhere in Europe was fraught. On 27 August the Austrian police discovered on the A4 motorway near Parndorf an abandoned refrigerated lorry that belonged to a human trafficking ring; it contained 71 human corpses. On 2 September the Syrian child Aylan Kurdi was found dead on a beach in the Turkish seaside resort town of Bodrum. He had fled Syria with his parents and drowned when their boat capsized.

Today, German reporters and correspondents who were on the spot recount the quandary they faced between wanting to help the humanitarian effort, on the one hand, and their obligation to do their jobs as journalists on the other.

How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?

“...we can do it.” The state chancellor Angela Merkel made her by now well-known pronouncement “we can do it.” The statement polarised public opinion, being enthusiastically received by one half of it and vehemently criticised by the other. Many mass media outlets such as Die Zeit, Der Spiegel, and Bild newspaper adopted it as their own. Shortly afterwards, Die Zeit, for example, printed the affirmative headline “Of Course We Can Do It.”

In late August the news magazine Spiegel printed words by German president Joachim Gauck on the cover. Following a visit to a Berlin refugee shelter, Gauck had expressed his hopes for a “bright Germany” characterised by openness, while decrying the “dark Germany” of hate and racism. Spiegel reproduced the opposition on a double cover: on one cover, the title “Bright Germany” was displayed over an image of people releasing balloons into a blue sky; while the other, “dark Germany” cover depicts an asylum shelter going up in flames. Each title is followed by a statement by Gauck: “It’s up to us how we want to live.”

The Hamburg Media School study concludes that 82% of German news items in 2015 cast the issue of refugees in a positive light. Twelve percent were purely informative; while only six percent viewed the country’s refugee policies as a problem.

On 5 September 2015 Angela Merkel pledged to take in all of the refugees who had been stranded at Budapest Keleti train station. Now Germany became their destination. The governments of Hungary and Austria arranged for the refugees to continue on to Germany, with Austria supplying shuttle buses. Within days, up to 13,000 refugees were arriving in Germany every day. Federal, municipal, and local agencies were overwhelmed. Countless volunteers helped to provide supplies and accommodation.

The media reinforced people’s willingness to help. Germany’s largest tabloid, Bild, styled itself as an advocate for the refugees. The conservative newspaper extended an explicit welcome to them and began a campaign, titled “Helping Out,” which involved printing regular tips to help readers get involved where they lived. The campaign logo even used the hashtag, which had previously been the domain of the left and of left-wing politics.

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Diversifying the Discourse

The desire to give refugees and immigrants a voice and a forum soon took hold in newsrooms. Refugees were no longer to be simply the subjects of news articles, but their authors as well.

The first such project of a large scale for the public-at-large appeared in Zeit Magazin on 28 May. Published bilingually in German and Arabic, it addressed the situation of refugees and was illustrated with cell phone photos provided by refugees themselves, which they had taken on their journey to Germany. Additionally, one article in the issue tells the story of the successful integration of Fatmire Alushi, a midfielder on the German national women’s football team. She and her parents had migrated to Germany in the early 1990s, refugees from the war in Kosovo. With its wide circulation amongst a predominantly liberal, educated readership, this bilingual issue of Zeit Magazin left an important mark on the discourse.

The Berlin daily Tagesspiegel in Berlin was one of the first newspapers to feature a regular weekly column written by a recent “newcomer in Berlin,” the Syrian student Ahmad Al-Dali, who describes in it his impressions and experiences of the city.

In his first column, Al-Dali makes his position clear: “The term ‘refugee’ is connected with the need for help and weakness. But I don’t want pity. I hate to ask for help ... As a refugee, you lose the feeling of being a person. You lose yourself ... There are people who think they know everything about me, when they hear I am a refugee. However, I have a past in Syria and hopefully a future in Germany. In Damascus, I was a normal student. I played the bass guitar and made music with a friend.”

As of July 2016 the Süddeutsche Zeitung has also published a regular column titled “Neue Heimat” (New Homeland). It appears every Friday and is written by four immigrant journalists: Lillian Ikulumet from Uganda, Olaleye Akintola from Nigeria, Nasrullah Noori from Afghanistan, and Mohamad Alkhalaf from Syria. Some media outlets have long put a premium on diversity, integration, and identity, such as the daily newspaper Die Tageszeitung (also known as taz) or the quarterly Missy Magazin, a feminist journal for politics and pop culture.

On the television and radio station Deutsche Welle, the Lebanese-German journalist Jaafar Abdul Karim hosts the talk show Shababtalk, on which young people from both Germany and the Arab world discuss topics such as political participation, equal rights, and sexuality. In addition, Karim produces a video column for Spiegel Online called “Jaafar’s Videoblog” and on Zeit Online he writes the trilingual blog “Jaafar, shu fi?”

The Changing Mood:

From Autumn 2015

The sympathetic treatment of refugees in the media that began in summer 2015 had negative effects as well. It awakened the feeling that the concerns and fears of the German population were not being taken seriously.

Following the terror attacks in Paris, on 13 November, the euphoria in the media became more muted. Just two weeks later, on 25 November, the daily newspaper Die Welt announced in one headline that “terrorism and refugees will be the end of our high standard of living.” This is just one example. More and
more, refugees were blamed for both the increasing threat of terrorism and actual attacks, and they were subject to blanket condemnation.

Then in Cologne on New Year’s Eve, more than a thousand women were sexually assaulted or robbed by almost as many men. The perpetrators were quickly described as having “come from North Africa.” But only gradually did the proportions of the attacks become clear. The Kölner Stadtanzeiger was the first to report on the event, publishing an online article, “Mass Assault of Women at Central Station,” on New Year’s Day. There was another short item on 2 January in the same paper. Then more and more media began reporting on the incidents, including international newspapers like The New York Times and The Guardian.

Journalists were faced with a dilemma from the start: to name the perpetrators’ presumed countries of origin or not? Guideline 12.1. of the German Press Code specifies that a suspect’s “religious, ethnic, or other minority membership” may not be identified “unless this information can be justified as being relevant to the readers’ understanding of the incident.” But this sort of discretion had become complicated in the meantime since agitation against refugees, foreigners, and immigrants was already snowballing on social media. If journalists chose not to mention the presumed origin of the perpetrators, right wing politicians and opinion makers would accuse them of suppressing the truth – and accuse the media of being Lügenpresse, i.e. “the lying press.”

Lügenpresse is another important concept that has gained in significance in reporting on the refugee crisis. It is quite correctly associated with National Socialism, but was originally coined in the nineteenth century as a means to stigmatise the press. Today this term is in common use at Pegida demonstrations, chanted by choruses of anti-Islam demonstrators, as well as in statements by the ultra-right party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), or AfD.

What happened on New Year’s Eve in Cologne altered the coverage of refugees in the media. The authors and editors of the monthly magazine Cicerone, which carries the subtitle “Magazine for Political Culture,” struck an increasingly nationalist tone. This was something new. Previously, in December 2014, the magazine had drawn attention to itself with a subversive cover, which featured a well-known slogan from the 1990s – “The boat is full!” – which right-wing politicians and media used at the time to inveigh against asylum seekers and refugees. This was placed over an illustration by the Italian artist Emiliano Ponzi that shows a tourist about to dive into a swimming pool on the deck of a cruise ship. Beside her, in the water around the bow of the ship, people are floating and drowning. The cover story, too, presented a critique of the idea of sealing off Europe’s borders as well as portrayals of refugees. Following the events in Köln, however, the magazine did an about-face. The cover of the February 2016 issue featured an image of Angela Merkel seated on a sofa, drinking tea, while outside the window behind her the Cologne cathedral is going up in flames. The headline below reads: “...no longer my country: Germany between loss of control and government failure.” Articles in the issue talk of an “inundation of Germany” and an “invasion from faraway cultures.” This reversal of approach was sharply criticised by other journalists; and many regular contributors ended their association with the magazine.

In summer 2016 three attacks took place in quick succession that intensified debate over domestic security and refugees. On 17 July a 17-year-old refugee, who was living in Germany as an unaccompanied minor, attacked passengers on a regional train outside Würzburg. He injured four people and was shot dead while trying to escape. On 22 July a mass shooting took place in a Munich shopping center; a German-Iranian high school student killed nine people before shooting himself. On 24 July in the Bavarian town of Ansbach a Syrian refugee set off a bomb in his backpack, injuring 15 people and killing himself.

On 19 December the Tunisian Anis Amri carried out a terrorist attack with a stolen lorry on the Christmas market at the Berlin Breitscheidplatz. He was shot dead four days later by police in Milan. In the Berlin attack 11 people died and another 55 were injured. The newspaper Berliner Morgenpost decided to stream live from the crime scene and was criticised for doing so. However, on the whole the regional and national coverage was unbiased, sober and in accordance with journalistic standards.

Domestic security and refugees were regularly discussed as two sides of the same coin, even when there was no connection – as in the case of the mass shooting in Munich, where the killer had grown up in Germany and had leanings towards right-wing.
extremism. A Bild headline asked: “After Bloody Week in Germany, How Are Refugees Monitored?” Die Welt wrote: “Bavaria Cracks Down on Violent Refugees.” The news channel n-tv titled one report in more or less neutral terms: “Terror, Extremism, Refugees: What Germans Fear”; but the report itself only reinforced a feeling that every refugee was a potential criminal.

The discourse from late 2015 onwards also included discussion of whether statements made by Chancellor Merkel and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) had led to the increase in the number of immigrants to Germany during the previous year. People pointed to the supposed effect of pictures of the train station in Munich or selfies taken by refugees together with Merkel, which had circulated millionfold in social media.

In September 2016 the BAMF published the exact numbers of refugees: around 890,000 had been registered; 441,899 had applied for asylum. What is notable here is that the number was only minimally higher than the one the Federal Office had estimated at the beginning of the year. This contradicted the notion that the government’s statements were taken as an “invitation.” Most refugees had already left their countries – primarily Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq – by spring of 2015, well before the statements were made, which is attested by findings from migration studies.

With its informative infographics and multimedia coverage, Die Zeit has provided extensive, nuanced, and often multilingual reporting on the topic.

**Hate Speech**

Hate speech that flows out of the right-wing and nationalist milieu via social media undoubtedly has an influence on public opinion, but the media’s treatment of hate speech has also been significant not least because of previous controversies which raised questions about the ways in which concepts and their meanings are handled.

There had already been concern expressed over coverage of murders carried out by the right-wing terrorist organisation National Socialist Underground (NSU). In a series of killings, the group’s members murdered nine people, the majority of whom were originally from Turkey. The police needed six years to solve the crimes. Meanwhile, media formulations such as “Döner Killings,” raised negative stereotypes and suggested the victims were killed by others from within the Turkish migrant community. This was proved not to be the case. In a study by the Otto Brenner Foundation journalists were taken to task and given recommendations for ethical conduct.

The ways in which language shapes false representations is explored by Udo Stiehl and Sebastian Pertsch on their website www.floskelwolke.de. Using specialized software and Google, the two news journalists analyze 1,385 German media websites twice a day, from the smallest local newspaper to the largest news digest. Their focus is on hundreds of key terms, classified according to three categories, which they examine for implicit biases while tracking their incidence in the media. Each of the terms is added to a glossary and supplied with a brief commentary. For example, as the commentary for the phrase “illegal refugee” explains: “There is no such thing as an ‘illegal refugee’ because only the entry or residency in a country can be illegal, not the person. To be a refugee – as a consequence of war, for example, or expulsion – is both legal and guaranteed as a human right. To refer to people as ‘illegal refugees,’ therefore, is a dangerous confusion of terms.”

By critically unpacking terms that are commonly used in the media, Stiehl and Pertsch encourage readers to evaluate their own language. Instead of speaking of a “wave of refugees” one might instead refer to “people migrating.” When a problematic term cannot be dispensed with, they recommend qualifying it with a modifier such as “so-called;” for instance.
There are still thousands of people who have been living in mass accommodations, such as school gymnasiums and container settlements, since they arrived in summer 2015. For some the situation has become so unbearable that with financial support from the German government they return to the country from which they had so recently escaped.

Journalists, too, are also increasingly subject to hate speech on the Internet and must defend themselves. Political trolls often attack prominent reporters and media personalities with vitriolic posts, tweets, and comments. On 29 August 2015, for instance, after being barraged with slurs and threats, the television presenter Dunja Hayali posted a statement on her Facebook page in which she asserted very clearly that asylum is a human right.

How Are Things Different Now?
Currently the media gives too little coverage to the positive side effects of migration, including both economic and social transformation processes. What happens to the remittances that the diasporas send back to their countries of origin? How do these experiences change people and their environments, not only in their old homes, but in their new ones as well?

There has also been too little reporting on migrants establishing companies and making financial investments in Germany. Although it must be said that company founders from other countries may not set much store by this sort of labeling. Reporting on recently arrived refugees often follows the principle of the “single story,” according to which integration takes place quickly and successfully, but which often ignores the difficulties involved in the process.

Finally, not enough has been written about so-called voluntary returnees. There are still thousands of people who have been living in mass accommodations, such as school gymnasiums and container settlements, since they arrived in summer 2015. For some the situation has become so unbearable that with financial support from the German government they return to the country from which they had so recently escaped. Stories like these can usually only be found on blogs or on the Facebook pages of aid organizations.

It would also be important to find out more about the influence that opinions circulated in social media have on the work that journalists do. Social media are a part of the public sphere, and debates on Facebook and Twitter are often covered by reporters.

In Germany the events of the past year have changed the way migration is reported on, and the causes of migration and expulsion are now being addressed. In November 2016, for instance, the newspaper Die Tageszeitung launched a series of investigative reports on migration between Africa and Europe.

Journalists’ initial enthusiasm and occasionally even advocacy for refugees have since been replaced by attempts to represent the complexity of migration. Media perspectives and approaches to the phenomenon have likewise become more global and nuanced.

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Links and sources
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