SPAIN

Desperation, Tragedy and Criminal Coverage that Distort the Media Image of Migration

Jose Miguel Calatayud

Up to the early 1970s Spain was a country where the migration story concerned political and economic exiles and emigrants who left Francisco Franco’s dictatorship. The trend started to reverse from the mid-1980s, when now democratic Spain joined the European Union (EU), and mostly from the 1990s, when, already richer, it started to receive more and more economic migrants from Latin America, northern Africa and some parts of Europe.
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/EMM4_migration_narrative
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However, this evolving and complex phenomenon has been translated in Spain into a much more simplistic media discourse dominated by two stories. The first and most graphic is that of desperate Sub Saharan Africans either trying to climb the walls separating the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla from Morocco, or being rescued from drifting, overcrowded dinghies in the Atlantic or in the Mediterranean. This despite the fact that almost all migrants arrive in Spain by regular and legal means, and that sub Saharan Africans make up only 3.95% of all foreigners in Spain.

And the second is about some of these migrants already living in Spain being associated with criminal activities. These mostly relate to Moroccan men linked to drug trafficking or other misdemeanours, Romanian gangs participating in organised crime, or Latin American youth gangs committing acts of violence.

A meta-study on how the Spanish media covers migration, published in 2012 but relevant up to the “refugee crisis”, identified five main, repeated and distorted narratives: the idea of “avalanche” and “invasion”; the danger of migrants bringing illnesses or inappropriate cultural customs; the association between migration and criminality; migrants being poor and marginalised; and the invisibility of migrant women.

On television and in pictures as well as in print, migrants would usually be portrayed as poor, young men and as passive actors in the story. Photographs would show them from a high angle, which diminishes the subject, while the rescuers and the police dealing with the migrants would be pictured from low angles, making them look more impressive.

In general, the migrants themselves wouldn’t be given much of a voice and the full context of the situation in their countries of origin and reasons why the migrants left would also be missing in these news stories. There would, of course, be differences between media coverage according to

- the platform of reporting, with television channels offering the most simplistic discourse, and radio and mainly the press offering a more in-depth analysis;
- the ideological bias at work, with conservative news outlets taking a harder, anti-migration stance, and progressive media being more welcoming towards migrants and more critical of the harsh response by the authorities; and
- the quality gap, with populist and sensationalist media producing a rather visual and emotional discourse, and prestigious media outlets making more of an effort to acknowledge the complexities of the migration process.

Throughout 2015, as more asylum-seekers and migrants were becoming stranded in north Africa, Turkey and Greece, and drowning in the Mediterranean, the media increased their coverage of this phenomenon, reporting more on the hardships faced by people trying to reach Europe and focusing less on the stories of Sub Saharan Africans trying to enter Spain.

The definite turning point in the Spanish media was the image of the dead body of Syrian toddler three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, on a Turkish beach, widely published on 2 and 3 September 2015. The images shocked many and provoked a change in the general media discourse.

Migrants and asylum-seekers became more humanised, individualised and relatable and were given a voice to explain the reasons that had led them to risk their lives trying to reach Europe. Images and pictures started to show them as families, small groups or individuals posing for the camera and having names and surnames, and not only as anonymous bodies overcrowding dinghies or trying to “assault” a wall.

A bigger effort was made to try and bring the big picture to light, researching why so many people from different places, and not only war-torn Syria, were risking everything for a chance to enter Europe.

Also those media outlets that had maintained an anti-migration position changed their discourse. The story was of a “tragedy” afflicting “the refugees”, and media asked for Europe to do something. Now being considered “refugees”, those attempting to reach Europe were doing so because they had been “forced to” leave their countries of origin and were escaping war and conflict and sometimes persecution. For a while, this trend included not only Syrians and Iraqis but also people from other places that a few weeks before were almost invisible to the mainstream Spanish media, as was the case for Eritreans, Congolese and Sudanese people among others.
Following being labelled a “refugee crisis”, the media nearly stopped using the word “migrants” and began to refer almost exclusively to “refugees”, bringing together and confusing different legal categories like “economic migrants”, “asylum-seekers”, “beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance” and “refugees”. This confusion could be seen for example during the second half of 2015 in the coverage of “The Jungle” camp in Calais, where thousands of people were living in dire conditions and hoping to cross into the UK. For El País newspaper, in July there were only “migrants” in “The Jungle” but by November – after the death of Aylan Kurdi– they’d all turned into “refugees”, while in some other articles both terms were used.

Other media in Spain followed exactly the same pattern, and “refugee” was being used so much that Fundéu, a foundation that advises in the use of the Spanish language in the media and online, ended up picking refugiado (refugee) as the 2015 word of the year.

However, the honeymoon between the refugees and some of the Spanish media that previously, before Kurdi, used to support anti-migration positions started to crumble after the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, in which 130 people died, and was practically finished a few weeks later after the events in Cologne, in Germany, on New Year’s Eve, amidst reports of groups of men, supposedly including asylum-seekers and refugees, harassing and sexually assaulting dozens of women near the city’s train station.

Those media who invested most in covering the human angle of the crisis produced accounts which sometimes tended too much towards the emotional. This was the case of Cadena SER, the news radio station with the highest number of listeners in Spain, which in early 2016 made the effort of broadcasting special programmes, for example from Jordan, but also included touching background music in its news clips about migration, while other news stories didn’t include any background music.

While initially welcomed by media analysts and activists, this “pro-refugee discourse” might end up creating different categories in which economic migrants or those fleeing persecution on religious, sexual or other grounds are perceived as less legitimate or as having less right to come than those escaping war, as noted by Red Acoge, a federation of Spanish NGOs working on migration and refugee issues.

Throughout 2016, as the novelty of the refugee story began to fade and the public was becoming less sensitive to the repetition of dramatic images, Spanish media coverage of migration went partially back to focusing on those trying to cross the Spanish borders coming from Sub Saharan Africa, while it also kept an eye on the migrants and asylum-seekers trying to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. This was helped by the NGOs running rescue boats, namely Doctors Without Borders (Médecins

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Sans Frontières, MSF) and Proactiva Open Arms, a small Spanish NGO, as both hosted many journalists on board their ships and allowed media access to the rescue operations and to the people rescued themselves. During the last few weeks of 2016 and the first of 2017, as freezing weather spread over Eastern Europe, the harsh conditions faced by migrants and asylum seekers in countries like Greece and Serbia brought them back to the front pages.

From migrants to refugees and back to migrants

Red Acoge has published a four-volume study on how the media covered migration in Spain between 2014 and 2016. The three volumes covering 2015 and 2016 have analysed more than 2,800 news stories in 30 national, regional and local media outlets. The study highlights how during the coverage of the “refugee crisis” media generally improved the quality of their coverage of migration stories, in particular by humanising and giving migrants and asylum-seekers a voice, and by trying to provide context to explain why these people had left their places of origin.

Red Acoge found that the number of articles containing “errors” fell from nearly 50% among those analysed during the first part of 2015 to 20% of those analysed in 2016. The most common errors described by the study are similar to those from the pre-2015 reporting of migration: indicating the migrants’ nationality even when it is not relevant (mostly in the case of those already in Spain); alarmism over migration and criminalisation of the migration process; reduction of migrants to figures and statistics; use of overly dramatic stories; and confusion in the use of different terms like “migrant”, “asylum-seeker” and “refugee”.

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the news agenda by acting as gatekeepers and even as providers of their own content to the media. Some journalists don’t see being hosted and transported by an NGO and having access only to its beneficiaries as sources and always with NGO staff present as translators as being a problem, but others acknowledge that just by providing access to particular situations NGOs are influencing media coverage.

Another difference appears when discussing the role of social media as reporting tools. Some journalists say these are now just one resource among many and say content found on social media can be used for reporting, while others don’t feel comfortable using it and say journalists should be extra-careful and verify all sources and content coming from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other online services.

When it comes to challenges and obstacles found in their work on migration, journalists note the lack of transparency of the Spanish authorities, and, especially among freelancers but also some staffers, the lack of resources and support available to do their job properly. There’s particular concern over the lack of time allowed for research and work on in-depth stories and the lack of interest that some editors show in this kind of journalism.

Some journalists say they’ve been pressured to rush some stories, a problem with all news reporting and not only migration. But no one said they’d been censored or forced to cover these stories from a sensationalist point of view. Nevertheless, several of those interviewed requested they remain anonymous because of fear of retribution, which is a worrying sign that might be connected to increasing job insecurity in Spanish media.

**Conclusion: asylum-seekers are humanised but a bigger media effort is needed**

News media these days struggle to cover long-term, complex issues that are difficult to explain in daily news stories, such as migration. The economic crisis and increasing job insecurity have also weakened the capacity of news outlets to report on complex stories; there are fewer staff and resources available to produce even more content than before. The burden is increasingly falling upon badly-paid freelancers, who the media tend to rely upon more and more, including reporting from conflict zones and crisis-affected areas.

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On top of this, the highly competitive online information ecosystem pushes some media to rush reporting and run sensationalist pieces. Spanish migrants themselves are also generally absent from the media, even though a study published in 2013 estimated that as many as 700,000 Spaniards had emigrated since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis, most of them young, educated people who couldn’t find appropriate jobs in Spain. When the media report on them, often they are not identified as ‘migrants’ but just as Spaniards living abroad.

If we refer to the EJN Guide for Migration Reporting, in general the Spanish media would get an average of 11.3% of the coverage. The narrative is sometimes sensationalized, there is some confusion between different legal concepts like “asylum-seeker” and “refugee”, the bigger picture and full context are usually absent from the narrative, and before “the refugee crisis” migrants weren’t often given a voice. On the other hand, and even though many media still describe the attempts by Sub Saharan Africans to scale the walls in Ceuta and Melilla as “massive assaults”, for the most part the Spanish media usually avoid extremism and inflammatory content.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To improve coverage of migration, the Spanish media should also improve the job security of their staff and freelance contributors, and make sure they have adequate resources to do their jobs.
2. They should invest in specific training for their staff, including freelancers, and promote the use of a common guide on how to cover migration. This could be done through the Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE) and the Colejegi of Periodistas de Catalunya, which together represent all professional Spanish journalists and which have already produced general codes of professional practice.
3. Finally, when it comes to migration, above all, the Spanish media should make an effort to follow their own fact-based agenda and aim for the big picture and providing appropriate context.

Jose Miguel Calatayud is an award-winning journalist based in Barcelona.

References, links and sources

1. In 1999 people of Sub Saharan origin made up 3.28% of all those of foreign origin living in Spain. This has been slowly increasing and by 2015, the latest year for which figures are available, reached 3.95%. The main countries which migrants arrive in Spain from are, in this order: Romania and other EU countries (mainly the UK, France, Italy and Germany), Morocco, Colombia, Venezuela and other Latin American countries, Pakistan, from China. These figures come from Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE). Población (españoles / extranjeros) por país de nacimiento, sexo y año. Available online in Spanish on http://www.ine.es/pai/Table.htm?path=/t20/txg/p10910/f6&file=nie01002p6&10


9. See note 5.

10. According to the latest official audience figures covering the period from February to November 2016. The data is available online in Spanish on http://www.aimc.es/-Datos-EGM-Re-sumen-General-.html

11. Red Acoge’s website is available in Spanish on http://www.redacoge.org

12. The four volumes are available to download in Spanish on http://www.redacoge.org/es/documentos.html

13. Written or phone interviews were conducted with one analyst and eight journalists working with Spanish – and in some cases also international– media: six from the press, one from the radio, and one photojournalist. They all had covered migration since before 2015. The author of this report himself has also reported on migration for the Spanish and international media, but only before 2015, and has been a humanitarian worker who has followed the subject closely during the last two years.


15. FAPE’s code is available online in Spanish on http://fape.es/home/codigo-deontologico/ and the Coleg’s code is available online in Catalan on http://www.periodistes.org/ca/home/periodisme/codi-deontologic.html.