Single-minded Media Fail to Grasp Opportunities to Go Beyond Tales of Woe

Sana Farhat

Dramatic political change brought about by the fall of the former regime in January 2011 coupled with the changes in migration flows have led to the migration issue becoming a prominent focus of the Tunisian media landscape. The importance of the migration issue on the agenda of Tunisian media can be attributed to the large number of young Tunisians setting out for Europe, many of them without visas and at great risk to their lives. At the same time the conflicts in Libya and Syria have generated a large number of refugees and within the country there is a large body of migrants from African countries.
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

© European Union, 2017

The information and views set out in this study are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Neither the European Union institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) was commissioned to conduct this study.
During 2015 and 2016 the main events that marked media coverage of migration were the tragic shipwrecks involving young Tunisians or migrants of other nationalities (Algerians, Syrians and sub-Saharan) attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in makeshift boats.

...
departure”, “clandestine immigration” or “irregular immigration”.

When it comes to media coverage of the Tunisian diaspora, this is overshadowed by the focus on more dramatic news coverage and tends to revolve around occasional and seasonal events, principally the return of Tunisians living abroad to their home country during the summer holidays, summer schools or the once-yearly congress of Tunisians abroad. It is during this period that a handful of Tunisian media may talk about Tunisians living abroad, mentioning their contribution to the national economy in the form of money transfers.

However, a few television programmes endeavour to show Tunisians living abroad in a positive light. Ahlan Tounes is one such weekly programme broadcast on the national channel 1, Watania 1. Its target audience is the Tunisian community abroad.

In general, Tunisian media use information articles, comments and opinion pieces to talk about migration with regular coverage of the various foreign communities in Tunisia, and particularly on Tunisians attempting to migrate, but the main focus is on shipwrecks, the hardships and the living conditions.

However, the “migration story” genre describing migrants’ life experiences is not particularly common in Tunisian media, apart from a few articles that interview Syrians in Tunisia, or which relate the schooling of Syrian and sub-Saharan children in Tunisian schools.

The nature of reporting tends to highlight the facts of the migrants’ situation and this shapes the narrative of reporting by the media. Occasionally, it is clear that some journalists reporting on the issue have trouble managing their emotions. This can be seen in their coverage of shipwrecks or when they deal with subjects about the foreign communities established in Tunisia. In some cases, their positions are negative, even openly racist. They convey stereotyped images of migrants, based on the exclusion of others.

As a result, stories about migrants have not altered the way the media report on the various groups’ everyday life experience. Indeed, as one of them points out, because journalists have their own singular way of crafting stories based upon their individual vision, belief and affiliations with the migrant communities, it affects the quality of their work. As a result, “the migration issue is not handled in an in-depth, objective way by all of the journalists in Tunisia. It is generally confined to the information,” said journalist Rim Saoudi.

This observation has been confirmed by academic research into the subject in Tunisia. Academic Riadh Ben Khalifa, in an article entitled La Harga au prisme de la presse tunisienne (February 2011 – May 2013), states that Tunisian journalists, who had been subject to stringent censorship up until then, suddenly found themselves in a climate in which they could comment freely on the migration problem.

The Newsroom Challenges

The migration story is not high on the list of priorities of most chief editors. It only tops the news lists when there are dramatic events to report – shipwrecks or other sensational incidents that will catch their audiences’ attention. Nor do media managements highlight the notion of migrants’ rights as being linked to human rights. They are too often motivated by financial gain in a bid to

In Tunisia it is still difficult to access reliable data and statistics, despite the adoption of an organic law on access to information in March 2016. Media have no choice but to rely on ministerial press releases or the figures provided by the consulting companies or associations that carry out some research on the subject.
How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?

Occasionally, it is clear that some journalists reporting on the issue have trouble managing their emotions. This can be seen in their coverage of shipwrecks or when they deal with subjects about the foreign communities established in Tunisia.

attract advertising.

The pressure exerted by managing editors with an eye on sales and marketing, for instance, has a direct impact on journalists’ work. Some downplay the story opting for short news items on migrants and migration or they publish articles on shipwrecked migrants in the “Other news” pages, hence editorial carelessness, the use of stigmatising vocabulary and the lack of precision.

Others spotlight the consequences of the presence of specific communities (Libyans, sub-Saharan, etc.) and their impact on the economy and consumers’ standard of living. Often this leads to negative messages, of exclusion, racism and hate, and the promotion of deeply-rooted stereotypes to the disadvantage of these communities.

Journalists also have to contend with other obstacles. It is still difficult to access reliable data and statistics, despite the adoption of an organic law on access to information in March 2016. Media have no choice but to rely on ministerial press releases or the figures provided by the consulting companies or associations that carry out some research on the subject.

As one report indicates: “Tunisian journalists have difficulty exploring the complexity of the migration question and the various issues it involves... They lack the resources necessary to carry out in-depth investigations.”

It is important to note that some journalists obtain information about shipwrecked migrants on the Italian coasts from foreign media sources. Even the images and photos they use to illustrate reports and articles published in the print or online press are usually taken from websites.

This is because there is a shortage of photographers interested in the migration issue, and managing editors are reluctant to allocate resources to expanding the media coverage of migration issues.

Other considerations have a bearing on media coverage of migration, including political and business interests. This can lead to more hate speech. Even some public media broadcast messages stigmatising migrants suggesting there is “a risk that the structure of the Tunisian population will be profoundly altered by these migratory phenomena”.

A call to review visa procedures and tighten controls has been launched in these media. “Ban immigration or bring back visas for the nationals of certain specific countries’ or ‘provide the support and governance necessary to avert the downward social ills imported from elsewhere...’ are some of the messages conveyed by certain public media.

Moreover, hate speech directed at Libyans, the sub-Saharan community, refugees and Syrian asylum-seekers can also be found in public debate and speeches.

The media relay the discourse of limitation, subsequently possibly leading to exclusion, expressed by government officials, among others. For instance, “the Secretary of State for Immigration has said that the Tunisian government will be unable to take in more Syrian refugees, given the country’s limited resources as a result of the current economic situation.”

The media also relay what Tunisian officials say without analysing or reviewing the words used. Several examples show that not only certain journalists, but even public figures and some leading officials have scant knowledge of immigration terminology.

It is not surprising that as a result of these factors there is often a lack of objectivity in the treatment of migration-related issues which may explain the poor response of the media audience to the challenges of the migration crisis.

On the other hand, a number of young activists are trying to take a different approach to reporting on the migration story and in efforts to assist migrants. They are using alternative media, such as social networks or websites run by associations. They are also using the tenets of human rights and personal freedom of movement to defend migrants’ rights and denounce racist acts against foreign communities in Tunisia.

Foreign communities in Tunisia are also creating a movement using online opportunities and the social networks - Facebook, YouTube, etc. - to convey their concerns and get their messages across.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, it is clear that this analysis of some Tunisian media reveals that news media coverage of migration does not play a major role in the editorial life of journalism in the country and where it does, it revolves around news about shipwrecked migrants and the living conditions of Arab or sub-Saharan communities in Tunisia.
At the same time, human rights issues arising from migration are not a priority for media coverage and in the nature of reporting several media reflect a poor command of the migration issue and more specifically the vocabulary and terminology defined by international migration organisations.

Confronted with both internal obstacles posed by the editorial team and external obstacles, journalists have nowhere to turn for help. They are ill-equipped to cover migration issues. They are also pressed for time and under pressure from their managing editors.

These problems lead media to reflect a contradictory image – on the one hand highlighting the difficulties migrants face while on the other conveying messages of stigmatisation, stereotypes or even messages of exclusion.

There are, however, examples of good journalism practice in the alternative media, which try to handle the migration issue objectively by presenting a range of different speakers and viewpoints. The online newspaper nawat is an example of this.

The story report produced by Agence Tunis Afrique Presse on the living conditions of Syrians on the outskirts of Tunis, and which was published by a number of media, is another positive example and underlines the importance of training journalists and raising the awareness within media of the need to make migration a central theme in genre of journalism.

Recommendations
The following proposals may be useful in helping to improve media coverage of migration in Tunisia:

- Introduce a strategy for training journalists in migration issues: help journalists vary journalistic genres and not confine themselves to reporting the facts about migration.
- Directly target the senior management of Tunisian media - the editorial directors and chief editors - to raise their awareness of the importance of covering migration-related subjects objectively.
- Include media coverage of the migration issue in the Tunisian government’s proposed national migration strategy (2016-2020).
- Establish standing assessment criteria to monitor changes in the way the media treat migration issues.
- Structure and develop monitoring of the media, by domain, for more effective analysis and traceability of the migration issue.
- Build partnerships with media regulatory bodies and structures in Tunisia, such as the Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HAICA); journalism training establishments: the Centre Africain de Perfectionnement des Journalistes et Communicateurs (CAPJC); the Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens (SNJT), in order to help bring the Ethical Journalism Network migration reporting guide to the attention of journalists.

The migration story is not high on the list of priorities of most chief editors. It only tops the news lists when there are dramatic events to report – shipwrecks or other sensational incidents that will catch their audiences’ attention.
Establish standing assessment criteria to monitor changes in the way the media treat migration issues. ... Structure and develop monitoring of the media, by domain, for more effective analysis and traceability of the migration issue.

of the Tunisian media and journalists, and raise their awareness of the importance of applying it in order to respect migrants’ rights.

- Form a partnership with the national press agency (Agence Tunis Afrique Presse) to distribute this charter within the editorial team and adopt consistent concepts in dispatches and reports.
- Work on developing and creating alternative media managed by the migrants.
- Run a campaign to promote the Ethical Journalism Network guide (on combating hate speech in the media) to the various media and journalists in Tunisia. An initiative could be conducted with the SNJT, Article 19, the Arab Institute for Human Rights and the EuroMed Rights network to promote the guide. The same initiative could be conducted with the associations interested in migrants and migration, such as the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux, the Association de la communauté syrienne en Tunisie and/or the Maison du Droit et des Migrations.
- Develop and promote the Ethical Journalism Network Moving stories report, we recommend translating it into French and Arabic so that it is more accessible to Tunisian journalists, and organising training sessions on the subject.

Sana Farhat is a reporter for the Tunisian press agency (TAP) currently based in Paris.

References, links and sources

1. http://www.assabahnews.tn/article/111894/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A7%DA%97%DA%84%D9%86%D8%A2-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%86-%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%85
3. Assabah newspaper: http://www.assabah.com.tn/article/104562/%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%82%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A
4. An Arabic word meaning “to burn”.
5. An Arabic word used to describe irregular immigrants, literally “burners”.
7. Translation: “Welcome Tunisia”
10. Live interview with Rim Saoudi, journalist at Assabah.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
19. http://www.assabahnews.tn/article/111894/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A7%DA%97%DA%84%D9%86%D8%A2-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%86-%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%85