Public Debate Needed to Confront Denial and Media Stereotypes

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Algeria has always been a host country for migrant communities, and even more so since its independence. The Sahrawi people and the Palestinians, for instance, were very quickly integrated into the Algerian social fabric and a very deep relationship has been forged over the decades with both communities, a policy well accepted and supported within Algerian society.

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/EMM4_migration_narrative

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The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) was commissioned to conduct this study.

Countries covered in this study

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by ICMPD, the EC, or its partners.
There are signs of change, with groups in civil society, including academics, and some journalists and politicians now trying to change this situation. Their challenge is to reshape the current public discourse, which is not a true reflection of society, and to help people in Algeria come to terms with far-reaching changes taking place in the country.

And yet more recent migration and, in particular, that from sub-Saharan Africa has not seen the same sort of untroubled integration. Indeed, migration questions have developed and been embraced quite differently.

In the space of a few years, Algeria has gone from being a place of transit to a settlement country for many thousands of sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, as well as for people on the move from Syria, Libya and Yemen. Yet talk and consideration of migration and refugee issues in Algerian media, whether it is in the press, on radio and television or on digital platforms, appear to be discouraged.

Migration-related themes are often relegated to the “other news” section on the news agenda and reporting on migration tends to focus on its association with matters of security, violence and the rising migrant death toll in the Mediterranean, and problems of exclusion, clearly related to the humanitarian crisis caused by deaths on the move.

The media focus was like in almost all other countries in the North African region, and is not a true reflection of society, and to help people in Algeria come to terms with far-reaching changes taking place in the country.

First signs of positive change

On a positive note, however, there are signs of change, with groups in civil society, including academics, and some journalists and politicians now trying to change this situation. Their challenge is to reshape the current public discourse, which is not a true reflection of society, and to help people in Algeria come to terms with far-reaching changes taking place in the country.

Media coverage of migration during 2015 and 2016 was, like in almost all other countries in the North African region, marked by a number of tragic events. The media focus was clearly related to the humanitarian crisis caused by deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean, and problems of exclusion, mass deportations, violence and sometimes the mobilisation of Algerian civil society on the migration issue.

Reporting peaks around incidents

One tragic example was an incident that took place on 1 October 2015 when Marie-Simone D., a 33-year-old Cameroonian national, was beaten and raped by around seven Algerians at the entry to the Coca district in the metropolitan area of Oran. Almost a year later, in 2016, the Oran criminal court handed down 15-year prison sentences to three youths for this assault and rape.

In another incident, on 25 October 2015, some 18 sub-Saharan African nationals, including two children and three women, died and another 50 or so were injured in a serious fire that destroyed the hangar in which they were living in the Said Otba industrial estate in the town of Ouargla. It had been in use since 2012 when the local authorities converted it and made it available for migrants. Within weeks the Algerian authorities moved the occupants to another location.

The situation of Syrian refugees has reportedly deteriorated considerably since the beginning of the crisis in Syria. Algeria has taken in more than 25,000 Syrians, although the media has reported that many remain marginalised.

During 2016 more violence involving migrants made headlines. On 25 March 2016, dozens of sub-Saharan migrants were injured near the OPGI district in Béchar, 950 km from Algiers as a result of a stone-throwing assault by dozens of masked attackers. Media reported how migrants tried to call the police for help, but allegedly their calls were not acted upon. When the police intervention did arrive, tear gas canisters landed next to the migrants’ living quarters.

Again, the suffering of migrants made news on 16 June 2016 when the bodies of 34 people, including 20 children, were found the week before in the Niger desert. They had been trying to reach Algeria.

There was a spike in news reporting on 26-27 November 2016 when in the Dely Ibrahim district in Algiers, a building that housed around 150 sub-Saharan migrants was attacked by local residents. No other incident has ever prompted so many articles and responses on the social networks.

Finally, media extensively covered events on 1 December 2016 when 1,500 migrants and asylum-seekers were deported. The president of the Algerian Red Crescent, Saida Benhabylès, explained why the deportation was needed: “Given the overcrowded conditions in the capital and the security problems they create, the public authorities have decided to transfer the migrants to the South, where the living conditions are better,” she told the daily newspaper El Moudjahid.

Prejudices and stereotypes are reinforced

Regrettably, most Algerian media still relegate migration coverage to the second tier of news reporting or, worse still, to the status of brief items in news columns. Few media, whether print or television, explore the subject in depth, through investigations or immersive reporting which might involve living alongside migrants and refugees, or following the progress of major cases involving justice and deportations. They tend not to generate original information about the issue.
Instead, like the local authorities, Algerian media generally content themselves with reporting the “official” versions of information issued by the Algerian defence ministry (MDN), or the press agency Agence de presse algérienne (APS), and tend to use press releases from the authorities (the police forces), the Algerian Red Crescent and the human rights watchdog (CNCPDHD) without questioning the content.

At the same time, some media, often reflecting bias and prejudice in the unfeeling use of terms to describe migrants and their communities, may have contributed to linking sub-Saharan migrants and even refugees to criminal activity. This has led in some cases to a downward spiral in ethics and use of language, with migrants unjustly portrayed as being associated with trafficking, theft, disease transmission and aggression. In this way some Arabic and French-language media have been stereotyping migrants for years. In November 2016 an article in the French-language newspaper El Watan laid the blame on migrants, apparently without any grounds, after outbreaks of violence in a working-class district. The problems of stereotyping give rise to the misuse of terms like “Blacks”, “Africans”, “illegals”, “immigrants”, “criminals” and “traffickers” when media are referring to migrants. Sadly there is, to date, no common lexicon.

Moreover, sometimes journalists working for the same newspaper will use different terms, which suggests that there is no editorial consistency on the terminology to be used. Often media and writers do not consult Algerian migration experts or fundamental texts, including Algerian law and the major special-purpose texts which exist around the question of migration. Similarly to Europe or other countries of the region, this same problem of linguistic indecisiveness is also a feature of the political class.

Nevertheless, some journalists do make the effort to follow the recommendations of the NGO Médecins du Monde (MDM), the IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Often these are journalists who have received special coaching, such as the journalists who have received training initiated by Institut Panos Europe and delivered through a series of conferences and workshops in Algiers and Oran.

In order to tell the migrant story more truthfully and effectively, and to deal with migrant related issues, such as the importance of remittances, and relations with the Algerian diaspora, more than just a superficial interest in migrants and their communities must be taken.

But mixing with migrants and refugees does not happen often. As a result, migrants are isolated and frustration mounts as the years pass. This lack of knowledge of the economic and social realities of migrant life is revealed by the fact that a 2008 report on migrants’ contribution to the Algerian economy published by the CREAD (a research centre in applied economics for development) remains the only reference document for journalists.

Migrants, money transfer, and denial

In April 2016, the digital newspaper Maghreb émergent reported a discussion with Leila Beratto - RFI journalist in Algeria and co-founder of the “Terminus Algérie” project - who has been working on economics and migration questions for two years which showed how the question of money transfers by migrants to their families is almost taboo in Algeria.

Many migrants do not have bank accounts and this makes transferring money difficult except through international wire transfer agencies and further complicates the search for reliable figures. Subterfuge is used to send money, by creating an internal network, made up of migrants, and which escapes notice and official monitoring and control. Moreover, migrants’ investments are limited since they do not have the right to buy a home and often live in rented or sub-let accommodation.

An article written in 2015 by the Algeria correspondent of the “Middle East Eye” website reports that a windowless garage is rented out for $230. This is an exorbitant rent that shows that some landlords take advantage of the lack of official controls and often migrants are the victims of these irregularities.

All in all, talking about and reporting on migrants puts a focus on an issue that it appears almost everyone prefers not to discuss. There is a sense of denial that is often so strong that some media outlets claim migrants will leave soon which goes some way towards explaining why media coverage sometimes fails to report from within the migrant community in Algeria. Despite efforts by a number of stakeholders in various sectors, including the authorities, too often migrants remain the invisible men, women and children whose opinions are not reported but who, nevertheless, may be the subjects of xenophobic articles and occasionally racist front pages.

The low quality of media coverage is reflected in the fact that there tends to be a handful of photos that reappear frequently in Algerian newspapers and news websites. Online news sites make excessive use of photos showing migrants begging in the streets of large towns, migrants crowded into trucks, and sick or injured migrant children.

These clichéd photos are often used to support opinion pieces, but overall there are very few first-hand accounts by migrants, or comments from academics or specialised researchers which might give more perspective to the public debate.

Recently, in December 2016, the president of the CNCP-PDH, the national consultative committee for the protection and promotion of human rights, accused sub-Saharan
migrants of spreading Aids and sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) in Algeria, in an interview given to the Arabic-language daily Al Sawt Al Akher.

Questioned about the situation of sub-Saharan migrants in Algeria, he stated that “the expansion of these African migrants into several communes in Algiers” might “cause numerous problems for Algerians”. On the other hand, in another, more sympathetic tone, the newspaper El Hiwar commented in 2016 on migrants’ situation and the assistance given to them during the month of Ramadan.

How the reporting improves, and why it needs to improve further

But even with these problems, today the situation is improving. Far more than in earlier years, certain media now encourage in-depth feature reporting. Much more needs to be done though, given the scope of the problem and the urgent need to talk about migrants and their life in Algeria and particularly the need to focus on social questions such as the problems facing stateless migrants or the right to work, social security cover, age and education. As yet, the debate on migration is still not a part of public discourse and remains neglected.

In order to confront this problem journalists and editors need to make migration an essential part of the routine of everyday journalism and not just driven by the news of dramatic events or that content which comes from foreign press agencies alone.

Very often journalists face difficulties trying to approach migrants, or to obtain access to official sources or even to shoot film footage in certain areas. Official permission is often needed and this makes the task more complicated. At the same time journalists and media have limited resources, whether it is access to and use of equipment or the funding for allowances to go out into the field and to report more intensively on the subject.

Debates within traditional journalism circles are ongoing. There are reports of journalists who get into heated exchanges with their superiors when it comes to handling articles on migrants. Within the media community there is often division, unacknowledged racism and a lack of understanding of the core issues.

Beyond the traditional media framework, it is important to note that the migrant question is taken up by many Algerian activists and human rights groups who issue press releases and run migrant-support solidarity operations through the social networks.

A platform on migration has been set up to report on the situation. And recently, on 20 and 21 July 2016, subregional consultations for North Africa were held in Tunis to develop a civil society network on the movements of refugees and migrants in the Middle East-North Africa region. This initiative was organised by UNHCR and gathered delegations from Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Libya and Tunisia. The aim of the civil society network is to provide a “platform” for regional partners to combine their individual voices and present a stronger call to protect and assist displaced persons. During the consultations, Algerian sociologist Hocine Labdelaou, who is affiliated with the CREAD, said he was ready to oversee this encouraging initiative.

This sort of development should elicit more responses from the media community which unfortunately still provides a narrative scarred by a dangerous vocabulary and an apparent reluctance to move beyond clichés and racial stereotypes. This undermines the efforts of many journalists who are seeking to provide a different editorial approach and who are endeavouring, with training, to put forward a faithful image of migration in Algeria and a more truthful reflection on the complexities of the migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The main recommendation, which would appear to be an urgent priority, is to train journalists, chief editors and journalism students on migration.

2. Redefine the media’s sources and work more closely with researchers, academics and Algerian research centres, and Algerian authorities.

3. Forge more partnerships with NGOs and Algerian associations.

4. Create room for discussion with the local authorities in order to be kept constantly informed.

5. Compile a migration glossary of the terms used.

Faten Hayed is a journalist for El Watan Week-end in Algiers.

Links and Acronyms

1. Report by the KBC television channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xh2OiypY


4. Video filmed by migrants in Béchar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bUmmnmLIaY

5. Questioned about the situation of sub-Saharan migrants in Algeria, he stated that “the expansion of these African migrants into several communes in Algiers” might “cause numerous problems for Algerians”. On the other hand, in another, more sympathetic tone, the newspaper El Hiwar commented in 2016 on migrants’ situation and the assistance given to them during the month of Ramadan.

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7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8j28DhVJIbc


9. hhttp://www.assawt.net/2016/12/%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%82-%D9%82%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%82-%D9%82%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%82-%D9%82%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%82-%D9%82

LAADH: Ligue algérienne des droits de l’Homme, Algerian human rights league

HCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

MDM: Médecins du Monde

CREAD: Centre de recherche en économie appliquée pour le développement, research centre in applied economics for development

IOM: International Organization for Migration

MDN: Algerian Ministère de la Défense nationale, national ministry of defence

APS: Algérie presse service

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