Media and Migration from a migration perspective: 
*Observations from the International Centre for Migration Policy Development*

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

A study by journalists, for journalists and policy-makers

Migration media coverage in 17 countries from 2015 to 2016
This study is the first element of a broader investigation into how individual journalists and, more generally, mainstream media report – and do not report – on migration, and how such reporting influences public opinion in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

From the perspective of an organisation specialised in migration policy development, the analyses by the 17 authors presented in this study illustrate a number of highly professional and promising approaches to reporting on migration. They also show a number of shortcomings as well as key challenges which journalists, migration organisations, policy-makers and civil society face when it comes to informing the public about a complex phenomenon. Our main observations on these shortcomings are as follows:

1. Due to the migratory context in the last few years in the Mediterranean, the media’s reporting on migration focussed almost exclusively on the thousands of people fleeing their home countries as a result of conflict or other contextual factors and the effects of these flows of people on transit and destination countries; as a result, the media also contributed to the perception that migration was “a problem” rather than a multi-faceted global phenomenon with a variety of permutations, challenges and opportunities.

2. Day-to-day realities in countries on both sides of the Mediterranean, migration success stories, the enormous opportunities relating to migration as well as the fact that all Mediterranean countries have a history of migration were and are much less reported on. This begs the question: do most journalists themselves perceive the less- or underreported facets of migration as part of the complex phenomenon? Or do most of them simply not associate positive facets such as labour migration, remittances and others linked to emigration to the migration phenomenon? Has “migration” become synonymous with immigration?

3. A small number of journalists and national media outlets in a few countries seem to address the phenomenon holistically by making a link between emigration of their own nationals to foreign countries – including through reporting on their respective diaspora - and immigration from other countries. An observation by the author of this study’s chapter on Spain illustrates this very well: 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.

4. The narrative on migration in the Mediterranean seems to be strongly influenced by national and international media reporting mainly on immigration, and more particularly irregular immigration. More research will need to be conducted to improve our understanding of the interplay between the media’s reporting, public opinion and establishment discourses, and which influences which and to what extent.

5. While there is some reporting on a given countries’ nationals abroad i.e. their diaspora as well as some stories about successful immigrants and/ or integration, these are far from dominating the debate. Furthermore, they are not reported on as further facets of the migration phenomenon but rather as if they were unrelated to it. Migration does not seem to be reported on holistically, but narrowly, with apparently unrelated focuses on a) immigration and b) emigration.

6. This issue of terminology – and migration as a whole being predominantly reported as, and thus becoming, almost a synonym for irregular (im)migration – might be the biggest challenge when it comes to working towards more balanced reporting on migration: “migrants” vs. persons benefiting from eased mobility, “diaspora” vs. expatriate communities are just two examples of the terminological challenge. The development of distinct terminologies creates a separation and widens the gap between “us” and “them”; it impedes better understanding and hampers the perception of commonality.

7. The limited knowledge and technical understanding of migration extant among many media professionals, resource constraints in the sector as well as the lack of migration information and data available to inform the work of even well-intentioned journalists often results in reporting which reduces migration to its extremes. This clearly shows how much work still needs to be done to explain migration more holistically via e.g. supporting journalists in becoming more migration-knowledgeable. Journalists and media decision-makers need to be made aware of these existing tendencies, and migration expert organisations such as ICMPD have an important role to play when it comes to educating journalists and editors about the multiple facets of migration to contribute to more balanced reporting about a complex phenomenon.