Executive Summary

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
More than a million people bound for Europe made the migration journey across and around the eastern Mediterranean in 2015. In 2016, according to Frontex, the European border agency, the number of migrants fell dramatically. Despite this reduction in overall numbers attempting the crossing, the tragedy intensified with more than 5,000 people losing their lives in what was the deadliest year on record. In the last few turbulent years, on both the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, the media have faced stern tests of their professionalism in covering migration. Problems related to migration, different types of political discourse and the human tragedy associated with migration have dominated reporting, and this study provides an insight into how the media have reported on a broad and complex topic in the midst of what was repeatedly described as a crisis. It is based upon expert reflections from within journalism on the performance of media across all platforms and, in the spirit of peer review, includes recommendations for improving coverage.

Journalists from 17 countries, mostly around the Mediterranean, have examined the quality of media coverage within their respective national contexts. They highlight examples of good work marked by careful, sensitive and humanitarian reporting and also expose the shortcomings as well as the darker side of media driven by political bias, hate speech and opportunism.

The conclusions from many different parts of the Mediterranean are similar; there are inspirational examples of journalism at its best – stylish, resourceful, and painstaking – and equally powerful instances of media stereotyping and social exclusion.

But everywhere the study paints a picture of journalists and journalism under pressure: of under-sourced media unable to provide the time and money needed to tell the story in context; of poorly trained journalists uninform ed about the complex nature of the migration narrative; of newsrooms vulnerable to pressure and manipulation by voices of hate, whether from political elites or social networks.

The influence of social media cannot be underestimated in an age when many, if not most, consumers get their information firstly from social networks and through their mobile devices. The publisher is more likely to be a major internet company, such as Facebook, which requires fresh thinking on how to promote core standards of journalism in covering migration on all platforms.

This study confirms that media narratives continue to shape public opinion, but it also reveals how in all countries journalism is a distorting lens as much as a magnifying glass. On the one hand it can expose inhumanity and corruption in the way that migrants are treated, and on the other it is able to follow an agenda that inspires discrimination and hate that intensifies the suffering of the victims of migration.

The migration story is told in two voices. The emotional coverage of human loss through iconic images of human suffering and the hard realities of massive movements of population that have the potential to disrupt the living conditions, security and welfare of host communities.

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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.
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This absence of voice is also felt in countries where the status of migrants is changing. Some North African countries, for instance, places formerly regarded as stopping off points by sub-Saharan migrants on their way to European destinations, are now becoming host countries, but oftentimes the media seems reluctant to embrace this new reality.

In some European countries political leaders have welcomed new arrivals and media coverage has ebbed and flowed with the political tide. The enthusiasm for migration in countries like Sweden, Germany and France has weakened in the face of acts of terrorism or rising public concern over the impact of new arrivals on settled communities.

Media everywhere struggle to detoxify the migration issue. Journalists will often edit and remove racism and avoid repeating the hate-speech of political extremists, but others worry that boycotting hostile and bigoted voices inadvertently leads media to play down legitimate public concerns over the negative impact of migration.

It is noted that while Islamophobia and anti-Arab rhetoric is present in some media coverage in parts of Europe, this is mirrored by similar racist narratives directed notably at sub-Saharan migrants in some countries of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Across the region the guiding hand of politics is at work. Conservative voices that are hostile to refugees arriving on their doorstep and left-leaning parties that focus on the humanitarian crisis look to their friends in the media to help them make political capital out of the crisis.

In this situation, policymakers and political leaders themselves have a role to play in shaping the public discourse. Everyone with an interest in this issue, not only journalists, has a responsibility to avoid playing on people’s fears and uncertainties, to eliminate the language of confrontation and hostility and to encourage national dialogues on how to meet the challenges of migration.

This is crucial because most often the story is told in the context of national experience. To some, as in Hungary, it is a new phenomenon, to others, such as in Palestine and Israel, coverage is framed in the sharp focus of long-running regional conflicts.

In many countries the political temperature has cooled as numbers of migrants on the move have declined, but some media still stoke public fears and uncertainty. However, there are some grounds for optimism as well as examples, such as coverage of the situation in Lesbos in Greece, which shows that global media attention, celebrity visits and a sense of history can help media shape the migration story into a positive, even inspiring expression of human solidarity.

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Conclusions

1. Media coverage is vital to shaping people’s opinions on migration and the plight of refugees and asylum seekers;
2. Undue political influence, self-censorship inside newsrooms and a prevailing lack of resources hampers the preparation of in-depth, well-researched editorial needed for reporting in context;
3. As a result much of the media coverage of migration reflects political bias and is superficial, simplistic and often ill-informed;
4. The migration story follows two media narratives:
   - Emotional and highly-charged reporting on the plight of migrants as victims with almost daily human interest focus on tragic events and
   - The story of numbers, and the potential threat migrants pose to the security, welfare and cultural standing of host communities;
5. Media coverage tends at first to project and reflect empathy, solidarity and goodwill towards migrants fleeing war zones or those who are victims of tragic events, but in time, the tone changes to become more concerned and even hostile towards migrant communities through the use of stereotypes or a negative focus on crime, threats of terrorism and anti-social behaviour;
6. The language of reporting is often laced with hate-speech and loose language, talk of “waves”, “invasions” or “tides” and ignorance of the correct terminology to describe migrants, refugees, displaced persons and their status;
7. Media coverage has a strongly national focus, with a lack of detailed reporting on the context and complexities of migration, or reflection on wider social and political issues affecting both sides of the Mediterranean;
8. Media staff at all levels are often ill-equipped and inadequately trained in migration reporting. Often they work in precarious conditions and there is a reliance on badly-paid freelance workers;
9. Media struggle to provide balanced coverage when political or community leaders at national or regional level respond with a mix of panic and prejudice to the movement of migrants and refugees across national borders;
10. In a majority of the countries covered by the study media fail to give adequate voice to migrants themselves and often media reporting relies too heavily on single, official sources of information. Often there are problems of access to reliable data on migration numbers and conditions.
11. Some countries of North Africa, formerly major transit points for people moving from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East are becoming host countries, but this development is not adequately monitored and covered by media;
12. In most countries the longer-term focus on migration questions such as connection with the national diaspora or the impact of remittances has been obscured by the media focus on the recent crisis, nevertheless in some countries these remain present on the editorial agenda;
13. Social media and online sources often influence media coverage and encourage a “rush to publish” through the dissemination of rumour, speculation and alarmist information that feeds fear and ignorance among the public at large.
14. Most media strive to avoid reporting racist and extremist propaganda relating to migration, but some journalists are concerned that this may inhibit reporting on the often legitimate fears of people living in host communities;
15. There is an urgent need for new initiatives, including new forms of public funding and support, to help media to better explain the process of migration, its role in human history and its contribution to national and regional development;
16. Policymakers, community leaders and people in the public eye have a role to play to promote a civil public discourse and to eliminate hate-speech, intemperate language and provocative actions that exploit fears and uncertainty within society at large.
Reinforcing positive examples and approaches

To promote existing best practice examples and to encourage use of available information and data including relevant research, glossaries and fact-based materials as set out in the analysis of available material included with this study.

In particular, efforts should be made to

- Examine whether national initiatives, such as the Charter of Rome in Italy and the Greek Charter of Idomeni, can be applied in other countries throughout the region;
- Promote exchange of media best practices from countries where the migration crisis is most acute, such as Lebanon and Jordan and other Southern Mediterranean countries;
- Encourage journalists, media support groups and media organisations to develop regional and sub-regional initiatives to improve migration reporting, including use of the Ethical Journalism Network’s guide to migration reporting and its 5-point test for hate speech;
- Encourage prizes and awards at national and regional level to provide examples of professionalism in reporting migration on all platforms of journalism;
- Promote fresh research by academics on media and migration to identify trends and to highlight developments on different aspects of migration, including the media reporting of refugees and displaced persons.

Training

To develop comprehensive training programmes for media and journalists including workshops and online methods to encourage ethical reporting with a focus on:

- Use of correct terminology
- Understanding international humanitarian law and legal rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers
- Avoiding hate-speech and political bias in reporting of migration concerns
- Use of images, video and photography
- Providing balanced coverage of the migrant issue from the standpoints of arrivals and host communities
- Ensuring presence of diverse voices in media coverage, particularly from migrant groups (settled and new arrivals) as well as from host communities
- Targeting key players in media organisations, including editors-in-chief and media owners, to show how migration can be placed in the mainstream of editorial work
- Developing diversity in sources of information.

Media Action

To develop support programmes for media organisations and to strengthen their capacity to report on migration issues. In particular, by:

- The appointment of specialist migration correspondents in all newsrooms
- Improving the conditions of journalists and media workers, including freelance staff
- Providing resources for research and in-depth journalism to report on the complexities of migration
- Promoting national media partnerships for coverage of migration
- Preparing and circulating glossaries and handbooks on migration reporting for newsrooms and journalists working across all media platforms. Make them available in real time in languages used by the media and have them updated regularly.

Recommendations
Encouraging the appointment of people with experience of working on migration issues or journalists who are migrants or come from migrant families to work in media

Promoting media action to give more voice to migrant communities through support for media initiatives targeting migrants and refugees (settled communities and new arrivals) including radio programmes in appropriate languages; blogs, columns and articles by migrant commentators

Strengthening the capacity of public service media to report on migration particularly by providing special news and information resources for displaced people from war-zones to help them keep in touch with their home communities

Establishing regular and continual media monitoring and reporting on how media cover migration

Encouraging newsrooms to move beyond coverage of the migration “crisis” and move into coverage of issues of integration that will assist normalisation of migrants in the public sphere.

The Role of Policymakers

To encourage policymakers, community and civil society leaders to play a more active role in creating space for tolerance and dialogue in public discussion of migration. In particular,

Policymakers should examine how they can fund and support better journalism without compromising the editorial independence of the media;

Political leaders and people in public life who feature in the media should be fact-based in their communications and restrained in the language and terminology they use;

All officials and agencies providing information to the media should check facts and verify information thereby assisting the media to prepare balanced reports.

Building Dialogues: Understanding Migration and a Culture of Civil Discourse

To promote the sharing of information and experience between countries and new dialogues at national level aimed at improving understanding in the media and the public at large by

Organising national workshops and conferences with journalists and media on the challenges of covering migration, to share experiences and to identify possible joint programmes of editorial work;

Organising regional media “summits” or sub-regional conferences to exchange information on the challenges facing journalists and media in different countries;

Promoting activities for dialogue involving all stakeholders – migrant communities, civil society groups, academics, media and policymakers – on the need for a common approach to

– combat hate-speech, stereotyping and misinformation in public discourse
– awareness and understanding of migration as a natural process with historical roots in all communities
– the importance of independent and inclusive media coverage to creating peace and stability

Inserting migration issues into existing programmes to support public education and training in media literacy

Developing research and media monitoring programmes with universities, media support groups and the media at large to create reliable and useful information on migrant conditions, the impact of media coverage and the creation of an information space for all stakeholders around migration issues.

Encouraging the creation of independent and alternative media voices inspired from within migration communities.