



Moving Stories

International Review of How Media Cover Migration



Ethical
Journalism
Network

EDITED BY AIDAN WHITE

Moving Stories

Published in London by the Ethical Journalism Network
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11 Vicarage Road, London, E15 4HD United Kingdom

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This report is published as part of a programme of assistance to the work of the EJN provided by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all of the authors for their contributions and to Douglas Morrision for his skilful editing of the report. We also appreciate the help of EJN Board members and others who have helped shape the final text. In particular, we thank Kieran Cooke and his colleagues at Climate News Network and Tony Bunyan at Statewatch who assisted in the selection of contributors. The quote from H.G. Wells on the back cover comes from Ali Smith in *The Guardian* on November 20th 2015.

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A group of children, likely refugees, are shown in a line. In the foreground, a young boy is holding a piece of light-colored fabric. The children are wearing simple, worn clothing. The background shows more children and a clear sky.

FOREWORD

Beyond the headlines

» JAN EGELAND



For years, the Norwegian Refugee Council and other humanitarian actors have called out – too often in vain – to the international community, to the media, the decision makers and the public opinion about the sufferings of millions of civilians fleeing war in Syria.

As the conflict escalated, and the humanitarian disaster with it, creating the biggest refugee crisis in our generation, our appeals for wider media attention, with some notable exceptions, fell on deaf ears with an apparent lack of interest on the part of the vast majority of television and radio companies and major newspapers.

It was arguably only with the tragic death of Aylan Kurdi and the publication of pictures of his body on a beach in Turkey that Western public opinion and global media finally woke up. Immediately, media lenses focused sharply on the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and both politicians and ordinary people had to respond.

What about the many other humanitarian crises beyond the media's radar? Every two minutes another South Sudanese child becomes severely malnourished. But these stories are seldom told.

But this incident only raised another question. What about the many other humanitarian crises beyond the media's radar? In war-torn South Sudan, for example. This country is rarely in the limelight. In 2011, it gained independence from Sudan ending a generation of war. Two years later, the civil war broke out resulting in massive forced displacement and today the country is one of the world's impoverished places. Every two minutes another South Sudanese child becomes severely malnourished. But these stories are seldom told.

A South Sudanese colleague told me it was strange to see how things can change from one day to the other only because of international media attention.

“In Europe, it was that boy on the beach. Maybe we need a picture of a boy like that in South Sudan,” she said while preparing to go on a new mission to one of the world's hardest-to-reach areas where dropping food from World Food Programme airplanes is the only way to provide hungry people with something to eat.

Too often not even stories about children dying of starvation are enough to make headlines on the nine o'clock news. Humanitarian disasters that deserve our attention often go uncovered because there is no photographer or journalist on the ground to tell the story. Only a couple of conflicts receive our attention at any given time, while most dramas get none at all. Why is that?

The reasons are complex. It is not just a lack of humanity on the news agenda or a matter of luck or a matter of caring more about some people at the expense of others. We need a broader lens to see what really is going on.

In the Norwegian Refugee Council we annually publish a list of the world's 10 most neglected displacement crises. This year the Rohingyas have topped the list. This minority Muslim community under pressure in Myanmar is also found in neighbouring Bangladesh where hundreds of thousands have sought protection.

One criterion to be on the neglected crises list is a lack of media attention. Other factors include lack of funding, little humanitarian presence and difficult access to the victims of the conflict. Often, there is a strong correlation between the different factors: access problems can lead to lack of media attention, which again can lead to lack of donor concern, which again leads to even bigger access issues. This completes a vicious circle that is not easily broken.

But there is an important truth in all of this – decision makers pay attention to the media, and independent journalists reporting with care, humanity and professionalism have enormous power to tell stories that create a new path.

But, as this report reveals, mainstream media is currently under pressure with news companies struggling to adapt to a new reality with plummeting revenues and competition from new media. Often media will simply say they cannot afford to cover these stories.

But this should not be an excuse for adopting a herd mentality – where media follow each other to cover a small cluster of the most obvious stories. Media around the world are now reporting on the disastrous humanitarian consequences of the civil war in Syria and the exodus to Europe and they are going beyond the numbers story which has dominated news coverage so far.

Yet as the poignant human tragedies from Syria takes centre stage, where is the coverage of the second largest humanitarian crisis and war on our watch: in Yemen? Here, around 21 million people are in urgent need of emergency relief. They suffer from external and internal bombardment, blockade and totally inadequate assistance and protection.

Also the journalists themselves need to be protected to be able to report on the atrocities. For journalists reporting from conflict and war 2015 is another deadly year. Like humanitarian workers, journalists are not only at risk of becoming so-called collateral damage during military operations, they are also increasingly targeted.

It is therefore essential that the international community focus on the protection of journalists in armed conflicts to allow for less casualties in the imminent future.

In Europe we talk about a sharing of responsibility in terms of coping with the growing influx of migration. Maybe it is time to talk about a media “burden sharing” where media institutions, rather than chasing the same stories, divide the coverage of the human suffering so that children in grave risk in South Sudan or Gaza do not continue to stay in life-threatening situations without the world knowing.

This EJN report *Moving Stories* is a welcome step to allow journalists get an overview of the problem areas as well as promoting best practices when it comes to reporting on the wider migration story.

Without media attention, humanitarian crises, with their horrifying impacts, will continue to be learned by the outside world way too late.

Jan Egeland is the Secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council



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INTRODUCTION

Moving stories

» KIERAN COOKE AND AIDAN WHITE

Migration is part of the human condition. Ever since humankind emerged out of East Africa it has been on the move – searching for a better climate, looking for supplies of food and water, finding security and safety.

Migration has suddenly jumped to the top of the news agenda. During 2015 journalists reported the biggest mass movement of people around the world in recent history.

Television screens and newspapers have been filled with stories about the appalling loss of life and suffering of thousands of people escaping war in the Middle East or oppression and poverty in Africa and elsewhere.

Every day in 2015 seemed to bring a new migration tragedy: Syrian child refugees perish in the Mediterranean; groups of Rohingyas escaping persecution in Myanmar suffocate on boats in the South China Sea; children fleeing from gang warfare in Central America die of thirst in the desert as they try to enter the US.

In response to this crisis the Ethical Journalism Network commissioned *Moving Stories* – a review of how media in selected countries have reported on refugees and migrants in a tumultuous year. We asked writers and researchers to examine the quality of coverage and to highlight reporting problems as well as good work.



The conclusions from many different parts of the world are remarkably similar: journalism under pressure from a weakening media economy; political bias and opportunism that drives the news agenda; the dangers of hate-speech, stereotyping and social exclusion of refugees and migrants. But at the same time there have been inspiring examples of careful, sensitive and ethical journalism that have shown empathy for the victims.

In most countries the story has been dominated by two themes – numbers and emotions. Most of the time coverage is politically led with media often following an agenda dominated by loose language and talk of invasion and swarms. At other moments the story has been laced with humanity, empathy and a focus on the suffering of those involved.

What is unquestionable is that media everywhere play a vital role in bringing the world's attention to these events. This report, written by journalists from or in the countries concerned, relates how their media cover migration.

They tell very different stories. **Nepal** and the **Gambia** are exporters of labour. Thousands of migrants, mostly young men, flock from the mountain villages of Nepal to work in the heat of the Gulf and Malaysia: often the consequences are disastrous. People from the Gambia make the treacherous trip across the Sahara to Libya and then by boat to Europe: many have perished on the way – either in the desert or drowned in the Mediterranean.

In these countries reporting of the migration of large numbers of the young – in many ways the lifeblood of their nations – is limited and stories about the hardship migrants endure are rare. Censorship or a lack of resources – or a combination of both – are mainly to blame for the inadequacies of coverage. Self-censorship, where reporters do not want to offend either their media employer or the government, is also an issue.

The reports on migration in **China**, **India** and **Brazil** tell another story. Though large numbers of people migrate from each of these countries, the main focus is on internal migration, a global phenomenon often ignored by mainstream media that involves millions and dwarfs the international movement of people.

What's considered to be the biggest movement of people in history has taken place in China over the last 35 years. Cities are undergoing explosive growth, with several approaching 20 million inhabitants. Similar movements are happening in India and, to a lesser extent, in Brazil.

In Africa the headlines focus on people striving to leave the continent and heading north, but there is also migration between countries, with many people from the impoverished central regions heading for **South Africa** – a country where media also deal with problems of xenophobia and governmental pressure.

In Europe migration and refugee issues have shaken the tree of European unity with hundreds of thousands trekking by land and sea to escape war and poverty. The reports here reveal how for almost a year media have missed opportunities to sound the alarm to an imminent migration refugee crisis.

Media struggle to provide balanced coverage when political leaders respond with a mix of bigotry and panic – some announcing they will only take in Christian migrants while others plan to establish walls and razor wire fences. Much of the focus has been on countries in South Eastern Europe which has provide a key route for migrants and refugees on the march. In **Bulgaria**, as in much of the region, media have failed to play a responsible role and sensationalism has dominated news coverage.

In **Italy**, a frontline state where the Mediterranean refugee tragedy first unfolded, the threat of hate-speech is always present, though this is often counterbalanced by an ethical attachment of many in journalism to a purpose-built charter against discrimination. In **Britain** the story has also often been politically-driven and focused, sometimes without a sense of scale or balance: this has been particularly evident in reportage of the plight of refugees in Calais.

In **Turkey**, seen by many European politicians as a key country in stemming the onward rush of migrants, most media are under the thumb of a government that punishes dissident journalists, so the public debate is limited.

Like their Turkish colleagues, journalists in **Lebanon** live with the reality of millions of refugees from war-torn Syria within their borders which makes telling the story more complex and it is not helped by confused mixing of fact and opinion by many media.

At the same time in the **United States** media have helped make the migrant and refugee issue an explosive topic in debates between Republican Party candidates for the presidency. Media time has focused on heated and often racist exchanges. This has obscured much of the good reporting in some media that provides much-needed context. South of the border, in **Mexico** media also suffer from undue political pressure and self-censorship.



“Open the world more equitably so we all may walk freely. Or close the borders and let each one return to his house and see how much poorer and drearier and darker the world is when we all stay at home.” – Chibundu Onuzo

In **Australia** the media in a country built by migrants struggles to apply well-meaning codes of journalistic practice within a toxic political climate that has seen a rise in racism directed at new arrivals.

These reports cover only a handful of countries, but they are significant. The problems of scant and prejudicial coverage of migration issues exist everywhere. Even reporting of migration in the international media – with a few notable exceptions – tends to be overly simplistic.

Migrants are described as a threat. There is a tendency, both among many politicians and in sections of the mainstream media, to lump migrants together and present them as a seemingly endless tide of people who will steal jobs, become a burden on the state and ultimately threaten the native way of life.

Such reporting is not only wrong; it is also dishonest. Migrants often bring enormous benefits to their adopted countries.

How would California’s agricultural industry or the Texan oil fields survive without the presence of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Central

American workers, often labouring on minimal wages? How could the health service in the UK continue without the thousands of migrant nurses and doctors from the developing world? How would cities like Dubai, Doha or Singapore have been built without labourers from Nepal or Bangladesh – or how would they function without the armies of maids and helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia?

These reports underscore why media need to explain and reinforce a wider understanding that migration is a natural process. No amount of razor wire or no matter how high walls are built, desperate migrants will find a way through. People will still flock to the cities, drawn by the hope of a better life.

The migrant crisis is not going to go away: the impact of widespread climate change and growing inequality is likely to exacerbate it in the years ahead.

The inescapable conclusion is that there has never been a greater need for useful and reliable intelligence on the complexities of migration and for media coverage to be informed, accurate and laced with humanity. But if that is to be achieved we must strengthen the craft of journalism.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND USEFUL LINKS

1. Ethical context

Migrants and refugees are a vulnerable minority who can quickly become scapegoats for the ills of society – social and economic decline, crime and unemployment, pressure on health and welfare services and lack of security.

Media can counter this threat and help people better understand the complex migration story by applying ethical principles, avoiding crude stereotypes, developing good newsroom practice and engaging with the audience. In particular, journalists should apply and respect the following five core principles of journalism in their work:

- ▷ Accuracy: fact-based reporting, analysis and commentary;
- ▷ Independence: journalism free from self-censorship and political pressure;
- ▷ Impartiality: fair reporting that tells all sides of the story;
- ▷ Humanity: sensitive and careful journalism that avoids doing undue harm;
- ▷ Accountability: media transparency and commitment to correct errors.

2. Newsroom practice

Media companies and journalists' unions and associations should prepare concise guides to best practices for the reporting on refugees and migrants. In addition, all media should examine their internal structures to make sure they are telling the story in the most effective way.

News organisations can:

- ▷ Appoint specialist reporters with good knowledge of the subject to the migration and refugee beat.
- ▷ Provide detailed information on the background of migrants and refugees and the consequences of migration. It is especially important to note that some major studies reveal how migration can strengthen national economies in the longer term, even where there are short-term challenges.
- ▷ Avoid political bias and challenge deceptive handling of the facts and incitement to hatred particularly by political, religious or other community leaders and public figures.
- ▷ Respect sources of information and grant anonymity to those who require it most, particularly

those who are vulnerable and most at risk.

- ▷ Establish transparent and accessible internal systems for dealing with complaints from the audience over coverage of migrant and refugee issues.
- ▷ Review employment policies to ensure newsroom diversity with reporters and editors from minority communities.
- ▷ Provide training for journalists and editors covering everything from international conventions and law to refugee rights and what terms to use while covering refugee stories.
- ▷ Monitor coverage regularly. Organise internal discussions on how to develop and improve the scope of migration coverage.
- ▷ Manage online comments and engage with the audience to ensure that migration stories are not used as a platform for abuse or intolerance.

Media associations and journalists' unions can also support national structures for independent regulation or self-regulation of journalism, such as press councils. Where there are industry-wide codes of conduct and guidelines dealing with non-discrimination these should cover reporting migration.

3. Engage with the media audience and connect with migrants

Refugee groups, activists and NGOs, many of which provide vital information for media, can be briefed on how best to communicate with journalists and media can explain to the audience their policies and editorial approach which may encourage readers, viewers and listeners to contribute useful additional information.

4. Challenge hate-speech

Hate-speech is widespread in the media. Often it can't be prevented when it comes out of the mouths of prominent public figures, but journalists should always remember that just because someone says something outrageous doesn't make it newsworthy. The Ethical Journalism Network has developed a 5-point text for hate-speech as a useful tool for newsrooms. (See below).

5. Demand access to information

Media cannot report without access to reliable information and facts. When access to information is restricted, such as not being allowed to enter

refugee camps, media and civil society groups should press the government both nationally and internationally to be more transparent. Media and journalists' unions should meet regularly with police and state authorities and agencies to ensure journalists have safe conditions in which to work and access to the information they need.

Some Useful Links

Glossaries

International Organization for Migration (IOM Key migration terms)

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Media Friendly Glossary for Migration

Statistics

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistics and Operational Data

International Organization for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report

Internal Displacement Monitoring Center Global Estimates 2015

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Resources Publications

Sources

International Refugee Law – Everything you need to know from the UNHCR

Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM)

Refugee Studies Centre (RSC)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Council of Europe (COE)

European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

Forced Migration Online

The Journal of International Migration and Integration (JIMI)

The Global Migration Centre (GMC)

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)

Red Cross Global Campaign on Migration

Middle East Migration Issues (Migration Policy Institute)

Resources for journalists

Accountable Journalism Database

Africa's Media Silence over Migration Crisis

BBC: Migration in Figures

Climate News Network

Dart Centre Covering Migration Tips for Journalists

Ethical Journalism Network: Migrants or Refugees?

Ethical Journalism Network Five-Point Test for Hate-speech

Europe: The Migrant Files

Jean Paul Marthoz: "How to cover migration"

Getting the Facts Right: Ethnicity and Religion (ARTICLE 19)

Media Diversity Institute

Statewatch

UK NUJ Migration Reporting Guide for Journalists

Data-Based Study into Characteristics of Migration Coverage in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States – Summary report and Full presentation

Why Al Jazeera will not say Mediterranean Migrants

David Cameron: "Swarm" of Migrants crossing Mediterranean

Ten myths about migration

Guardian Special Report:

Hardline Australia, confused Scandinavia and tense Russia: The global immigration picture

Generation E – Data Driven Project Report on Youth Migration from Southern Europe

The Med: One final danger in a migrant's odyssey

The Arduous Journey of Colombian Migrants Headed for Chile

What crime have I committed to be held like this? Inside Yarl's Wood

Risking their lives to cross the border: Europe or Die

Jimmy Breslin: "The Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutierrez"

Giovanna dell'Orto/Vicki Birchfield: "Reporting at the Southern Borders Journalism and Public Debates on Immigration in the U.S. and the E.U."

Peter Andreas/Kelly Greenhill: "Sex, Drugs and Body Counts"

Fabrizio Gatti: "Bilal"





WEST AFRICA: THE GAMBIA

Desperate young take the backway to an uncertain future

» LAMIN JAITEH

West Africa has experienced migration as a result of many factors, including population pressure and violence – communal, ethnic and criminal. Much of this movement can be classed as forced: in recent times it has been driven mainly by poverty, with people seeking better economic prospects elsewhere. Ongoing political strife and corruption have also played a big role in people choosing to leave.

It's a story rooted in history that remains untold by the country's journalists, particularly in its modern context, and not least because of the tough social, political and professional conditions in which media across the region are forced to work.

The countries of West Africa share historical migration characteristics. The slave trade, starting in the 16th century, had long-term impacts on Africa as a whole but was particularly devastating in West Africa – the main transit area.

The trade not only caused widespread death and human suffering, with Africans treated as a commodity, bought and sold and forcibly sent across the Atlantic to the Americas and the Caribbean, it drained West Africa of millions of its young. The development of economies was severely set back as the most productive segment of the population disappeared overseas.

In modern times, colonialism imposed arbitrarily drawn boundaries but these have done little to curtail patterns of migration which, to most inhabitants, have been a normal way of life for centuries. Communities have family and kinship ties across the region, borders are porous and often unsupervised

The formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 was a bold attempt to stimulate and give form to the kind of borderless society that existed in pre-colonial times.

The free movement of people was one of ECOWAS' main principles. This was not universally welcomed: smaller countries such as the Gambia and Senegal expressed fears of economic domination by Nigeria, the Community's demographic and economic giant. At the same time, Nigerians were concerned about the possible influx of ECOWAS citizens into their country.

Despite these reservations, traditional intra-regional migration in West Africa – viewed by demographers and others as one of the world’s major migration patterns – continues. The overall picture is complex and flows frequently change, due mainly to positive or negative economic factors. Over recent decades, changes in climate have become an important driver, with people escaping drought or forced to move in order to plant crops or graze cattle in more fertile areas.

Farmers from Mali move south to take advantage of better grazing at certain times of the year. They might, for example, sell their stock in Liberia and take salted fish and other produce from there back north. Young men from Burkina Faso move south to work in mines in Liberia or on the cocoa plantations in Ghana or the coffee groves of Ivory Coast.

Others, including Gambians, would traditionally move north to work in Libya and elsewhere in North Africa. Meanwhile, thousands migrate to Nigeria to work in its oil industry or other concerns.

“Migration networks go in every direction” says one American expert on the region. “I think of them as like a spider’s web – long or short distances, they transcend modern boundaries.”

It is impossible to gauge the extent of intra-regional migration but it is likely to run into the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, each year. It is also impossible to calculate its economic benefits: most cross-border financial transactions use informal finance networks, often based on extended kinship groups.

Such remittances are vital and are often the difference between death and survival for poverty-stricken families. Some research has been done on the level of remittances flowing in from areas outside the region.

A recent study by the World Bank says: “Remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa rose 3.2 per cent to around US\$33 billion in 2014 from US\$32 billion in 2013 – a significant acceleration from the modest growth of the preceding two years.”

The figures show that Nigeria is the largest recipient of remittances, amounting to US\$22.3 billion in 2014. This reflects the large number of Nigerians who now live and work outside their country, mainly in the UK and in the US, and who regularly send money back to their families or invest in projects in Nigeria.

More than 20 per cent of the Gambia’s gross domestic product now comes from remittances, according to the World Bank, one of the highest percentages in Africa. However, this figure is likely to be a considerable underestimate, reflecting only money transfers through formal networks.

The media and migration

Covering the migration story in Gambia is a challenge for journalists because of the restrictions that have been imposed on media for more than 20 years. But even if the media were free, the Gambian context is full of challenges.

The Gambia is one of the world’s poorest countries with most people living on less than \$1 a day. The United Nations Development Programme index of human development in 2014 ranked the Gambia 172nd out of 187 countries in terms of health, education and other development factors.

The population of under two million, though small, is one of the world’s fastest growing, doubling in size virtually every decade since the early 1960s. The country also has one of the world’s youngest population profiles, with nearly 40 per cent under the age of 14. Finding jobs for this growing stream of youth is a constant challenge.

Tourism and the export of peanuts are the major sources of income, together with foreign aid and remittances from Gambians working in West Africa or in Europe and elsewhere. While there has been an upsurge in investment in the business sector in recent years – mainly by Gambians living abroad – the economy is stagnating. The recent Ebola crisis hit the tourism industry hard, even though no Ebola cases were reported in the country.

Although the constitution in the Gambia guarantees all citizens freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and many other internationally recognised human rights, the governing Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction headed by the president, Yahya Jammeh, who seized power in a military coup in 1994, has systematically undermined these rights. The government has brought in legislation aimed at silencing the media, including obligatory bonds of about US\$16,000.

Media outlets have to lodge this amount with the government before starting operations and it is held as a guarantee should a court ruling go against them. Such laws have severely restricted the development of an independent media. Many journalists



exercise self-censorship, afraid of provoking the office of the president.

While the media is kept firmly in line at home, the Gambian diaspora has set up a lively overseas media network, establishing online newspapers and radio stations, mainly in the US and in the UK. Most of these are fiercely critical of the government and President Jammeh and most of these outlets are rigorously monitored and blocked by the government.

Amnesty International accuses the Gambian authorities of subjecting journalists to enforced disappearance and of torturing activists: “Muzzling of dissent has had a devastating and chilling effect on human-rights defenders, journalists and political activists who have been persistently brutally targeted solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression,” says Amnesty.

With little sign of change and competition for jobs growing as increasing numbers of young people leave school, desperation leads many to embark on a dangerous journey, first across the Sahara to the coast of North Africa and then to Europe.

In the Gambia, there’s a special term for this dangerous and illegal journey to Europe: it’s called the Backway. No one knows how many have left to take it but the number is likely to be in the tens of thousands – a significant proportion of the population. Everyone knows the Backway and its various routes. Trafficking agents based in Banjul, the capital, are the first point of contact for the would-be migrant: the usual trek involves a long

bus journey from Banjul to Agadez in Niger and then on to Libya.

At one time Gambians would have stopped to work in Libya, earning their additional trafficking fare for the journey across the Mediterranean. Nowadays, with order breaking down in Libya and few jobs available, migrants can be stuck for months or even years waiting for funds to arrive from relatives already in Europe or elsewhere in order to continue their journey.

Until recently there was little reporting in the tightly controlled media about migration or of the hazards faced by those making the journey. Though migration influences virtually every family, perhaps the government did not want too many questions asked as to why numbers of people, mainly the young, were leaving. The president has made known his displeasure at this exodus.

The online *Jollofnews* says Jammeh has generally dismissed the economic worries of Gambian migrants. In a national TV address he said they should concentrate on working at home rather than heading off to Europe and elsewhere. “If these people (the migrants) are true Muslims ... they should equally believe that their sons and daughters could have made it at home if they were ready to invest and work,” he said.

Jammeh has said young people should apply their energies to working in agriculture and producing more food.

The *Daily Observer* state-owned newspaper published a story about a young Gambian who had tried



to reach Europe through the Backway but failed: he had returned to the Gambia to take up farming.

“Alhagie Darboe is no doubt a shining example among the youths in the Kombo East District Village of Kafuta, West Coast Region. Over the years he made several unsuccessful attempts to travel through Backway, but since he returned the Backway syndrome he once had has been driven away with the coming of President Jammeh’s vision 2016 and ‘grow what you eat and eat what you grow’.

“Darboe said that since he returned home, he wasted no time in venturing into farming; something he said that has improved his living conditions.”

The president has in the past strongly attacked European policies towards migrants, in particular a plan to bomb the boats of Libyan people smugglers. “We will retaliate against the massacre of Gambians in the Mediterranean,” said Jammeh on national TV. “If the European Union is acting out and kills a Gambian I swear, I will fight back.”

Early in 2015 Jammeh offered all Muslim Rohingya refugees escaping discrimination in Myanmar asylum in the Gambia. *The Standard* newspaper published in full a press release from the office of the president.

“As human beings, more so fellow Muslims, it is a sacred duty to help alleviate the untold hardship and suffering these fellow human beings are confronted with. Therefore, the Gambia being a country with predominantly Muslim population and with a natural culture of inter-faith tolerance

hereby expresses willingness to accept and resettle all those people who wish to reside in the Gambia.”

It is not clear if any of the Rohingyas have accepted the offer. The *Kairo* online publication – blocked in the Gambia – was sharply critical of the move. “The Gambian dictator who is evil and ruthless to his own people wants to be the world’s kindest Muslim leader by offering to take in the embattled fugitives.”

There are some signs that attitudes to the country’s migrants might be changing in government and in the mostly government-controlled media. A civil society organisation called Operation No Way Back, led by Bubacar Jabbi, a local youth, has been raising the issue.

Jabbi, who says he became disturbed by what he calls the senseless waste of life among youthful migrants, is frequently heard on the airwaves and appears in newspapers telling of the perils of the journey to Europe. His organisation has also staged concerts and held youth camps aimed at persuading young people to stay at home.

In the Gambia, radio is the fastest and most effective way to disseminate information. Though many stations report on only “safe” topics such as sport, Operation No Way Back has been gaining more coverage.

“Backway Bad Way” is a popular song on the radio. Even government-controlled radio stations run periodic vox pops, gauging public attitudes about migration. The responses tend to fall into two categories: for every person who speaks out against illegal

migration there is usually another who says that only by journeying to Europe will dreams be realised.

The government has also set up youth projects, targeting villages in the countryside and aimed at persuading young people to stay.

The state-controlled *Standard* newspaper has started to run regular stories on the plight of Gambians in Libya and at camps in Italy. Each edition that covers these stories of human suffering generates a flood of enquiries from family members worried about the fate of their children.

“I used to be overwhelmed by people asking if I had information on their sons or brothers each day we published news about accidents at sea,” said one of the editors.

Though the media have become more active on migration, in a small country like the Gambia, word of mouth is often the main means of communication, with people influenced by stories they hear from friends and relatives, rather than by columns in a newspaper or reports on the radio. This is particularly the case among the young: Facebook and text messaging act as key drivers of migration.

A brother who has made it to Germany or the UK will text or send a Facebook message to a younger sibling back in his village. Pictures of the brother’s new life will be sent. To justify the payment of precious family funds to a people trafficker the newly arrived migrant might seek to paint a rosy picture of his or her circumstances.

The young might dismiss the stories they hear of the deaths and suffering of migrants in the government-controlled press, on radio or on TV. But they will often be taken in by the more personal messages on Facebook or in a text message.

The Gambia opened its one university only in 1995. Before that, people interested in higher education had to go abroad, mainly to Europe or to the United States. These students, when returning, were nicknamed Semesters.

Today the word refers to those who travel abroad legally or illegally and then come on return visits, spending their money and talking of their lives abroad. Some use their money to help their families improve their lives and buy houses or tractors. Others use it to stage extravagant parties and show off their supposed wealth.

Many have raised loans in London or elsewhere specifically so they can return and give the impres-

sion of an easy life abroad. Gullible youths, tired of struggling in the Gambia and dreaming of life overseas, are taken in by the Semesters. A phenomenon called “Nerve Syndrome” has even been invented to describe youths becoming anxious and breaking down when they can’t raise funds to pay traffickers for travel.

It seems no amount of articles or broadcasts about the suffering and death of migrants will deter these young and impressionable people. It’s estimated that there are now about 30 absentee funerals every month in the Gambia of migrants who failed to realise their dreams.

“Just imagine how many deaths will happen in one year alone,” says Bubacar Jabbie of the Operation No Way Back campaign. “I wonder how long we can allow the country’s youth to perish at this rate?”

The media has reported on the deaths of youths risking their lives at sea on their way to Italy and Spain but it doesn’t investigate many of the root causes driving migration.

And it is clear to see why this editorial vacuum remains in place – media is tightly controlled by the government and reporters resort to self-censorship because they are afraid of drawing attention to factors such as the dire economic conditions for fear of falling into disfavour with the authorities

But even if they were able to exercise their professional duties without restraint they are restricted by a paucity of resources and have no capacity to properly investigate migration: newspapers or radio stations don’t have the funds to send reporters to Libya or to Italy to follow the fortunes of migrants. In many cases journalists who might undertake such projects could find that they themselves are not allowed into Europe or elsewhere

Given this difficult environment both politically and economically it is no surprise that the quality of journalism is often low and has created a crisis of trust between media and the public. Many people are generally suspicious of the media and are unlikely to heed its messages.

Instead people rely on word-of-mouth reports or social media outlets. And many of them – especially the young – dream of a better life. Often it seems they suspend any rational assessment of the dangers they face in attempting the journey to Europe, so great is their desire to get there. The migration from the Gambia shows no sign of ending and nor does the crisis that continues to cast a shadow over journalism.



Migration: It's the same old story

'The enormous change in human conditions to which nearly all our present stresses are due, the abolition of distance and the stupendous increase in power, have flung together the population of the world so that a new way of living has become imperative ...

'The elaboration of methods and material has necessitated a vast development and refinement of espionage, and in addition the increasing difficulty of understanding what the warfare is really about has produced new submersive and demoralising activities of rumour-spreading, propaganda and the like, that complicate and lose contact at last with any rational objective ...

'The uprooting of millions of people who are driven into exile among strangers, who are forced to seek new homes, produces a peculiar exacerbation of the mental strain. Never have there been such crowds of migrating depressing people.

'They talk languages we do not understand ... they stimulate xenophobia without intention ... Their necessary discordance with the new populations they invade releases and intensifies the natural distrust and hostility of man for man – which it is the aim of all moral and social training to eliminate ...

'For the restoration and modernisation of human civilisation, this exaggerated outlawing of the fellow citizen who we see fit to suspect as a traitor or revolutionary and also of the stranger within our gates, has to be restrained and brought back within the scheme of human rights.

– H. G. Wells, *The Rights of Man* (1940)



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