



Moving Stories

International Review of How Media Cover Migration



Ethical
Journalism
Network

EDITED BY AIDAN WHITE

Moving Stories

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A group of children in a refugee camp, with one child in the foreground holding a piece of fabric. The children are of various ages and are looking in different directions. The background shows a clear blue sky and some structures in the distance.

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"



BULGARIA

A study in media sensationalism

» ROSSEN BOSEV AND MARIA CHERESEHVA

In April 2014 a group of 17 Syrian refugees, including six children, were forced to leave the house they rented in the village of Rozovo after continuous protests by local people. The villagers were determined not to accept the Syrians because, they said, their safety was under threat.

Asked by a reporter why refugees were feared so much, a Rozovo resident answered: “We know they are danger. We have read the press, we have seen the news on TV.”

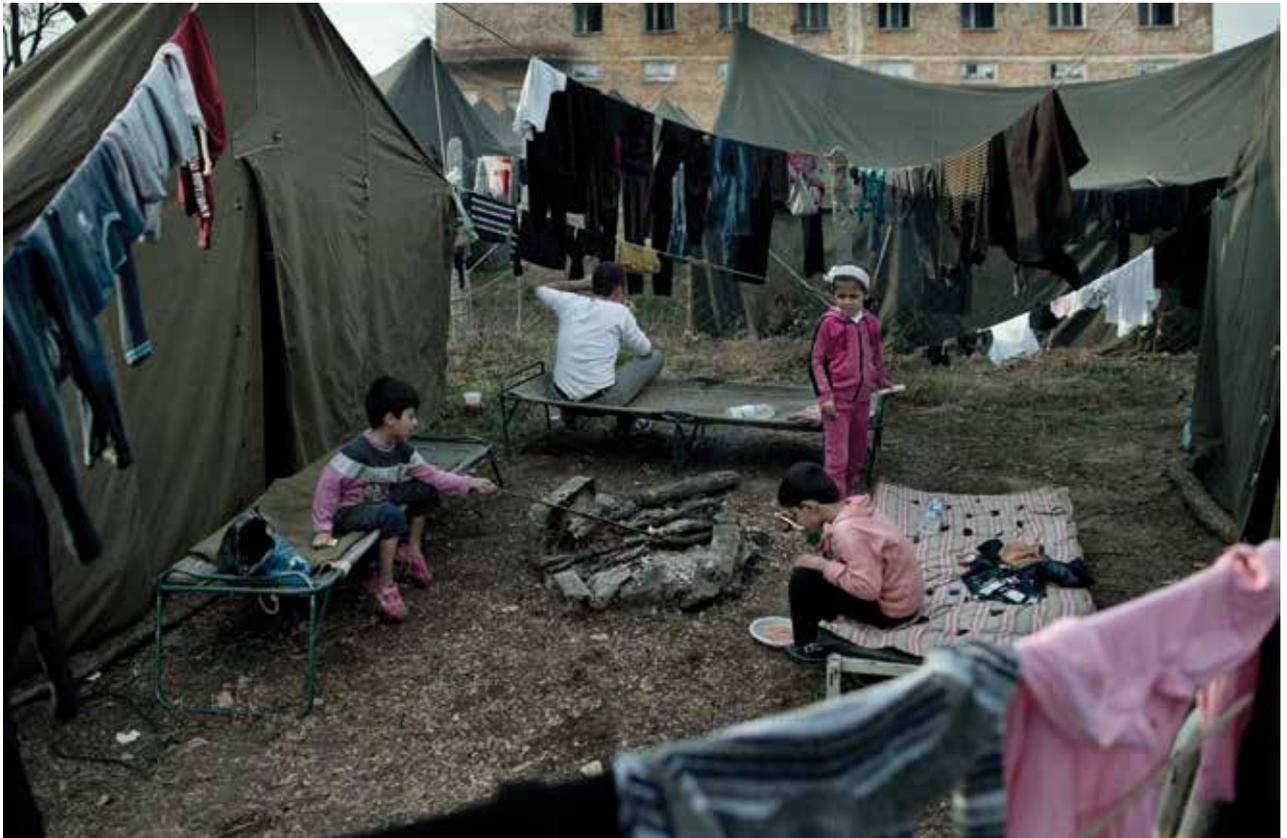
This answer pretty well summarises both the media reaction to the refugee crisis in Bulgaria and the fearful social attitudes it provoked among the majority of Bulgarians. Even though other major factors may explain the widespread lack of solidarity with the asylum seekers in this part of Europe – such as the country’s weak economic and social system, the inadequate administrative response and poor political leadership – the media largely failed to play a responsible role.

Instead of mediating the conflicting opinions and providing balanced and reliable information, the mass media plunged into sensationalism, and often in breach of basic ethical and professional principles of journalism in the process.

Bulgaria, like other Balkan countries, is experiencing the biggest refugee influx in its modern history. In the last quarter of 2013, it received more than 7,000 asylum applications – around 10 times the annual average for the past 10 years.

There was a steady increase in 2014 and 2015, too, from 11,081 to 11,630. The arrival of so many people, whether fleeing war, persecution or poverty, caught the country unprepared on every front – political, administrative, humanitarian and logistical. This resulted in a refugee crisis, which could have been less intense if the necessary steps at state and municipal level had been taken in advance.

Even though there were some grassroots initiatives and volunteers working through NGOs stepped in to provide essential support for the refugees, their arrival provoked a largely negative reaction within the public at large, warmed up by a loud far-right and xenophobic public discourse. This opened space for a surge in hate-speech, hate-crimes and discrimination. It was by any standards a massive challenge for media to moderate this intemperate and hostile reaction.



But there is a big question mark over whether the media itself was prepared for the task their journalists faced. Firstly, it quickly became apparent that there is insufficient knowledge and experience of covering migrant and refugees issues. In addition, newsrooms were hamstrung by a lack of well-trained and informed personnel able to provide high-quality reporting and analysis.

The media environment and political pressures on journalism didn't help. The deteriorating conditions for press freedom have been well recorded with Bulgaria ranking 106th in the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom index. The country's media operate in a small and heavily-concentrated advertising market with non-transparent media ownership, and undue influence from political and economic interests on editorial policies. The systems for self-regulation of media content and performance are dysfunctional. All of this has directly affected the quality of coverage.

The country's press and online media are governed by two separate ethical committees, each adopting a different code. The first, which might be considered authentic and independent, is only recognised by a small part of the media, and covers refugee issues in its standards. The other, which includes 80 per cent of publications, is practically inactive. In addition, there is the Council of Electronic Media, a state organisation responsible for radio and television, but it has a passive

attitude and its lack of impact has, if anything, made the situation even worse.

The migration story becomes headlines news

By the end of 2012, the issue of migration of third-country nationals (both legal and undocumented migrants) in Bulgaria was a marginal topic for the local media. In fact, between 2009-2012, only 812 articles on the issue made their way into the press, electronic and online media in the country according to a survey by Proway Communications agency.

The topics they covered were diverse: state and EU policies, access to the social system and labour market, discrimination, and crime. Of the analysed stories some 82 per cent are neutral and purely informative, with only 5 per cent openly negative in tone.

The most common problem noticed by the researchers is that journalists generally failed to make a distinction between the different legal terms: immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented migrant, etc.

One year later, the picture changed completely. With thousands of people crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border to seek asylum in Europe, there was a dramatic peak in coverage. In one month alone,

Although major international news organisations such as AP and the BBC banned the term “illegal migrant” from their internal ethical codes, it is still broadly used in Bulgaria.

from mid-September to mid-October 2013, a total of 8,439 news pieces were registered in the online media. (*Sensika*, 17 October, 2013)

A brief content analysis shows a major shift in the discourse, with key topics identified as: national security, terrorism, disease and refugee camps.

The asylum seekers were largely framed as a homogeneous mass of people, who constitute a “problem”, a “threat” for the integrity for Bulgarian and European societies.

How sensation became the norm

A series of headlines in mainstream Bulgarian media reflected the change of mood and direction in media coverage:

- ▷ “The Prime Minister: 2 million refugees are waiting on the Bulgarian-Turkish border”
- ▷ “Expert: The newly arrived refugees are future ISIS fighters”
- ▷ “Islamic State floods Europe with refugees”

These headlines (all containing fact-based claims) were proven to be wrong or unverified. They did not come from unruly tabloids, but were from leading Bulgarian media: *Focus News Agency* and the two biggest private TV channels: *Nova TV* and *BTV*. The source for the last headline, quoted in the main news section of *BTV*, a market and opinion leader, is the British tabloid *The Daily Mail*.

Unfortunately, the reliability of sources, the level of knowledge and experience of the experts and analysts invited to comment on migration and the relevance of political statements such as the one by Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov have been rarely questioned by journalists.

Instead, unverified information easily finds a way into the headlines in the mainstream media, and is copied and replicated via news websites and social media.

A clear example of this phenomenon is the statement of the (ex) Vice-Minister of the Interior Vassil Marinov, who claimed that the monthly allowance for one refugee in the country is 1100 leva (approximately €550) – higher than the average monthly salary. This information was immediately disseminated through all media channels, with no attempts to verify its authenticity.

It provoked outrage among Bulgarians, 40 per cent of whom, according to the World Bank, live under the poverty line or are at risk of poverty. More than a month later, an investigation by *Sega Daily* newspaper proved that Marinov’s claim was speculation and that a refugee in Bulgaria received only 65 leva per month (€33 approximately).

Currently, even those allowances are frozen, but the “Divide and Conquer” impact of this political provocation is still observed. Many Bulgarians feel undervalued and foreigners get more favourable treatment.

And there is, of course, a commercial interest in favour of sensational headlines that generate more hits in online media, which gains more and more influence both in terms of audience and advertisers. As a result, some editors are less inclined to strive for authenticity and objectivity.

Refugees or illegal migrants?

Although major international news organisations such as AP and the BBC banned the term “illegal migrant” from their internal ethical codes, it is still broadly used in Bulgaria.

A monitoring of press clippings, done by the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency BTA between 1 February and 1 March, 2014, shows that the term has been used in 49 out of 405 news pieces on migration, or more than 10 per cent. In most cases the media have quoted statements by the responsible public authority, a former Minister of the Interior Tsvetlin Yovchev, which leads to the conclusion that the politicians themselves are contributing to the negatively biased media content.

Still, no attempts have been made to clarify to readers that the phrase is inappropriate and why. But this reflects a widespread malaise in journalism where the different terms related to migration and seeking asylum are not used in their correct context.

Instead terms which have distinct meanings in international law and in common understanding are used out of context and often as synonyms. Headlines and reporting will refer to “the

fugitives”, “immigrants” and “refugees” without any clarity or distinction creating both confusion and ignorance for unwary and uninformed readers, viewers and listeners.

Hate-speech on the march

Even more alarming is the rise in hate-speech expressed by politicians and some journalists and channelled through the media without criticism or context. And it has broadly penetrated the public discourse. Some 45.6 per cent of the participants in an Open Society survey from November 2013 claim to have witnessed aggressive statements against minorities – ethnic, religious and sexual – in the previous 12 months.

The main medium for spreading hate-speech, according to the respondents, is television, referred to by 75 per cent. The second most important is the internet, where the forums have turned into a nest of openly xenophobic comments. Despite the recent decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Delfi vs Estonia*, which stipulated that the operators of internet sites are responsible for content in their user forums, the field remains largely unregulated and few newsrooms bother to moderate online comments and discussions.

Two of Bulgaria’s far-right parties represented in the national parliaments have private TV channels, *SKAT* and *Alpha*, which predominantly base their content on racist and xenophobic rhetoric, naming asylum seekers “Taliban’s”, “jihadists”, “terrorists” and so on.

Recently, the Council for Electronic Media issued 11 adjudications on violations of the Law on Radio and Television against *Alpha TV*, including hate-speech, but all of them went without any legal consequences.

Unfortunately, not only the politically related channels give a platform to hate-speech. Extremist politicians, journalists and popular figures are often invited to television and radio studios to comment, while the voices of the refugees themselves are rarely heard.

Typical of the hateful political speech given media exposure is that from Magdalena Tasheva, a far-right MP who on BTV accused refugees of being cannibals: “The society doesn’t care if the refugees are eating human flesh or just chewing it, there are international conventions that they have breached,” she said, “We cannot love murderers. No one loves mass murderers.”

Although Bulgaria criminalised hate-speech with the introduction of Article 162 (amended in 2011), its implementation is rare and insufficient. In its latest report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), has expressed concern that between 2008 and 2013 only 55 pre-trial proceedings were initiated under Article 162, including both paragraph 1 on incitement and paragraph 2 on the use of violence or damage to property. Of these cases 11 went to trial and 10 accused were convicted (none of them on the grounds of hate-speech).

This creates a feeling of impunity among politicians and public figures, who tend to express their extremist views in order to benefit from greater popularity. This places a great responsibility on journalists and editors who have to make their own judgments on what is hateful and potentially illegal.

But that is only part of the media challenge. Journalists and editors sometimes appear to forget that behind the plentiful numbers and statistics surrounding the migrant and refugee story are thousands of human-interest stories charting experiences that are profoundly important to creating a fuller understanding of the crisis within Bulgarian society.

This understanding is also vital to finding solutions at civil and state level. And although there have been many distortions and deficiencies in coverage, some stories have served as a call to action and to bring positive change in attitudes. A report by Irina Nedeva on the suffering of the Syrian family Hawash, broadcast by Bulgarian National Radio, for instance, was one of the first to shed light on non-existent state support for refugees fleeing Syria.

It led to the creation of the Facebook group “Friends of the refugees”, a civil initiative for humanitarian and integration support for migrants and asylum seekers, unprecedented in scale and activity for Bulgaria.

The group gained substantial media popularity, which helped attract more supporters and accelerated state reaction to the humanitarian challenge of providing shelter and care for the thousands entering the country in search of protection.

Positive examples of high-quality and compassionate reporting include *Slavi’s Show*, the most popular evening show in Bulgaria, which made a documentary series dedicated to the Syrian refugees with a focus on their perspective and *Nobody’s kids*, a documentary by a *Nova TV* reporter, dedicated to

Journalists sometimes forget that behind the statistics surrounding the migrant story are thousands of human-interest stories.



unaccompanied minors in Bulgaria. Some positive items in *Capital Weekly* included the features “Germany, end of the trail” and “Wall of punches.”

There is little doubt that coverage of reporting migrant and refugee issues would improve if serious attempts were made to strengthen the media landscape in Bulgaria. The dismantling of current media concentrations and the increased transparency of financing mechanisms would ensure fair competition and a dynamic market, which will improve quality and adherence to ethical standards, including those related to the refugee crisis.

On a broader level it is within the European Union’s mandate to advocate fairer criteria and increased transparency and the government’s programme has included steps in this direction, by proposing it will only do business with media that adhere to the industry’s ethical code.

But urgent steps need to be taken towards media education in asylum law, in order to increase understanding of the subject and media would be helped with more effective action from police and prosecutors to uphold laws countering hate-speech. More also needs to be done to counter online hate.

But in all of this journalists are wary. They want to be able to tell their stories ethically and professionally, however they are cautious about the use of law to restrict free speech.

There is no doubt that fresh initiatives to support critical and ethical journalism are urgently needed. Bulgarian media, like their counterparts across the Balkans, are in the frontline of the European migrant and refugee crisis, and if it is to be resolved without social conflict it will require a renewal of professional commitment to reporting that tells the story accurately but with lashings of compassion and fact-based analysis.

References

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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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