

Media Coverage of the Migration Crisis in Europe: a Confused and Polarized Narrative

Dina Matar

Senior Lecturer

Centre for Media Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London

There is no doubt that what has been termed the migration or refugee crisis in Europe has been framed in the public and media discourse as the defining phenomenon of the second decade of the 21st century. And there is no doubt that the media coverage of the mass movement of people escaping continuing violence and wars in the Middle East and persecution elsewhere into Europe has deflected attention from the continuing phenomenon of mass displacement – internal displacement and population movements within nation states due to persecution and natural disasters – and the flight of Syrians into Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 65.3 million people were forced out of their homes in 2015, of which 21.3 million were refugees and more than one million crossed into Europe in that year, sparking a crisis as various countries in Europe struggled to cope.¹ The vast majority arrived to European shores by sea, but some migrants made their way overland, principally via Turkey and Albania. Most of the refugees came from Syria, but ongoing violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, abuses in Eritrea, as well as poverty in Kosovo, also contributed to forcing hundreds of people to look for new lives elsewhere. While the number of refugees arriv-

ing in Europe has steadily fallen since its peak in 2015, media attention to the refugee situation remains high and greatly polarized, not least because of associations (irrespective of whether these are true or false) between refugees and terrorist incidents in France, Brussels and Germany and, by implication, with militant jihadist parties such as Islamic State, and because of the instrumentalization of the migrant crisis by various political parties in Europe as a question of national interest and security in a changing environment.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the media coverage of the crisis over time; rather it intends to reflect on general trends culled from a variety of published studies and interpretations of trends and issues. It is also beyond the remit of this paper to discuss the divergent ways in which political parties, particularly those on the far right in Europe, have used the refugee and migrant crisis in the form of a “moral panic”² to stoke up support and legitimize their exclusivist nationalist policies, or the ways in which mainstream media have been complicit in normalizing such “moral panic” discourses while conflating migration with terrorism and with rising Islamophobic tendencies and attitudes on the continent. As ideological processes, “moral panics,” as Stuart Hall has argued, represent a way of dealing with what are diffuse and often disorganized social fears and anxieties, not by addressing the real problems and conditions underlying them, but through projections which are then displaced onto an identified social group.³

¹ See www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html for further details and updated information on the refugee situation.

² Moral panics have been defined in terms of threats to societal values and interests and presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: Creation of Mods and Rockers*, MacGibbon and Kee, 1972.

³ Stuart HALL. “Racism and Reaction” (1978) in Sally DAVISON, David FEATHERSTONE, Michael RUSTIN and Bill SCHWARZ (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Selected Political Writings*. Duke University Press, 2016.

The Media – Divisive and Problematic Trends

The use by political elites and media entities of “moral panic” discourses to construct divisions and differentiations along lines of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or other modes of difference within national or international boundaries and in relation to migration is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, critical cultural thinker Stuart Hall has consistently discussed concerns around the growing number of migrants from former British colonies, particularly the Caribbean, in the 1960s and 1970s. Writing from a different perspective and specifically in the context of the Western media’s coverage of Islam and Muslims, Edward Said, too, has argued that “sensationalism, crude xenophobia, and insensitive belligerence are the order of the day, with results on both sides of the imaginary line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that are extremely unedifying.”⁴

In terms of the current refugee crisis, it is not an exaggeration to say that media coverage of what has been termed “the migration” or “refugee” crisis in Europe and elsewhere has followed similar trends, and has been as politically divisive and inconsistent as have official policies regarding the phenomenal increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Europe. While policy and political divisions about how to cope with the large number of refugees arriving in Europe due to war, internecine conflict and persecution are not surprising, what is worrying are the ways in which mainstream media coverage of the refugees or migrants in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa have tended to repeat stereotypes and frames that construct the refugees as a collective “other” that is different from “us,” and as a humanitarian or security problem, and in the process silencing, dehumanizing and marginalizing those represented and talked about.

Furthermore, the word refugee, often used interchangeably with the words migrant or asylum seeker, has been essentialized as a fixed and rigid category in which refugees have been delineated as those who are “worthy” or “unworthy,” or those “who qualify” for protection and those who “fail to qualify,” or, in other words, those who deserve our compassion and sympathy or those whom we should be

afraid of, ignoring the diversity of their experiences, journeys and the historical contexts that led them to leave their homes. Even a cursory survey of mainstream media coverage of the refugees reveals that the migration story is often told as a story of human loss made visible through iconic images and visual representations of human suffering, or a story of massive movements of populations that have the potential to disrupt the living conditions, security and welfare of host communities, underlining how the media have been implicated in the reproduction and dissemination of narratives constituted by geographies of power and control.

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Even before the current crisis, research conducted by the European Commission⁵ in 2011 found a range of attitudes towards migration, although overall public perceptions have been negative, particularly because the public debate on migration in many European countries has been heavily influenced by populist anti-immigration politicians and negative media framing of the refugees. The research also showed that the repetition of particular divisive terms (us and them, for example) and the construction of differences along racial, ethnic or religious lines have had a negative impact on public

⁴ Edward SAID, *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, Vintage, 1997:2.

⁵ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. “Migrant Integration. Aggregate Report,” *Qualitative Eurobarometer*, May 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/qual/qj_5969_migrant_en.pdf

attitudes toward the refugees. The report suggested that the “negative migrant stereotypes **are a result**, at least in part, of **negative press coverage**” (2011: 9), which was further compounded by inflammatory and dehumanizing language about migration and migrants, also used in the language of populist anti-immigration political parties, as well as mainstream political figures.⁶

In a recently published report, commissioned by the UNHCR, researchers at Cardiff University,⁷ however, reported variations in how the mainstream media in five European countries covered asylum and immigration issues. According to their findings, Sweden came across as the country whose media coverage was the most positive towards refugees and migrants, while the UK was reported as having the most negative coverage and the most polarized, though this was more evident in the right-wing media, which was reported to be uniquely aggressive in its virulent campaigns against refugees and migrants and in stoking Islamophobic attitudes. The report noted in its findings that in most media, negative commentary on refugees and migrants usually only consisted of a reported sentence or two from a citizen or far-right politician – which was often then challenged within the article by a journalist or another source. In the British right-wing press, however, anti-refugee and migrant themes were continuously reinforced through the frames used in the coverage as well as in editorials and comment pieces.

Broadly speaking, the research found that the various media in the countries studied differed widely in terms of the predominant frames they used in their coverage. For instance, the use of humanitarian frames to describe the refugees was more common in Italian coverage than in British, German or Spanish press, while the use of securitization frames (understood as perceived threats to the welfare system, cultural beliefs and values of the country concerned) was more prevalent in Spain and the UK. The research also showed that media coverage tended at first to reflect empathy, solidarity and goodwill towards migrants fleeing war zones or those who are victims of tragic events, but in time, the tone changed to become more concerned and even hostile to-

wards migrant communities as the media used stereotypes or focused on crime, threats of terrorism, radicalization and anti-social behaviour.

Indeed, in the British media, over time, the securitization frame became more dominant, with migration talked about as “uncontrolled” and as a security threat and the migrants as a burden to British society – to the labour market, to border security and to welfare – thus serving to legitimize measures such as restricted asylum and tougher border control. However, British television news reporting, which often focused on the plight of the refugees at Calais or in the Mediterranean features some of the most empathetic coverage of the refugees themselves. Conversely, the broadcast news reports also tended to frame the crisis as a problem of illegal migration, rather than settlement of the refugees, thus inadvertently deploying the securitization frame in referring to how the UK should respond. In Germany, in contrast, securitization discourses were used to refer to rising xenophobia as a security threat, and nationalism and fragmentation as a threat towards European values.

The MENA Region

Broadly speaking, coverage of the refugee crisis in Arab media generally tended to repeat the narratives of the European media. Interestingly, however, the media in some countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia,⁸ sometimes deployed a “blame” frame for the crisis, suggesting that it could have been averted if the US and its Western allies had intervened in the unfolding militarized conflict in Syria and acted against its President Bashar al-Assad. Such frames were also instrumentalized to support or legitimize the geo-political interests and policies of these countries, which have supported the insurgency against the Syrian regime in various ways. For example, well-known political analyst and former Qatari diplomat Nasser Al Khalifa, who often uses his personal Twitter feed to elicit support for particular policies, accused Western officials of “shedding crocodile tears” over the crisis and that they

⁶ In July 2015, former British Prime Minister David Cameron described the refugees seeking to reach European shores as “swarms of people coming across the Mediterranean.”

⁷ See the full report on www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html.

⁸ It is worth noting that the two countries oppose Syria’s President and have supported opposition groups allied against him.

“watched Syrians being killed by Assad’s chemical weapons and barrel bombs for five years.”

In Egypt, the refugee crisis was used by some media commentators to legitimize the military rule under General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, warning Egyptians of conflict and war, and therefore a similar fate to that of Syria, if they did not rally behind the President. The use of the legitimating frame was often juxtaposed with a negative portrayal of the refugees as burdens on society. One such association was made by a popular Egyptian presenter through a video of Syrian refugees in Lebanon on Al-Nahar TV, a private Egyptian channel. In the video, she called the refugees “disrespectful, lost and ruined,” and urged Egyptians to support the army if they didn’t want to end up like the people in Syria.

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Interestingly, media in those countries hosting Syrian refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon, have also deployed the securitization frame in their coverage of the refugee crisis, expressing concerns about possible terrorism. These frames were also used by the pro-Syrian regime media in order to legitimize the regime’s ongoing war against its opponents. For example, some of the headlines in the major state-run newspapers *al-Watan*, *al-Thawra*, *al-Tishreen* and *al-Ba’th* include: “Terrorists Make Their Way into Europe in Guise of Refugees;” “The West Creates Terrorist Organizations to Achieve Its Plans in the Region, A British Doctor Incites to Join ISIS, and Austria Stops Accepting Refugees;” and “Germans Arm Themselves Fearing Refugees.” A few other interesting themes emerged as well, such as reports on provocative Western rhetoric against migrants. An article from *arabianbusiness.com* reported comments by an American politician about

her desire to shoot Syrian refugees. Few news outlets focused on the lives of Syrian refugees in their adoptive countries, with media focusing on the crisis rather than on personal narratives of survival and coping in difficult situations.

Conclusion

The role of media in supporting, enhancing or legitimizing particular frames and narratives has been amply discussed in media and cultural studies, but the debate about whether this role can be ascribed to the power of media institutions, to global capital, to the relationship between political entities and the media, or the ability of some entities to cement their control through the media remains open and unresolved. Clearly media power is not a tangible reality, but a social process organized around distinctions between a manufactured “media world” and the “ordinary world” of ordinary people. Essentially, this means that the media influences the way we come to understand the world as a web of narratives in which power and knowledge are part of one system. In the context of the refugee crisis, there is no doubt that how much we see or how much we hear about it through the mainstream Western media is inextricably linked to the ways in which particular narratives produce common assumptions and construct ideologically-driven divisions along racial and religious lines, which embed themselves in the media, academia and other places. What is troubling though is that these assumptions and divisions become naturalized, normalized and taken for granted, thus becoming acceptable explanations and descriptions of the crisis and those who are experiencing it. Indeed, how refugees are described, categorized and represented matters because news not only reflects the events taking place and views that are already “out there,” but also actively contributes to, and constructs, our understanding of what those events mean. It is in this way that the media shapes the range of possibilities for understanding what the story is on migration, and the way we perceive migrants and refugees.