

Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum
sef: Roundtable Talk

Distortions in migrant reporting. Striving towards a realistic picture

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In recent years, there has been a steady increase of refugees and forced migrants around the globe. All over Europe, refugee and migration policy has become the focus of public debate. To create a well-balanced public dialogue, a diverse representation of migrants and refugees in the media is needed. Mainstream media, however, tend to shy away from narratives from migrants' perspectives. This entails the inherent danger of perpetuating typical stereotypes of migrants and refugees. In a roundtable talk at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum, sef: invited international experts to address the following questions: How are refugees and forced migrants

being portrayed in the media? Can traditional journalism meet the expectations projected on it? How can migrants make their voices heard? What can mainstream media learn from innovative projects on migrant reporting?

“More reporting, less politics”

The representation of migrants in the media is not balanced at all. This is one of the main research findings by Professor Margreth Lünenborg, Professor for Journalism Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. As she told the audience during the roundtable talk, in the media the stereotype of the “male villain” is paired with a victimization of women. Both images are permanently being reproduced. This “othering” in traditional reporting does not only create a negative image of migrants and refugees. Coincidentally, it also establishes a self-assuring image of the self (in this case: the “native” population), which is again reproduced by the media. Further, according to Lünenborg, the more politicalized the medium is, the more stereotypisation can be found. Peter Seidel, Political Reporter and Editor at the Newspaper Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger in Cologne, underscored this. Newspapers and other media at national level had more pressure to present a “complete” picture whereas local news often managed to narrate diverse stories on migrants with a local relevance, he added. Consequently, one participant called upon journalists to “do more reporting and less politics”.



sef: Roundtable Talk: Margreth Lünenborg, Thomas Bade (Chair), Peter Seidel and Nazek Ramadan (l.t.r.)

“Fear sells”

Nazek Ramadan, Director of the London-based NGO Migrant Voice, vividly explained that the language and imagery widely found in migrant reporting is inherently political as well. Phrases such as being “flooded” by refugees, images of crowded boats, and people wandering across borders in huge masses all deny the individuality of migrants, she criticized. At the same time, such imagery evokes the feeling that Europe and its societies are genuinely being threatened by migrants. Some participants argued that these pictures need to be included in the media as they present a reality as well. However, there was also widespread agreement that it is up to journalists how to contextualize such imagery. Unfortunately, “fear sells more newspapers than hope does,” Ramadan concluded. Speaking openly from his every day work as a reporter, Seidel admitted that although the utilization of suggestive language and imagery is often discussed in his newsroom, sometimes journalists simply do not consider the implications of their wording and imagery carefully enough.

Absence of migrant voices

Ramadan further clarified that the use of suggestive language and imagery is aggravated by the absence of migrant voices in the media. Her organization conducted a survey which found out that in the United Kingdom, less than one out of eight stories on migrants actually quote migrants. Ramadan emphasized that she absolutely understands the lack of resources and the amount of pressure weighing on journalists today. However, in migrant reporting, the same ethics should be applied as to the reporting on women, people with a disability, etc.. In these cases, e.g. it is regarded common sense to involve people affected.

Authentic reporting?

There was also a debate about how authentic migrant reporting could actually be achieved. To Sherry Al Hayek, Blogger and Freelance Journalist from Syria, access to first-hand information is easier than many journalists think. She wondered why journalists do not make use of the platforms refugees themselves use for the exchange of information. Many refugees post stories of their everyday life and their experiences on social media. Unfortunately,

however, posts usually only go viral in the closed circle that is already covering these issues. “But the information is out there,” Al Hayek emphasized. At the same time simply accessing information is often not enough. According to her own experience, newspapers often do not want critical and authentic stories. Instead, journalists sometimes simply want to meet Syrians to cover stereotypical stories of how refugees live, she reported. Ramadan shared similar experiences: sometimes her organization has to intervene when journalists have too rigorous an image in their head they want to underline with a quote or a background story.

Professor Jake Lynch from the University of Sydney brought an additional incentive to authentic reporting into the discussion. His research and perception analyses show that a change of reporting does make a profound difference to the consumer. One participant added that part of the responsibility of how migrants are perceived also lies with the recipient. Clicks on certain stories in social media create bubbles. However, positive stories tend to get clicked on less. Therefore, there is a danger for them to disappear, especially if journalists get paid for their stories by the amount of clicks they achieve.

Creating a realistic image

To conclude the discussion, all panelists were asked to share their ideas of what innovative projects might be helpful to achieve a realistic image of migrants and refugees in the media. Lünenborg would love to invent a transnational newsroom in which various perspectives on Germany and Europe are being debated and then transported into the public. Seidel would like to create a trilingual online platform in English, Arab and German. On this platform, journalists could get to know their colleagues from abroad and look at migrants and refugees from a different angle. Ramadan shared the project “Meet a migrant” her organization is already implementing. In this, journalists train migrants how to speak to the media. In the process of this, they get to know the other and can take back an individual and authentic story for their work as well, leading to a win-win situation. Al Hayek’s shared her priority that more refugees who are trained journalists and now without a job are brought into a position in which they can cover refugee problems for the media. However, she warned that the world does not necessarily need more projects. Instead, the media should do what they already do but in a better way: “reform and evolve,” she called her credo.

Imprint

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