



a migrant?” while in Italy, the top search was “How to adopt a Syrian orphan child?” but also “How many migrants are there in Italy?” The questions posted to Google in Hungary perhaps reflect the politically charged atmosphere that had developed as images of migrants marching across Europe filled screens in the previous weeks. People in Hungary asked, “How should a Christian respond to the migrant crisis?” but also “Is Budapest dangerous for tourists?”

The same study also underlines another aspect of the Aylan story, that which recounts the less than sympathetic international responses. There were attempts in the press and elsewhere to undermine the central message and this was mostly executed by painting Aylan’s family as undeserving, not the innocent victims that they were being depicted as. The father was portrayed as the boat’s driver and therefore a ‘people smuggler’, as having abandoned the boat and his family, and even as having organised the trip in order to get dental treatment. Other images, like those of former ISIS members arriving in Europe masked as refugees, would also hammer away at the burst of positive feeling towards refugees that had been unleashed by the Aylan images.

Finally, to what extent did the tragedy of Aylan have long-lasting consequences such as changes in public opinion towards asylum-seekers in the long term and changes to policy towards the crisis? It has to be borne in mind that the crisis had been building for years, as had the increase of deaths in the Mediterranean, while images of Syrian refugees carrying children on their shoulders marching through Europe had filled television screens in Europe since the spring.

The Sheffield study is also instructive here. The study, focusing mainly on the UK and Norway, argues that a shift in political discourse at the top levels was immediately visible but that asserting that the image had a lasting role is premature and likely flawed. In the UK, in the days following the emergence of the Aylan image, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced increases in assistance and on 4 September, two days after the image’s publication, Cameron announced that the UK would take 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years from camps in Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. In the weeks that followed however, politicians

were already renegeing on their promises. Cameron talked of the need not to be “overwhelmed” by refugees; a spokesman for Sturgeon, who had pronounced herself reduced to tears by the image, confirmed that there were no plans for preparations to offer a home for refugees as had been previously announced; while in Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, vocally supportive of the plight of refugees following Aylan’s image, was found to be obstructing immigration officials from processing Syrian asylum claims. Moreover a You.Gov report reported that only 9% of those who reported seeing the image stated that they believed more refugees should be allowed into the UK.

In Norway, a changed scenario is also visible directly following the publication of the image. An ad-hoc issue based social media group, a Facebook group known as Refugees Welcome to Norway (#RWTN) which had been launched some weeks prior to the tragedy, grew exponentially from a couple of hundred members to 90,000 almost overnight. It triggered the volunteering of masses of people, mostly young people who had hitherto not been engaged in any civic activity. Moreover, as the time coincided with the last phase of local government elections, right-wing parties took an incredible drubbing with the anti-immigration party, the Progressive Party, achieving its worst results in local elections in twenty-four years. Whether this was sustained, is however not clear.

### *Media influence on Migration*

The story of Aylan Kurdi and the subsequent dramatic effects on public opinion, political rhetoric and political action may be an outlier. Undoubtedly few stories, or images, generate the seismic effects that this solitary image was able to create. That media shapes the way people engage with issues is however indisputable. The role of media in shaping social and political policy has been well researched (Dalton et al 1998, Domke et al 1998, Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Shah et al 2002). Agenda setting theory has long been seen to show that the salience of a story in the media is transferred to the attention and significance the audience attributes to it (McCombs, 1974). Moreover, with attribute

agenda setting or framing, the reader/viewer is provided with the actual raw material on how to think about an issue (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). The media, as said, tells us not only what to think about but also to how to think about it. Hall (1975) argues newspapers ‘make the news meaningful’ as they shape both the salience and the valence of social and public policies for news consumers. To frame a story in one way and not another, Entman (1993) elaborates:

is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

Moreover, we know that journalists personalise, emotionalise and dramatise news stories to optimise their accessibility as well as their impact (Zahabi-Bekdash, 2015). By doing so, journalists mould national and global narratives and consequently social and political judgments. Narratives are the shorthand to our being, they are the stories that humans use to understand their lives and the world around them, and to plan and justify their actions. Beach (2010) contends that societies create stories about everything ‘religion, politics, popular culture, regional identity, racial and ethnic identity, attitudes towards other members of the culture and towards minority members, and attitudes towards others’.

What is the literature on migration in the media able to tell us about the way that the media engages with migration? How are migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees portrayed in the media? How is the discourse around migrants and refugees routinely constructed by media outlets? What terminology is employed? How are stories usually framed? It is clear that the answer to these questions has important consequences. It impacts on the way migrant and refugee roles are defined in society; it shapes public discourse on immigration and refugee policy, as well as impinges on the development and availability of social programmes for refugees. Not least, it affects the very social climate that refugees and migrants have to navigate in their life on an everyday basis (Steimel, 2009).

The World Migration Report (2011) which looks at how to communicate effectively about migration contends that few areas of public policy are subject to greater misrepresentation in public and political discourse, yet more influenced by public opinion, than international migration. It argues that despite the digital revolution providing multiplicity of outlets and avalanches of information, many remain poorly informed about the scale, scope and socio-economic context of migration.

Recent research shows that in most countries the story of migration is dominated by two themes – numbers and emotions (Ethical Journalism Network, 2015). At most times, coverage is politically led, taking cues from political leaders as they pronounce themselves on the issue. Coverage is also very frequently dominated by loose language, too often, words with clearly different meanings like migrant and refugee are used interchangeably, confusing the reader/viewer. Repeatedly, where refugee or asylum seeker would be the better label, news outlets opt for the word migrant, thus initiating a process of attributes that are incorrect and misleading. Talk of invasions and swarms are also common. At other moments, the Aylan story being a particular example, the story has been laced with humanity, empathy and the suffering of those involved.

This means that the media and subsequently public discourse too frequently simplifies the migration narrative, constructing refugees, either positively as passive victims who deserve protection, or negatively as undeserving active agents of violence, immorality and fraud (Zahabi-Bekdash, 2015). Steimel (2009) contends that this depiction of refugees is not new but is borne out by the extant research – refugees, she argues, have always occupied these two primary roles in news coverage: victims or evil-infiltrators/frauds. Pickering (2001) analysing news coverage on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia describes his findings thus:

Refugees and asylum seekers have been routinely constructed not only as a ‘problem’ population but as a ‘deviant’ population in relation to the integrity of the nation state, race and disease (2001: 169)

Gale (2004) however, also working on media coverage in Australia, found asylum seekers also positioned as victims. Researchers have noted that reference to migration in key destination countries, particularly in Europe, the United States and Australia are characterised by language such as illegal immigrants and associated with topics of criminality, security or border protection (Threadgold, 2009; Kim et al, 2011; Pickering, 2001). In the United States particularly, Hayes (2008) found that themes of law enforcement, security/terrorism, and the burden of illegal immigrants on social services, were found to be widely used in order to negatively frame immigration and immigrants. An interesting finding was discovered by Branton and Dunaway (2009) who analysed a dataset of 1,227 news stories on the topic of immigration published in California during a 12-month period. The analysis probed the rate of positive, negative and neutral coverage and observed that geographical proximity impacted significantly on how coverage of immigration was reported. The researchers found that the closer the proximity to the Mexican border, the more negative news coverage and opinion pieces tended to be.

Steimel (2009) examined top US newspapers' coverage of refugees in American human-interest stories over a period of six months from September 2008 to March 2009. She found that as human-interest features, the stories provided a largely positive portrayal of individual refugees and their families and presented refugees (a) as prior victims; (b) as in search of the American dream; and (c) as unable to achieve the American dream. These discourses, she concluded, represented a narrative of escape, hope and then the harsh reality of settling in a country deeply affected by the economic crisis. She observed that only one of 54 articles which she identified as portraying refugees as prior victims, depicted refugees as possible threats and a national security concern through potential links to radical terrorist groups. Talking of young Somali refugees, the article describes them as targets for terrorist recruitment and goes on to observe a vote taken in Holyoke City Council to oppose a plan to resettle Somali refugees, contending they were a burden on schools and other services. Steimel however, found that positive depictions of refugees were by far the most dominant and often dwelled on the harrowing stories of victimisation and threats that

prompted them to leave. She argues that this is most likely explained however by her choice to focus entirely on human interest stories which by their very nature aim to personalise and emotionalise an event, issue or problem so that the audience can personally connect to the individual who represents the issue. It is difficult to present a fraud in a way which personally resonates with the audience and is much easier to capture a positive emotional connection when individual refugees are presented as victims in need of protection.

Finally, we will look at two very recent studies that have utilised advances in technology to analyse very large datasets in a more diverse number of selected countries. The first, by McAuliffe and Weeks (2015) is part of an Occasional Paper Series by the Australian Government and analysed media messaging within a set of print and online media comprising more than 500 million pieces in 10 nominated countries during the six-month period extending from 1 October 2013 to 31 March 2014. The study focused on five mainly migration origin countries: Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Pakistan; Sri Lanka and Vietnam, and five other destination countries: Canada; the Netherlands; Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The researchers aimed to create a baseline analysis on the thematic content of the media messages; the extent to which that coverage was favourable, unfavourable or neutral; as well as the level of contextual framing in which migration themes were reported.

‘Moving Stories, International Review of How Media Cover Migration’ (2015) was commissioned by the Ethical Journalism Network in response to the biggest mass movement of people around the world in recent history during the tumultuous year of 2015. It asked researchers to examine the quality of coverage and to highlight reporting problems and good work in a number of selected countries. Here as well, the review sought to bring to light similarities and differences in countries as diverse as Bulgaria and Brazil, Lebanon and South Africa, Italy and Turkey. The study reviews fourteen countries as well as provides a closer look at the view from Brussels.

Returning to the Australian study, the media content was first analysed by theme, identifying eight broad themes including, for example, asylum

seekers and refugees, irregular migration, and overseas workers. It was then analysed in terms of tone of message (favourable/unfavourable/neutral) and finally examined along four broad contexts. In the latter phase, all media messages were divided according to whether they fell within the socio-cultural (potential impact on social cohesion); economic (boosting or posing a threat to jobs, housing, social benefits); humanitarian (human suffering and assistance) or security (perception of security threats) contexts.

The key findings (McAuliffe and Weeks, 2015) indicate a varied discourse in print and online media in the different countries. Each country had its own particular set of migration issues being discussed and this was likely linked to a unique broader discussion or political cycle in each country. Significantly, the key themes in destination countries differed substantially to those in origin countries while coverage by theme, tone and context differed significantly across the five origin countries. The study also found that reporting was largely neutral but that where it was not neutral, coverage was more likely to be negative. The predominant frame, more so in countries of origin, was the humanitarian frame. The UK and Switzerland were exceptional in that the economic frame was the most significant. Irregular migration and people smuggling on the other hand tended to be framed in a border/national security context in all countries reviewed. A range of similarities and differences were identified in the selected destination countries. In the latter, coverage tended to be more polarised than in origin countries, with less neutral reporting and more unfavourable reporting. The authors consider one of the more stark findings to be the limited extent of favourable messaging on migration across all destination countries, with unfavourable coverage significantly outweighing favourable messages.

In the United Kingdom, the dominant theme in the period under review was ‘immigration and immigrants’, accounting for more than half of all stories. Moreover, commentary was driven by a discussion on a more than expected rate of migration and top stories included a government campaign that warned people in the United Kingdom illegally to go home or face arrest as well as interviews and opinion polls expressing concern about the lifting of controls restricting Romanian and Bulgarian citizens in the United Kingdom. In Switzerland, against



a background of increasing arrivals of asylum seekers and migrants to the European Union, the Swiss media's focus was mainly on the potential economic impact of immigration. Coverage of asylum seekers and refugees was balanced, most focusing on number of arrivals but also including favourable (requesting Europe to do more for Syrian refugees) and unfavourable (bogus asylum seekers, and asylum seekers contributing to crime) coverage. In Norway, in contrast, more than half of reviewed articles related to the theme of asylum seekers and refugees, prompting mostly neutral coverage. Government's commitment to find accommodation for resettling refugees leads the favourable messages but the cost of resettling refugees and a triple murder committed by an asylum seeker contributed to negative sentiments.

The 'Moving Stories' study (2015), compiled at the end of 2015 following the Aylan wake-up call, paints a picture of journalists struggling to cover the humanitarian crisis which was unfolding professionally but often failing even in as simple an exercise as using the right terminology. A passionate debate on whether to use 'refugee' or 'migrant' crisis continues today with many outlets preferring the use of the term 'migrant'. Perspectives were also found to be very contrasting and driven mainly by national, governmental and political policy objectives. The review contrasts the tone advocated by the German daily *Bildt* when it launched a high-profile campaign 'We help' with the negative accent of many media in the Western Balkans, Hungary and other East European countries where tens of thousands of refugees were met with barbed wire, barriers and physical abuse. The study contends that the more humane approach ushered with the Aylan Kurdi story was short-lived and media coverage focused on refugee numbers rather than human interest has returned.

To take a few examples related to Europe and the Mediterranean region. The review of the Bulgarian coverage is damning for Bulgarian media – it states that instead of mediating the conflicting opinions and providing balanced and reliable information, the mass media plunged into sensationalism. A brief content-analysis demonstrates a discourse dominated by national security, terrorism, disease and refugee camps. Moreover, unverified information frequently found its ways into headlines – one such example – 'Islamic State floods Europe with

refugees'. In Italy, touched also by shipwrecks that led to more than 5,200 deaths (Jan-Aug 2015), the human side of the story attracted the greater media attention, with focus also on the rescue efforts. At the same time, there was no lack of alarmist discourse about immigration with the number of arrivals occasionally described as an 'invasion'.

The study on coverage of the media in Turkey, home to the largest community of Syrians displaced by the ongoing conflict, is limited and based on two smaller reviews. Both find security issues dominating the media agenda. The research on the United Kingdom corroborates the findings of an earlier study by Threadgold (2009) as well as the Australian study mentioned above. It finds that the issue of immigration, for years 'a toxic and divisive political issue', became highly charged, volatile and polemic in the wake of the refugee crisis. The study underlines the rhetoric of negativity in the media and highlights what 'Moving Stories' describes as possibly the lowest point for British media coverage when in April 2015, the highest circulation tabloid 'The Sun' described migrants as 'cockroaches'. For only a short period following the Aylan tragedy was a reframing discernible. Playing alongside the Mediterranean migration crisis in British media over the course of 2015 was a story closer to home - the situation in the makeshift camp of Calais as refugees and migrants waited for their chance to travel to the UK. To be noted however, are some rare examples of media criticising migration coverage with the *Guardian* taking the lead.

Finally a look at how the media in Lebanon addressed the crisis in 2015. The study contends that in Lebanon, migration can be nothing if not a meaningful story, with the small country hosting the largest number of refugees per 1000 inhabitants in 2014 - 257. A third of Lebanon's population is estimated to consist of Syrian refugees. Abu-Fadil argues that the media in the country are covering a crisis well beyond the country's capacity and that coverage offers a mixed bag including some good coverage that is not representative of the mainstream media. The author quotes from a project monitoring racism in Lebanese media released by the *Maharat* Foundation which finds that the media were somewhere in the middle on racism but that hard news stories tended to focus on "crime, violence, drugs, disruption of security and terrorism, or on analyses that characterised the stranger as not only different but

as an element of instability and a threat". The study concludes that the media landscape was a reflection of Lebanon's complex makeup that creates a media discourse built on fear (Moving stories, 2015).

The above has provided some insight on the way the media engages with migration. The next section will look at how public opinion is divided on migration issues and probes the extent to which media can be said to play a role in the perceptions and attitudes which the public adopt towards migrants and refugees.

### *Public Attitudes towards Migration*

Many factors are known to influence public attitudes towards a whole range of issues, and this includes public attitudes towards asylum and immigration. These factors are demographic (age, sex, race); economic (income); social and cultural (religion, media, information services, actual and perceived social norms, ethnicity, lifestyle); psychological (personality type); political (left wing/right wing ideologies) and geographical (location and proximity to immigrants) (Crawley, 2009).

It is also to be expected, that attitudes towards migration are shaped by the perceived extent of migration flows. In 2014, more than 276,000 migrants irregularly entered the EU, which represents an increase of 155% compared to 2013. In 2015, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that 1,011,712 arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean with 3,695 dead or missing at sea. While the numbers for 2016 have fallen following agreements that the European Union has negotiated, they are estimated to account as of July 2016, to 239,923 arrivals by sea and to 2,933 dead or missing (IOM, 2016). The numbers are staggering with 2015 representing the largest wave of people on the move in Europe since the Second World War. They have been triggered by the war in Syria where the greatest number of refugees are coming from but are also swelled by conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan and in parts of North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The discussion above has also identified an overall portrayal of migrants in the media in many societies, not least in Europe as the refugee crisis

unfolded, to be mostly negative.

How have public opinion and perceptions responded? The latest Eurobarometer poll by the European Union which was published at the end of February 2016 is highly instructive (Eurobarometer 2015, 84). In the poll, which was carried out across all EU member states and candidate countries in November 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, the refugee crisis tops the list of concerns for EU citizens. Immigration is seen as the most important issue facing the EU by 58% of EU citizens. This represents a 20 point increase since the spring of 2015. Terrorism, mentioned by 25% of respondents, is a poor second. Indeed immigration concerns have been on the rise since the spring of 2013 and have been continuously increasing, gradually up until 2014, but by 14 points and 20 points in the spring and autumn of 2015 respectively. The concern with immigration is not uniform in all European states, with Estonia heading the group at 79%, Germany, Denmark and the Czech Republic at 74%, the UK at 61% and Spain at 39%. Only in Portugal however is the issue of immigration in second place. Moreover, this is the first time that an item not directly related to the economy has headed the list. Immigration is also seen as the main national problem in twelve member states where it was mentioned by more than half of the population.

Does immigration evoke positive or negative feelings? This is another question posed by the Eurobarometer survey. The majority of European citizens have negative feelings towards the immigration of people from outside the EU. The proportion of respondents with negative feelings has also increased since spring 2015 (59%) with unsurprisingly some of the Eastern European countries topping the list of critics (Slovakia, Latvia (86%); Hungary (82%); Czech Republic, Estonia (81%). Countries where the majority of respondents take positive views of immigration from outside the EU are Sweden (70%), Spain (53%) and Ireland (49%). Negative views however have gained traction in 18 European countries.

Moreover, 9 out of every 10 Europeans say that they want the EU and/or their governments to take additional measures to fight the illegal immigration of people from outside the EU. More than two thirds

of Europeans are also in favour of ‘a common European policy on migration’ although this has lost ground since spring 2015.

Some observations about public opinion and perceptions about migration carried in the World Migration Report (2011) are also eye-openers. The report compiled by the International Organization for Migration, which is an extensive review of existing surveys globally, explores some of the more determining factors which are seen to influence public opinion and what lies at the core of prevailing negative sentiment. One of the most consistent findings in many polls is the over-estimation of the absolute number of migrants in a given country or region. Research findings also show that the way questions are worded and the respondents’ understanding of terminology determines favourable or unfavourable responses. The report underlines what has already been discussed, in that perceptions and opinions are “not static or formed in a vacuum” but are sensitive to socio-economic and demographic factors and may shift over time, particularly following increased interaction with migrants. Contextually, political turmoil, unemployment and economic recession are typically followed by politicians engaging in restrictive discourse and policy while the populist nature of migration debates in many parts of the world, is conducive to a climate in which migrants are seen as in some way responsible for the ills of society - unemployment, social burdens, security issues and lack of social cohesion.

In such a scenario, the role of the media is critical in both influencing and reflecting public opinion where media coverage has the potential to exacerbate what may be an already tense situation. Papademetriou and Heuser (2009) assert that the media has also a stake in reflecting debates and driving migration policy. This burdens the media with a unique responsibility to transmit accurate and balanced reporting even as it does so in partnership with relevant actors, particularly policy makers.

But as we have seen in the discussion above, accurate and balanced reporting is not the usual fare of media’s coverage of migration in particular. Notwithstanding the crucial role that the media is called to play in providing the information on which perceptions are formed and informed decisions are taken, and its ability to frame the debate in such

a way as to open up the discussion; too frequently, statistics, trends and analysis are selected to sensationalise or to drive an argument. Indeed, the IOM report (p 26) asserts that much migration-related media coverage tends to be: (a) episodic, that is related to a migration event and therefore prone to surges of coverage, usually of a negative nature; (b) with a focus on illegality, even though offending migrants may represent a minority of migrants; (c) an exaggeration of the facts; and (d) lacking context.

There are underlying reasons which drive media to cover migration in this way, not least the growing commercialisation and competition among media outlets which often lead to sensationalism. There is also a patent lack of reporters of migrant backgrounds who are frequently barred from mainstream newsrooms due to language competence and a perceived lack of understanding of societal norms. It has been also suggested that migration being a complex phenomenon, it is easier and more effective to focus on the negative stories, while reflection of the views of the perceived audience and/or owners of media outlets may also come into play (Chappell and Glennie, 2011).

### *Conclusion*

Over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the past few years since the upheaval in the Mediterranean, as migration flows across the Mediterranean and into Europe increased, migration has attracted greater media attention. As we have seen above, the salience of the migration story has also been transposed to the public perception with immigration topping the list of concerns of European citizens. Migration has also become increasingly politicised, becoming the rallying cry of the rising far-right but driven also by dehumanising language by mainstream politicians who feel that they can no longer allow the debate to be monopolised by the far right.

In all of this, the media is partly responsible. The European Commission (2011) has acknowledged that, “negative migrant stereotypes are a result, at least, in part, of negative press coverage” and has called for a more accurate, unbiased and realistic portrayal of migration. Even the

victim characterisation of refugees and migrants is not unproblematic argues Kapur (2002), creating what Zahabi-Bekdash (2015) calls vertical relationships of power in which refugees/migrants are “alienated, unable to integrate in the larger community, and stripped of their sovereignty, agency and ability to access discourses of power”.

So, how can the media be engaged to present a more balanced picture of migration and its impacts? Crucially, journalists need to be more attuned to weighing the impact of what they publish. Words matter. The right use of the terms employed is a mark of professional journalism. Conflating the terms migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker transmits poor understanding and contributes to misguided perceptions. That is not to say that journalists should engage in euphemisms. An honest debate on migration and its impact demands the use of straightforward and unambiguous language. A number of guidelines about how to talk about migration have been assembled by press councils and other organisations.

It would also be helpful for journalists to treat government and political rhetoric with caution, indeed it would benefit a more open debate, if this was also challenged and countered by other voices. Reporting that is fact-based and provides background and context will go a long way to displace unnecessary scaremongering and victimisation. A balanced act by the media would give voice to the migrant/refugee community but would also reflect the legitimate concerns of citizens. Migrants and refugees are not a homogenous body of people, stereotyping communicates just that. Avoidance of sensationalism, whether in word or image, creates a better climate for the debate to take place serenely and rationally. The most desirable debate is the one that is informed by research and in which facts and figures are not used selectively, where journalists refrain from playing the numbers game. Migrants and refugees in mainstream newsrooms could also provide a more balanced stance towards the issues surrounding migration but migrants and refugees can also use social and ethnic media to position themselves in the debate.

As migration in the Mediterranean continues and as Europe grapples with immigration as its main concern, the media’s voice can be more

than that of a mediating actor. It can be, as Papademetriou and Heuser (2009) advocate, an independent social actor that sets the agenda and drives immigration issues at the same time as reflecting the on-going debates in public and policy circles. For this to happen however, a robust change in the way that media engages with migration is in order.

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