The Media and Migration: An Introduction

By Akses Jerôme Bekiş

Introduction
This year’s Mediterranean Discourse on Regional Security (MDRS) conference will focus on migration. It is especially since the Arab Spring and the development of the Syrian Civil War that migration has become a hot button issue on both sides of the Mediterranean and beyond. Thus, in the spirit of finding shared solutions to regional problems, this year in Tunis the MDRS conference will address this exact topic.

One reason migration has become such an important issue across the region is due to the role of the media. Since the emergence of the “refugee crisis,” the media has allocated extensive coverage to migration and its human consequence, delivering the reality of human flight into the living rooms of millions of people around the world. Consequently, the media in general has become an essential element in any discussion of substance on migration and a vital part of realizing a holistic approach for the security implications of migration.

The Media as a Stakeholder: Why It Matters to Any Debate on Migration

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term media as “the internet, newspapers, magazines, television, etc., considered as a group.” By this definition, the term media is an all-encompassing concept that entails all channels of communications whether it is a news organization or a traveler’s blog on the internet. Until recently, the traditional understanding of media was restricted to mediums such as the television, radio, and printed outlets, but ever since the establishment of the internet, lines have become increasingly blurred as massive proliferation of information flows across the world. This information blast has created a world in which a single Twitter account can reach further than any other medium of media has in the past.

Accordingly, the media plays a pivotal role in bringing a broad array of issues to the attention of the public. The media, in all its diversity, is an important actor in terms of both agenda setting

and framing of issues, influencing the way in which certain issues are brought to the attention of the public, as well as the perceptions created, and the responses generated. For example, research has shown that people exposed to news media with high political content are more likely to vote than those who are not.

However, in relation to the topic of migration, the media frequently plays a more significant role than it does on other matters of societal relevance. The prime reason for this is that news media outlets often exhibit a negative bias when it comes to the reporting of their stories. This bias is further compounded by the fact that migration-related stories, especially those in the post-2015 period, are not simply problem-centric but present the issue of migration from an economic, welfare, cultural, or security frame for which, too often, the negative outweighs the positive. Furthermore, the news media, even in the absence of negative news, is not likely to feature success stories or the human face behind the migrant or refugee from the MENA region.

These realities have serious implications for the way in which newcomers are welcomed in host countries. When it comes to the impact on public attitudes towards migrants and refugees, there is evidence that current reporting on migration has led to an increase in anti-immigration attitudes and, in some instances, an increase in extreme-right violence. However, it is not strictly the reporting of news by mainstream media that influences the public’s attitudes and actions. Studies on exposure to online comments and content have revealed that comments posted by others play a role in shaping an individual’s attitude and behavior toward a targeted group.

The manner in which the media influences people does not only manifest itself in the immediate perception of and behavior towards migrants and refugees, as there are very real political consequences of this form of public discourse. In the case of Europe, the increased visibility of the “refugee crisis” increased the citizenry’s Euroscepticism. Additionally, right-wing populist leaders tend to position themselves within the detrimental discourse already present within the media. Although these insights have been unearthed through research of which most tends to

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5 Eberl et al., “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects.”

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


9 Eberl et al., “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects.”

be Euro-centric in focus, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of these implications would also apply to the other side of the Mediterranean under similar circumstances.

Indisputably, the media is a pivotal stakeholder and a major player when it comes to migration since it is an instrumental channel through which people become aware of societal issues such as immigration, but it also actively shapes the population’s perceptions and actions on a personal and political level.

**Discourse on Migration: Europe**

Literature on the discourse on migration in Europe is considerable and has been partially surveyed before. However, despite the fact that the body of works on the subject is comprehensive, it is by no means complete, especially since comparative studies on the portrayal of migration and its associated facets across various regions in Europe are still lacking. Furthermore, studies on migration and its impact on social media platforms have been under-researched.

In general, studies in this area indicate that detrimental discourse on migration within Europe outweighs positive portrayals, particularly due to the existing framework repeatedly adopted by the media on the continent. One example of this “reality-gone” hyperbole is Slovenia in which a narrative of securitization that problematizes migration as an inherent security and existential threat is consistently assumed. In the case of Slovenia, there has always been a degree of hostility “directed against anything foreign.” Nevertheless, it was essentially at the height of the “refugee crisis” when the country experienced a massive increase in migration via the Balkan route that the discourse in the national media took a detrimental turn. During news broadcasts, migrants were presented as public health and security threats in a manner that sought to set them apart or “other” them. This discourse in the mainstream media eventually culminated in a process of securitization that made migrants an existing threat to the Slovenian state and its citizens. Nonetheless, in many countries across Europe, the discourse on migration within the mainstream media of a given country is neither as hostile nor as uniform as in the case of Slovenia. For instance, in Belgium research has indicated that there is a considerable difference between the Flemish and French regional news reports, as the Flemish are generally more negative with their representations than the French. Moreover, the Swedish media is relatively positive in its coverage of refugees, as Swedish journalists are inclined to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, shown, for example, by greater attention to female refugees. It is through

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11 Eberl et al., “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects.”
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
17 Vezovnik, “Securitizing Migration in Slovenia.”
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
such presentations of actual migrants and immigration at large that it is possible to reduce the concern that people regarding immigration, especially when such representations are positively inclined.\textsuperscript{22}

Even though the media in Europe often exhibits a detrimental discourse within its coverage of migration across the continent, it is by no means the rule in all instances. In fact, there are examples, such as in parts of Belgium and Sweden, in which the media has been shown to play a constructive role through its discourse and portrayals. Nevertheless, despite the intricacy of the subject matter, these insights raise a broad array of questions such as whether or not it is possible for the media to strike the right balance between reporting the truth and actively playing a constructive role. In other words, can “freedom of the press” be preserved if the media is an active stakeholder?

**Discourse on Migration: The MENA Region**

There has been surprisingly little research conducted on the way in which migration is represented in the media across the MENA region.\textsuperscript{23} One study provided insight into the case of Jordan in which the representations of refugees and migrants in the headlines of the Jordan News Agency (PETRA) were examined.\textsuperscript{24} The study spans from 2012 through 2016, the period the country saw the greatest influx of refugees from neighboring Syria.\textsuperscript{25} According to the study’s authors, it is possible to identify a clear pattern of development of the headlines over this period. At first in 2012, the headlines appear to be very sympathetic to the plight of the refugees.\textsuperscript{26} Then, gradually, from the end of 2012 until 2015, the discourse increasingly emphasized how the country was in dire need of assistance to cope effectively with the large influx of people.\textsuperscript{27} However, what is by far of most interest is how the headlines began developing from 2015 onward, as they illuminated the scarcity in funding and then, suddenly in 2016, changed their focus to Europe and its struggles with the migration situation.\textsuperscript{28} This last development reveals how PETRA was inclined towards emphasizing the problems associated with large-scale migration first by stressing how even relatively resource-rich countries were struggling, which in turn further stressed the unrealistic burdens and difficulties that were placed on Jordan.\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, by adapting some of the key talking points from the European media on the topic of migration, the country’s state media agency revealed how European discourse might have considerable reach and impact on the other side of the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{30}

In a similar report drafted with the explicit purpose of identifying how the media on both sides of the Mediterranean reports on migration, it is evident how Jordan is not just an example of how European discourse manifested itself on the southern end of the sea, but also how similar

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
detrimental actions were taken by the media in the MENA region. One example of how European media practices seemingly dominated the Jordanian media can be seen in how the voices of actual Syrians and their stories feature quite rarely in the country’s media and when featured do so from the premises of the conflict in neighboring Syria. Another illustrative example of detrimental discourse commandeering the media landscape of the MENA region was witnessed in the sensationalist and security-centered reporting in Morocco. Such examples underscore how European media discourse on migration tends to appear within the media of the MENA region, and how certain practices, such as the nearly singular portrayal of the migration topic through a security perspective and a lack of individual migration success stories dominates the news cycle.

Even though it is uncertain whether the adoption of European media practices and discourse across the MENA region is coincidental or the product of coherent planning, it is most likely safe to assume that it is a mixture of both. There are several plausible reasons for this assumption, one is that in some countries across the region, migration is not a “front page story” and, as such, the adoption of existing discourse and practices might be a pragmatic choice for journalists and editors. As shown by the case in Jordan, at times highlighting the problems associated with migration in Europe might serve a local agenda. Nevertheless, as is the case with Europe, across the MENA region there is not only considerable differential in the discourse witnessed in many countries, but there are also some examples that can be considered constructive, such as Egypt where often success stories of individual refugees tend to be featured by the national mainstream media.

Although the scope for further research into public discourse in the MENA region is significant, it is possible to draw logical conclusions. Firstly, despite the causality being unknown, there are relationships between the media representations and practices on migration in Europe and the MENA region as shown by the situation in Jordan. Secondly, there are inherent differences in the way media outlets in the region report on migration between countries and within countries. Finally, much of the media coverage on migration in Europe has a tendency to address local concerns and grievances, real and perceived, strongly resembling the coverage witnessed on the other side of the Mediterranean. In the light of all of this, an array of pivotal questions remain elusive and will remain so for some time to come. For example, why is it that the media in Egypt emphasizes success stories while the media in countries such as Jordan with far larger refugee populations focus on the burdens associated with migration?

**Conclusion**

At this juncture, it is clear that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and the manner in which both citizens and politicians frame issues of societal importance, including migration. Furthermore, it has been shown that on both sides of the Mediterranean the media has, to a large extent, played a considerable role in disproportionately problematizing migration, despite the few instances in which the media permitted itself a more positive and constructive

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32 Ethical Journalism Network, 84–86.
33 Ethical Journalism Network, 94–99.
34 Ethical Journalism Network, 75–77.
role. It is precisely through such tangible examples that it is possible to recognize the impact of the media and understand how a change in approach can significantly affect migration issues. Adjustments would require a more balanced reporting on the topic of migration, bringing to the forefront a human perspective on the issue and advancing stories of successful integration. Therefore, the question is not whether the media should be considered an important stakeholder in finding shared regional solutions to the dilemmas associated with migration, but rather how the media can become an effective partner, given the possible hurdles to an array of mediums and the freedom of the press. Additionally, while most of the research highlights fairly traditional media, social media should not be overlooked in its ability to shape perceptions and perspectives. The biggest question remaining is whether it is possible to effectively integrate social media into a holistic approach towards migration and if so how?

About the author
Akses Jerôme Bekiş is a research intern at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies working under the direct supervision of Dr. Petra Weyland, whom he assists in the organization of the Mediterranean Discourse on Regional Security conference for 2019. He recently completed his undergraduate studies at Utrecht University and is set to commence his graduate studies at the Graduate School of Humanities, Utrecht University as a research masters student. His research focuses on Middle Eastern affairs, international relations, and conflict studies.