

Refugees in the media discourse

PATTERNS OF COVERAGE IN GERMAN MEDIA

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In a media analysis, the media coverage on the refugee crisis in Germany was examined and 5 consecutive waves of reporting were identified.

For over 18 months, the topic of “refugees” has captured the attention of Germany. People fleeing to Europe is not a new phenomenon, though. Since 1990, ever more people have tried to make it into the EU, which they consider economically strong and safe, but the summer of 2015 witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of refugees. The reasons included the civil war in Syria, the rise of the so-called Islamic State, a lack of prospects after years of violence in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan – but also traffickers who were becoming more professional and a chain reaction. In 2015, a total of around 890,000 people sought asylum in Germany; in 2016 the number was 280,000 (BMI, 2017). This was an immense challenge – both for society in general and for the media in particular.

In a representative survey in December 2015, 41 % of respondents criticised media coverage of refugees as one-sided. Only 25 % believed that an accurate picture of the migrants and their qualifications was shown (Köcher, 2015a, and vom Orde in this issue). The refugee crisis split public opinion in Germany and eroded trust in the classic media, but how did it come to that? What happened in German media discourse? Together with students, the authors watched the coverage, discussed it, and used key patterns to categorise it into 5 waves.

THE FIRST WAVE: STEREOTYPES

From January to April 2015, rather sober reports of refugees and tragedies on the Mediterranean Sea dominated media coverage. This corresponded to the state of previous communication science research.¹ Media scientist Matthias Thiele (2005) found that when portraying flight, asylum and immigration, the primary contexts are crisis, conflict, catastrophes, and crime. This pattern could also be seen at the start of 2015. The sporadic media portrayal in the first quarter concentrated on anonymous masses of people – especially in overcrowded boats or at the fences of refugee centres. The tone was mostly negative: Refugees were collectively portrayed as victims of wars, crises, or trafficking gangs. Often there was also a debate about “economic refugees” who wanted the advantages of the German welfare state. Individual fates were rarely shown, and when they were, then usually the focus was on their suffering.

In April, media attention increased sharply when almost 1,000 refugees died in one night in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Lampedusa/Italy. Harsh criticism was expressed against the EU refugee policies, but coverage mostly remained within the stereotypes described. Attempts to give different narrative perspectives were rare at this time. The public TV programme *Zapp* (2015) summarised the problems: The media used images of “the others” without criticism and always asked the same questions about their tales of woe. What was lacking were positive

examples that did not show those arriving as victims or freeloaders.

THE SECOND WAVE: EMPATHY GROWS

The more asylum-seekers came to Germany, the more portrayals of refugees were aired. However, the stories continued to concentrate on their suffering or their attempts not to get tripped up while navigating German bureaucracy. Volunteers who assisted refugees were also portrayed more often.

Although it was clear that there would be a much larger number of refugees coming than in the previous year, routine coverage was not particularly intensified. Even news about emergencies at sea rarely held the headlines longer than one day, and the state of emergency seemed to have been accepted as normal. There was hardly any contemplation in the classic media about how much migration the country could handle or how to deal with the new arrivals. In the internet comments, these kinds of critical questions were already being asked. In contrast, the leading media concentrated on the lack of empathy on the part of German Chancellor Angela Merkel when, in mid-July, she told a crying refugee girl on a talk show that she would probably be deported.²

Heribert Seifert with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* found that German media reported “with a noticeable bias on the topic” (Seifert, 2015a): The coverage focussed on empathy with migrants. The portrayals were always of the same protagonists, the same phrases.

In particular, leading print media and public broadcasters were homogenous in this regard. Topics such as conflicts about establishing homes for asylum-seekers or criminal acts committed by asylum-seekers were only covered by local media.

THE THIRD WAVE: WELCOMING EUPHORIA

In July 2015, the Greek debt crisis was still the feature story, but that changed in mid-August. The German Minister of the Interior spoke for the first time of the record number of refugees that were expected in 2015: 800,000. A few days later, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees suspended the Dublin procedure for Syrians. In Heidenau in Saxony/East Germany, there were xenophobic riots. First, concern about right-wing agitation dominated the media. On 31 August, Chancellor Merkel made what has likely become her most famous statement: “We can do it.” (“Wir schaffen das.”) At this point, images of the dead started to be shown. There were heated discussions about whether and how they should be shown. First it was a lorry used by traffickers that was discovered in Austria: Inside, 71 refugees had suffocated to death (Meedia, 2015). But the media uproar happened especially after the image of Aylan was shown, the 3-year-old Syrian boy who drowned and was washed ashore on the Turkish coast. The photograph became an iconographic representation and, starting on 3 September 2015, it triggered a wave of media empathy (Filipović, 2015). On 4 September, Merkel said “yes” to the entry of refugees from Hungary. Germany and Austria opened their borders. All channels and title pages were then dominated by images of overflowing train stations. What could be seen were exhausted and relieved refugees with signs

with phrases like, “We love Germany” and “Thank you, Angela Merkel,” but also Germans who were standing to form a corridor and applauding those arriving. At the latest at this point, children became the symbol of the refugee crisis even though the majority of those arriving were young men (Schönauer, 2015). The “welcoming culture” was celebrated in the media.

An increasing number of journalists travelled to the Austrian-Hungarian border to report on the refugees’ sometimes horrendous experiences. Some went “undercover” in German refugee homes to reveal abuses (e.g. Jaberina, 2015). Even then, many reflected critically on how the role of a helper could be reconciled with that of a journalist.³ Rumours of “bad refugees” who supposedly robbed supermarkets and raped women were contradicted with fact checks. Publishers such as DuMont and Springer provided materials for asylum-seekers in Arabic, the *Hamburger Abendblatt* hired refugees as “refugee reporters”. Even the tabloid newspaper *Bild* changed its approach: Previously it had contributed to stirring up resentment against foreigners, but at this point it presented a new campaign to support refugees (Niggemeier, 2015; Bild, 2015).

During this period, the media entered into a “competition to see who could show the most empathy and welcoming culture without giving a thought to the weariness this could create in the reader” (Seifert, 2015b). Many journal-

ists became “lawyers of the refugees” out of a sense of empathy and commitment. The perspectives of the refugees and their helpers were often shown exactly as they told it while opposing voices were ignored or accused of being right-wing. Those who asked critical questions or pointed out risks were side-lined. The concerns and fears of many Germans were given almost no space in the media discourse. Journalist Michael Hanfeld (2015) from the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* criticised a “welcoming journalism”, and the portal *Meedia* commented: “In print media and TV, the idea is conveyed that the country is a kind of amusement park with unlimited capacity and willingness to receive refugees” (Winterbauer, 2015).

THE FOURTH WAVE: REVERSAL TO THE OTHER EXTREME

At the end of September 2015, the pendulum reversed course. The focus was then on riots and fires in refugee homes as well as the political clash on the topic of refugees. The media outdid each other with speculation about how many people were coming and how long the wave of help could hold up against the “onslaught”. At the beginning of October, Germany’s highest-circulation daily paper *Bild* assumed there would be an additional 1.5 million immigrants coming that year (Solms-Laubach, 2015). In an interview, the paper asked Chancellor Merkel: “Is it right to morally judge the Germans who are worried or afraid in light of the hundreds of thousands of refugees that are entering the country?” (Diekmann, Ronzheimer & Kausch, 2015).

These observations were not limited to tabloid media. The change of course could also be seen e.g. in the liberal weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. Although at the beginning of August its title page read “Welcome!”

with a picture of a refugee family, on 17 September the headline was “Merkel and the refugees. Does she know what she’s doing?” (Niggemeier, 2016b). On 4 October, the programme *Bericht aus Berlin* (*Report from Berlin*) on the public channel ARD showed a photomontage of Chancellor Merkel in a chador (Ill. 1). The presenter asked: “What is happening with our values? Yes, how do we govern when refugees have problems with gender equality, with women’s rights, with freedom of the press and of opinions?” (Álvarez, 2015). Characteristic for this wave was that critique, concerns, and fears, which up to that point had been found almost exclusively in alternative media, could now also be heard in classic media. Now citizens were asked more frequently about their impressions. The key topics were the overwhelmed towns and the discussion about a limit on the number of refugees. Maximilian Popp from the news magazine *Spiegel* observed what he considered to be a radical change in narratives: from the welcoming culture to the dangers of massive immigration (Röben, 2016). For some, however, this inclusion of critical voices came too late: In a representative survey in October 2015, 47 % of respondents criticised media coverage of refugees as one-sided (Köcher, 2015b; 2015a). But for the first time, the media prioritised another story higher than the refugee topic. The terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 briefly became the top news story. In this context, however, refugee policies were still discussed. Despite many warnings, there was soon public speculation as to whether the terrorists were refugees or pretended to be refugees. This shift to the negative side of the topic reached its climax with the coverage of the New Year’s Eve events in Cologne/Germany. At first, the police report stated that there was a peaceful atmosphere. What actually happened – numerous sexual assaults against women by men of North African and Arabic descent – was making the rounds through social

networks together with the accusation that the events were being purposely concealed. Only on the 4th and 5th of January 2016 did the incidents make it into the national media. Initial caution was followed by a revitalisation of old ways of thinking and often there was a generalising link made to the topic of refugees. The narrative of the “Arabic man” and his uncontrolled sexuality as a threat for the German woman and Western freedom was widespread (e.g. Ulrich, 2016). Communication scientist Kai Hafez (2016) determined: “The brief empathy for refugees that dominated the media in the summer fell back on the traditional discourse focussing on the problems of crime, difficulties with integration and unbridgeable cultural differences.”

THE FIFTH WAVE: VERY FEW INDICATIONS OF IMPROVEMENTS

At the beginning of 2016 various approaches could be observed. Editors published explanations for why they reported in which ways, described how individual cases fit into the larger picture, and interviewed new protagonists such as integrated migrants about the current refugee debate. At the same time, in the first week of the year, violence and rule violations by asylum-seekers were the focus of the media’s attention and not violence committed against them. This was true even though at the beginning of the year almost no day passed without an attack on a refugee home in Germany (Monitor, 2016). Media coverage from the border areas also changed. At the end of February, the reception centre in Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border gained attention due to the catastrophic conditions there. At first the coverage seemed to repeat that of the previous year – on the one hand images of desperate children at border fences and on the other hand the familiar, stereotypical portrayals

of masses of people. What was new was that the masses were more often shown as being aggressive.

DECREASING RELEVANCE IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 2016

The riots in Idomeni, which lasted until May, were a reaction to the closure of the “Balkan route”. On 20 March 2016, the refugee agreement between the EU and Turkey also came into effect. As a result, far fewer refugees came to Germany. In the following months, one could hardly speak of “waves” anymore because the frequency of coverage sank drastically. The Institut für Empirische Medienforschung in Cologne (IFEM, Institute for Empirical Media Research) found: From August 2015 until May 2016, refugees were the most important topic in the main news programmes on television. Only once during this period was the topic superseded: in November 2015 by the terrorist attacks in Paris. Starting in June 2016, the relevance significantly decreased, however – the European football championships, “Brexit”, the US elections, terrorist attacks (Nice, Berlin, Ansbach), and the Syrian War were of greater interest until the end of the year (IFEM, 2015; 2016).

The primary topics in July 2016 were the killing spree in Munich, the knife attack in Würzburg, and the bombing in Ansbach. In these contexts, the focus was repeatedly on the group of refugees. In fact, 2 of the perpetrators were refugees and another was of Iranian descent. Some headlines went beyond these individual cases, however, and portrayed refugees in general as a dangerous group.⁴ The topic of refugees once again become the main focus of the media for a brief time in September 2016. Many media professionals looked back at the events of the year before – and were certainly also self-critical.⁵ That, at least, gives hope for more nuanced coverage in the future.

CONCLUSION

German coverage of refugees in 2015 and 2016 evinced serious deficits. Problems included a lack of differentiation, a lack of objectivity and too much of a herd mentality. Media professionals should learn from these mistakes because the topic of refugees will continue to be with us for a long time. Specifically, that means using more context and background, critically questioning how topics are set and designed, perceiving and portraying various perspectives and opinions, and continually breathing life into ethical standards. ■

NOTES

- 1 Until 2015/2016, there was very little in this area on flight and migration. The few studies available showed that topics shape the media in waves, and a link between coverage and increasing xenophobia could be found because media coverage is very simplified, relies on drama, and discusses especially negative aspects (cf. Jäger, 2000; Butterwegge et al., 2006).
- 2 Programme on the German federal government's dialogue "Gut leben in Deutschland" ("Living Well in Germany") on 15 July 2015, aired on NDR, a public broadcaster. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4au5Up0eQ> [15.02.2017]
- 3 A successful example was Martin Kaul (2015) in the German newspaper taz.
- 4 For example, the kicker in the newspaper Tagesspiegel on 31 July 2016 stated: "Terror and Refugees" (John, 2016). Available at: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/terror-und-fluechtlinge-was-wir-den-opfern-von-anschlaegen-schuldig-sind/13950038.html> [15.02.2017]
- 5 Cf. among others Giovanni di Lorenzo (Meedia, 2016) and Susanne Glass (Bouhs, 2016).

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