

# Flight and asylum in the media

## SELECTED INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

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This article offers an overview of the media discourse and representation of refugees and asylum-seekers using selected international research findings.

### NARRATIVES AND IMAGES OF THE FOREIGN

#### Stereotypes in words and images

Media play a decisive role in constructing social realities (Luhmann, 1996). Media discourse on discrimination processes against minorities has a particularly far-reaching influence since various contents and forms of reporting contribute to how recipients shape their attitudes and opinions (Ruhmann & Sommer, 2009, p. 419). The selection of topics, actors, and how they are evaluated (framing) as well as the linguistic and visual representation are especially interesting for research in communication science.

In Germany, since around the mid-1980s research has been done on representations of and discourses on flight and asylum in the mass media. In the context of the discourse on “abuse of asylum”, attacks on refugee homes in the early 1990s and the change in asylum law in Germany’s constitution in 1993, many content-analytical and discourse-analytical studies (mostly on print media) have been conducted, including several very large content-analytical studies on television (overview in Thiele, 2005, p. 10 ff.). For this period, Thiele emphasised the tendency of German media coverage to focus



Ill. 1: One way refugees are represented in the media is as an “anonymous, dark mass” or an “invasion”

on problems, conflicts, or crises. The group of asylum-seekers, who are perceived as foreign, are portrayed mostly in stereotypes. Often migration is linked to either crime or the exotic, and refugees are characterised as standing apart from German culture. Linguistically, derogatory terms such as “economic refugees” are used (ibid., p. 10). Refugees are often symbolised in words and images as an “anonymous, dark mass”, “chaos”, “flood”, and “wave” or as a “march” or “invasion” (Ill. 1). With these kinds of attributions, threats of a “swamping” or “siege” are imagined and urgent action is called for (ibid., p. 11). International findings (cf. overview in Esses et al., 2013, pp. 520 ff.), for example from the USA, Norway, Australia, or Canada, point in the same direction. An Australian study reached the conclusion that the noticeable lack of media images showing individual refu-

gees with recognisable facial features contributed to the “visual dehumanisation of refugees” while the dominance of media images of large groups and boats led to a “culture of fear” (Bleiker et al., 2013, p. 411). In all, an increasingly negative tone can be found in media discourse: “Over the course of the past 10 to 15 years, portrayals of immigrants and refugees in many Western countries have become increasingly negative, with the media focusing on the threats that immigrants and refugees pose to members of host societies.” (Esses et al., 2013, p. 520). In its report from 2012, The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration found an “anti-immigration sentiment” in broad parts of Europe and stated that “inconsistent media coverage” was in part responsible for this (The Hague, p. 15). A study on the international discourse on asylum-seekers and refugees in

worldwide English-language newspapers identified 5 negative frames in this context: Refugees and crime, illegitimacy of asylum-seekers and seeking, refugees as a threat to the national identity, refugees as an economic burden, and social deviancy (Haynes et al., 2004). In the emerging nation of Malaysia, as well, a media analysis found a negative tone in its reporting that was determined by the fear of refugees as potential carriers of infectious diseases (Kaur, 2007).

### Public opinion and media discourse

Even in classic immigration countries such as Canada or Australia, whose media traditionally tend toward positive reporting on refugees, framings and metaphors appear that emphasise immigration as a crisis and something threatening. For example, the link between public opinion and media reporting is shown in an analysis of the Canadian press on the landing of 4 boats with 599 Chinese refugees on the British Columbian coast in 1999 (Mahtani & Mountz, 2002). The tone of public asylum discourse changed dramatically with this event, which was called “irregular migration” and “critical” (ibid., p. 20). Although the number of refugees was low in comparison to other migrant groups in Canada, the press used figures of speech that were reminiscent of a natural catastrophe and declared the refugees to be “bogus refugees” in contrast to rightful “genuine refugees” (ibid., p. 21). At the same time, policy makers were accused of being “too soft” and allowing migrants to enter the country through the “back door” (ibid., p. 29). In their policy recommendations, the authors suggest better and more pro-active cooperation between policy makers and media in order to promote fact-based and balanced reporting that includes stories about the various contributions of recent immigrants to Canada (ibid., p. 30).

Other researchers also point to the problem that the broad public is often given too little fact-based information on the topic of migration and flight, and that individual political elites could use this to portray the acceptance of refugees as a threat or burden to national social systems (for example in Esses, 2013, p. 519). Wright (2014) also refers to the lack of contextualisation of the global phenomenon of forced migration: “Few refugee news stories make the connection between ‘there’ and ‘here’: sympathetic coverage of those in far-off lands affected by disaster and war appears in stark contrast to the media treatment of those seeking asylum in the West” (ibid., p. 461).

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Esses, Victoria, Medianu, Stelian & Lawson, Andrea (2013). *Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 69(3), 518-536.

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*The Hague process on refugees and migration* (2012). *Global Hearing on refugees and migration*. Report 2012. The Hague. Available at: [http://thehagueprocess.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THP-Global\\_Hearing\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://thehagueprocess.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THP-Global_Hearing_Report_2012.pdf) [16.02.17]

Haynes, Amanda, Devereux, Eoin & Breen, Michael (2004). *A cosy consensus on deviant discourse: how the refugee and asylum seeker meta-narrative has endorsed an interpretive crisis in relation to the transnational politics of world's displaced persons*. Working Paper WP2004-03. University of Limerick Department of Sociology Working Paper Series. Online Paper. Available at: [https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/3632/Haynes\\_2004\\_cosy.pdf?sequence=2](https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/3632/Haynes_2004_cosy.pdf?sequence=2) [16.02.17]

Kaur, Kiranjit (2007). *Media reporting on refugees in Malaysia*. UNEAC Asia Papers, 13, 8-12.

Mahtani, Minelle & Mountz, Alison (2002). *Immigration to British Columbia: Media Representation and Public Opinion*. Working paper series no. 02-15. University of British Columbia. Online Paper. Available at: <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2002/WP02-15.pdf> [16.02.17]

Wright, Terence (2014). *The media and representations of refugees and other forced migrants*. In Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh et al. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (pp. 460-472). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## DISCOURSES ON FLIGHT AND ASYLUM ON TELEVISION

### Refugees in television reporting

In his review of the state of research on how refugees are portrayed on television in contrast to print media, Wright (2014) reaches the conclusion that TV reporting is generally more subtle and less explicit, but it can also convey implicitly negative images whose underlying importance is often not realised by those responsible for the television programmes: “For example, it is often the case that video footage to illustrate asylum-seekers in the UK is of men, while with ‘overseas’ migrants from disaster, women, and children are usually shown. The underlying message suggests a sense of potential aggression and threat from men hanging around ‘our’ streets in contrast to helpless passive victims of circumstances beyond their control.” (ibid., p. 464) To ensure television’s “balanced approach”, programme-makers should pay attention to such implicit visual messages and keep their distance from rhetoric in print media that sometimes speaks of “floods of refugees” (ibid.). Against the background of a heated, media-critical debate on the reporting on right-wing extremism, foreigners, and asylum in Germany, Brosius & Esser (1995) looked at the question of a potential escalation of xenophobic violence caused by reporting in print media and television news programmes in the context of attacks on asylum-seekers. The authors find that television has a greater potential for animating copycat perpetrators to commit violent acts, whereby it is not primarily the type of reporting that is key but its extent (ibid., p. 168). A study from Belgium (Jacobs, Meeusen & d’Haenens, 2016) analysed the extent to which television news programmes’ content on the topic of migration and ethnic minorities differed in the case of one public and one private commercial

provider. In addition, they evaluated whether the programme preference for public or private television reporting correlated with a specific attitude on migrants. The content analysis of 1,620 news items broadcast between 2003 and 2013 showed that the reporting by the private broadcaster VTM was characterised by slightly more sensational and tabloid aspects than that of the public broadcaster VRT. VRT showed a more positive and balanced view of migration. The viewer survey (n = 439), which was carried out in 2 waves in 2009 and 2014, showed that those who preferred public news also had a more positive attitude toward asylum-seekers and the benefits of migration than the viewers of the private programme. "Furthermore, cross-lagged analysis provided tentative proof that the causal mechanism runs from watching news to attitudes, and not vice versa" (ibid., p. 656). In light of the debate about the "public value", the authors claim that strong public broadcasting systems play a key role in the increasingly diverse society, as only they can develop a normative vision of living together that is independent of pure market logic.

### Refugees in entertainment programmes

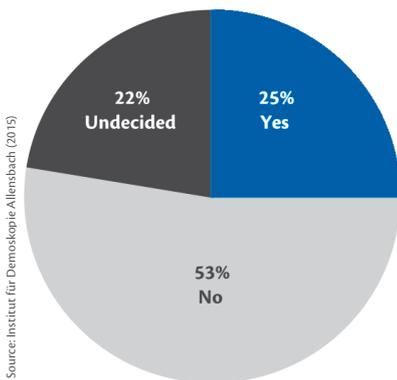
Research findings on entertainment programmes and their representation of and narration about refugees are rare. In his dissertation, however, Thiele (2005) also looked at entertainment programmes. Especially when dealing with daily talk shows, crime shows and "multi-cultural" comedies, he found that "old" stereotypes had been replaced by new images of refugees and migrants that were just as stereotypical. Such

figures were characterised by strategies of idealisation, infantilisation, and exotification, which were intended to lead to a positive identification. According to Thiele, however, these images are nothing more than the other side of the coin to the racist ideas and projections (ibid., p. 295).

The oft-discussed Australian reality TV programme *Go back to where you came from* (Ill. 2), which was developed in co-operation with UNHCR and the rights to which have already been sold in 9 countries, has attempted a new approach since 2011 for creating empathy and understanding for refugees. The programme arose as a reaction to the heated political debate in Australia in which especially refugees who tried to make it there with boats over the ocean were vilified as "queue jumpers" who bypass the "real" refugees (Nikunen, 2016, p. 269). During a one-month experiment, 6 candidates who (except for one participant) have a restrictive and hostile attitude toward asylum-seekers are sent to refugee camps and conflict regions in order to experience what it means to be a refugee and

to reflect on their own attitudes: "By addressing humanitarian questions, *Go back* combines areas that usually convey oppositional moral registers: reality television and sensationalism with humanitarianism, justice and social responsibility." (Nikunen, 2016, p. 266)

Especially in Europe, this mix led to a lively, controversial debate, while in Australia the programme is a rating success and has already won several television awards. The Australian public broadcaster Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which airs the series, has profited on several levels according to Nikunen: Firstly, with this programme, SBS does justice to its public charge of promoting cultural diversity in Australia as well as public debate on multiculturalism and diversity issues. With the programme's popularity and the multi-platform strategies on Facebook and Twitter, the public broadcaster is also able to reach new (young) target groups. One study (Nash, 2015) on the first-person simulation game *Asylum Exit Australia*, which was conceptualised alongside the television



Source: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (2015)

Ill. 3: Does the media show an accurate picture of refugees, e.g. the number of families and young men and their level of education? (n = 1,457 Germans 14 years and older)

programme and has been well-received especially by young viewers, surveyed players and came to the conclusion: “*Asylum* seeks to contribute to a national debate, and this research suggests that the subjective, affective, and embodied perspective it fosters offers audiences new ways of understanding, engaging, and potentially participating.” (ibid., p. 969)

Brosius, Hans-Bernd & Esser, Frank (1995). Eskalation durch Berichterstattung. Massenmedien und fremdenfeindliche Gewalt. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Jacobs, Laura, Meeusen, Cecil & d'Haenens, Leen (2016). News coverage and attitudes on immigration: Public and commercial television news compared. *European Journal of Communication*, 31(6), 642-660.

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Nash, Kate (2015). Simulation games, popular factual media and civic engagement: an audience study of *Asylum Exit Australia*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 37(7), 959-971.

## REPORTING ON THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS 2015

In their analysis of German reporting on the refugee crisis in 2015, Hemmelmann & Wegner (2016) reflected on the main trends and patterns in German print media, television and online and identified 5 characteristic waves (see also Hemmelmann & Weg-

ner in this issue). After the welcoming euphoria had reached its pinnacle and German media were competing to produce the most empathetic reporting, reports on the terrorist attacks in Paris signalled a shift in the media discourse to the other extreme and focussed on the supposed threat potential of the refugees. At the same time, the perceived credibility of German media eroded: In a representative survey by the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (Allensbach Institute) from 2015, the refugee reporting in December 2015 was criticised by 41 % of respondents as being one-sided and 53 % did not believe that an accurate picture of the refugee make-up and their qualifications was being conveyed (Ill. 3).

In a study by U.S. scientists (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016) on media discourse on the European refugee crisis, it is emphasised that in the discursive framings of the reasons for flight, often dichotomies such as voluntary/forced, migrant/refugee, and economic/political were used to differentiate and evaluate refugees, whereby only forced migrants who left their home for political reasons (such as Syrian war refugees) were seen to have a “moral deservingness” (ibid., p. 16) for exercising the social, economic, and political rights of the asylum status. The picture of the dead refugee boy Aylan Kurdi stood as a symbol for this perspective: “The parsing of deservingness operates on many levels and in many forms. In September [2015], images of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body on a Turkish beach reverberated across the globe, stirring public outrage and affecting politics as far away as Canada during its federal election [...]” (ibid., p. 17) Voluntary migrants, in contrast, were often framed as “economic opportunists” in media discourses.

Australian scientists took the global horror at the picture of the drowned refugee boy and the political consequences as a starting point for

discussing media images of dead refugees at Europe’s borders (Lenette & Miskovic, 2016). The most common portrayals of migrants who cross borders during their flight have a depersonalising and criminalising effect on the recipients due to the mass of people shown. In contrast, images of dead refugees at border crossings are almost never seen in the media even though these deaths occur and visualise the individual suffering of refugees in a highly emotional way: “The lack of depiction of actual dead bodies in the public consciousness can contribute to inertia [...]; it seems like the fact that asylum seekers die at border crossings has become fiction in our collective imagination [...]” (ibid., p. 8)

In a study commissioned by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), scientists from the Cardiff School of Journalism analysed the media reports on flight and migration in Europe between 2014 and the start of 2015 (Berry et al., 2016). For this, thousands of press articles from Spain, Italy, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden were evaluated and substantial differences were found in terms of the sources used, selection of topics, evaluation of the migration, and the language used. In the German and Swedish print media, one could read primarily about “refugees” or “asylum-seekers” while Italian, Spanish, and British media wrote about “(im-)migrants”. According to the authors’ opinion, the terms used have a large influence on the tone of public debate; overall, the Swedish press demonstrated the most positive attitude toward refugees while British reporting was the most negative and polarising in Europe (ibid., p. 252 ff.). Humanitarian topics came up especially in the Italian press, which had the most homogenous reporting together with Spain. The German sample was characterised by the widest variation in attitudes towards refugees with a strong focus on domestic political sources (ibid., p. 259).

Hemmelmann, Petra & Wegner, Susanne (2016). *Flüchtlingsdebatte im Spiegel von Medien und Parteien*. *Communicatio Socialis*, 49(1), 21-38.

Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (Allensbach Institute) (2015). *Vertrauen und Skepsis – Bürger und Medien. Eine Dokumentation des Beitrags von Prof. Dr. Renate Köcher in der Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung No. 292 vom 16. Dezember 2015*. Available at: [http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx\\_reportsndocs/FAZ\\_Dezember2015\\_Medien.pdf](http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx_reportsndocs/FAZ_Dezember2015_Medien.pdf) [16.02.2017]

Holmes, Seth & Castañeda, Heide (2016). *Representing the "European refugee crisis" in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death*. *American Ethnologist*, 43(1), 12-24.

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Berry, Mike, Garcia-Blanco, Inaki & Moore, Kerry (2016). *Press coverage of the refugee and migrant crisis in the EU: a content analysis of five European countries*. *Project Report*. Geneva: *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html> [16.02.2017]

### CRISES SELL NEWS: CONSEQUENCES OF ONE-SIDED IMAGES

Given the fact that television plays a large role in public discourse on refugees, Canadian scientists (Esses et al., 2013) ran several experiments to analyse the dangers that media coverage on asylum and flight can have when it primarily portrays the acceptance of refugees as a threat to the accepting society, which also feels insecure. This reporting usually follows the motto: "Crises sell news" (ibid., p. 522). The one-sided negative portrayal and discussion of flight and asylum as problems can also be interpreted as answers to a widespread societal insecurity and the threat to national identities as a result of globalisation (ibid., p. 521).

In one experiment, the test persons were asked to read an online article on the actor Steve Martin's biography and then to answer questions. Casually placed at the bottom of the website was a caricature that showed an asylum-seeker in front of the desk of the Canadian immigration authority, carrying several pieces of luggage and documents. Some of the participants

saw a version of the caricature in which the luggage had words written on it like "AIDS" or "SARS", while the other participants saw the same picture without those words. In general, the participants had a difficult time remembering the caricature, but for the participants who had seen the version of the drawing in which the asylum-seekers were stigmatised as carriers of dangerous infectious disease, there was a significant tendency to view this as a threat and a depersonalised being (ibid., p. 525): "By perceiving immigrants and refugees as not completely part of the human ingroup, one can more easily believe that they deserve negative outcomes and that perceptions of the national ingroup do not need to shift to accommodate their inclusion. In this way, threat is reduced and the status quo is maintained." (ibid., p. 531)

### Social inclusion and self-image

In his review of the state of research on "integration in the media", Ruhrmann (2016) points out that the topic of social inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees was marginalised for decades in German media, and in particular contributions from science received almost no notice from the public (ibid.). Instead, the media discourse had a one-sided tendency: "Immigrants do not make assessments, but (usually negative) assessments are made of them. Immigrants do not make demands, but demands are made on them." (ibid., p. 190) According to the author, only in the last 10 years can one see a more nuanced and informed discussion.

That negatively coloured media reporting can also influence the self-image of ethnic minorities was shown by a Canadian study among others using the example of the Bosnian refugees in Quebec. If there is a one-sided, biased portrayal, then minorities anticipate reprisals and view their social relationships with the majority society as disturbed (Ridjanovic, 2007). In this study,

it also became clear that refugees react particularly sensitively to one-sided, negative, and stereotypical portrayals of refugees and ethnic minorities due to their often traumatic experiences in their home countries and during flight. This underscores the demands of scientists on the media to be particularly careful and fair when reporting and portraying ethnic minorities and not to reduce them to their role as refugees and asylum-seekers, that is, to avoid an "othering" (e.g. in Tsfati, 2007). Those creating media should reflect on the stances they take, make the reasons for these stances transparent and treat the perspective they have chosen as one of many possible ones (Hemmelmann & Wegner, 2016, p. 35).

Ruhrmann, Georg (2016). *Integration in the media. Between science, policy consulting, and journalism*. In Georg Ruhrmann et al. (Ed.), *Media and minorities. Questions on representation from an international perspective* (pp.177-194). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Ridjanovic, Amra Curovac (2007). *Le rôle des médias dans l'adaptation des réfugiés dans leur pays d'accueil. Le cas des réfugiés bosniaques dans la Ville de Québec*. *Recherches Qualitatives, Hors Série*, 4, 69-91.

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