

22.03.2016 - Communication & Information Sector

Covering Migrations and Refugees – are media doing the right thing?



Although many media have focused on humanistic reporting and on telling the stories of refugees, very few journalists are trained to cover this issue – with important consequences. These were some of the conclusions of media experts who gathered on 18 March in Paris to discuss about Media and Migration, during a thematic debate organized by UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

© UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

The issue of populations on the move has been highlighted by the Syrian exodus and its impact on Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Europe, but is also very evident in the Americas, in East African countries, and in Afghanistan, Iraq and [India](#) amongst others.

In this context, untrained reporters are failing to pick up the relevance of differences between the terms “migrants”, “asylum-seekers” and “refugees”. But “words matter,” observed Melissa Fleming, spokesperson for the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees.

Another result of unprepared journalists is that the media have often reduced refugees to an image where they are either a (male) threat or a group of victims, according to Dutch academic, Jacco van Sterkenburg.

There is a similarity between these two approaches, in his view. They both create a “us and them” which reveals differences at the expense of coverage of shared human issues amongst local residents and newcomers.

Across all countries, “media have been manipulated by political leaders, too often accepting their outrageous statements” added Aidan White, Director of the Ethical Journalism Network which has recently published “[Moving Stories](#)”, an international review of how media cover migration.

Furthermore, “training is very much needed” noted Dr. Guita Hourani, Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University (Lebanon), both for journalists and for editors, and not only on journalism ethics but also on how to challenge intolerance in the political rhetoric and on how to contextualize events.

Turkish academic Nevin Yildiz, from Hacettepe University, proposed that women refugees should be given priority attention, so that through them other women can be approached and allowed to express themselves, “because women’s visibility is very limited”.

The experts agreed that newsrooms lack capacity to cope with such an unprecedented situation, and that more means are needed to report on this issue appropriately.

Fleming called for specialist reporters on refugees, as well as complementary UN social media coverage, to promote public understanding of a complex story.

“Support is also needed for refugee media, and for networks of refugee journalists, so that refugees themselves can tell their own story” added Mogens Bjerregard, IPDC Bureau Member for Denmark.

White concluded that “migration is part of the human condition, our nations are built on migration” – hence the need to contextualize and focus on reasons.

The IPDC is the only multilateral forum in the UN system designed to mobilize the international community to discuss and promote media development. The Programme not only provides support for media development projects but also stimulates international debate on important media-related issues. After the debate, the IPDC Bureau agreed on follow-up action to promote best practices of professional reporting on this issue and high ethical standards in this field.

Source: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/all-news/news/covering_migrations_and_refugees_are_media_doing_the_right_thing/#.Vvt7GVV97IU