

SPRING 2019

MIGRATION, FAKE NEWS AND MEDIA ETHICS

REPORT



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The Migration & Integration programme is supported by the United States European Command.



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**Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union**

DESPERATELY SEEKING TRUSTWORTHY JOURNALISM ON MIGRATION

Sensational headlines and so-called ‘fake news’ have the power to sway public opinion, so modern media must better balance its coverage of Europe’s migration challenges. This was a conclusion of Friends of Europe’s 7 May Policy Insight debate ‘Migration, fake news and media ethics’ during which participants explored ways to improve migration reporting and hold online platforms more accountable.

Taking place ahead of the European elections, the debate examined how the migration debate might be weaponised by those seeking to influence the outcomes. “Given fears of foreign meddling in elections and the media’s powerful role in shaping public opinion and political choices, as happened with Brexit in 2016, we are all braced for more lies,” cautioned **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.

“Good quality journalism includes honest information and freedom of expression, which are key for democracy and good governance,” she said. But how can we tackle the avalanche of mis- and disinformation shared by irresponsible media outlets – and through social media channels – especially as regards Europe’s already-heated debate over migration?

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Shada Islam

Director of Europe & Geopolitics
at Friends of Europe

PERSONAL AND POSITIVE STORIES

Susan Dabbous, freelance journalist and author of the book *How would you like to die? Diary of a kidnapping in Syria*, warned that while many journalists engage in constructive reporting on migration, others may be pressured by media outlets to do otherwise. She highlighted examples of unscrupulous reporting in the United States and United Kingdom, as well as some media in Italy that often use inflammatory headlines against migrants and Muslims – despite it contravening Italy’s constitutional values.

She added that journalists and photographers are well aware of the power they have when reporting – it is easy to manipulate messages about migrants through words and images.

Frustrated by this form of migration reporting, Dabbous called for journalists to move away from reporting which can dehumanise the subjects and turn instead to reporting on personal stories that restore migrants’ humanity, respect and dignity: “Migrants are people with names, stories and pasts which we need to tell too.”

“Humanitarian assistance in the Mediterranean has been criminalised, especially our SAR [search and rescue] work”

Inma Vazquez

Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF)
Representative to the EU and NATO

FAIR AND BALANCED REPORTING

Tom Law, Director of Campaigns and Communications at the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), agreed on the importance of telling these personal stories, but also highlighted the importance of fairly balanced reporting which is all too often missing.

Through their work, the EJN has concluded that migration reporting is often based on official government sources. “Migrants’ own voices tend to get ignored in these reports,” shared Law. He suggested that journalists report independently of government narratives, but also admitted that even the best journalists can struggle with reporting due to the rhetoric surrounding migration, standards of political correctness, and the sometimes-offensive language used by senior politicians about migrants.

Despite this, Law emphasised that it is essential not to lecture journalists, who are usually doing their best under difficult circumstances, but rather to work with them to understand their decision-making processes. “It’s better to work with them and ask them to consider why they are making the choices they do when reporting on migration,” he said.

REAL WORLD CONSEQUENCES

The power of media goes beyond simply influencing public opinion. In some cases, the outcome can put lives at stake.

The vilification in the media of some NGOs as ‘taxi services for African refugees to Europe’ has resulted in the complete dismantlement of their search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean. Libya has the only remaining coastguard pursuing SAR, despite being primarily tasked with tackling smuggling and human trafficking. The organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was one NGO which was caught in the crossfire.

“Humanitarian assistance in the Mediterranean has been criminalised, especially our SAR work,” said **Inma Vazquez**, Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) Representative to the EU and NATO. She was able to trace the root cause back to a single media article from December 2016 which insinuated that NGOs like MSF were colluding with smugglers and traffickers. Although the original article was amended, the distorted version continued to spread. The sentiment was quickly taken up by social media, mainstream media and even some institutions.

The result has been that a number of MSF staff are now under criminal investigation for collusion. Worse still, this negative narrative was further spread by anti-migration leaders in Italy, Hungary and Austria – and recently mirrored in comments by France’s Minister of the Interior.

"This official yet clearly negative narrative has done real damage to NGOs like us," admitted Vazquez. As a result, the organisation has learned lessons for the future – including on the need to anticipate the risks of fake news and to build a positive narrative. MSF is focusing on improving its public communications and is working with journalists, supporters and institutions to combat the collusion arguments through transparency and by making use of facts and figures.

COMPLYING WITH CODES FOR ONLINE MEDIA

Social media is often blamed for spreading fake news, but steps are being taken to reign this in. Online titans like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have signed up to the EU Code of Practice against disinformation – part of the EU Action Plan against disinformation – as well as the EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, noted **Matthias Oel**, Director for Migration, Mobility and Innovation in the European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs.

The Action Plan seeks to create an EU network against disinformation: each member state must designate contact points and participate in a European rapid alert network about fake news. "Our Code of Practice should help a lot, because it disrupts the advertising revenue of fake sites and enables such sites to be closed," he remarked.

But while self-reporting imposed on online players is a good first step, others believe that social media giants could do far more to be transparent and react faster when they detect fake news or disinformation on their platforms.

NEW INITIATIVES IN ETHICAL JOURNALISM

The European Commission naturally supports pluralistic journalism and is working hard to combat fake news and disinformation, shared Oel. It recently drafted a statement for the EU's Sibiu Summit on 9 May 2019, underlining that communication on the EU should be a "shared responsibility of all parties involved" – in other words not just of the EU institutions, but also of local, regional and national bodies.

The Commission also wants to ensure that citizens are able to make informed political choices. As a result, they are working to ensure that communication is multilingual, factual, focused on concrete results for citizens and capable of enabling two-way conversations. The Commission is also eager to support and fund quality media.

While supporting quality media is a good idea, Law also raised the issue of who is responsible for making the funding decisions. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Journalism Trust Initiative, launched

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Freelance journalist and author of the book *How would you like to die? Diary of a kidnapping in Syria*

in 2018, may provide a good example. The initiative sets a standard on how funding decisions are made for news organisations and which news algorithms are used – without relying on governments. It can also help governments decide which quality media to fund and can influence the algorithms chosen by online providers to promote news. “This is much better than allowing Google or Facebook to make such decisions,” Law added.

A number of other tools are available to encourage ethical reporting, said Law. Journalists can tap into various media toolboxes, among them EJN’s guidelines on migration reporting and trafficking.

“We want to help those journalists think through how and what they report, as well as to identify difficult dilemmas and ways to deal with them,” he added. Echoing the views of others in the debate, Law also called for more journalists of refugee and migrant backgrounds to be brought into newsrooms.

MEDIA LITERACY AS A SILVER BULLET

At the end of the day, the weight of sorting through legitimate and fake news lies with the consumers of media themselves, many of whom have already made up their minds about the issues. “Even if we change how we tell the news, people will still find their fake news somewhere else,” admitted Dabbous.

But there is still hope for the future. While the disinformation phenomenon is neither new nor close to being solved, it is still possible to empower current and future generations to become critical media consumers. For this to be successful, governments, institutions, organisations and educators will need to make greater efforts to promote media literacy among citizens. This will prove to be the silver bullet in countering disinformation in the years to come.

Key recommendations to organisations and institutions:

- Anticipate the risks posed by mis- and disinformation and work to build and support a positive narrative on migration.
- Be wary of the power of neutral language – even saying nothing is saying something.
- Don't lecture journalists who are doing their best under difficult circumstances. Instead, work with them and ask them to consider why they make the choices they do when reporting on migration.
- Support and fund responsible media outlets.
- Improve media literacy among citizens by encouraging them to be critical readers and helping them to become more aware of how fake news is spread and produced.

Key recommendations to journalists and media outlets:

- Migrants are people with names, stories and pasts – tell their personal stories and the positive contributions they are making to societies.
- Ensure fair and balanced reporting by going beyond government sources and including more diverse perspectives.
- Bring journalists of refugee and migrant backgrounds into newsrooms.
- Increase reporting about the causes of migration (conflict, climate change, etc.) in local, regional and national press.
- Those who write the stories have immense power – beware of manipulating messages through words and photos.

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+32 2 893 98 11
info@friendsofeurope.org
friendsofeurope.org

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