WHAT ROLE DOES THE MEDIA PLAY IN DRIVING XENOPHOBIA?

GERMANY: TWO FACES OF REFUGEE REPORTING

J. OLAF KLEIST

The media's coverage of the 2015 European refugee crisis stood in stark contrast to its xenophobic stereotyping of the early 1990s. Back then, following German reunification, the country saw heightened nationalism, a rise in the number of refugees, a series of racist riots and murders, and constitutional reforms that severely restricted political freedoms. Newspapers published articles about the criminality of foreigners, often using derogatory terms. Until the number of asylum-seekers sharply declined during the mid-1990s and the topic of refugees largely vanished, a media-constructed anti-migrant discourse penetrated society.

The issue came back into focus in 2013 when refugees began to protest their living conditions. By 2015, the arrival of about 1 million asylum-seekers started to affect everything from personal lives to global politics. Initially, journalists seemed to proceed with care, cognizant of the mistakes of the 1990s. A study by the Hamburg Media School counted 19,000 articles on refugees that year—4,000 more than in the previous six years combined. Four out of five articles took a positive view of refugees, which, the report suggests, helped to reduce negative perceptions in the public overall. Major media outlets, such as *Hamburger Abendblatt*, had reporters dedicated exclusively to migration issues, allowing for in-depth reporting and research.

In tandem with Chancellor Angela Merkel's assertion, "We will manage," the major conservative tabloid, *Bild*, started a campaign, called "Refugees Welcome," to provide information to potential volunteers. Indeed, an online survey my colleague Serhat Karakayali and I conducted found that media reports were a particularly important factor in the burgeoning volunteer movement for refugees in 2015.

But by September, the coverage took a substantial turn. The frequency of the term "border control" in publications surpassed that of "welcome culture." Media researcher Friederike Herrmann argues that the media began creating the impression that the refugee issue was overwhelming the state, thereby inciting fear. This shift came in unison with the EU's closure of its southern borders, anti-refugee protests, and calls by mainstream politicians to restrict the number of asylum-seekers allowed to enter Germany.

In the wake of sexual assaults by migrants during the 2015 New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne, the media was widely criticized for reacting too slowly and not being explicit about the perpetrators' identity for fear of being deemed "anti-refugee." Reputable news sources, both liberal and conservative, published numerous reports about migrant crimes, often accompanied by sexual stereotypes. Images of white women's bodies defiled by black hands were widely condemned on social media.

Journalists internalized the notion that their reporting about the refugee crisis had been too positive. In 2016, racist tropes about criminal foreigners, "asylum abuse," and refugees as a resource burden found their way back into major media outlets. Meanwhile, the government's introduction of stricter integration laws and racial profiling by the police in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2016 received little criticism.

German coverage of refugees seems to take cues from government policy. In early 2015, the media had an edifying influence on the public's perception of refugees. Its record has since been grim. Germany's upcoming election will be a test: Will the media have a beneficial impact on the refugee debate again, or will it instead echo the populist politics spreading worldwide?

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FAIRNESS > OBJECTIVITY
ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

Striving for objectivity is the last thing a journalist should do. Fairness is a far better ideal. I've spent over a decade writing and reporting in countries like South Sudan, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Honduras, where conflicts never occur between equals. To speak truths about who causes carnage or corruption isn't advocacy; it's a moral imperative, and honest editors and reporters should welcome it. We should explain where human rights violations happen and who is at fault.

Xenophobia is coursing through the veins of today's world. The demonization of refugees has become a regular feature of the Murdoch empire and *The Daily Mail*, causing public distrust and anger toward the most marginalized in society. In Australia, over the last two decades, publications have vilified refugees so intensely that residents now fear the relatively small number of asylum-seekers arriving by boat. Politicians are mostly too weak to resist this stream of invective. The result is the "Trumpification" of immigration policy, with race-based ideas aimed at one group: Muslims.

This is happening across Europe and Australia in addition to the U.S.

Journalists should have every right to protest in the streets, online, and in their work about policies that are discriminatory, illegal, or nonsensical. If not now, when? This applies to both the left and right. Reporters are human beings, not robots programmed to exclude their critical faculties.

Additionally, journalists have a responsibility to be transparent about their positions and views. They should acknowledge who they're voting for in elections. Countless American journalists and commentators actively supported the Hillary Clinton campaign for the U.S. presidency in 2016. That's their right, but they should be open about it. Responsible media outlets should also welcome a diversity of views and reporter backgrounds especially from areas, races, and religions that are routinely ignored in the mainstream press.

In the age of media disruption, the public deserves journalists who are honest about their intentions, even if it upsets people with different political views. A solution is not to cover politics as a game between two, equally compromised sides. The best reporting has always been about giving voice to those without one.

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RUPTURES ACROSS THE BODY POLITIC
DOMINIQUE TRUDEL

Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the possible victory of Marine Le Pen in the next French presidential election are symptoms of the current explosion of xenophobia in Western

democracies. But while the multiple, complex, and overlapping media dynamics underpinning this phenomenon are still widely misunderstood, one effect is obvious: the normalization of intolerance. To explain enduring stereotypes, researchers point to the biased representations of minorities and foreigners in popular culture. Following the murder of six Muslims in a Quebec City mosque in January, journalists and scholars highlighted the role of populist radio stations in spreading Islamophobic discourse. Even Premier Philippe Couillard denounced the pervasiveness of Muslim stereotypes in Quebec's culture.

But when considering media content, politicians and scholars often avoid the broader question of the role of journalism in the creation and division of political communities. As historian Benedict Anderson famously argued, the notion of "the French people," as distinct from the German or Spanish, for example, made very little sense before the era of the printing press. In 18th-century Europe, the dissemination of novels and newspapers printed in commonly spoken languages created a new sense of belonging. Later, during the 19th century, the development of national railways and telephone networks contributed to the emergence of new political communities and ideas, like "Italy" and "Canada."

The great nationalisms of the 20th century were largely media-driven fractures between "us" and "them." The creation of such boundaries is consubstantial to the most fundamental media effect: providing a common experience of space, time, and language. In this sense, all media are "xenophobic" as they provide a specific experience of belonging that may appear to be unique and natural. This is equally true for the most pro-democratic and progressive outlets. Recent media-driven lifestyles and trends—think of barn wood, eating organic, and buying local—are reinventing pseudo-folk communities that are not so different from the fringe websites of the far right.

Today's burst of xenophobia differs from the 19th- and 20th-century media-driven nationalisms. The proliferation of new media and platforms dovetails with both the multiplication of political communities and new divisions between them. The "other" to be feared is no longer a distant abstraction—xenophobia has turned inward, decomposing historical political communities and old nationalisms. The new generation of populist politicians understands and exploits this dynamic, promoting new ruptures that tear across the old national body. What we may be in need of now is a revival of traditional nation-building media: well-financed national television networks or serious national newspapers that promote inclusive and non-essentialist images of our political community.

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RUSSIA: WHAT WE FOCUS ON
EKATERINA ZABROVSKAYA

In 2016, anti-immigrant sentiment peaked in Russia. The importance of the media in driving or curbing xenophobia was particularly visible in the relations between Chechnya—Russia's southern, predominantly Muslim republic—and other regions of the country. Once a hotbed of separatism and terrorism, Chechnya has since launched a campaign to improve its image and Russia's attitude toward Muslims.

Still, discrimination persists against labor migrants from the South Caucasus and the Muslim countries of Central Asia. Cultural and religious differences between Russians and these newcomers often result in violent conflicts, attracting significant media attention. In 2013, the Russian media ran footage of an

immigrant from the Caucasus killing a 25-year-old. Afterward, hundreds of Russians vandalized the property of immigrants in Moscow's Western Biryulevo neighborhood.

In a March 2016 survey, the independent Levada Center found that 80 percent of Russians said they support restricting the "inflow" of immigrants into the country, replecting a nationwide spike in anti-immigrant sentiment. Pollsters speculated that this xenophobia was rooted in external events: The media had been heavily covering the European refugee crisis and sexual assaults perpetrated by migrant men in Germany.

As American political scientist Bernard C. Cohen wrote in his 1963 book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, the media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." When journalists are accused of driving xenophobia, they shrug their shoulders, and say they merely report the facts. But, like an artist trying to paint a complex scene, certain details will inevitably be left out; something is rearranged, something is emphasized. When news of such events as the murder in Western Biryulevo is dramatized and played repeatedly, it can fuel nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes.

In 2015, responding to rising violence against Muslims and attempting to counteract false stereotypes and improve interreligious relations in Russia, the parliament of Chechnya drafted legislation to ban any mention of a terrorist suspect's nationality or religion in the media. While Russian President Vladimir Putin signaled his favor for similar legislation back in 2007, the Chechen bill was met with intense pushback from the journalistic community and not adopted.

Restrictions on speech cannot address the root of the problem. Journalism involves ethical decision-making, but also obeys the rules of the market. As long as the competition for profits and ratings remains a core motivator, we'll see more reportage that appeals to people's fears.

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AN ILLUSION OF DIVERSITY
SYDETTE HARRY

I'm a first-generation American from a country that most people need to have pointed out on a map. My family and I learned to be Americans by watching *The Cosby Show* and reading *The Daily News* and *The New York Times.* At the same time, my parents obtained illegal copies of the BBC's *Desmond's* before it became available in the U.S., and walked to the one grocery store that carried *Stabroek News* and *Kaieteur News*, Guyana's leading dailies, to teach me what it meant to be Guyanese.

The media clued me in to which aspects of culture were widely accepted and which were restricted and othered. What you watch, read, and listen to can define your identity and forge community, but it also highlights what you are not. In my work, I constantly wonder where I should locate myself amid all the noise and content. I often ask myself: What skills, spaces, and tools was I given, and what else must I create to insert myself into the media ecosystem? When should I address those problems systemically versus emotionally? Does my work merely make my voice more perceptible, or does it make space for others—such as children like my younger self—to be heard?

Analysis of social media tends to focus on interconnectivity or popular access, ignoring what I find most intriguing: its multiplication of formats. If you find yourself outside of the mainstream narrative, you can experiment with

multiple mediums to define yourself and to bypass traditional gatekeeping.

Still, the creation and consumption of video, podcasts, and tweets can create an illusion of openness, access, and diversity. Twitter, Instagram, and the now-departed Vine have theoretically allowed more people to express themselves, but they also enforce certain parameters. A tweet, for example, has a limited word count and inherently pushes users to solicit reactions.

In this hyper-networked media landscape, users on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube often drive home the same points of view, over and over. These platforms build unity, but they still isolate users from larger and contrary narratives. Corporate control and societal conventions are still at play in social networks, amplifying the voices of the most powerful, rather than meaningfully expanding the narratives available in the media.

Social media can create opportunity, but it does not eliminate hegemony; the proliferation of mediums allows us to support myopic worldviews and ignore facts. At its best, new media can facilitate conversations long barricaded in traditional outlets. At its worst, it manufactures a fiction of multivoicedness while reinforcing bubbles. You can broadcast yourself unchecked, but you can also broadcast others unchecked. And too often the act of broadcasting is mistaken for conversation.

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