



AUSTRIA

Good and Bad, but a Lack of Accountability when Journalism Fails the Migration Test

» Katharine Sarikakis

The issue of migration began to dominate the Austrian media with the dramatic surge northwards of refugees entering the country along the Balkan route as they made their way to Germany. There was a record number¹ of asylum requests in Austria in 2015, of around 90,000, an increase of 200% over the previous year, and a number, in a country of 8.5 million inhabitants, which was seized on especially by tabloid press as something of an existential threat.

How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?

A study by journalists, for journalists and policymakers

Migration media coverage in 17 countries from 2015 to 2016

Funded by the European Union



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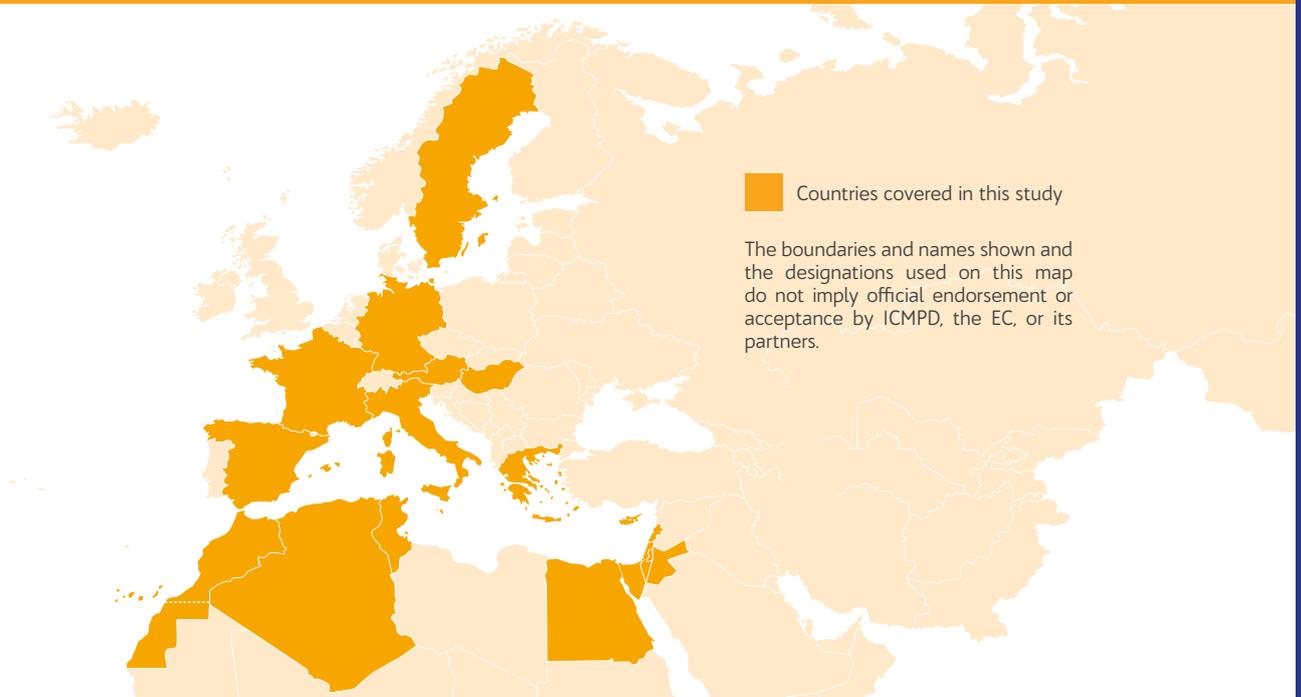
ABOUT EUROMED MIGRATION IV AND THE STUDY

“How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?”

This is a Chapter of the Study “How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration?” carried out and prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network and commissioned in the framework of EUROMED Migration IV (EMM4, 2016-2019). The objective of this project, financed by the European Union and implemented by ICMPD, is to support EU Member States and ENI Southern Partner Countries in establishing a comprehensive, constructive and operational dialogue and co-operation framework, with a particular focus on reinforcing instruments and capacities to develop and implement evidence-based and coherent migration and international protection policies. In order to achieve this objective, EMM 4 builds upon the results of the first three phases of the project (2004-2015) and

tailors its activities around two pillars: the first pillar facilitates effective North-South and South-South regional dialogues and co-operation in the four main fields of migration and international protection-related matters (legal migration; irregular migration; migration and development; international protection and asylum). The second pillar focuses on capacity-building by applying a new outcome-oriented approach that includes sub-regional activities, tailor-made national training programmes and targeted technical assistance packages for committed partners. Both pillars are supported by a horizontal and cross-cutting thread aimed at accumulating evidence-based knowledge and establishing effective communication in order to contribute to a more balanced narrative on migration.

Find the entire study at www.icmpd.org/EMM4migration_narrative



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The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) was commissioned to conduct this study.

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It coincided with the discovery of dozens of dead migrants in a lorry on a motorway about 30 km from Vienna, in a news event that became a global story.

The migration surge was mainly a consequence of the deterioration of the armed conflict in Syria. The evident humanitarian crisis was met first with calm and objective media coverage, but was quickly used by certain political leaders to advance a rhetoric defined by stereotypes and xenophobia.

The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance denounced the inflammatory speeches of FPÖ, the Freedom Party of Austria, and other groups (Freedom House 2016).

Statements by political leaders, such as the Austrian foreign Minister, included a proposal to “keep refugees in island camps”, associated “high birth rates” in Africa with migration flows towards Europe, identified the need for increased border controls as an emergency issue, and ultimately justified the eventual restrictive emergency legislation passed by the Austrian Parliament and signed by the then President of the Republic.

Meanwhile, the government *de facto* closed the Balkan route, reinstating border controls with their EU neighbours. The change in policy to expedite refugee applications including through arrest and detention by police was criticised by international and Human Rights organisations such as Amnesty International².

As reported in the Financial Times: “We have a long tradition of welcoming people humanely and we lost this way of thinking in the last few months,” says Klaus Schwertner, chief executive of Caritas Vienna, the largest charity helping refugees in Austria³.

The coverage in Austria as in other countries was presented by media largely as a crisis for national states rather than for the international community. The largely neutral media reporting at the beginning changed over the year, giving way to increasingly negative coverage of refugees. In the press, there were almost double the numbers of negative articles as positive articles, while the number of neutral reports decreased steadily according to one study⁴.

This study shows that media references to legal frameworks that might help people to appreciate the intensity and context of displacement, moved steadily from references to humanitarian aid and refugee laws to an emphasis on Schengen and the Dublin Agreement moving the public debate steadily away from humanitarian crisis and international action to one of

border control and national actors.

In contrast, civil society organisations tried to highlight the international dimension, treating this as a “European” affair. Certain media also played up a criminal subtext to the discussion on migrants. Laws dealing with criminal activity, border controls, and those covering people smuggling, or illegality of migration and “trespassing” received most attention, whereas foundational laws such as the Human Rights Convention and the Geneva Convention on refugees were sidelined.

Despite widespread recognition of the need for media to promote integration of refugees, which became also anchored in the press code of the Austrian Press Council, and in the charter of the ORF, the public service broadcaster, it is clear that there is a need for greater adherence to these guidelines among media professionals.

The reasons for weak media performance are many: the priority given to commercial priorities over ethical and professional content; a professional journalistic culture that relies heavily on political elites as sources of information; and a journalistic bias towards sensationalism. In addition, the Austrian Press Council relies on voluntary compliance among its member and has little possibility to sanction non-members who violate its code and principles. It is therefore commonly referred to as a “toothless tiger”.

Nevertheless, towards the end of 2016, the Council came up with a checklist⁵ for journalists covering migration, refugees, and asylum seekers. It provides a useful ethical framework for journalists, but since the tabloids are not members and disproportionately distort and sensationalise reporting on migration, uptake of this checklist is limited to interested freelancers, plus some journalists working for the quality press.

In an effort to counter claims of biased reporting on migration, particularly from groups and individuals associated with right wing online platforms that the public broadcaster (ORF) and other mainstream media are in effect “Luegenpresse” (lying press), the ORF produced a handbook on the role of *quality journalism in migration issues* in which a series of guest authors discussed reporting on migration⁶. The texts evaluate the degree to which the public broadcaster and other media have embraced ethical standards, including accuracy and balance, in their coverage. Foremost among the concerns raised was the need to combat ‘fake news’ which many authors feel leads to increas-

ing mistrust of migrants, as well as the need to reach out to those groups isolated from mainstream migrant reporting.

Indeed, the tendency towards “negative” reporting on migrants is linked to the fact that reporting does not include the voices of migrants. There is a good deal of reporting on alleged crimes committed by migrants, but rarely, especially in tabloid media, are there comprehensive interviews with migrants themselves.

Noteworthy exceptions here must be mentioned, and in particular the ORF, whose guidelines help maintain civil and nuanced reporting, without resorting to excessive bias or editorial control. Although there are examples of editorial bias, neutral and objective reporting is far more prevalent than any other trend. Of particular importance is the bilingual youth radio station FM4 which has maintained a professional pro-humanitarian approach which provides comprehensive coverage in terms of source, voices, aspects and solutions, as well as in-depth analysis.

This exception has been supported by quality reporting across Austrian broadsheet press, however not necessarily systematically. Often the subjective approach of journalists and the economic pressures facing media lead to a distorted view created by what is called “negative framing” (Bonfadelli, 2010, p.183). This also involves the use of negative, fear-inducing terms such as “flood of refugees”, and the focus on fear-inducing themes such as alleged violence and criminality.

Stereotypes of the “criminal foreigner” remain very much the norm in Austrian media. Several scholarly studies have shown repeatedly the negative treatment of migrants by the media, as for example, back in 2001 (Meier-Braun, 2001, p.126) Meier-Braun noted that a “media reality” is created that does not conform to “real reality”. This “media reality” suggests that “foreigners are more criminal, more lazy, and worse than

national citizens – at least in the minds of .. average citizens”.

The Austrian broadsheet newspapers, which are members of the Press Council, have covered migration over the last two years in a more balanced and a less alarmist way than the tabloids.

Initially in Austria there was, especially in the broadsheet press, as well as in public media and private audio-visual networks a focus on welcoming refugees. But within months – and as a presidential election campaign began, in which the candidate of the far right party, emphasised alleged links between migrants and crime and terrorism and presented them as a security threat – much of the press shifted into a mode that focused, particularly in tabloids, on the ‘threat’ presented by migrants. There was a failure to underscore the rights of refugees under international law and to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees fleeing brutal conflict in Syria.

Furthermore, in the tabloid newspapers almost all of the reporting on migration follows an alarmist political line in relation to crime, whereas in the broadsheets there is a high volume of reporting on culture linked to migration, for example theatre productions put on by migrants. The *Kurier*, reported on an initiative Inside Out, in a move they termed ‘Walk of Fame for Humanity’ that covered Vienna’s leading pedestrian shopping street with 2,100 large portraits of refugees⁷.

The rise in reporting with the *Kronen Zeitung* (tabloid) corresponds to the height of the refugee crisis and the presidential election.

There is less reporting overall on migration in the tabloid press than in the broadsheets, in part because of the absence of any cultural reporting linked to migration, but also because the focus of the tabloids is narrower. There are virtually no articles on links to the economy or democracy. The focus is primarily on domestic politics, security issues, and reporting on al-



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leged criminal offences by migrants, especially sexual assault. The tabloids also seek to exploit any criminal statistics to highlight a supposed 'threat' presented by migrants. The same is true in other tabloids that are not in this database, e.g. *Oesterreich* and *Heute*.

The broadsheets tried to show the human face of migration. But there is no common approach. The professional quality broadsheets clearly make an effort to diversify coverage, and not sensationalise, but the tabloid newspapers often mix up the terms migrant and refugee, and also report inaccurately or in an unbalanced manner.

In one instance⁸, the editor-in-chief of a regional edition of the *Kronen Zeitung*, the country's leading tabloid, suggested in a column that "testosterone-charged" Syrian refugees had engaged in "highly aggressive sexual assaults" and that Afghans had damaged and dirtied a train compartment. He also claimed that "hordes" of refugees had been storming supermarkets "taking whatever they want, and then disappearing". He was forced to apologise after the police denied that this had occurred. He claimed he got the information from Facebook.

This incident came a week after the paper was reprimanded by the Austrian Press Council for having reported on Syrian refugees in a way the police described as distorted and exaggerated, apparently with the goal of representing Syrian refugees "in a bad light". The Press Council said the paper in the article appeared to be suggesting that "every Syrian refugee was a terrorist"⁹, and the article was clearly "discriminatory".

However, the *Kronen Zeitung* and the two other leading tabloids in the country, *Heute* and *Oesterreich* are not members of the Press Council: they argue that the Press Council has been set up by broadsheets to damage their business¹⁰.

The fact that the country's three leading tabloids – the newspapers that are admonished more often than any others by the Press Council – refuse to be members or accept their rulings, makes it much more difficult for a common professional and ethical reporting line on sensitive issues and particularly on the issue of migration to be established at the level of newspapers and throughout the media.

For example, the Austrian Press Council noted¹¹ that a July 2016 article by the online site of *Oesterreich* falsely reported that an alleged sexual assault by an African migrant on a woman whose upper bikini part was "torn from her body". The Press Council found that there was no such case. But since *Oesterreich* is not

a member and refuses to be bound by decisions, the impact on the newspaper's reporting ethics and professional standards regarding reporting on migration is likely to be minimal to zero.

While some quality media outlets, including broadsheets, private broadcasters and the public broadcaster make the effort to use correct terminology to describe the migrant community, this is not the case in the tabloid media, two of which – *Oesterreich* and *Heute* – offer free copies. Together, the three leading tabloids – *Krone*, *Heute* and *Oesterreich* – reach millions of Austrians every day, and so inaccurate or sensational reporting on migration has an impact, which may partly explain why the public mood has to a degree shifted away from the welcoming attitude towards refugees back in 2015.

Broadsheets meanwhile have made some efforts to incorporate migrants into actual reporting, with *Die Presse* actually 'handing over' output for a day every week, for a certain period of time, to a team of migrant journalists who worked in conjunction with editors for the newspaper, allowing for an approach which offered a more reflective view from the migrants' perspective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Austrian press coverage varies significantly. At times, some newspapers tend to mirror the political mood of political elites while at the same time, the lack of attachment to a self-regulatory body and hence the lack of accountability makes it difficult for journalists and citizens to exercise pressure for accurate and balanced reporting. In this situation it might be recommended to establish:

1. A system of obligatory membership to the Austrian Press Council as a non-state interventionist mechanism to ensure unbiased and balanced reporting;
2. Media actions to give more voice to migrants, not simply as victims or as perpetrators of crimes
3. More internal training of journalists to confront own and systemic biases;
4. More research funded by journalists' organisations collectively to monitor and evaluate shifts in reporting in relation to political positions of political elites, political pressures and economic pressures.

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Anthony Mills provided additional research in the preparation of this article.

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The *Kronen Zeitung*, *Der Standard*, *Die Presse*, and *Der Kurier*, are Austria's four leading newspapers. A summary of their performance in reporting on migrants and refugees related issues shows:

***Kronen Zeitung*:** 367 articles on migration in the past two years with 229 in 2016 alone. Headlines on migration covered or refugees read: terror, borders, crime, politics, security, integration, control, immigration, Viktor Orban, asylum seekers, EU, foreigners, extremism, Brexit, migration, (Austrian foreign minister) Sebastian Kurz, jihad, FPO, Africa, fear, demonstration, with police with the overwhelming alarmist tone of 'Can it get any worse?' while running an anti-EU commentary.

***Der Standard*:** Articles over two years 906 with 539 in 2016. Headlines: migration, refugee camps, refugees, populism, rights, integration, dance, Germany, Africa, EU commission, (Austrian defence minister) Doskozil, (Austrian interior minister) Sobotka, surveillance, right wing populism, Europe, Brexit, immigration, Aleppo, EU summit, Mediterranean, deaths, people smugglers, Trump, European Council, Greece, refugee crisis, human rights, , Trump, Austrian foreign minister Kurz, Syria, democracy, Orban, the Euro, EU, Europe, EU austerity, populism, borders, Hungary, Greece, EU deal with Turkey, books, identity, Libya, facts and figures, globalisation, Islamic State, trade, Balkan route, mosque, cultural change, children, migration and art, climate change, Erdogan, Africa, EU summit, asylum, Turkey, OECD, university, Christianity, Islam, Amnesty International, hospitality, FPO, border controls, elections, right wing parties, Hofer, unemployment, sinking boats, civil rights, constitution, artists' house, dialogue, Tsipras, UNHCR, consensus, former Austrian interior minister Mikl Leitner, IMF, protection, The type of coverage was essentially hard news, but also with a positive tone at times: such as news of fewer refugees coming to Germany, or court rejects Swiss limits on immigration, or fellow refugees handing over a suspect to authorities.

***Die Presse*:** Produced over two years some 671 with 378 in 2016. Headlines: migration, Doskozil, border

controls, Merkel, Trump, EU, conference, Euro, social pact, art, Lega Nord, populism, immigration, terrorism, Frontex, Turkey, refugees, OSCE, political correctness, internships, recruitment, globalisation, FPO, Orban, schools, people smugglers, migrant deaths, office and residential real estate, literature, Africa, chancellor Kern, Kurz, border controls, Islamic state, bombmaker, inspiration, job market, media, Austrian military, dance, events, police, border fences, EU summit, demagogue, democracy, burka, Italy, Syria, Mediterranean, income, wealth distribution, Visegrad countries, Alternative fuer Deutschland, work, Brexit, integration, borders, guest workers, Turkey agreement, clichés, EU Commission, Juncker, Europol, freedom of movement, right wing, history, fear of migration, refugee onslaught, global citizenship, the Church, centre for dialogue, mass migration, tolerance, women's initiative, unemployment, Hungary, illegal migration, drowned migrants, Islamism, deportation, security, universities, art, job chances, writers, intelligence services warning about migration, military, budget, criminal statistics, people smugglers, voter rights, elections, women and children, UNIDO, immigration, poverty in Africa, the poor masses, and nationalism. The tone was varied, but there was some alarmism for instance on the threat of another refugee onslaught.

***Kurier*:** Produced over two years some 778 articles and in 2016 a total of 423. Headlines included : exhibition, cabaret, EU, Europe, International Organisation for Migration, existential crisis for Europe, police, airport, defense minister, asylum seeker upper limit, job market, far right, crime, Muslims, terrorist attack, Brexit, border controls, Turkey deal, foreign minister, racism, discrimination, police, integration, demonstration, deportation, children, jobs, unemployment, Le Pen, populism, globalisation, soldiers, Africa, women, terrorism, social impact awards, UNHCR, artistic performance, refugee summit, Greece, alarmism, Hofer, conflict solving, respect, refugee suffering, destructive populism, refugee waves, support for refugees by Ai Weiwei, traffic chaos at borders, right wing extremism, far right 'Identitaeren', presidential election, Muslim population of Vienna, cinema, EU commission, worries about social peace in Vienna, culture, The content had lots of focus on culture, arts etc, and with positive headlines such as: Austria needs migrants.



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Links & Sources

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- ² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/04/austria-asylum-law-refugees/>
- ³ <https://www.ft.com/content/fc68bb26-8bea-11e6-8cb7-e7ada1d123b1>
- ⁴ A content analysis of online media in six European countries related to their reporting on migration at the height of the crisis found that 61% of the articles could be classified as "neutral reporting", and 27% "obviously negative". However, the percentage of "obviously negative" reporting was highest in Austria and Germany, rising to 37% in Austria and 39% in Germany. Filipova/Lieb (2015) Report on media coverage as presented at Vienna public event on Refugees, International Law and the Media 2.12.2015. The study covered selected European countries over a period of six months April –September 2015 inclusively.
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