

# Reporting European Crises:

## Migration. Testimonies from the coverage in Austria, Germany and Greece

Jean Monnet public round table and workshop, University of Vienna, 17 March 2017

In collaboration with the College of Liberal Arts University of Minnesota, USA

**Rapporteur:** Dr Olga Kolokytha, Media Governance and Industries Research Lab

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### Panelists:

Jeanne Carstensen, Public Radio International;  
Adéa Guillot, correspondent, Le Monde;  
Caterina Lobenstein, journalist, Die Zeit;  
Corinna Milborn, PULS 4;  
Ioannis Papadopoulos,  
reporter/multimedia producer,  
Kathimerini;  
Mustafa Sarwar, journalist and  
broadcaster, Afghan service of Radio Free  
Europe/Radio Liberty.

### Moderators:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Katharine Sarikakis,  
Universität Wien;  
Prof. Dr. Giovanna Dell'Orto, University of  
Minnesota (USA);  
Dr. Irmgard Wetzstein, Universität Wien.



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This event was part of the activities of the Jean Monnet Chair of European Media Governance and Integration and was organised by the Media Governance and Media Industries Research Lab, Department of Communication- University of Vienna in collaboration with the Center for German and European Studies and the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Minnesota. The aim of the public round table and the workshop was to generate discussion among different categories of stakeholders on the challenges of the migration and refugee situation in Europe, and on another level, to offer in-depth understanding of migration from a media and communication perspective, in particular that of journalists and broadcasters.

The panel discussed the narrative of the crisis and the complexity of migration trends, followed by a discussion on the over-simplified victimisation of refugees and migrants. Panel presentations and discussion gravitated towards the multifaceted challenges of reporting on a humanitarian disaster.

There are challenges with regards to gaining access to powerful political elites to provide a thorough coverage of the crisis. Panellists highlighted here the angle of security issues, arguing that journalism is under attack in certain countries and also touched on issues of digital surveillance and data being on high risk as a result of political pressures.

Attention was placed on terminology, highlighting that the term used in the Greek coverage of the migration crisis for example was *illegal migrants*, a term used for some time before changing to *refugees*. The shift on the choice of words was made by the Greek press, when having to face the challenge on how to approach refugees.

The challenges on how to discuss complex issues with publics who are told of the crisis as if it is an exceptional situation, raising the question of what story do journalists actually relate when reporting on the refugee situation were also discussed. When so much media does not seem to do so, journalists face the additional challenge of *doing the right thing* and covering the crisis in a way that does not present people simply as victims, but tell their stories and at the same time unfold the complex situations that lead them to forceful displacement and to becoming refugees.

Discussing what is a refugee “crisis,” the focus was on figures and on the way in which the focus on – and lack of comprehensive- numbers of refugees demonstrates the ways in which the debate is shaped by a twofold problematisation; figures/ numbers on refugees are producing political pressures on governments to act more effectively on the migration/ refugee crisis. These numbers, in turn, also have economic implications on refugees themselves with regards for example to issues of healthcare costs covered by State authorities and organisations. The problem of trustworthy sources for gathering evidence was also raised at this point, with emphasis placed, on one hand, on the “easiness” with which journalists may have access to refugees about which they can write stories and the difficulty to gain access to officials, on the other hand. It is easy to

victimize refugees but it is also not uncommon to receive hateful comments by readers when focusing on the human aspect stories on refugees.

The importance of personal experience was also discussed as one of the panel members was an internally displaced person and raised the issue of people in that position, as well as refugees outside their countries feeling comfortable talking on camera when their families might still be at risk in their native countries. This issue contributed to the debate as it brought forward the topic of personal stories of refugees and forcefully displaced people being told and the various dangers in which they find themselves into, that unfold challenges for journalists to cover.

The conversation then turned on human rights issues and migration as related to Europe; all today's topics have been present for the past 20 years but it was in 2015 that the emphasis on refugees as victims -- of conflicts, of poverty, of criminal networks dominating migration routes, and of a patchwork of often ineffective policies -- was highlighted. There has been a change of attitudes at the end of that year but now the time to show reality has come and it is a responsibility of the Media to showcase people who are *doing things right*.

The event participants had the opportunity to discuss through live Q&A dimensions of reporting migration. The public was also invited to provide their views on the gaps and positive examples in crisis reporting in writing through their response to a short survey, the aim of which was to stimulate reflection. The responses seem to gravitate towards certain common points such as the position of the European Union, the question of who receives more coverage from the refugee/ migration crisis and the challenges for journalists covering the issue. The European Union seems to be caught in an internal conflict. Press reporting reveals information on national political leaders to a great extent, and then of EU political leaders and international organisations, but not so much migrants/ refugees. There is agreement among participants that the migration/ refugee issue is related to other social and cultural issues in the EU and solidarity is of great or some importance for most. What appears to be missing from the reporting on migration is the refugees' experience and perspectives, as well as the perspective of integration. From the journalists' point of view, what is missing is reports on integration. An important issue identified with regards to reporting on migration is access to camps and dealing with reactions of resentment from the readers/ audience.