Recommendations for media reporting on migrants and refugees

The assumption of the importance of media for the construction of meaning in the society underpins research into media representations. Although this process entails a complex relationship between coding and decoding media messages the meaning of which is determined by cultural context, by analysing media representations we cannot come to conclusions about how audiences decode that content, because in order to understand the matter at hand, we have to focus on audience research. By analysing media representations, which we see as the dominant element in constructing the social reality and not as a reflection (whether thwarted or true-to-life) of that reality, we primarily focus on meanings that we can find in the content/text and based on which we can make hypothetical conclusions about the coder's intention, or in other words, about meaning that the media intended to affirm. In that process of construction of meaning we cannot observe individual journalistic practices separately from organisational editorial policy governing the work of individual journalists and, in a broader sense, the practices of our own professional community. Despite the fact that, observed at the individual level of media content production, great importance is attributed to professional education, internalized professional ethics, experience in journalism and the journalist's personal values, whereas hegemonic order is important at the level of the society, production practices are nevertheless primarily marked by ideological and political orientation of the media organization, based on which content is moulded. In this process, space is allocated for topics and actors that affirm this orientation, directing media practises and contents toward the perceived audience that the specific medium targets. Editorial policy may strive to 'catch' as large a segment of the population as possible, by nurturing the more 'moderate' ideological positioning (which is, of course, more subject to change in terms of meaning in the social and historical context) or it can address a narrower population segment; however, a form of 'symbiosis' in the mutual recognition of the media and the audiences (and naturally advertisers) is always present and it should be viewed in a broader social context of dominant values. This relationship of interpellation does not imply that journalists/media and audiences are in the same position of power; in fact, it is the media/journalists who reduce social reality in their daily production practices, selecting a completely specific segment to code and making decisions about how to frame a certain topic and about which actors they will include and which they will exclude. Apart from its audiences, the place that the media occupy in the social structure has to be determined in order to understand media practices, seeing that this place determines their mode of operation to a certain extent. In this context, one has to consider the ownership structure of the media organization,

1. Popović, Helena (2016) Mediji trećeg sektora: konceptualizacija i društveni kontekst njihovog djelovanja. In: Car, Viktorija; Matović, Marijana; Turčilo, Lejla (Ed.), *Mediji i javni interes*. Zagreb: Faculty of Political Science and Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung.

2. Journalists' Ethics Council received in 2021 a total of 108 reports, of which 59 turned out to be confirmed cases of violation of the Croatian Journalists' Code of Honour. In 2020 it received 65 reports, 43 of which were confirmed cases of violation of the Code, whereas in 2019, there were 35 reports, with 15 confirmed violations of the Code (data for 2019 is inconsistent); however, even in cases of violation of the code of ethics, the repercussions only pertained to members of the Croatian Journalists' Association (and most often this involved just letters of reprimand), whereas non-members suffered no consequences. Journalists' Ethics Council cautions that the *Code* (2009) should be amended so as to properly incorporate the changes that have taken place in journalism in the meantime (source: https://www.hnd.hr/izvjestaj-o-radu-novinarskog-vijeca-casti-za-2021-godinu. Accessed 20 March 2022).

revenue generated by it, the technological platform primarily used in content production (television, radio, press, web portals), size of the media organization which affects the division of labour (strict hierarchy or horizontal modes of operation), and other. For example, when it comes to ownership structure and revenue, media organizations can be categorized into three sectoral areas: 1) Public service media are institutionally more tightly connected with the government and with the way of defining cultural and social values in that domain. Discourse is based on creating national unity and legitimacy is derived from acting in the public interest, with social stability and support for those in power underlying all action. Diverse contents are offered in order to make sure that all population segments are included. Due to subscription-based financing, social expectations from that media organization are the greatest; 2) Privately owned media organizations that have a commercial orientation that entails maximisation of profit are structurally separated from the government, and mostly produce popular forms and contents. They most often reproduce a hegemonic discourse that includes an economic dominance and profit orientation, which is a consequence of their structural position of being dependent on advertisers; 3) Third sector media (or civil society media) are non-profit and their operations are connected with constituting alternative types of public. They primarily enable small-scope communication, participation and interaction within different communities and different interest groups. They encourage pluralism and diversity because they address minorities and include in the content they produce the kind of topics, formats and methods of approaching them that are not often represented in dominant media.[1]

Because of the complexity of the mutual relationship between media-constructed reality and social reality, formulating recommendations for reporting on specific themes emerges as a difficult task. It is evident that the normative ethical and professional principles – which are referred to in the Croatian Journalists' Code of Honour adopted by the Croatian Journalists' Association and which require, among other things, the following: In their work, journalists are obliged to defend human rights, dignity, freedom and values, respect pluralism of ideas and views, oppose all forms of censorship, contribute to strengthening the rule of law and as part of the public to participate in the democratic control of power and authority' – are not enough, because journalists and editors often fail to abide by those principles and, moreover, they are often not held accountable for that failure.[2]

When it comes to reporting on the phenomenon of migrations, we can say that this is generally an issue that causes much controversy; there is not even a remote consensus on migration policies, and consequently

there is no agreement about how one should report on that topic. Unlike the topics that pertain to different aspects of identity which often cause political and ideological controversy, topics such as, for instance, reporting on children's population are not that controversial: there is some (at least declarative) agreement that this is a vulnerable group that has to be protected, in which context reporting on children is formed around that assumption.

If we first look at the characteristics of the dominant type of media reporting covered by this study (despite the differences in terms of individual journalist practices), in which our qualitative analysis included 3044 articles published over the course of two years (2018–2019) dealing with the migration phenomenon, the following conclusions can be noted:[3]

— In reporting, the media primarily rely on official sources, both quantitatively (in terms of the number of articles that report the views of government representatives) and qualitatively (in terms of those views generally not being questioned), thus non-critically reinforcing the dominant official policy of persons in power. And while it is relatively understandable that the work of actors who are part of the institutional policy will be kept an eye on, considering that it is the normative foundation of journalism to perform a kind of 'supervision' of the elected government representatives (based on the liberal normative model)[4], that 'supervision' of their work should nevertheless involve more than just unprocessed publishing of entire press releases (which come from the institutions' public relations departments) or statements that are reported in articles and that are generally not questioned. This strategy can be correlated with the structural connection between the media and the actors in the position of power, but also with the methods of media production, which, through routine repetition of settled practices, produces more and more content, quantitatively speaking, and does this faster and faster (especially in the context of filling web portals with content), while the qualitative aspect of reporting is receiving less and less attention. At the same time, the logic of profit affects the number of employees in the editorial department and their working conditions, which results in them resorting to readily available practices (such as copy-paste journalism).

— Reporting on migrants is predominantly negative. This can be explained by ideological and political orientation of the actors who, owing to their structural position, get the most media representation: in the observed period, these were right-wing government representatives, and the hegemony was accepted by all

3. Popović, H., Kardov, K and Župarić-Iljić, D. (2022) Medijske reprezentacije migracija: Diskurzivne konstrukcije migranata, izbjeglica i tražitelja azila u hrvatskim medijima. Zagreb: Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities of the Republic of Croatia.

4. Popović, H. and Rodik, P. (2021) Novinarstvo i politika: novinari o komunikacijskim praksama s političkim akterima. CM-Communication and Media, XVI (2021), 1, pp. 27-52.

centrist media, more or less intensively. Moreover, right-wing oriented media generally tend to be more prone to negative discursive construction of migrants. Negative reporting is contributed to, among other things, by sensationalism, which is present in most media, regardless of their ideological and political orientation; consequently, the negative aspects of reporting appear as a constant.[5]

— Reporting exhibits a noticeable continuous gender stereotypization based on the conservative idea of gender.

— This topic is often reported in a simplified manner, based on insufficiently verified information, showing even a lack of knowledge of the subject-matter reported about. This can be seen, for example, in improper use of terminology (asylum seeker, refugee, asylee, migrant, person under international protection, etc.). Non-critical publishing of materials and statements without questioning their content or associating with other sources of information ('we give you the press release in full'...). Complex and ambivalent events are often reduced and simplified, which generally deteriorates the quality of public communication and discussion, in which context there is often unfounded generalization as well ('locals are in fear') in order to elevate an isolated event to a social problem, without any real reason.

— Reports on this issue are characterized by sensationalist reporting, which includes dramatization, patheticness and manipulation of emotions of the audiences, with the intention of arousing strong positive or negative sentiments ('nobody can sleep peacefully any more'). Controversial actors, statements and hypotheses (by politicians, citizens and their Facebook profiles, the clergy and their official websites, etc.) are also reported about, and these often involve hate speech, exclusiveness and hostility. Regardless whether or not such content is treated critically, by giving media space to such actors (who are marginal in terms of their numbers), the media (in) directly legitimize and give visibility to voices using non-tolerant and discriminating language, thus contributing to potential spreading of exclusive discourse.

— The central characteristic of reporting on this issue is the conflict format, which is presented as the fundamental social relation between different actors (between political actors on all levels of power, between political representatives in positions of power and civil society organisations, between the local population and migrants, between migrants and the police, between different countries, etc.), in which sense the actual content that might, in a democratic context, be based on argumented exchange of differences,

5. An exception from the negative sentiment is found in left-wing media, which are very few in Croatia and which, owing to the methodological framework of this study, were not included in the sample.

becomes irrelevant. The media fake a democratic discussion in the dichotomous key of 'balanced reporting', while simultaneously undermining the relevance of argumentation in the public domain by promoting triviality in the conflict format as a sort of spectacle.

— 'Stories' which are most represented in the media agenda regularly come in the dominant media formats: crime and crime pages, narrated personalized tragedies and topics suited for ideological and identity-related political battles, but deprived of any argumented debate.

— The media deliver 'humanitarian' reporting on migrants/refugees in recognizable annual cycles. They recognize the need for this kind of reporting mostly on specific dates (World Refugee Day) or in specific periods of the year (December, holiday season – the time for giving, selfless sharing and helping others).

— The media mostly deliver incident-focused reporting on migrants, but on the rare occasions when they report on 'normalization' of everyday life in the context of refugees' resettlement and their integration in the Croatian society, there are noticeable elements of propaganda reporting, especially in media representations of persons under international protection who have come to the country under the migration quotas (who are at the same time the type of migrants who are 'approved' by elected political representatives). They are often glorified and romanticised 'with good intentions', often even infantilized, in order to make them seem likeable, which results in patheticness (by using expressions such as, for example, 'they couldn't keep a smile off their face') and, apart from this being interpreted as propaganda, it can be viewed as sensationalist reporting as well. Due to the overly and atypically positive reporting that is clearly intended to influence the audiences, this type of reporting can be counter-productive precisely because it is (or could potentially be) recognized as propaganda and/or sensationalism.

— Articles produced by other media are often published, which results in endless repetition and recycling of content in different media, which significantly reduces diversity in reporting and in the approaches used. In a great number of published articles there is no indication of the source (original author), which represents violation of journalistic ethics.

— The media operate as an autoreferential system focused on the media field – primary reference is to the content published a) in the relevant medium itself ('going back on a previous report' and 'we give you a complete overview', referring to past reports); b) in other media (this is an omnipresent phenomenon); c) on official websites of various institutions (press releases); d) in the form of comments on web portals or in social networks (circulating text, mostly through online communication). Journalists' reports from the field involving communication between the journalist and other social actors are becoming a marginal practice, which leads to perpetualization of similar content, actors and meanings.

Having in mind these characteristics of media reporting, the conducted research has made it possible to give recommendations that pertain to individual media practices of journalists:

— Rely on different sources and promote and nurture the analytical form of expression, instead of the exclusive or predominant acceptance of the interpretive framework of secondary sources of information, especially those that are uniform and come from official sources or actors who are part of the domain of institutionalized politics.

— Take into account the credibility of sources and verify the facts reported, and at the same time avoid imprecise, biased and tendentious information.

— Rely on one's own media production instead of non-critical, non-selective and non-transparent reproducing of content from other media.

— Avoid sensationalist and stereotype-promoting approaches to covering migrations and refugeehood.

— Avoid representations of migrants and refugees through a prism of security and crime or through underlining insurmountable differences and barriers in living and interacting with migrants and refugees (language, ethnic, religious barriers) between the domicile and newly-immigrated population.

— Avoid stereotypization of gender roles in gender representations.

— Provide media reports which present not only conflict-riddled relationships among different social actors but also those that involve cooperation.

— Avoid non-critical reporting of inappropriate language and hate speech in media space.

— Always be guided by the principle of anonymity and protecting the identity and integrity of the person who is the subject of reporting, especially if that person's status in terms of stay or protection has not been granted or regulated.

— Try to use first-hand information obtained from the actors themselves, especially from migrants and experts. In case of refugees, it is desirable that they themselves be heard, because otherwise they are implicitly marginalized and/or portrayed as passive victims.

— Reports should include the voices of other participants in the

integration system, such as landlords, employers, volunteers, assistants, educators, representatives of national minority organizations and citizens in general (friends, neighbours,...) in order to get a more complete picture about the social relationships that are created on the micro-level and that contribute to everyday experiences of integration.

— Reports should include opportunities that migration opens up for migrants and for the societies into which they are coming, including the possible risks.

— Reports should make a connection between individual stories (micro-level) and the broader social, economic, cultural and political context.

— When reports are about actions connected with misdemeanours or criminal liability of migrants and refugees (individual cases), generalization of all migrants and refugees as collectively responsible offenders should be avoided.

— One should be aware of the use of language and avoid conceptual metaphors that construct migration and refugee-related phenomena through allusions to a mass occurrence, natural disasters, flora and fauna-related phenomena, uncontrollable events, biblical plague or alike.

— Simplification, which implies the reporting on migrants and refugees only from a one-dimensional humanitarian aspect, should be avoided.

— 'Humanitarian' reporting, which is characteristic of shorter reporting cycles on special dates or months (World Refugee Day, December, holiday season), should be extended to the remainder of the year as well.

— When reporting on migrant and refugee children, one must always respect the principle of protecting the child's interest.

— Instead of using visual materials that suggest and portray refugees as passive victims or through an idealised type of 'desirable' immigrant (compared to the 'undesirable' economic migrant), images should be used that reflect the actions of the subjects themselves and the real life position and situation of those involved in migration processes (family members, friends, neighbours).

— As a professional journalist, one should be aware of their own position of social power as an actor who is a co-creator of public opinion and whose reporting might either contribute to an atmosphere of fear, discrimination, call to a lynching or violence or, on the other hand, be conducive to diffusing or eliminating social tensions and conflicts connected with the fear of the new or the unknown, or social differences.

For specific reporting on migrations, a website could be set up with basic information that are relevant for the Croatian context (including the normative framework, regulative documents, scientific publications that deal with this topic, etc.), which could be used by journalists who could find information on this issue in just one place. Additional education of journalists would also be useful:

— For the purpose of their informing and sensitisation about aspects of the system and experiences regarding international protection granted in the Republic of Croatia: an overview of migration, asylum and integration-related legal and institutional framework; structure and profile of migrants and persons under international protection; rights and obligations of persons under international protection; main challenges and an overview of activities and main actors in the integration system; examples of best practices of media reporting based on European experiences; main skills in the context of intercultural dialogue.

— Journalists should be familiarized with the basic terminology used in the context of migrations and refugeehood, with precise explanation of the legal definitions of the terms migrant, asylum seeker, person under international protection (asylee, refugee) and proper use of these terms during reporting should be encouraged.

— One should promote the co-organizing and co-financing of education and training specifically designed for journalists who are migrants/refugees themselves, by proactively supporting volunteer work and other work engagements of refugees in various media.

— One should promote active participation and getting to know migrants and refugees through formal and non-formal education practices such as workshops for future media workers who will report on migration and refugeehood-related issues.

— Financial and administrative support should be given for media literacy programs, both for migrants and for citizens in local communities where migrants reside.

Seeing that the media domain covers a great diversity of actors and discourses from other social domains, informing and education should include experts in various fields and stakeholders in the integration system, including political actors from the national, regional and especially local level.

— Based on the Framework for the integration of persons who have been granted international protection at the local level (pg. 33), and coordinated by the Office for Human Rights and the Rights of

National Minorities, with participation of media experts and other relevant stakeholders in the integration system, it is recommended to 'develop a media and communication plan (which will include a strategy for public and private media access), (…) guidelines for communication with the local community in which asylees and asylum seekers reside or will reside, especially for those cases when the first such group is arriving to a local community and in the event of incidents and crisis situations.'

— Public financing should be provided to support visibility, participation and a more active engagement of persons under international protection in media space and, if feasible, also in the process of creation of media content in public and private media on national and local level in the communities where they reside.

— Financial support for media that promote any form of discrimination in their reporting should be restricted.

— If local communities already have a model for promoting ethnic and cultural diversity, for example in ethnically heterogeneous communities where there are more national minorities, one should attempt to apply the positive experiences of national minority organisations in their media production.

— Financing and promotion should be given to public media campaigns dealing with presentation of new fellow citizens in a way that promotes the learning about, understanding and respect for the values of different cultures and strengthening of social cohesion within local communities where refugees reside.

— Stakeholders in the integration system should develop a model of regular informing of local media (e.g., in the form of a newsletter on mailing lists) about integration-related issues and the refugee problem, through directly notifying journalists and proposing topics to be covered, especially those connected with best practices of integration in the field.

— An address book should be created with contact details of relevant actors (institutions, organizations, activists, migrant associations) that can be distributed to journalists and that they can use to contact stakeholders in the migration, asylum and integration system in order to get statements from them and create media content.

— Journalists but also migrants and refugees themselves should be involved in the creation of future policies and measures connected with media reporting on migration, asylum and integration topics.

Nevertheless, in connection with the recommendations for good-quality reporting on migration issues that primarily pertain to individual practices of journalists who are active within their media organizations, one

should underline that such recommendations (that are created in the context of civil society, academy, public policies, etc.) are not sufficient to initiate more substantial changes. Reasons behind this can be identified in the following broader problem sets:

— Structural position of media in modern-day society which includes the functioning of media organizations based on market principles of profit interest, despite the fact that they are social institutions that should primarily focus on public interests. This results in the primary focus of media being shifted to entertainment and controversy. Commercialization of media and dominance of a profit-oriented logic has led to information becoming merchandise, the kind that is increasingly being treated the same as any other product in the market.[6] Radical profit-oriented logic results in precarisation of journalistic work, the imperative of productivity, sensationalist reporting intended to attract audiences, simplified approach to phenomena being covered, clickbait journalism – where eye-catching headlines serve as bait that leads to content that is 'surplus' or second-grade (repeated, recycled content).

— The relationship between political and media institutions is a relationship of mutual pressure and extortion, with political actors using their position of power on different levels of governance and applying pressure through various mechanisms: from public policy making, state aid system, to litigation… all of which is indirectly or directly intended to 'discipline' journalists/the media.[7] On the other hand, the media themselves can potentially 'extort' political actors through the mechanism of negative publicity. In this sense, these are complex relationships of power, but at the same time also relationships based on interests of political and media actors, where in fact, at least in a normative sense, the media should represent the general public and the public interest.

— Changes in curricula of higher education institutions that educate journalists, which involve the teaching of skills more than of certain social phenomena, create a chronic deficit of theoretical understanding of the society and social processes, including a deficit of critical reflection on one's own position in the society.[8]

— Technological changes (primarily digitalization, widespread use of the Internet, smartphones, etc), which, in an absence of active professional standards, facilitate non-critical, unchanged copying of content from all kinds of sources, without indicating which ones, lead to a homogenization of content, even though there is an illusion of a wide selection and great diversity of content.

6. Popović, Helena (2015) Commercialization and Privatization of Media in Southeast Europe: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing? *The Political Economy of Communication*, 3(1): 25-38.

7. Popović, Helena (2014) „Istraživanje o integritetu medija – Hrvatska". In: Leković, Saša (ed.) *Značaj medijskog integriteta: vraćanje medija i novinarstva u službu javnosti.* Zagreb: Investigative Journalism Centre. pp. 57-123.

8. Popović, Helena (2018) Journalism in Croatia in the Southeast European Context: Deterioration of the 'Professional Project'. *Work Organization, Labor & Globalisation,* Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 2018: 25-42.

In light of the foregoing, in order for media representations of the migration phenomenon to change, one has to dig deeper and make structural changes that that would radically transform the method of functioning of the media and media practices and push them toward truly professional and independent work, where public interest comes first and one strives to emancipation of citizens and development of critical thinking. However, in order for that to happen, all social actors have to become involved and the primary prerequisite for that is the existence of a political will, which includes a willingness for confrontation in economic and market-based relationships.

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