

EXPLORING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN REPORTING ON MIGRATION ISSUES IN LATVIAN NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract. *This article analyses the perceived importance of various influences on the ways in which Latvian local and national news media (print, online, TV, radio) have reported on migration issues and the process of accepting asylum seekers in Latvia during the last years. Previous studies indicate that the framing in media content depends on a large number of considerations such as general principles of ethical reporting, the established cultures inside media, and – in many cases – the individual perceptions of the “right” and “wrong” of the journalists and editors. The current study applies a qualitative approach drawing on 13 semi-structured interviews with media editors. The data analysis reveal how the perceptions of various individual, procedural and cultural influences intersect with the journalist perceptions of media roles, responsibilities and duties in a democratic society. Based on the results, suggestions are made about the opportunities of lifelong learning training development for journalists.*

Keywords: *media ethics, migration reporting, news media.*

Introduction

“Managed migration” has become a new policy framework in Europe since 2000 (Balch, 2010, 19). At the same time, immigration has become one of the main subject of news coverage and, in many parts of the world, also related to political contradictions (Hallin, 2015, 876). As the previous research reveals, on one hand, mainstream journalism is trying to follow professional ethics of reporting about migration (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013, 489), on the other hand, media are frequently criticized for “stirring up debates around immigration” (Balabanova & Balch, 2010, 382). Such findings call for further explorations on what are the factors that shape the ways in which media report on migration.

The aim of the current study is to analyse the perceived importance among Latvian media news editors of various influences on the ways in which Latvian news media (print, online, TV, radio) have reported on migration issues and the

process of accepting asylum seekers in Latvia during the period of 2015 – 2016. It was the time when European Union (EU) experienced high rates of immigration. This period is often referred to as a “refugee crisis” (Newland, 2016). The research question of the study is the following: How do news content editors perceive the role of various social influences on the news framing and reporting about migration issues in Latvia and Europe?

Social influences on ethical decisions in migration reporting

Previous literature suggests that journalists in their work and decision making rely on various cues, which journalists adopt through learning, training and socialization into profession (Cook, 1998). Several theoretical interpretation of these structures of cues exist. Some previous studies emphasize the macro-level, arguing about cultural and ideological aspects to be influential on reporting (e.g., Preston, 2009), along with systemic, political and economic influences (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2010). Others take a broader approach and also include the mezzo- and micro-level aspects, as did Voakes (1997), who, focusing on ethical decision making, found seven different social influences: individual, small group, organizational, competition, occupational, extra-media, and legal. However, previous literature makes it clear that the media systems – varying from liberal, democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist – are very complex and each has its own elements of influences that make them operate according to different logics. The media system in Latvia is characterised as hybrid, lacking one dominant paradigm (Skudra, Šulmane, & Dreijere, 2014). It has characteristics from the liberal media model, the democratic corporatist model, and the Mediterranean or polarised pluralistic model, namely, very liberal media regulation, high level of political parallelism, commercialization tendencies co-exist with weak system of self-regulation, low level of professionalism and accountability towards the audience (ibid.). As it is pointed in the previous literature, the “states” that media take and the modes of operation depend on cultural, economic and political context and circumstances, and the content also influences the dominant framing of news about migration (Hallin, 2015). Human-interest framing is more used in a liberal media system; besides, human-interest framing is more common in popular media outlets than elite-oriented media outlets (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, 787). It has to do with the fact that “people who already hold a liberal attitude toward immigration prefer, and expose themselves to more human interest-oriented news stories” (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015, 871), while others find personalized reporting of immigration disturbing (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015, 870; Beyer & Mattes, 2015). Other studies indicate that there is a tendency for journalists to use a frame of conflict when discussing social issues and highlighting oppositional views (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013,

500). Hallin (2015) outlines that news coverage about immigration may vary depending on the cultural associations attached to the issue, and the way news interact with demographics of the media audience (p. 877, 879). For example, market driven media might perceive immigrants as unattractive news coverage to their audiences and advertisers (Beyer & Mattes, 2015, 842). Hence, commercial pressures might not lead to the human-interest reporting. In the systems with strong public service culture and professionalization of public service broadcasting journalists more likely feel obligation to focus on the perspectives of marginalized groups in the society (Benson, 2013, as cited in Hallin, 2015, 878).

The portrayal of a “good” asylum seeker (meaning – the one which is grateful, willing to work, learn the local language, seeking asylum because of political reasons) versus a “bad” one (related to threats, risks, illegality, unsafety, seeking asylum for economic reasons) is found to be a common feature in media content (Hellman & Lerkkanen, 2017; Lulle & Ungure, 2015). Immigration “threat” frames often dominate together with reports of a “flood” of “aliens” (Chávez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002, as cited in Hallin, 2015, 878). McKay, Thomas and Blood (2011) found that media overwhelmingly refer to the numbers of the immigrants arrived, thus creating an image of an “unstoppable wave of asylum seekers” (p. 619). Media often refer to immigration as a threat: potential source of illnesses (Butterworth, 1966, 358), insecurity, increasing levels of crimes (Greenberg & Hier, 2001, 573, 574), risks of riots and drugs, sexual aggression, religious fanaticism and terrorism (Cottle, 2000, 5, 15). Previous research also raises concerns about the problem that immigrants’ voices are often absent from the public debate, which leads to a situation where immigrants are perceived as outsiders in relation to the rest of society, and the opportunity of creating a vision of a nation with a multicultural life is missed (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013). Furthermore, the images of immigrants posted in publications often show immigrants in a worse light than the text itself (Hallin, 2015). Horsti and Nikunen (2013, 501) conclude that “this demonstrates the inadequacy of agenda setting without a more profound ethics and understanding of the transnational dimensions of society”.

Background of the study

In terms of the “journalistic infrastructures” (Dimants, 2018, 143) that exist outside the media outlets and shape the larger context in which media operate, Latvian media environment is characterised by three different journalistic cultures that compete within the Latvian media system, and they differ in the ways of understanding media accountability and media roles in the society (Dimants, 2018). First, there is a traditional Russian journalistic culture characteristic of the minority of the Latvian media, second, an instrumental and authoritarian (post-Soviet) journalistic culture, and, third, a modern (Western)

journalistic culture with an orientation towards achievement of high journalistic professional standards and journalistic autonomy (Dimants, 2018). Weak system of media accountability is partly a consequence of strong market pressures and commercialization that has challenged Latvian media system since 90ties (Lauk & Jufereva, 2010). Second, the professional media workers' community is divided. There are two professional associations: the Latvian Journalist Union (LJU), which was established in 1992, and Latvian Journalist Association (LJA) that was founded in 2014 (Ločmele, 2017). The LJU does not have a member registration. The LJA, by the end of 2018, united 126 individual members (LŽA, n.d.). Some other professional associations exist, among them Latvian Press Publishers Association and the Latvian Broadcasters Association, but they do not deal with media professionalization issues, rather focusing on lobbying for economic interests of commercial media (Dimants, 2018). Third, currently, there is no single code of ethics binding the entire media sector; different media follow different codes of ethics: their own codes or either the code issued by the LJA in 2014, or the code of the LJU that dates back to 1992 and has never been amended (Ločmele, 2017). It is included in the Action plan of the Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 to draft a proposal of common ethical standards (Ločmele, 2017). By the end of 2018, the Media Ethics' Council was established (Lsm.lv, 2018), which is going to serve as a self-regulatory body handling complaints about media ethics' breaches. However, accession to the Council is voluntary, and its decisions will be binding only to the member organizations.

Fourth, a critical public debate about the media accountability, responsibility issues and roles of media in a democratic society in Latvia is only emerging. For years, the only place where media critics and latest research was published, was the internet site www.providus.lv (Lauk & Jufereva, 2010). Currently, public broadcasters try to fill in the gap: the Latvian Radio runs a monthly discussion program "Media anatomy" where media representatives, media researchers and other invited experts participate. Every now and then media accountability and professionalism issues are tackled in the weekly discussion program "Tieša runa" ("Direct Speech") in the first channel of Latvian Television.

Finally, media workers in Latvia are offered very few and only occasional project-fund based possibilities for life-long learning (e.g., training programs are offered by the Baltic media centre for excellence). Therefore, it is emphasized in the document of Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 (Guidelines, 2016), that it is of crucial importance to extend the opportunities for media professionals to improve their skills and knowledge in the field.

After re-gaining independence in 1991, Latvia has had a rather fragmentary experience on welcoming asylum seekers. For example, from 1998 to 2014, a

total of 1440 asylum applications were received by the Latvian authorities. In 2017, 395 persons submitted asylum applications, 158 out of them - relocated from Greece and Italy, but 40 persons resettled from the refugee camps in Turkey (OCMA, 2018). However, in 20th century, Latvia went through significant ethnic changes due to inward migration from other Soviet republics during 1951-1990. During this period, more than two million people arrived in Latvia making the ethnic proportion of Latvians drop from 77% in 1935 to 52% in 1989. This was an aspect stimulating strong public discourse against in-ward immigration after regaining country's independence in 1991 (Eglīte & Krišjāne, 2009). As suggested by Šulmane (2010), media outlets in Latvia continuously reflect the overall feeling in the society as being threatened by external influences. As it was observed recently, in Latvian media a "heightened sense of external threat" emerged during the current migration peek in Europe (Lulle & Ungure, 2015, 83). However, emergence of discourses of solidarity and hospitality also could be observed (ibid.).

Methods

The participants of the study

For the purposes of this paper, 13 news editors from different media outlets were interviewed. In the sampling process, we distinguished between various formats and platforms: press, radio, TV and the Internet (online), as well as public media and commercial media, as well as national and local media.

Data collection

Semi-structured individual interview was chosen as the most appropriate data collection method. The interviews were structured in two blocks of questions: first was about the ethical issues related to the ways in which Latvian media reported on immigration during the "migration crisis" period, and second was about more general aspects related to the status of codes of media ethics in the media outlets that the respondents represented. In the first part of the interview, the respondents were asked to express their overall impressions and highlight particular issues that they considered as problematic from the media ethics perspective. Considering how often the migration reporting is examined through content analysis, and how rare are studies that employ other data collection methods, our interview material provided valuable insight in the factors that actually shape and influence the content production. Each interview lasted for 40 – 60 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. For the purposes of this paper, only the parts about immigration reporting from the transcripts were used.

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed and coded according to the principles of thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007). The initial coding of interview material was carried out in order to move from descriptions to analytical categories. Constant comparison approach was applied to find the similar codes in different interviews, and arrive to a set of the dominant themes.

Results and discussion

In this part, we analyse the perceived importance of various influences on the ethical consideration and the ways in which local and national Latvian news media (print, online, TV, radio) reported on migration issues and the process of accepting asylum seekers in Latvia during 2015 – 2016. It was the period when European Union (EU) experienced high rates of immigration, and is often referred to as a “refugee crisis” (Newland, 2016). The section is structured around the following themes that emerged during the analysis of the interviews: the cultural, societal, market, procedural and other influences on ethical considerations about migration reporting, and the perceptions about the media role in a democratic society.

Cultural and societal influences

Media coverage related to immigration processes during this particular period, according to our respondents, could be characterized as a battle between two extremes. Some media stuck to stereotypes about immigrants as Muslims and potential terrorists, about cultural differences that Latvia as host society would not be able to overcome, while other media cultivated liberal, humanistic ideas, and propagated the country’s role in global processes and responsibilities of Latvia as a member of EU. In the words of one of our respondents:

Media took the migration crisis as a very serious topic... as something that had to be covered a lot. Migration may cause consequences on our future. Many link it [migration] to terrorism risks, others held the opinion that our society may experience further fragmentation and division between ethnic groups. Many think that we should integrate them [migrants] and in this way increase the number of inhabitants. Many diverse opinions are there. They all deserved to be covered by media. (Respondent 3).

During the interviews, we captured reflections on the thought expressed by Šulmane (2010) that overall negative feeling in the society about immigration has deep historic roots:

Latvian public is very much against immigration, and we as media can do very little about it... It is related to the stereotypes in the society, the fear and historic experience, fear from foreign cultures. (Respondent 4).

Some of our respondents challenged this claim by saying that media leaned towards the opinion that society in general has a negative view on immigration processes and that asylum seekers are undesired and not welcomed in our country. Thus, it can be said that Latvian media failed to act as meaningful hosts (Silverstone, 2007) – media missed the opportunity to organize co-presence of multiple voices thus they did not extend the discussion about immigration towards multiculturalism (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013). As Respondent 1 explained:

Media tried to guess the mood of their audiences. Unfortunately, media believed that people Latvia are mainly conservative. Therefore, media adjusted their tone according to this belief. On the other hand, the division between “ours” and “not-ours” is something that immediately is recognized in our society. Media exploited it. (Respondent 1).

Respondent 1 considered it to be morally wrong of media to promote the divide based on ethnic grounds. He told during the interview, that the medium he works for closed the comments' option for news pieces about immigrants – due to the aggressiveness that was expressed in the comments. In his eyes, this was a move signalling about the stance that the medium chose to take in order to hamper the spread of negativity. He was arguing that in democratic countries media role is to “stand for all humans”:

Imagine, the migrant has just arrived, he has nothing... Then it is the duty of the journalists to stand for him, to support his perspective. Journalists had to take positive and supportive stance which they did not. (Respondent 1).

Another of our respondents noted that during the “refugee crisis” period media generally failed to use their tools and power to try to promote societal cohesion:

Especially TV channels could focus more on real stories – take some real asylum seekers as examples; let them be part of the whole thing. How they have arrived, what is their background, where and why they flee from... Then after some time, how they find a job, about the families. The real stories... It could work, I think... Instead of believing that everybody in Latvia is afraid of refugees and against them. Of course, it means that the journalists have to put effort to find such stories... If we only got to know such families, I think, everybody could make such a story. (Respondent 4).

The theme about Latvia and a member state of EU and the duties associated with this appeared in our interview material. As one of our respondents outlined, media had to explain to the audience that Latvia has certain duties as an EU member no matter whether it is liked or not:

Does not look good that we take EU money ... but do not want to give anything in return.... Although some politicians and media find it difficult

to accept it... So are we here, - admitting it with clenched teeth...
(Respondent 2).

Established practices and procedural influences

According to our respondents, opinion-based content in the lines of “he said she said” journalism (Rosen, 2011) largely dominated media content during the whole “refugee crisis” period, thus preventing media from providing deeper insight into the complexity of migration processes to their audiences. Rosen (2011) explains that “he said, she said” journalism means that a journalist does not make an attempt to assess or do fact check on claims that he or she collects from public disputes, instead confronting the claims as two opposing and often extreme sides. Several of our respondents noted that media did little or no analysis about the problematics related to migration; instead, they were going after colourful opinions that contradicted each other. As the most popular sources, politicians, state officials and different interest groups served. Media in this way were creating the frame of conflict (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013) around the immigration topic. Some of our respondents did not see as a problematic issue. As Respondent 1 explained:

... we collect opinions and then publish in the exact same form, without changing. We do not produce analytical materials with opinions from our journalists. (Respondent 1).

However, other respondents considered such an absence of deeper analysis and reliance on opinions by some of our respondents as wrong and not beneficial to the best interests of media audiences. At the same time, our respondents suggested that market logics guided media – they aimed for audience attention. As one of our respondents said:

Media failed in providing deep analysis [about immigration processes]. Instead, they [media] concentrated on polarized opinions. No further elaboration, content with very little added value ... I think, this was not journalists' intention to create a negative image of immigrants or something, not necessarily. My guess is that in such ways media hoped to earn more clicks... The more controversial title you can put, the better... It is the same as with bad “bloody” news. (Respondent 3).

Apart from “he said she said” style of journalism, another problematic aspect in immigration coverage was that media focused mainly on formal facts – numbers, statistics, changes of legislative acts, aspects in immigration policies – instead of human-interest stories. Journalists were massively reporting about the formalities, probably, as one of our respondents speculated, to convince the audience that the situation is under control, something that is previous literature has been explained as controlling imaginary “unstoppable flow of asylum seekers” (McKay, Thomas, & Blood, 2011). Our respondents argued that partly such practice was caused also by over-reliance on press releases that were

prepared and issued by different state and non-state actors involved in the immigration processes. For many weeks during the “peek” of crisis in 2015, media followed the discussions in Latvian Parliament about the number of asylum seekers that Latvia would accommodate. Our respondents recalled that some politicians made it a big issue during the parliamentary debate before the decision was made. So did some media as well, although the number of asylum seekers that our country finally agreed to accept as part of the EU immigration deal (approximately 500 individuals in total), compared to other EU member countries, was small. However, some of our respondents noted that it was not the best practice to report about immigration with mere numbers, since without telling and showing who are the real people behind these numbers the media content did not help to overcome the “*ethnic fear*” (Respondent 3). Previous research has pointed towards the tendency in Latvian media to follow political agenda, especially in public TV which by many audience members is perceived as a source of “official” national news (Juzefovičs, 2012). Such approach of following the political agenda, according to our respondents, led also to quick exhaustion of the news value of the migration topic, because media had difficulty in extending the scope and broadness of migration themes besides the numbers, formal procedures and legal framework. Respondent 4 commented:

Media stuck to a routinized path. Besides foreign news about crimes committed by immigrants in other countries, the domestic news was about immigration policies, and the statistics – how many, where, when and so on... (Respondent 4).

We derived from our interview material that as soon as policy makers stopped talking about migration issues and – consequently – stopped producing opinions, the topic lost its appeal to media as well. Asked about the topicality of migration by the time of the interviews (end of 2017, early 2018), one of our respondents said: “*there is no reason to do news on migration currently,*” (Respondent 7) indicating that there are no political decision making in progress related to immigration.

Time pressure appeared as an influential factor affecting the news production about migration. Our respondents recalled that the “migration crisis” developed very quickly; therefore, in some cases mistakes were made due to hasty decisions to follow the political agenda. The issues with ethically questionable practices in our data appeared in relation to the case when the public TV arranged a live broadcasting in a Saturday morning from the centre for asylum seekers “Mucinieki”, which, according to media experts, was an unnecessary effort from the medium, without real news value (Rožukalne,

2016)¹. However, as Respondent 2 said, it was clear that the public atmosphere in the beginning of 2016 was very nervous, filled with fears and many questions about the potential arrival of the asylum seekers, therefore such decision to organize this particular live broadcast by the public TV might be understandable.

Time pressure had other consequences: during the “peak” of crisis, journalists started filtering more thoroughly content produced by other media because they noticed that some false made-up stories were circulating in Latvian media space. However, our respondents did not see that media in Latvia would intentionally spread misinformation about immigrants; instead, they blamed some journalists for failing to perform their professional duties:

Nobody was trying to publish misleading information, I think... Time pressured us very hard, and it was unprofessionalism of some journalists that caused mistakes. However, these mistakes were corrected later. (Respondent 3).

Another issue that emerged was the terminology – media adapted the word “refugee” very quickly and used it as a general term describing all immigrants, not distinguishing between asylum seekers, persons with alternative status, or refugees. As one reason was mentioned the indifferent attitude towards the terminology or lack of knowledge in the audience:

We [journalists] knew that most people do not know the difference, so, probably, the thinking was, why to bother or confuse our readers. (Respondent 3).

Another reason, according to our respondents, was the unprofessional attitude from journalists who did not care to learn about these nuances and apply correct terminology.

Conclusions

The central conclusion that we can draw from our data analysis are the following. First, instead of reflection on immigrant personal stories, as well as putting focus on immigrants themselves, media focused on legislation, immigration system, and statistics from official sources. Media relied on the various state and NGO actors involved in the process of asylum seeker acceptance and integration and their press releases as dominant information sources. The voices of the immigrants were absent from the news content, which caused the situation where immigrants were shown mainly as a threat or a problem for the society, thus promoting anti-immigrant argument and increasing

¹ The archived material can be found here: <https://ltv.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/06.02.2016-latvija-ierodas-pirmie-patveruma-mekletaji.-zinu-specializlaidum.id65289/>

fear. From a normative perspective, to stimulate social integration, media should represent the realities of all demographic groups of the society (Gans, 2011). Therefore, it ought to be the moral duty of journalists to make sure that the immigrant views are represented in the media content, and actively seek to perform that duty knowing that immigrants cannot reach to media as easily as the other groups of the society, such as Latvian politicians or well-articulated NGOs. Second, in immigration reporting, media largely exploited the format of “he said she said” journalism, preventing media from deeper analysis of the complexities of the immigration problematics. Reliance on official sources also led to limitation of the scope of themes about the immigration processes. Such an approach contributed to a quick exhaustion of the immigration topic. As our study indicates, media have prioritized the concerns about the numbers of audience reach over transnational sensibility (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013). However, we agree with the previous studies that in a democratic society it actually should be the duty of media to create spaces for co-presence of multiple voices, and exercise their power for setting an agenda without the risks of marginalization (Hallin, 2015).

We treated our study results as a baseline knowledge for development of a targeted training program for news media journalists and editors aiming to offer an opportunity to extend knowledge and skills for immigration reporting. We drafted the training program with a specific focus on the following five themes: 1) current processes and legislation at international and national levels in integration of immigrants, the right terminology in the immigration reporting; 2) good practices of media ethics related to immigration reporting in Europe and beyond; 3) media literacy, critical handling of sources and techniques of deconstruction of disinformation in journalists' work; 4) media interaction and impacts on their audiences' attitudes and opinions; 5) employment of storytelling approach in reporting related to the integration of third-country nationals.

We prepared the training program acknowledging that Latvian media operate in a particular cultural, political and political context, therefore, incomplete awareness of the “journalistic infrastructures” (Dimants, 2018) may hinder the journalists from doing an ethical work. We set a specific focus on some techniques and human-interest framing in immigration news as tools that could help the immigrant voices to be more represented in the news content, as well as added elements (media literacy, disinformation deconstruction) to support media in more fair reporting. However, we believe that much more work and effort has to be invested in drafting and implementing media training programs, and also establish system to measure how the improved knowledge and access to training translates into more informed and ethical reporting of immigrants and asylum seekers over time.

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