

Countering Hate Speech and Misinformation in the International Reporting of Refugees and Migrants

Abstract

Journalists play a crucial role shaping public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. Too often reporting on this topic can reproduce negative stereotypes, mis- and disinformation and even hate speech (UNHCR 2019). Our four-person team of lecturers at a UK journalism school partnered with the Media Diversity Institute, the European Commission and the Ethical Journalism Network to run highly interactive, half-day workshops for final year journalism students on the reporting of migration and refugees. This focused on how students could ethically report on migration and refugee issues, and how they could counter hate speech and mis- and disinformation in their journalism. The workshop was followed by a public symposium featuring a panel of refugee journalists who offered practical tips on accessing and engaging with refugees and asylum seekers while reporting. Surveys showed the students were inspired by these sessions and would make use of the knowledge they gained.

Description of the activity including the Learning Objectives

We ran a series of intensive, interactive, half-day workshop about international reporting on refugees and migrants for undergraduate and graduate journalism students. These workshops focused on the challenges posed by hate speech, disinformation and misinformation within reporting about refugee and migration issues – and how journalists could counter these in their own reporting. After the workshop, students attended a public symposium which starred a panel of refugee journalists. We ran these activities in collaboration with the Media Diversity Institute, the European Commission and the Ethical Journalism Network.

We had multiple learning objectives. On completion of the learning activities, we wanted students to:

- *Understand* the challenges of reporting on refugee and migration issues and the importance of ethical reporting on this topic
- *Understand* the concepts of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech and *be able to distinguish* between them
- *Be able to report* on migration and refugee issues without reproducing harmful hate speech or mis and dis-information.
- *Understand* the importance of including refugee and migrant voices within news reports

The workshop was broken into three sessions. The first, contextual session provided an overview of research on the shortcomings of current reporting on refugees and migrants. It also introduced students to the concepts of hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation. Students were given resources including Claire Wardle's [7 types of Mis- and Disinformation](#) and the Ethical Journalism Network's [5-point hate speech test](#).

In session two, students worked in small groups to analyse media content: searching through populist news coverage and social media comments about refugees and migrants, and identifying hate speech and mis- and disinformation. This activity helped students understand the various ways in which hate speech can manifest, and the role that mis- and disinformation can play in this phenomena.

In the third and final session, students did some reporting. They were given a set of real-life press releases that had been disseminated by human rights NGOs as well as statements by UK and US political elites. This included some contradictory and inflammatory statements. Students had to run fact checks and write a news story and decide whether to include - and how to frame – misinformation spoken by political elites about migrants. And they had to justify these decisions to their peers, making reference to the hate speech toolkit.

We ran this workshop four times, in intensive, small group teaching. After completing the workshop, all students were then invited to a public symposium at the end of the week about refugee journalism, which was held in partnership with the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. At this event, students heard directly from journalists who were refugees in the UK, who talked about their experiences of reporting and being reported on. This included powerful testimony about how they had been treated after misleading and negative news stories were published. It also included helpful, practical tips on how to access and centre refugee and migrant sources when reporting, and how this could help counter negative narratives. This event was recorded and disseminated as an episode of a high-quality media/academic podcast (details redacted).

The teaching activities were innovative because:

- We partnered with external NGOs, journalists and refugees in the UK. This helped students appreciate the pressing, real world nature of the issues
- The workshops combined knowledge acquisition, research and journalism practice.
- We ran the sessions as a teaching team; students worked with academics with experience in a range of regions including Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa
- The public symposium was solutions focused. It reinforced the workshop content and gave students the opportunity to ask professional journalists questions, based on what they had learnt.

Rationale

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has shown that refugees and migrants are often depicted as a “threat” to Western values (UNHCR, 2019). This news coverage is particularly concerning when it includes hate speech and mis- and disinformation; this content can have a profound and negative impact on the quality of life of refugees and migrants (IPI 2004). The relentless derogatory, negative messages in the United Kingdom tabloid press, in particular, has coincided with hardening of attitudes around asylum (Berry et al 2016), and can create and reinforce stereotypes that link asylum seekers with violence and terrorism (Cooper et al 2021). Inaccurate reporting and continued lack of voice for refugees can then tip this journalism into hate speech, where those seeking a new life are dehumanised

and spoken of in terms of ‘swarms’ and floods (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017). There is a pressing need for media organisations to recognise their role in combatting hate speech and intolerance against vulnerable people including refugees and asylum seekers (Article 19, 2018).

We wanted to challenge journalism students to analyse current reporting to understand these issues; to critically reflect on their own reporting; and to develop practical solutions for situation that they might face in a newsroom in their future professional lives.

The Media Diversity Institute (MDI) is an independent media development organisation based in London and Brussels, dedicated to promoting diverse, inclusive and accurate media internationally. In collaboration with the European Commission, the MDI ran a project on Silence Hate to combat hate speech in media. We teamed up with MDI to run these workshops as an integral part of the Silence Hate project.

Learning Outcomes

The students were highly engaged throughout the workshops. They successfully identified and distinguished hate speech, mis- and dis-information. And they demonstrated that they could write accurate stories that countered hate speech; they were able to articulate the ethical decision-making process they had followed. We surveyed the 41 attendees of the symposium. 89% of respondents said they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “I will use/share things learnt today”. 97% said they were inspired to learn more about the topic. The qualitative feedback comments described the session as powerful and thought-provoking, particularly the fact that students were able to hear directly from refugee journalists about their experiences. The Media Diversity Institute praised the design and content and of the workshops and symposium.

Word count (excluding title and abstract): 997

See below for:

- Image from the symposium / podcast recording (does not feature any of the submitters)

- Some of the resources shared with the students in the workshops, developed by the Ethical Journalism Network
- References list



HATE SPEECH

TURNING THE PAGE OF HATE:
A MEDIA CAMPAIGN FOR
TOLERANCE IN JOURNALISM

When it comes to hate speech, journalists and editors must pause and take the time to judge the **potential impact** of offensive, inflammatory content.

The following test, developed by the EJN and based on international standards, highlights questions in the **gathering, preparation and dissemination** of news and helps place what is said and who is saying it in an **ethical context**.

2 REACH OF THE SPEECH

How far is the speech traveling?
Is there a **pattern** of behaviour?

3 GOALS OF THE SPEECH

How does it benefit the **speaker**
and their **interests**?
Is it **deliberately intended** to
cause harm to others?

A 5 POINT TEST FOR JOURNALISTS

4 THE CONTENT ITSELF

Is the speech **dangerous**?
Could it incite **violence** towards others?

5

SURROUNDING
CLIMATE
SOCIAL / ECONOMIC / POLITICAL

Who might be **negatively affected**?

Is there a history of **conflict** or
discrimination?

1

STATUS OF THE SPEAKER

How might their **position** influence
their **motives**?

Should they even be **listened to**
or just **ignored**?

DONT **SENSATIONALISE!**

AVOID THE **RUSH** TO PUBLISH

TAKE A **MOMENT OF REFLECTION**

EthicalJournalismNetwork.org



FIVE POINT GUIDE FOR MIGRATION REPORTING



1 FACTS NOT BIAS

Are we **accurate** and have we been **impartial, inclusive** and **fact-based** in our reporting?

Are we **acting independently** from narratives that stem from politics and emotion rather than facts?

Are we **fairly** and **transparently** reporting the impact of migration on communities?



2 KNOW THE LAW

Asylum seeker? Refugee? Victim of trafficking? Migrant worker? Do we use **irregular migrant**? Do we understand and use migrant definitions correctly and do we articulate to our audience the rights migrants are due under **international, regional** and **national law**?



4 SPEAK FOR ALL

Do we have **migrant voices**? Are we **listening to the communities** they are passing through or joining? Question how representative self-appointed community and migrant spokespeople really are.



3 SHOW HUMANITY

Humanity is **the essence of ethical journalism**. But we must **keep our emotions in check**, avoid victimization, over simplification and the framing of coverage in a narrow humanitarian context that takes no account of the bigger picture.







5 CHALLENGE HATE

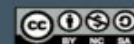
Have we **avoided extremism**? Have we taken the time to judge whether **inflammatory content** about migrants or those who seek to limit migration can lead to hatred? Words like "swarms", "floods" and "waves" should be treated with caution, as should indiscriminate use of "racism" and "xenophobia."



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