

## **Comparative data journalism study of migration coverage - Summary -**

*A pilot project by the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and the European Journalism Centre, in cooperation with the University of King's College (Canada), the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France), Deutsche Welle Akademie (Germany), Christelijke Hogeschool Ede (The Netherlands), and the University of Missouri (United States). The study received expert advice from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and was co-funded by the Open Society Fund to Counter Xenophobia.*

### **Motivation**

Mainstream newspapers, magazines, broadcasters, and online news outlets provide a window onto society's discourse about migration – at least in countries with high media freedom standards and varied media landscapes. They can be assumed to give a strong indication of the most salient public perceptions of, and issues concerning, migration-related topics, and perhaps even allow conclusions about the political, geographical, and social framework conditions in which migration takes place. In order best to work this out and to highlight the most relevant findings, this project adopted a comparative international perspective.

The migration coverage study plays a part in the media and migration programme of the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, which notably aims at stimulating a global debate about the current state of migration coverage in the media, to raise awareness of best practices, to improve journalists' competences, and to enable a more productive cooperation between media and migration stakeholders. In this context, the comparative study on hand is set to deliver empirical facts and to develop and test a methodology that at a later stage can hopefully be applied to a more comprehensive set of international media landscapes. It seeks to induce an evidence based debate about migration journalism that has an impact on practical everyday coverage, on journalism education and standards, and on how reporters best deal with their sources.

The results of the study were presented and discussed at the [2013 UNAOC Global Forum](#) in Vienna on 28 February 2013.

### **Approach**

With the cooperation of journalism schools and media research institutions in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, the project took snapshots of how the press covered migration within a four-week time frame around recent national or regional elections in the participating countries. Articles published by a selection of media outlets containing migration terms were scrutinised and coded for their framing of the topic. Specifically, the research team looked for the type of migrant mentioned and the migration related topic covered. Additionally, the tone of the coverage was compared with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to determine prevailing attitudes towards migration.

Overall, some 650 pertinent articles were identified and analysed across the five countries within the various four-week time frames in 2012, thus compiling a broadly repre-



sentative database. Research hinged on the French and US presidential elections, the parliamentary election in the Netherlands, and provincial and federal state elections in Canada and Germany respectively. Each country looked into their own findings, while the European Journalism Centre performed an overarching statistical analysis and created visualisations to facilitate comparison.

The number of media outlets taken into consideration varied considerably from country to country, depending on factors such as accessibility of sources and informed decisions about which media could be considered most representative or agenda setting. In France, the study benefitted from a particularly rich collection of sources compiled by another research project, whereas the other countries focused on a heuristic selection. Overall, there was a clear focus on print newspapers and magazines as well as their websites, while broadcast media proved largely inaccessible due to their ephemeral nature – a restraint faced by all but the utmost resourceful media content analysis efforts worldwide.

### Findings

Across countries, by far the majority of articles included in the study covered documented migrants; many framed them as either a minority or pointed out their status as naturalised. Irregular migrants made up the second-most mentioned group, with the bulk of other migration types lagging far behind; among these, asylum seekers and economic migrants were the most prominent.

However, this picture gets much more differentiated once the comparison between countries is taken into account. In Canada, documented migrants are almost the sole angle under which migration was considered, whereas in Germany the aspect of naturalised migrants dominated the picture. In France, on the other hand, the media looked primarily into documented and irregular migration. In the United States, minority status was

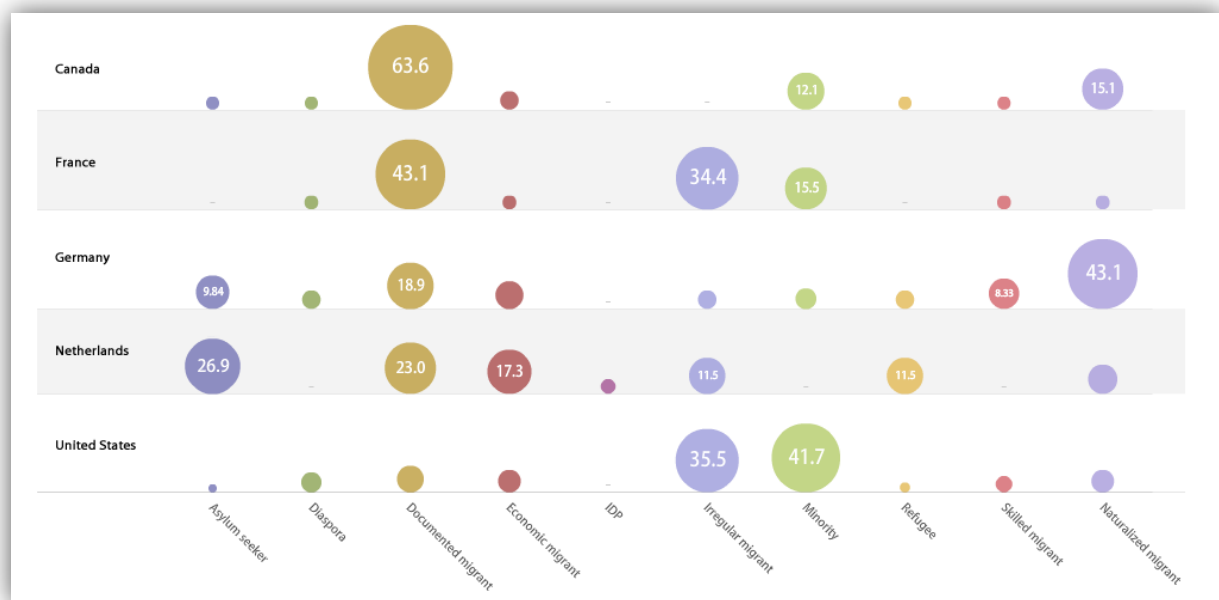


Figure 1: Type of migration per country in percentages



the most prominently discussed aspect of migration, followed by irregular migrants. The Dutch coverage spread across a broad spectrum of migration types from asylum seekers over documented and economic migrants to irregular ones and refugees.

These figures can be interpreted as mirroring specific debates prevailing around the respective elections. For instance, in the Canadian province of Québec, the citizenship status of migrant residents was an controversial topic of the election campaign. In the United States, too, migration played a part in both the presidential election campaign and outcome, most importantly with respect to the voting power of naturalised Hispanic immigrants. In France, migration came up as a campaign topic primarily under the aspects of strains it might put on the social services, and under the aspect of perceived security concerns. On the other hand, neither in Germany nor in the Netherlands was migration a particularly contested political topic around the elections. Rather, the press appears to have picked up individual news items that just happened to occur within the selected time frame.

Accordingly, the distribution of the most salient topics per country indicates that migration predominantly tends to be viewed through the lens of the particular interest of the host country. Because of this, the media does not sufficiently treat migration as an issue that relates to an international, cross-border framework. This is strikingly similar to the pitfalls of most of EU related journalism, where the European Union is not portrayed as an end in itself and scrutinised for its contributions to the common European good, but measured only by its direct advantages or disadvantages for an individual Member State.

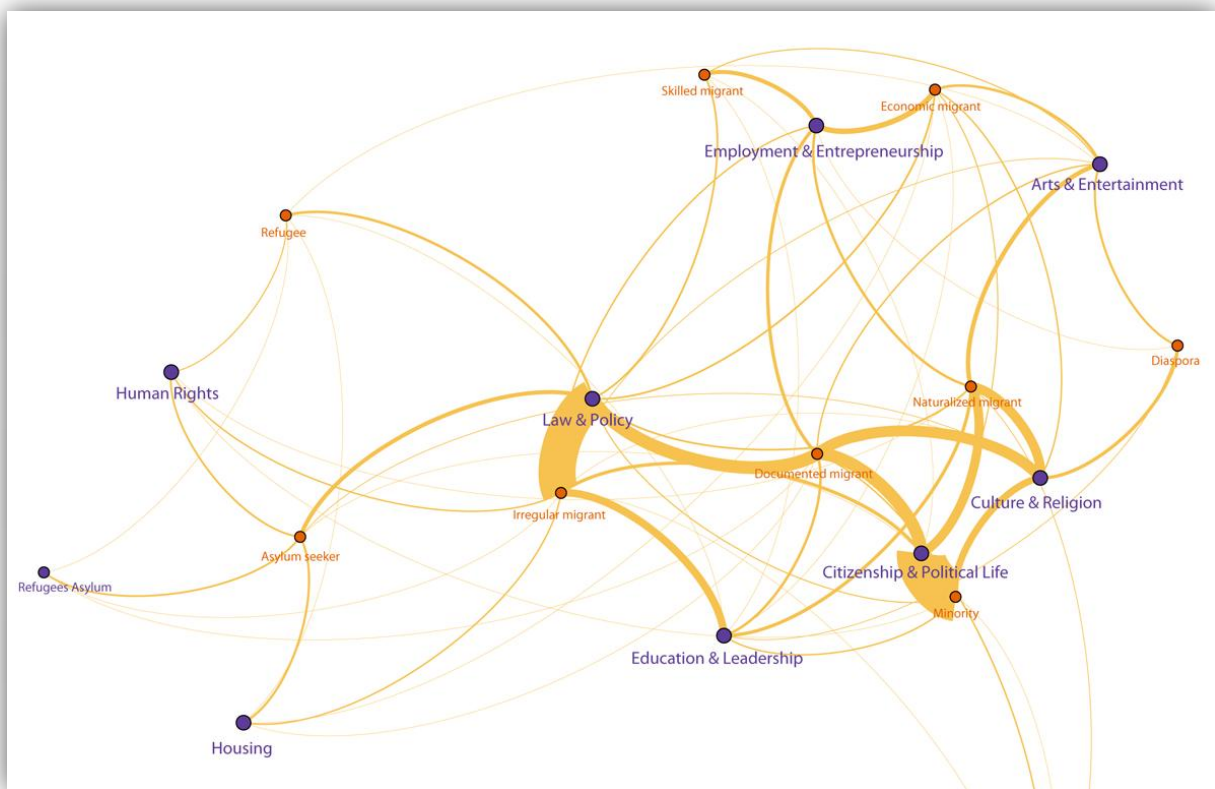


Figure 2: Migration type and topic co-occurrence



The picture gets an extra dimension once the topic of migration is taken into account as well. Across all countries, there is a clear emphasis on two thematic areas: citizenship and law. The notable exception is Canada, where the topical area of culture and religion very much dominates the coverage, followed by Germany. The category of employment appears to be primarily a European preoccupation, albeit not an overly strong one.

Looking at the co-occurrence of migration types and topics, it becomes apparent that there is a strong clustering around citizenship with minority, as well as around law with irregular migration. Both may perhaps be explained relatively easily, seeing that governments tend to respond with law enforcement measures to irregular migration streams, and that minorities with a background in migration may challenge mainstream notions of civic co-existence (e.g., degree of integration, influence on elections). Strongly connected to these two main clusters are the theme of culture and religion on the one hand, and the groups of documented and naturalised migrants on the other hand. This indicates that host country societies are preoccupied in particular with those migrants who are living there in the long run and hence leave a discernible mark on everyday life.

Almost the entire set of other co-occurrences seems relatively irrelevant compared to these main focal areas. For instance, refugees and asylum seekers in relation to human rights, or skilled and economic migrants in relation to economic considerations, do not play much of a role when it comes to media awareness, at least within the limits of the snapshot taken by this study.

The above observations are supporting indications that identity issues are frequently at the core of public and social perceptions of migration. Refugees and asylum seekers may easily be discounted as a group so detached from a Western host society that they do not appear to merit more than passing attention; except under specific circumstances, there may be a prevailing conviction that the authorities will be dealing with them anyway without giving cause for specific concerns among citizens. Skilled migrants do not catch the public's eye – or the media's eye, for that matter – very saliently either, seeing that they tend to come with the bonus of being particularly desired or in demand, and thus perhaps diffuse into the labour market and society without becoming overly conspicuous or newsworthy.

Another noticeable aspect is the overall tone of the coverage. The vast majority of all media analysed in the five countries appear to make a conscious effort to report on migration in a politically correct fashion, i.e., generally in alignment with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are neutral or at times even sympathetic when it comes to value statements about migrants and migration related topics. Of course, this is what one may rightly expect from mainstream media in pluralistic and democratic Western countries, where there is a high degree of ownership of journalism codes of ethics and a common sense of political moderation. Looking at fringe publications such as extremist papers, blogs, or talk radio in the very same countries might well have yielded quite a different picture.

However, as several of the national analysis teams noted, many articles find a way indirectly to convey a reserved or negative value judgement by using one-sided studies or surveys as a hook for their reporting without questioning them. Others give prominence



to negative or offensive quotes from politicians or random interviewees without putting them into perspective. So while the big picture seems to warrant the award of rather high fairness marks to the analysed media outlets, on closer inspection the overall image may become less favourable. In some of the instances observed in this study, the neutral coverage may be considered as merely perfunctory.

### **Conclusions**

Migration coverage shares with essentially all other facets of journalism a dependence on news values. It looks into issues which are perceived as new, different, and spectacular in the short run, yet are in consonance with habitual expectations of reporters as well as their audiences, and adhere to the rule that good news is no news. All this frequently stands in the way of a more differentiated, analytical, and constructive coverage – despite the fact that mainstream media in the five sample countries usually take care to remain impartial and to keep a professional distance from the subjects of their reporting.

The intensely national agendas reflected in the analysed set of articles call for initiatives to internationalise the coverage of migration – for instance through better training of journalists, exchange programmes, and a more widespread integration of migrant journalists in the newsrooms of the host countries. In such a way, future coverage could do more justice to contemporary mobility patterns and develop improved approaches to non-discriminatory storytelling. Notably, the findings of this migration coverage study empirically support the [recommendations](#) from editors and migration experts at the January 2013 UNAOC workshop "[Covering Migration: Challenges Met and Unmet](#)".

The self-reflection of the journalistic community on the specific pitfalls of migration coverage can be fortified, too. Time constraints and tight deadlines aside, their general readiness to adhere to good practices in reporting appears primarily to be undermined by deficits in specialised knowledge and context. A comparative study such as this one can add to the awareness of media professionals. The UNAOC and EJC plan to extend this exercise around migration coverage to other parts of the world as well as on related topics such as hate speech, diversity, and religion. In its next iteration, the study should for instance be extended to the media landscapes of countries of origin, e.g., in the MENA region, and look for similar patterns in geographical areas with their own migration streams, such as the Middle East and South East Asia.

The [full presentation](#) is available on Slideshare.

