

# Communications: An Overview

## Case study in Journalism

### **Journalists on the Frontline of Migration Debates**

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There must be some truth in assertions that the press helped construct the post-Westphalian world. It was extrapolated that the media historically contributed to the creation of national borders and the construction of national identities. Benedict Anderson suggested that the printing press was crucial for nation-building as it standardized the 'vernacular' elevating it to the "language of power" and it helped demarcate between national 'us' from all others. Thus it helped establish an 'imagined political community'. Similarly Marshall McLuhan had asserted that print technology reinforced nationalism through its associated social, economic and cultural practices.

The Gutenberg revolution was only the first in a series of communication or media revolutions that facilitated degrees of transcultural convergence as individuals become constituents of 'the global village'. In the 19th century the speed of global communications accelerated via the telegraph, which suited the objectives of Empire-builders. Eventually this was superseded by short-wave radio, global satellite television and the internet. The so called 'Information Society' relies on a range of converged, mobile and smart technologies that permit unlimited interaction across space and borders. Individuals often become dis-embedded from their own 'imagined community' and translocate elsewhere even before they attempt to physically cross national boundaries. The media stir desires and imaginings of attractive distant places.

People today relocate to greater distances more frequently than ever before in human history. It is estimated that over 1 billion people are migrants. The percentage of migrants as a share of the total population continues to rise, and in the next twenty-five years, the rate of migration is predicted to be higher. It has become more necessary for people to migrate because of environmental, economic, and political instability. Although in our region political turmoil and economic difficulties seem to be the main reason, we were warned that climate change may cause international migration to double over the next forty years. The percentage of total migrants who are non-status or undocumented is increasing, which poses a serious challenge to democracy and political representation.

Nevertheless, while globalisation processes have gained an unrestrained momentum, most states have only lowered barriers to communications, material goods and finance; but not for human movement except, in many cases, tourism. Most states have very clear rules regarding how and which non-nationals may enter, settle and/or work within their borders. They closely guard their frontiers "to keep the right people in, and the wrong people out". The current migratory flows, that include the biggest wave of refugees since WWII, and global responses to them, are a clear example of how unprepared we are for the human and social implications of globalisation. 'Otherness' and stereotyped representations have not diminished. In fact theories of intersectionality hold that identities (including those of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity) often interact and inter-relate to nurture systems of injustice and inequality. Journalism often reflects these realities.

## **The Role of Journalists**

Journalists may reinforce the existing status quo but they may help challenge it.

- Agenda setters: Bernard Cohen (1963): "The media may not be effective in telling us what to think but they are very effective in telling us what to think about". Issues that are not raised on the public agenda may fall into a spiral of silence. In their role as the Fourth Estate they have ample opportunity to compete with the state and powerful institutions in driving the national agenda. They may also they give visibility to specific sources, experts, civil society, other Non-State-Actors and international organisations, according to the agenda they wish to put across.
- Frame events: provide a setting that may shape public understandings of daily occurrences.
- Public intellectuals: Edward Said: "The media and the experts determine how we see the world". Journalists and media exponents have an important interpretative role. They are also important multipliers in the advocacy of many causes (because they are valuable in passing-along impressions).

Two dimensions that are also relevant to our discussion:

a) We have to acknowledge that even in the case of migration coverages ownership matters: In the debates on immigration Maltese media owned by political or religious institutions mirrored the position of their mother

organization. These positions were not always consistent throughout the past 10 years: Ex Church and GWU.

b) Professional preparation and the journalists own political orientation are also valid variables: Educational preparation may entail a higher level of conscientisation than learning by the rule of thumb. Political orientation is here not always indicative of one's allegiance to a specific political party.

c) The feelings of the audience cannot be ignored.