

Crossing the Mediterranean: Media Coverage of Europe's 21st century Refugee Crisis

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The history of mankind is replete with movements of human beings across our large planet. People moved or were forced to move because they could no longer live at one place in peace and stability. Wars and famines were common reasons to uproot the tents and move on to greener pastures but there were other reasons as they are still today. One of the major causes of leaving one's homeland is inter-tribal or inter-ethnic rivalry and the other is religious persecution. As we see in Middle-East or West Asia as commonly designated now, these causes are still alive and festering like unhealed wounds making people leave the safety of their homes and family for a more hospitable environment. Into this mixture of geo-politics and ideologies promoted by the super-powers, a complex situation has become more complicated leading countries to take sides and fight proxy wars. The 'migrants' and 'refugees' streamed in via various routes especially by crossing the Mediterranean. Whether these asylum seekers could be classified as migrants or refugees is contentious. One study examines how the very concepts of 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used in different contexts, and introduces questions about mobility, citizenship and the nation state. The media and the press continued to refer to the people leaving conflict zones as migrants looking for a better economic opportunity. Responsible journalists depicted refugees and their desperate situation in a balanced and sympathetic context but a majority of news media channels took the sensationalist and ideologically biased road, playing on people's anti-immigration sentiment, anxiety and fears.

Keywords: Refugee crisis, mass migration, Europe, refugees, geopolitics

Introduction

After the picture of Aylan Kurdi lying face down on a beach in Turkey was published on the front page of newspapers all over the world, there was a sudden flurry of coverage in the world press on the refugee crisis unfolding in Europe. In the initial phase (2014-2015), the crisis was highlighted mainly when the refugees and the migrants died in a boat accident or a ship had over-turned in the Mediterranean Sea. Not much attention was given to the refugee crisis and its root causes.

I became aware of the Mediterranean crossings made by potential migrants and refugees from the Sub-Saharan Africa when I attended a seminar in Seville (Spain) and Rabat (Morocco) on the issue of human migration (2014). The migrants infiltrated into Europe via Ceuta and Mellila, two Spanish enclaves on

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the African continent, not too far from the Strait of Gibraltar. Many migrants were dying either by trying to swim out to the sea and back into the Spanish territories or being shot at by the Spanish police by rubber bullets. The migrants/refugees are aware that once they land on a Spanish territory they could seek asylum in Europe (HRW, 2023; King, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). Some nations have also weaponized Sub-Saharan migration to achieve their foreign policy goals (Torreblanca, 2021; Alami, 2018). Majority of the African migrants or refugees who are vilified in Spain, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya are often poor and destitute with little or no livelihood trying to make a better life for themselves in an advanced, industrialized continent.

Whether these asylum seekers could be classified as migrants or refugees is contentious. One study examined how the very concepts of 'migrant' and 'refugee' were being used in different contexts, and introduced questions about mobility, citizenship and the nation state (Allen et al. 2018). The media and the press continued to refer to the people leaving conflict zones as migrants looking for a better economic opportunity but technically they were all refugees. Majority of the refugees were from Syria which still is a war zone. The war in Syria began as a protest movement, an off-shoot of the Arab Spring revolution when a wind of democratic change and uprising blew through the North African nations such as Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The Syrian movement metastasized into a violent war between the state and the rebels whose main goal was to overthrow President Assad and his regime. The crisis has not been resolved and the war that has been going on for years caused untold misery to the common people of Syria and created a major refugee crisis in Europe. Some European countries refused to take in the refugees, like Hungary, because they viewed the war refugees as Muslim invaders. They changed the narrative of the migration crisis of 2015 as a 'Muslim invasion of Christian Europe'. The narrative shifted the border's meaning from "a dividing line of the transborder Hungarian nation to a defensive line and civilisational rampart of 'Christian Europe'" (Merabishvili, 2023).

Majority of the refugees from Syria heading for Europe belonged to the middle and professional class, who may have thought that they could ride out the war between Assad's government troops and the rebels. The refugees were streaming in via Turkey and then taking a boat or a rubber dinghy to the closest Greek island (Kos, Lesbos). On the other hand, the Sub-Saharan refugees were setting sail from Libya where the chaos created by the end of the authoritarian leader Muammar Gaddafi led to a chaotic political situation. Many Sub-Saharan migrants who worked in a prosperous Libyan economy became unemployed, and the conditions back home in Niger, Chad, Mali, Senegal and Nigeria were either bleak or unsafe due to on-going internecine conflicts. For them the only way out was to cross the Mediterranean sea and they had to make the crossing during the warmer months because the winter was going to make the sea very difficult to cross.

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reasons as they are still today. One of the major causes of leaving one's homeland is inter-tribal or inter-ethnic rivalry and the other is religious persecution. As we see in Middle-East or West Asia as it is called now, these causes are still alive and festering like unhealed wounds making people leave the safety of their homes and family for a more hospitable environment. Into this mixture of geopolitics and ideologies promoted by the super-powers, a complex situation has become more complicated, leading countries to take sides and fight proxy wars.

A Brief History of Mass Migration

A brief history of mass movements of refugees reads like a harrowing tale of hapless pawns caught between two antagonistic powers playing a chess game with a frightening disregard for the innocent and the young. A list of 'refugee crises' from pre-Biblical times gives us a birds-eye view of how frequent these large-scale incidents were:

The Israelites comprising of ten tribes, were expelled from their homes by the conquering Assyrian rulers in 740 BC.

In France (1685), Louis 14th revoked the Edict of Nantes and the Huguenots were expelled because they were Protestants. Some 200,000 fled their homes to cities and towns all over Europe.

Approximately 5 to 7 million Muhacir Muslims arrived in Ottoman Turkey (1783) from Greece, Crete, Romania, Yugoslavia, Crimea, Bulgaria, Cyprus etc. because of persecution.

In Russia, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II (1881) unleashed a wave of brutal anti-Jewish sentiment, known as 'pogroms' which forced the people to flee to UK, US and other European countries.

During WWI (1914), the German massacre of Belgians led to an exodus of over 1 million into other European countries. A quarter of them went to UK. Around the same time, an Armenian diaspora of 5 million of the population left Turkey because of persecution.

At the end of WW2 (1945) we saw the biggest movement of refugees in world history – some 40 million left their homes to go to safe places all over the world. Thousands of Germans fled Eastern Europe before the end of the war.

In 1948, there was a mass exodus of Arabs (about 5 million) from their homeland which is now in Israel.

In 1972, General Idi Amin of Uganda expelled all Asians (Indian and Pakistani descent) calling them 'blood-suckers'. Some 90,000 left Uganda of which 50,000 went to UK and others to India and Canada.

In 1975, after the end of the Vietnam war, millions of Vietnamese fled to other South East Asian countries.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979) sent 5 million Afghans fleeing mostly to Pakistan. Since 1990 refugees continue to stream out - about 2 million per year.

In 1992, the Bosnian war left some 200,000 dead and forced 2.7 million people to flee. Half of Bosnian population was displaced – most went to the US and Germany. Some 700,000 Serbs went back to Serbia.

In 1994, Rwanda, the Hutus hatred for the Tutsi tribe led to a genocide where almost half-a-million Tutsis got killed; 2 million of them fled from Rwanda and many of them are still in refugee camps.

In Sudan's Darfur region (2003) the war killed about 200,000 and displaced 2.5 million people of which 250,000 are living in refugee camps in Chad.

The second Iraq war (2003) created a massive refugee crisis the repercussions of which are still being felt. Some 4.7 million Iraqis have left their own homes, of which some 2 million have left the country and settled in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. With a war in Syria, some of them have returned to Iraq.

The conflict in Syria (2011) began as an off-shoot of the Arab Spring movement and spiraled off into a proxy war between regional powers. The conflict between the rebels, Islamic State (ISIS) and the Syrian government has led people to leave their country to go to neighboring nations like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and eventually to Europe where they are facing an unprecedented refugee crisis not seen since the WW2 (Chalabi, 2015).

All continents in the world have undergone some major displacement of people for one reason or the other. In Africa since 1950s, the continent has suffered civil wars, ethnic conflicts and tribal warfare causing a massive uprooting of people from their homes that increased from 860,000 in 1968 to 6.78 million people in 1992, eventually dropping down to 2.75 million by 2004. The displacements occurred mainly in Angola, Sudan, Darfur, Libya and Western Sahara region. The largest have been from the Darfur region where the Sudanese civil war and the war in the Darfur region have sent refugees scurrying to Chad, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya (Rininsland, 2012).

In Asia, major refugee movements have taken place since the days of partition of India (1947) by the British. The partition created two new countries: India and Pakistan. A huge population exchange between India and Pakistan left approximately 14 million people homeless and about 1 million dead. Other major refugee movements have been in Tibet with the Tibetan exodus (1959), Bangladesh (1971), Vietnam after the fall of the government (1975), the Sri Lankan exodus due to a civil war between Tamils and Sinhalese (1983-2009), Uzbekistan (1989), and Tajikistan (1991). The Vietnamese exodus was more dramatic but it also included Cambodians, Laotians and Burmese who fled mainly to Thailand and then went on to the US, Canada, France and Australia for resettlement (Rininsland, 2012).

In late '70s and early '80s there was a huge influx of refugees into Hong Kong and Australia from Vietnam. They were referred to as the 'Vietnamese Boat

People'. At one time about 60,000 refugees had sought asylum in Hong Kong, and approximately 20,000 had been kept in 'cages' awaiting screening at the Whitehead Detention Center (Iyer, 2000). The refugees were not completely assimilated into the Hong Kong society but many had regular jobs in the construction business, and some of them made a living by selling their refugee passes to actual citizens (Iyer, 2000). Although the first wave of 'boat people' (1979) was fleeing war and conflict, the second wave (1990) were migrants seeking fame and fortune in a more prosperous city like Hong Kong. This was possible because of relaxed travel restrictions and more personal freedom in their homeland. Many were coming to get the resettlement allowance of \$360 paid by the UN to those who agreed to go back to Vietnam. The amount was more than a year's salary for many; they came to Hong Kong to get paid for going back to Vietnam (Iyer, 2000).

In the Middle-East, the focus of this study, one of the earliest displacements of people took place in the Arabian peninsula as a result of the 1948 Palestinian war. Some 700,000 Arabs fled from the newly created nation of Israel, forcefully driven out by the Zionist paramilitary groups. Other incidents that spotlight the refugee problem in Middle-East includes the internally displaced Syrians from the Golan Heights after the 1967 Israeli war; the Lebanon civil war (1975-1990); the Turkish conflict that led to Kurdish population displacement (1984-1999); the Iran-Iraq war (1980 –1988); the First Gulf War (1990) and the the Iraq War of 2003 (UNHCR, 2006). The last Iraq war displaced some 4.7 million refugees (about 16% of the population) of which 2 million fled the country and about 2.7 million are refugees inside the country. Roughly 40% of the middle-class have left the country and all groups from doctors to bakers have been targeted by the militias and criminals. As of 2007, some 2000 doctors have been killed and about 250 have been kidnapped, and about 50,000 Iraqi women and girls have been forced into prostitution (UNHCR, 2006).

21st Century European Refugee Crisis

Immigrants have been coming to the Americas (N. America, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil etc.) from Europe for a long time. In Argentina, between 1857 to 1990 about 45% of the immigrants came from Italy and 30% from Spain and others from Germany, Poland, France, UK, Belgium and so on. From 18th to mid-20th century, it was predominantly Europeans going out and not non-Europeans coming in. Immigrants to the U.S. were overwhelmingly Europeans because of turbulent times in Europe. In 1882 Washington passed the Chinese Exclusion Act that barred Chinese immigrants from coming into the country. The act was repealed in 1943. Chinese were also barred from emigrating to Canada because of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 and from Australia which followed a 'Whites Only' policy until 1973. During the 19th century the people leaving homes were predominantly 'economic migrants', while in the 20th century people moved mainly because of persecution, oppression, revolutions, world wars and civil wars. Jean-Pierre Lehmann, writing for Forbes, indicated that the "...the current

economic hardships, social transformations, political oppression, ethnic hostilities, religious and racial persecutions, and traumas of wars that are occurring...in Middle-East, Africa and other parts of Asia, in many fundamental ways reflect what occurred in the not too distant past in Europe” (Lehman, 2015).

The wars triggered a chaotic and horrible refugee crisis in the Middle-East and in Europe. In 2015, there were 2.3 million Syrians in Turkey, 330,000 in Istanbul itself while 261,000 of them were in refugee camps. Lebanon took in approximately 1.1 million refugees, Jordan housed 633,000 of them and Iraq was taking care of 245,000 refugees. More than 800,000 refugees arrived in Greece by sea. Most of them arrived by sea from Turkey to Greek islands like Kos, Chios, Samos and Lesbos in a flimsy rubber dinghy or a small wooden boat. The trip from Libya to Italy was more dangerous and hazardous. More than 3695 died trying to make the crossing in 2015 and about 3279 died in the Aegean Sea in 2014 (BBC World 2016, 2015). But many of the refugees in Turkey are “...penniless unable to speak Turkish and legally prevented from working” (Dinh, 2015).

Refugees from the Syrian conflict and Afghanistan war continued to find ways to get into Europe, and many died on high seas trying to cross the Mediterranean. Every single day dozens of boats were launched and many of them flooded with sea water, or engines failed and drifted out to high seas. People were ending up floating in the water in ‘fake life jackets’ holding their children and infants tight as their body temperature drops. Greek coast guards, *FRONTEX*, local fishermen, NGOs and volunteers were racing against time to save them. Some refugees died on the boat before they reached the shore – a woman with a heart condition had a heart attack and died enroute. The human traffickers did not care about the human cargo where a refugee paid \$1200 per person on the average. Almost a million of them resorted to paying these smugglers for transporting them in their ‘death boats’ to a safe haven. Observers and critics indicated that enormous amount of human suffering could have been avoided if only world leaders had established a rational process to apply for asylum (Cartensen, 2015).

Some nations locked down their gates and fenced their borders, and only a few like Germany openly welcomed refugees from the war torn areas in the Middle-East. In Europe, many people feared, and even now fear immigrants and terrorism. There is a growing element of latent fascism in some of the European nations. In such countries far-right parties are influencing the political agendas of the mainstream parties, says Alexander Betts, professor of refugees and forced migration at the University of Oxford. The problem was exacerbated by division amongst nations within the European Union. Europe was struggling to come up with a shared policy vision or to build political consensus around the policy of refugees. A number of European countries, however, refused to cooperate and instead pursued unilateral strategies (Alfred, 2015).

Europe’s reluctance to admit refugees has a precedence in America’s disapproval of allowing refugees into the country during WW2. A survey in *Fortune*, July 1938, showed that 67% of Americans approved of keeping Germans, Austrians and other political refugees (mostly Jewish) out of the country. Only 5% said they would encourage them to come. Another survey

conducted by *Fortune* showed that 61% wanted to block immigration of 10,000 Jewish refugee children from Germany. Comparison between Syrian refugees and WW2 Jewish refugees was not viewed relevant by some critics since the current group of refugees, they say could harbor extremists, but at the same time others saw a similar problem during WW2 when they feared Nazi infiltrators hiding amongst Jewish refugees (Ross, 2015; Roth & Ronk, 2015).

The current refugee crisis was managed and organized by United Nations Human Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) which served nearly 3 million refugees spread across Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and beyond. The organization was doing its best to protect and assist the needs of the refugees in healthcare, education and jobs area. UNHCR also provided an array of relief measures from cash and non-material items to supporting third-party administrators for health-care in Lebanon and other places (Hidalgo, 2015). In Jordan the refugee crisis raised its population count by 8%. For Jordanians, the highly visible presence of many thousands of refugees living in their midst has increased fear, resentment, animosity and alienation. The Jordanians feel they are worst off because of Syrians and the crisis has increased rents for housing, price of produce and common items, and put a severe strain on public services (Carrion, 2015).

In 2015, refugees fleeing the war in Syria was a defining moment and most complicated of all news stories. Refugees poured into Europe in historic numbers and their arrival forced political leaders to consider how many they will accept to resettle in their country. More than a million migrants and refugees moved into Europe, sparking a crisis and creating frictions and divisions between European countries. The conflict in Syria continued to be the biggest reason for migration but the ongoing violence in Afghanistan, abuses in Eritrea, poverty in Somalia and Kosovo were forcing people to look for a better life somewhere else. Germany pledged to accept 500,000 refugees while Hungary's Prime Minister Orban refused outright to accept any refugees/migrants and proceeded to seal Hungary's borders (Staudenmaier, 2018).

Despite a widespread coverage of the crisis in the media, the refugees' struggles, desperation, tragedies and personal upheavals, and the effort of those trying to ease their pain and misery were often left out. However, some outlets were making room in their coverage for these worthy stories. The question was: how did the media approach coverage of Europe's refugee crisis, and what were they doing to spotlight the solutions?

Methodology

This paper focuses on media framing of the European refugee crisis and tries to fathom the bias, depth, adequacy and completeness of coverage by the mainstream media networks and news channels. The theoretical concepts of *agenda-setting* and *media framing* in particular form the foundation of news analysis of European and US news media. The manner in which the media cover and narrate the story has a direct impact on people's perception of the event or an issue. It is important to note that the way the media 'frames' the story ultimately

gives the story its meaning. While covering an event or a story journalists can decide which elements to include or exclude in a story, thus a news-story could be framed in multiple ways, producing different meanings with different versions containing different attributes. Entman put it more succinctly when he said that "...to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text..." could be called framing. Tankard pointed out that the strategies involved in framing are selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration. Salience is the central concept in *agenda-setting* theory and it goes hand-in-hand with *framing* since via frame-changing, a tactic commonly used by journalists and editors, media can build a news event's salience by emphasizing different aspects of the event (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Media often use a tactic called 'frame-changing' to keep the story alive and current. Specific attributes of an event can be selected to conduct the process of frame-changing function. An assumption of agenda-setting theory is that increasing volume of coverage of the news story over a period of time increases its salience (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Journalists have an obligation make the audience understand why and how the situation has arisen and why it is happening. Their job is to observe and report what is happening, to give some context to the situation and not to give a solution. However, news stories can often become subjective because journalists sometimes do feel high emotions during crisis period.

The importance given to the story by placing the story at the top or the bottom of the news line-up determines the 'agenda' of the day for the general public. It is important to see how the media outlets are framing the story: negatively or positively, left or right, or with pessimism or optimism. As pointed out earlier, the media are doing more than just telling us what to think about - they are basically telling us 'what to think' by focusing on one particular angle of the story instead of another angle. Various reasons are given for 'framing' the story but media's agenda is often shaped by others: interest groups, government officials, citizens and politicians who try to influence what the media reports as the most important stories of the day. Researchers suggest that the media agenda is an outcome of a strong interplay between public opinion, political priorities and news priorities of the media, the profitability of the media business, and a combination of government and corporate forces intent on protecting the interests of the rich and the powerful (Croteau, Hoynes & Milan, 2012; McQuail, 1994; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). A sample of news articles, shows and programs were selected within a period of 2014–2020 from US, European and West-Asian mainstream-media which primarily focused on the European refugee crisis. A few of the selected sources were meta-analyses done by communication researchers of news coverage of the European refugee crisis in the Western and the West-Asian media. This study is based on a hypothesis that the mainstream media channels in the West would depict refugees and their desperate situation in a sensationalist and ideologically biased manner by pandering to the people's anti-immigrant sentiment, anxiety and fears; while responsible and ethical journalists would report and portray the crisis in a balanced, comprehensive and compassionate mode, and in a more humane context.

Media Narratives and Analysis

Were the media distorting the story, pandering to sensationalism, presenting only one-side to the story or were they giving the full picture? Ann Cooper, journalism professor at the Columbia University, said that a few media channels had done a fairly extensive reporting with background information, explaining the difference between a ‘migrant’ and a ‘refugee’ status and why there was a sudden influx of refugees into Europe, as *Washington Post* did. Some journalists inserted personal stories and reflection into their writings. National Public Radio (*NPR*) once did a story where a Greek ex-politician had Syrian refugees visit his house (Erbenraut, 2015).

Ethical Journalism Network (*EJN*) reviewed U.S. and international media coverage in (2015) in selected countries including Lebanon, UK, US and Turkey. The media watchdog criticized global media outlets for allowing refugee crisis to be hijacked by right-wing politicians, involving fear of immigration to further their goals. In the US, uncritical coverage of anti-immigration rhetoric and attacks on immigrants without any fact-checking contributed to growing xenophobia (DeBode, 2015). John Oliver, of *Last Week Tonight*, criticized UK’s Prime Minister James Cameron for the use of the word ‘swarm’ to describe the refugees and lambasted an incredibly racist *Fox News* report that used an old *YouTube* footage from 2010 to suggest a possible influx of terrorists amongst the asylum seekers. Many European politicians were actively telling the refugees not to come to their country. Hungary meted out the worst treatment to the refugees. They were fed like animals in a caged pen and kicked by reporters as they were fleeing the police on the field. Slovakia said that they would only take Christians since there were no mosques in Slovakia. Polish politician called the refugees “human trash garbage” who should not be allowed to enter (Bradley, 2015; Oliver, 2015; Husband, 2015).

Right-wing critics took the media to task for not revealing the real causes and effects of the refugee crisis. In fact, the narrative of the refugee crisis presented by the Western media was flawed. One of their criticism was that, a) EU countries were exploiting the crisis to import more people who would vote for the EU bureaucracy and b) the crisis wouldn’t have existed if the NATO powers had not armed and funded the jihadists in Middle East and North Africa to topple secular but totalitarian regimes. Instead of spending on bombs and guns to fuel civil wars, investments in the infrastructure could have raised the standard of living in those poorer countries. The media were essentially using the migrant crisis as an excuse for military intervention which exacerbated the problem (Einbinder, 2018; Georgiou & Labarowsky, 2017; Watson, 2015).

In another study of media coverage in 14 countries from Bulgaria to Brazil, said lack of resources, journalists and inability to provide in-depth and balanced reporting contributed to a distorted picture of the refugee crisis, one of the biggest stories of 2015. Journalists reporting on the crises were failing to tell the full story and perpetuating negative stereotypes used by politicians to make a point. In fact they “routinely fall into propaganda traps laid by politicians” (Reuters, 2015). There was also the confusion created by the use of the terms migrants, refugees and asylum seekers interchangeably. Adrian White, director of the *EJN*, said that

the media coverage of the crisis became “politically charged by an agenda following loose language and talk of invasions and swarms.” Some stories showed empathy, humanity and a focus on suffering but journalists often failed to spotlight evidence showing that migration was inevitably beneficial for economic and cultural development. Focus on hate speech, hyperbole, intolerance, distortion and sensationalism led to partial coverage and biased reporting. European media were struggling to provide that balance (Reuters, 2015; Greenslade, 2015).

The New York Times, on the other hand, created a digital platform and a social media strategy to tell the story about the journey and movements of migrants and refugee families. The *Times* reporters followed specifically assigned families on their journey and depicted their struggles to cross the borders. The stories gave details of the struggle and the nerve-wracking decisions taken by them to go into Greece or to another country, and how they were treated by the border police forces of various European nations (Bajak, 2015).

The mainstream media in Germany condemned violent attacks against refugees and refugee housing public broadcasting network like ARD urged citizens to stand up against hateful posts in social media where comments like “refugees should be set on fire” or “left to drown in the sea” were inflaming the net. Most stories in the media were complex in nature explaining why and where the refugees were coming and what the long term implications were; others were focusing on facts to reduce prejudices and break some of the myths about refugees (Bleiker, 2015).

Stories of refugee crisis also dominated Arab newspapers, popular TV shows and social media platforms. A few media outlets like *Gulf Times* of Qatar and *Al-Ahram* of Egypt expressed outrage towards Gulf leaders accusing them of lack of support and empathy towards Syrian refugees. Some tweets mocked Saudi Arabia's offer to build 200 mosques in Germany and questioned why oil-rich Arab monarchies were not helping the refugees. Kuwait agreed to host Syrian refugees only if they had Kuwaiti citizenship. Other commentators have turned their anger on the U.S. and NATO for not taking a forceful action against President Assad of Syria. But critics were also frustrated by the lack of coverage of refugee success stories in Europe and other places (MDI, 2015).

Conclusion

Public apathy to world events is of major concern to the news media outlets and to policy makers. People do not retain the details of a news report, what they retain is a general impression. This impression can become a part of the decision-making process and also shape the perception of what is happening in the world and of events people do not experience directly. News by function, is an ‘authoritative version of reality’ and helps shape everyday consciousness of ordinary people. Public apathy, disinterest and disaffection can also be due to the type of media coverage and media presentation. For example, when politics is presented as a horse-race or in the form of ‘attack’ journalism, sensationalism, soundbites and unexplained news, people tend to lose interest in the political

process and politicians. The “media-induced political disaffection” has created a deep cynicism regarding the political system. Media coverage of social problems also have in general, focused on false assumptions and stereotyping of those affected, for example, criminals are often represented as pathological individuals living in poor, urban areas and perhaps suffering from alcohol and drug abuse (Kensicki, Sp. 2004).

To combat the public apathy and disinterest in the Europe’s refugee crisis, media have resorted to more sensational news stories. Considering all the factors involved in the news construction, dissemination and reception process, and its effect on decision-making process, any sensational and negative news may have negative consequences in terms of attitude, opinion, action and behavior. The headlines showed the European Union in a complete disarray with a moral dilemma on one hand and a growing anti-immigration sentiment on the other. News stories were often shocking and gruesome with an occasional merciful and hopeful story inserted in between (Wyke, 2016).

The Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989, but new fences were going up in 2016, in response to the huge influx of refugees fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan and other places. The refugee crisis stripped open the old animosities and divisions within the European Union, and challenged EU’s commitment to a free-movement zone, as leaders of European nations argued and debated over moral and legal obligations along with a growing anti-immigration attitude amongst the people (Stearns, 2015; Stearns & Tirone, 2016). Waves of refugees swept up on the shores of Europe, mainly Greece, spotlighting tales of sorrow, fear and frustration where desperate families trying to flee bombardment and destruction in their homelands were stranded while innocent children drowned in the sea or lay inert on the beach. The scale of crisis in Middle East and North Africa was of such magnitude that the UN estimated about 15.5 million people had been displaced by wars and conflicts. The influx of refugees of 1.26 million, was so overwhelming that Slovenia, Macedonia, Austria, and Hungary built fences to prevent the refugees from going further, while Germany, Sweden and Austria reintroduced some border controls of their own. The attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) hardened the attitude of anti-refugee parties, groups and other right-wing nationalist parties who were resisting the plans to resettle and redistribute asylum-seekers across EU. EU Commission President Juncker pointed out that Europeans of all nationalities may have been forced to emigrate during historically calamitous time in Europe, including East Europeans who were vehemently against resettlement and redistribution of refugees. The argument against resettlement was primarily based on prevention of crime and terrorism, and also for preserving the European identity. Responsible journalists, however, depicted refugees and their desperate situation in a balanced and sympathetic context but a majority of news media channels took the sensationalist and ideologically biased road, playing on people’s anti-immigration sentiment, anxiety and fears.

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