Conflict, Memory, Displacement

Research team

Kirsten Forkert
(School of Media, Birmingham City University)

Gargi Bhattacharyya
(Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging, University of East London)

Federico Oliveri
(Sciences for Peace Interdisciplinary Centre, University of Pisa)

Janna Graham
(Goldsmiths, University of London)

Partners

Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association
(Birmingham, UK)

The Women's Cultural Exchange
(Nottingham, UK)

Implicated Theatre
(London, UK)

Cantieri Meticci
(Bologna, Italy)

Website   conflictmemorydisplacement.com

Aims and research questions

The aims of the research were to explore:

- how people in the UK and Italy use mainstream and social media to inform their understanding of conflicts, displacement and the role of political institutions, and how these understandings shape attitudes to displaced people.

- how displaced people memorialise conflict from afar and what impact have their processes of remembering had on understandings of global conflict.

- how creative methods can be used to articulate alternative accounts of conflicts, the asylum process and the role of political institutions.

Research methodologies

Media analysis of two UK and two Italian newspapers covering a selection of countries experiencing conflicts and people seeking protection, including some which have been largely visible in the media (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya), others which have received less attention despite still experiencing conflicts and sending many asylum seekers (such as Eritrea and Somalia), including historically (such as Columbia).

A survey of over 200 people aged 18-33 in the UK and Italy about how they use the media and how this use helps them understand global conflicts, displacement, and the role of political institutions.

Online ethnography of relevant hashtags on Twitter (such as #refugeeswelcome, #clandestini or #invasione), citizen solidarity initiatives (including Facebook groups for addressing refugees' basic needs, hosting refugees in private homes and crowdfunding) and anti-refugee or anti-migrant groups.

Semi-structured interviews with over 30 asylum seekers and refugees in the UK and Italy, where they were asked to critically reflect on their experiences within the asylum system and in the receiving countries, and the political situation in their country of origin.

Workshops in which material from media analyses and interviews was shared in order encourage critical reflections about the asylum process, encounters with non-migrant populations, memories of conflicts in their country of origin and the impact of bordering processes on everyday life.

Media analyses, online ethnography, interviews and workshops provided the material which was "dramatised" into a **theatrical script**. This enabled asylum seekers and refugees, generally silenced in the UK and Italian media, to "speak back" and provide alternative perspectives.

Key findings

1. **The mainstream media only covers some of the conflicts in the world.** Several conflicts and regions (such as Eritrea or Colombia) receive almost no coverage, or only in relation to people seeking asylum. When there is coverage, there is no context given for the conflicts – news coverage tends to be about day by day military operations, "terrorist" incidents or individual examples of suffering, but little about the history or geopolitics of the region, or the causes of the conflicts. This may lead audiences to feel confused and disempowered.

2. **Mainstream media coverage of conflicts is generally filtered through an idea of 'Western interests'.** The notion of "Western interests" may vary according to the situation, including the involvement of "our troops" on the ground, the kidnapping or killing of fellow citizens, the impact on "our national security", "our economy", "our access to natural/energy resources", etc. In recent years conflicts, and in particular in Syria, have been represented as of interest to Western audiences because they result in "mass migrations" towards Europe, producing the so-called "refugee crisis".

3. **Where direct Western intervention has been a central factor (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya), mainstream media have often presented conflicts as resulting from the failures of 'great men'.** In the UK much coverage of the Iraq war returns to the allegedly flawed character of Tony Blair and his personal responsibility for the military intervention. A similar interpretation occurs also in the coverage of Libya, in relation to his rapidly changing relations with the country and its former leader Gaddafi. In Italy, this focus on the flawed personalities of "great men" overshadows any other deeper explanation of ongoing wars.

4. **Mainstream media coverage offers almost no route to understanding histories of Empire, i.e. colonialism and neo-colonialism, as a factor in contemporary conflicts and the management of human displacement.** In addition, asylum seekers and refugees feel that UK and Italian populations know little about their countries, in general, and about the histories of Empire in particular. They also argue that this absence of knowledge hampers their understanding of the causes of contemporary migration and also reinforces the sense of Western entitlement.

5. **While mainstream media sources were consulted by many of the respondents of our survey, people are increasingly looking to alternative news sources in order to understand global conflicts, including social media and news comedy programmes.** Both in the UK and in Italy young people expressed suspicion of the media and its "hidden agendas", due to media ownership, and/or political interference. In Italy, the suspicion extends to online content, because of the perceived widespread of "fake news" and the fear of manipulative practices such as clickbait. In general, people chose to consult a range of news in order to piece together accounts that could be verified by multiple sources. In the UK, people use alternative media to 'check' international news, especially from countries that they know or to which they are connected.

Key findings (continued)

6. **Global and national institutions are increasingly seen to be ineffective in the resolution of conflicts and the management of human displacement, which produces radical distrust.** In the UK, Eurosceptic mainstream media coverage framed European and British foreign aid as supporting corrupt regimes and as conning the British taxpayer. In the Italian mainstream media, the main targets of criticism are EU institutions, who are accused of "leaving Italy alone" in face of unprecedented number of arrivals by sea. This radical distrust was also present in the initiatives studied in our online ethnography. In the UK, local populations who want to help refugees engage in mutual aid practices (such as donating necessities or raising money for charities) in the absence of lack of state support but also to counter perceptions of the British government as uncaring and intolerant. In Italy, critical attitudes to the EU are also present in comments on some Italian Facebook groups of NGOs providing reception to asylum seekers or supporting the establishment of "humanitarian corridors" from Lebanon open to Syrian refugees.

In the UK and in Italy, for those with strong anti-immigration views, this radical distrust can be filtered through a conspiratorial frame in which immigrants, particularly from Muslim countries, are seen to threaten social cohesion and governments who let them in as either deliberately or unwittingly facilitating social breakdown. In Italy, popular distrust has extended to NGOs engaged in search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, as a result of a large media and political campaign (a viral video, posted on YouTube and Facebook by a blogger attacking the "big business" of rescuing and welcoming migrants, has been taken as a case study for this trend).
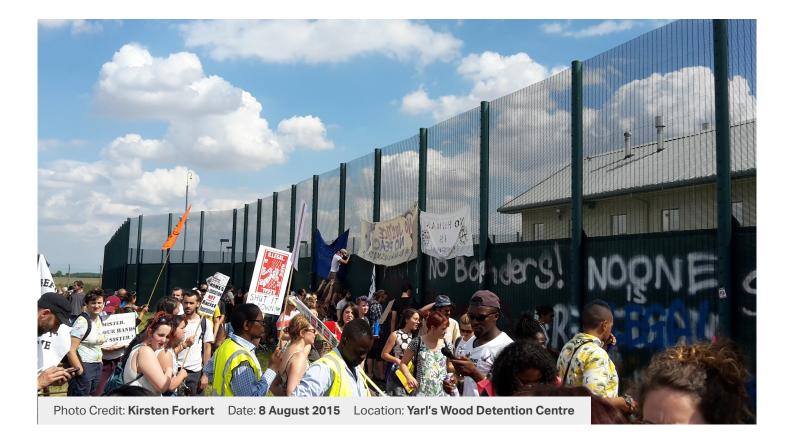
Migrants are stereotyped as tellers of sad stories by the media, the government and the voluntary sector. Both media and the immigration process demand that people present themselves as 'deserving victims' and that they share stories of personal pain. Migrants recognise this but also question the benefits to them of repeatedly retelling their stories to every audience – and migrants are concerned about what will be done with their stories (including by researchers).

At the same time, respondents especially in the UK were unwilling to identify times they have had fun, due to the fear that this could be used to undermine their claim to be 'deserving'. In effect, this expectation forces those seeking status to constantly retell their 'story' in order to 'prove' their case to every person they meet.

In Italy in particular, asylum seekers expressed the feeling of being under suspicion of lying in order to receive protection. This was also reflected in media coverage which stressed the need to distinguish between "refugees" and "economic migrants" (or "illegal aliens"). Moreover, the Italian media contributed to popular misunderstandings of asylum as legally due only to "people coming from countries at war", thus contesting the legitimacy of those people coming from countries depicted as "safe" or "not at war", but who were experiencing persecution nonetheless.

Key findings (continued)

7. **People are "made into migrants" by the government, the media, and members of society.** By this we mean that the category of 'migrant' is constructed actively as a means of erasing other identities and as a process of creating a new social identity that is demeaned and constrained by official processes. A sense of being "other", illegitimate and undeserving lie at the core of this identity. In the UK and in Italy, this is consistent with the general "hostile environment" surrounding asylum seekers and the outsourcing of immigration controls and the reception of asylum seekers from the public sector to the voluntary sector, businesses and private individuals. In Italy, public criticism of the excessively high costs of reception has led to the passing of a new law (March 2017) introducing "voluntary social activities" for asylum seekers as a way of "compensating" local communities for receiving them.

8. **There is a blur between being "made a migrant" and racialisation – and even being a "model immigrant" is no protection against this.** However, although many respondents spoke of facing racism on the grounds of how they looked, they also described additional or distinct experiences as a result of their immigration status. In our initial view, the processes of migrantification and racialisation reinforce each other at key moments, but remain distinct.

9. **Faith, music, comedy, self-organisation and knowledge of history (including legacies of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles) can be important resources in challenging injustice and dehumanisation.** These resources both undo migrantification, by forwarding different ways of being, and provide a politicised critique of Eurocentrism and the limited knowledge within Western society of other parts of the world.

Photo Credit: **Kirsten Forkert**   Date: **8 August 2015**   Location: **Yarl's Wood Detention Centre**

Confusion and distrust in relation to media coverage of global conflicts

"Some inform you a lot, some only focus on how it affects us in Britain despite it happening thousands of miles away, making me feel slightly angry"

[UK survey, : "How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?"]

"as if there are only one type of news that matter - western (i.e. usa and "important" european countries like france, germany etc)"

[UK survey, : "How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?"]

Often frustrated. Poor coverage of facts and speculation do not help attitudes. Also tired, over time people naturally become apathetic to suffering.

[UK survey, : "How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?"]

Media let us live in the dimension of "this is happening now". Yet this is without reference to the context and to the real causes of the events. This makes us swing from moments of emotion, provoked by tragic incidents, to moments of confusion around the real motivations of those incidents

[Italian survey, response to the question: "How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?"]

"I always assume that media have today a business-oriented mind, pursuing profits as their main goal. This makes that their decisions, on what news to publish and how to present the news, are dependent on market trends or on the political preferences of those who finance them. This prevails on the mission to correctly inform the audience"

[Italian survey, answer to the question: "Do you trust news media to give you accurate information?"]

"It's essential to use more sources in order to be informed. Conflicts are too much complex, it's almost impossible that a newspaper article may articulate them sufficiently. Moreover, governments try to minimize or present in a good way their role in those conflicts, so that news in mainstream media do not even touch the roots of the problems"

[Italian survey, answer to the question: "Do you feel that news media helps you to understand the background and context of conflicts in the world?"]

"News on conflicts make me usually feel distant and impotent" [Italian survey, answer to the question: How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?]Often is quite distressing, depending on how the coverage is presented, tabloid press in the UK for example almost hold the British Armed forces on a pedestal, nearly infallible. Plus the triumphalist tone often taken like with the infamous "Gotcha!"".

[UK survey, response to the question: : "How does media coverage of international conflicts make you feel?"]

Interview quotes: (being treated like a migrant)

"I have never felt 100 per cent British, because of the way people of my colour have been represented in media. For instance, if a criminal maybe commits a crime in London, if that person is white, it's going to be said a 30 year old man committed a crime, but if that person is black, they will emphasise a 30 year old black man of Nigerian descent who came to the UK as a refugee has done this and that, which means that one way or the other they say it's us and them, but basically they understand we are different from them."

[interview, London, March 2017]

"I think for me the word migrant isn't what I see the world's giving it to us. It's more like, you're an outsider. You're not a migrant because you're not contributing, or we're not allowed to touch any of their resources, so we're an outsider."

[interview, Nottingham April 2017]

(Culture and faith)

"Okay, we also have come together as other members of … immigrants, we go to the same church, so it's good for us because that's another place where we meet once a week at church and now it's totally a different level, it is spiritual, so it's also good for our soul and then we look forward to also that and then there's a lot of activities that the church organise which we get to be invited to. And then it gives you that sense of belonging as well."

[interview, Nottingham, April 2017]

(Talking back)

"Do you wish to stop immigration? Then stop neocolonialism in Africa."

[Interview, Pisa, June 2017]

"Italians, stop saying that we get 35 euros per day. This is how much costs the structure and all the stuff. We receive only 2.50 euros per day (and not every day, sometimes) just in order to buy something for us, to pay the phone and keep contacts with friends and the family."

[Interview, Pisa, May 2017]

Points for further research

Changing media use

Migration Studies has tended to focus on mainstream media. It is essential that scholars of migration develop a more extensive engagement with diverse media forms, including understanding the role of non-news forms such as comedy in informing popular understandings of migration.

Limited knowledge of history or of global events

A lack of knowledge of Europe's history in the world hampers public understanding of contemporary events. Migrants are surprised and dismayed at the erasure of imperial histories from public consciousness. This post-imperial amnesia is likely to be a matter of contention in relations with other parts of the world.

Equally, the absence of contextual information in media coverage of conflict threatens to further alienate the public from international institutions and the responsibilities of international law.

Learning to hear otherwise

This project has attempted, not altogether successfully, to avoid positioning migrants as tellers of sad stories. Participants were highly critical of the repeated demand that migrants tell their story to demonstrate that they are 'deserving'. However, the risk of not being recognised as 'deserving' does push people into repeated retelling of 'migrant stories', a genre deeply shaped by the demands of the asylum claim. We continue to believe that researchers must learn not to replicate this demand for a tragic performance.