

## **A media crisis on refugees**

Ismail Einashe, speaking notes 22 November

Thank you to Max for this kind invitation and thank you to Mounir and my fellow panellists. I am so delighted to be with you this evening in Amsterdam.

I am also delighted to be able to speak to you about *Lost in Media: Migrant Perspectives and the Public Sphere* a book by edited by me and Thomas Roueche. The book is published by Valiz in Amsterdam in cooperation with the European Cultural Foundation.

And to discuss the problematic ways in which the media has covered migration in recent years, especially since the so-called ‘migrant crisis’.

This book gathers critical responses to the representation of migrants in the media in Europe through nine essays by prominent writers, artists and journalists.

Ever since the "migrant crisis" hit international headlines in 2015. I have spent most summers reporting in southern Italy hearing the stories of young migrants who had survived the migration trail north - the human traffickers, torture, the Libyan civil war and the dangerous sea crossings on dinghies across the Mediterranean to Italy.

Reporting on stories of migration I have seen how since this ‘crisis’ partly caused by Europe’s own border policies has distorted media framing on migration and migrants and in the process migrant perspectives have been lost in the mainstream media.

Since the so-called ‘crisis’ of migrants post 2015 led to increased media coverage of migrants across Europe. This has resulted in an overwhelming negative coverage of migrant lives across Europe.

Since 2015 we have seen largest global movement of refugees. Not just in Europe, but across the world. Yet refugees make up a very small fraction of the worlds population – 90% of refugees stay in the regions of conflict.

In Lebanon / Turkey, Uganda, Ethiopia. 80% of migration in Africa is intra-migration – We have to tackle the myths that have gone unchallenged sine this so-called crisis in 2015.

We have all seen this ‘crisis’ as a border ‘crisis’ policed and controlled by the EU – Since 2015 the EU has built a vast border infrastructure to keep migrants out and justifies letting them die in the Mediterranean Sea as a deterrent to people smugglers, but the policy has failed. So far this year more than 900 people have lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean.

The European Union has militarized the Mediterranean as its member states squabble over the legality of search and rescue missions and what they should do to deal with the few that continue to arrive.

To me it is astonishing that this people continue to die in the Mediterranean Europe has 500 million people and 19 trillion Euro economy and is one of the wealthiest and developed regions in the world put the plight of people dying to reach Europe in recent years since the media peak of 2015 has largely remained unnoticed by the larger public.

We must also acknowledge that today’s realities at Europe’s border are rooted in slavery, colonialism, mass extraction and global capitalism – a plethora of historic political forces that have imbued the West with power and wealth for centuries, at the expense of countries in the Global South. When it comes to current public discussions about immigration in the Mediterranean and beyond, this is a fact that is rarely acknowledge

Before I move onto the book I would like to briefly mention a few areas where I think the media fails in their coverage of migration.

**For example:**

- Journalists who cover refugees often fail to tell the full story and routinely fall into propaganda
- Lack of context
- Words matter: Migrants or Refugee? vs. Migrant – does it matter
- Sensationalism
- Emotive – with no facts
- Misrepresentation
- Not culturally sensitive
- Language (‘swarm’, ‘marauding Africans’ ‘tide’)
- Not just cursory, but in depth too (helicopter journalism)

For me in my reporting on migration in Europe – whether it is interviewing migrants in limbo in Amsterdam, trafficked Vietnamese children who disappear from Dutch shelters or recently arrived young African migrants in Sicily. It is not only about seeking to tell their stories

or reframe how the media depicts such lives – but its also about looking at the system - the asylum and migration system and how that actually works.

What happens at borders, with police, during the immigration process, is it fair, is it transparent, is it humane, does it adhere to fundamental human right, many enshrined under EU and national laws in EU states – do officials live up to the law? Do they actually do their jobs? We find the system itself is in many cases the key part of the problem when it comes to experiences of migrants – and all the while looking at breaking down framing, or seeking changes in the media can miss the real issue of power – and how often corporate, mainstream media reaffirms, supports and covers news on behalf of.

Despite the explosion of media forms since the digital revolution, mainstream media still plays an extremely important role in shaping how news, in particular, is consumed in Europe. The standard tropes and stereotypes around migrants and refugees have a long heritage and are hard to defeat. Yet the success with which they are reproduced attests to the continued power of the media to shape opinion and understanding around these issues.

For me as a journalist who's covered these stories at the borders of Europe for many years – this is an important moment for us all to stop and consider the stories the media tells about Europe and its citizens - We are living through, in Stuart Hall's term, a particular conjuncture in Europe and indeed across the globe. In the current political, global situation there is a tendency towards nationalism, xenophobia, populism and anti-immigration

I feel that displaced people are never given the opportunity to have a voice in the European media - and while not every media outlet sets to necessarily vilify migrants in their coverage, nonetheless when migrants do appear in media coverage they are represented as characters in other people's stories, or as something other.

And beyond this media framing there is the POLITICAL CONTEXT – which we will hear about later here in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. But let's take my own country, the UK. We have seen various recent scandals, such as the Windrush Scandal in the UK and the Hostile Environment – and of course we are in the grips of the Brexit drama and this election – one of the worst in years and the very future of Britain in peril. For me the decision of the UK to leave the EU is a decision to reject

a body of shared, European values. The Britain of multiculturalism that I grew up in on council estate in London, which felt open to the world, is now in real danger, replaced by one keen to blame migrants, progressive politics, and diversity, for its ills.

Now I want to introduce *Lost in Media* and then widen out this conversation to look at a number of pertinent issues around this heavy, often contested subject of media representations of migration and migrants, which we will delve much deeper into later this evening.

The premise of *Lost in Media* – Is that if migrants do appear in media coverage they are represented as characters in other people’s stories, or as something other. Migrants are portrayed in extreme binaries, as vulnerable bodies or as dangerous outsiders; as silent actors, desperate hoards, as statistics—never with fully formed human stories. Migrants may have entered European societies, but their perspectives have been consistently denied and ignored – we hardly ever hear from them as legitimate voices.

In *Lost in Media* we hope to reframe the boundaries of the public sphere, and to illuminate the realities of contemporary Europe. We feel that is Europe is to contend with the myriad crises that it faces, the voices, and stories of migrants must be heard. When migrants are to become fully recognized citizens of Europe, they need to be participants in – rather than subjects of – public debate.

*Lost in Media* seeks to explore this complex terrain and challenge this narrative of dispossession through essays by and interviews with artists, journalists and authors. **André Wilkens**, the director of the European Cultural Foundation, writes that in order to change media narratives that frame migrants as strangers or a threat, we need a European public sphere that is democratic and in which diverse perspectives can be shared equally.

In his essay, the award-winning journalist and author **Daniel Trilling** argues that the European media’s depiction of the migrant crisis is a starting point for the uncomfortable reality of the present situation. In the years since 2015, the media and politicians have drawn upon a deep well of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia as a way to argue for hard borders and nationalism rooted in the rejection of those labelled as ‘non-Europeans’.

**Moha Gerehou**, a journalist for *El Diario*, argues in his contribution that racial stereotypes populate Spanish media to an extent that limits any real form of representation for migrants – or indeed non-white Spanish citizens – in the public sphere.

Media stereotypes feed off ignorance and our current climate of misinformation, as editor **Antonija Letinić** discusses in the context of the Balkans. For her, education has a positive potential and profound importance in responding to these otherwise intractable issues. At the same time, it is important to reflect that this is a game the right has played for many years.

In conversation, two of the world's most important writers, **Aleksandar Hemon** and **Nadifa Mohamed**, discuss the realities of their displacements, from Bosnia and Somalia respectively, and the complexities of telling their stories and the stories of people like them. For Hemon and Mohamed, their work as authors of fiction offers them latitude to tell such stories.

The journalist and editor **Dawid Krawczyk** shows that Poland's current right-wing government drew great strength from a two-decade-long culture war over art deemed offensive by politicians – a culture war that Krawczyk links directly to the current administration's attitude towards migration. This age of illiberalism has ushered in, for many, a sense of pessimism.

In conversation, the acclaimed performance artist and activist **Tania Bruguera** argues that the risk is that this pessimism leads to inaction, rather than building common bonds of experience. For Bruguera, the great danger of our time is that we become too tired to keep up the fight.

The question of who gets to tell migrant stories sits at the heart of the volume. The liberal media have at times played a negative part in the exclusion of migrant voices, as writer and *Guardian* newspaper columnist **Nesrine Malik** argues in her essay. The preoccupation with stories of 'good', 'virtuous' migrants feed liberal biases, while more nuanced, complex stories of migrants remain buried beneath the waters of the Mediterranean.

Of course, the migration question is rooted in deeper European histories. It's no coincidence that migrants come to Italy from Eritrea, Somalia and Libya, all of which were once Italian colonies, but as the Turner-Prize-winning artist **Lubaina Himid** says in conversation, there's a 'collective

amnesia' over the colonial legacies of Europe and how these histories are woven into migration today. Her work testifies to these issues.

Such a history is balanced, too, by that of the exile, as discussed by the renowned writer **Ece Temelkuran**. Like many writers before her, Temelkuran is no longer able to live in her home country, Turkey. She did not make the journey by sea, and her situation is far more secure than that of many; yet she remains displaced, lost amidst the claims made on her and the heavy weight of the designation: 'exile'.

The publication *Lost in Media* is the culmination of the European Cultural Foundation's two-year-long Displaced in Media project that sought to find ways to challenge media discourses around migration.

The project, which the European Cultural Foundation's **Menno Weijts** explains in detail in the book's afterword, worked with young migrant filmmakers across eight European countries, and grew out of Remapping Europe and its companion volume Remixing Europe.

The book includes stills from some of the Displaced in Media films, featuring the work of young migrant background filmmakers from across Europe. Elsewhere we have also used images from the American artist **Jacob Lawrence**'s iconic 'Migration Series', which tells the story of black migrations in America, and works from 'Life Seekers' a photographic series by the internationally renowned photographer **Jillian Edelstein** of migrants on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Taken together, these responses – both visual and written – show us that in these troubling times, as Tania Bruguera reminds us, we must not get tired but rather build common bonds of experience. The media have a unique role to play in fostering such engagements and building shared values by giving space to migrants and refugees to tell their own stories.