

Pubblicato il: ottobre 2024

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Registrazione Tribunale di Frosinone N. 564/09 VG

**“Once Illegal, Forever Illegal”: how media narratives impact on migrants’
integration in Flanders**

**“Una volta illegale, per sempre illegale”: come le narrazioni mediatiche
influenzano l’integrazione dei migranti nelle Fiandre¹**

di

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Abstract:

The article explores some experiences and perceptions of migrants and the local population regarding Belgian media representations. The reference literature and the data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with local population, refugees and migrants in the Flanders region, have allowed to detect aspects of discrimination, socialization problems and episodes of hate speech. These aspects make it more difficult to understand the reality of the migration phenomenon, contributing to the reproduction of negative stereotypes and prejudices against migrants and, consequently, tend to influence also the process of integration of migrants and refugees in Belgian society.

Keywords: media, migration, hate speech, integration.

¹ Although the manuscript is a result of a collaboration among the two authors, the contribution of each author can be qualified as follows: Marta Salinaro wrote paragraphs 1, 3 and 5; Benedetta Morpurgo wrote paragraphs 2 and 4. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Abstract:

L'articolo esplora alcune esperienze e percezioni dei migranti e della popolazione locale rispetto alle rappresentazioni mediatiche belghe. La letteratura di riferimento e i dati raccolti attraverso interviste semi-strutturate condotte con la popolazione locale, rifugiati e migranti nella regione delle Fiandre, hanno permesso di rilevare aspetti di discriminazione, problemi di socializzazione ed episodi di incitamento all'odio. Tali aspetti rendono più difficile comprendere la realtà del fenomeno migratorio contribuendo alla riproduzione di stereotipi negativi e pregiudizi nei confronti dei migranti e, di conseguenza, tendono ad influenzare anche il processo di integrazione dei migranti e rifugiati nella società belga.

Parole chiave: media, migrazione, discorsi d'odio, integrazione.

1. The role of media in shaping perceptions of migration

Since the refugee crisis of 2016, EU policies on refugees and migrants have become more stringent, and border control has been strengthened at the national level. It has become more difficult for refugees and migrants to cross not only the geographical borders across the European Union but also the boundaries of integration (Ferrera 2005; Estevens, 2018; Bosilca, 2021). Indeed, anti-immigrant policies are being put into practice in most countries around Europe and the European media narrative on migration is increasingly becoming negative, consequently influencing the host population's perceptions and therefore its attitudes towards migrants and refugees (Matar, 2017; EU-Logos, 2020). Furthermore, this direction is confirmed by the new European Union Migration and Asylum Pact (2024), which introduces stricter border controls and emphasizes the rapid processing and return of individuals who are not granted asylum. This pact aims to address the challenges of irregular migration by strengthening cooperation with third countries to prevent migrant crossings, thereby prioritizing the security concerns of member states over the humanitarian needs of migrants and asylum seekers. As a result, the pact reflects a shift towards a more security-focused approach, potentially exacerbating xenophobic sentiments and overlooking the contributions and rights of migrants within European societies.

In this framework, the role of the media is to offer us the opportunity to quickly access information on international events and their local implications (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2021), becoming the primary, and sometimes the only, source of information (Silverstone, 2013). In addition to informing us about global events, the media have two other functions: they shape the public perception of events and their implications, and they can also influence people's opinions and behaviors, for example, by fostering feelings of cosmopolitanism or global belonging (Chouliaraki, 2006), but also by arousing feelings of hatred towards specific categories of people. This can happen through the perpetuation of stereotypes, negative framing, or the use of inflammatory language, which can lead to the normalization of hate speech. When media consistently portray certain groups in a negative light, they can inadvertently legitimize prejudices and incite discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, contributing to a hostile social environment (Ekman, 2019; Wodak, 2015). As Triandafyllidou states, "the media do not simply passively report the news. They select what should be covered. In this way, they directly dictate social and political attitudes, shape ideas, and incite actions, for better or worse, in the same way" (2013, p. 243).

In the context of migration, the media play a central role in informing people about the arrival of migrants and refugees and the local implications of migrant mobility. At the same time, they influence people's opinions and behaviors towards this category, both positively, by making individuals aware of and familiar with migratory movements, especially with new arrivals, their stories, and the reasons for their struggles (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2021); and negatively, by selecting stories, images, and using terms that portray migrants and refugees as “enemies at the gates trying to invade Western nations” (Kosho, 2016, p. 88).

Over the past thirty years, migration dynamics have become increasingly important in the context of globalization, but social, political, and economic discourses on migration are still more oriented towards creating borders rather than eliminating categories and artificial distinctions (Estevens, 2018; Bosilca, 2021). Media discourses on migrants and refugees not only continually reproduce the distinctions between “us” and “them” through the process of “othering”, but also depict migratory movements as humanitarian emergencies, thereby creating a stereotypical image of the people who migrate and their countries of origin (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2014). The process of othering is closely related to the process of identity formation and migrants are increasingly being perceived, represented and “constructed” as threats to “our” jobs, “our” economy, “our” culture and “our” security system (Kamenova, 2014).

According to Dervin (2016), what happens on the media is that, from a sociological point of view, the strategy of othering identifies “differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between “us” and “them”” (pp. 46). In this framework, power is used as a discriminating factor to differentiate between other and self. Indeed, as Dervin (2016) states “the other is also often described through a deficit framework, a view that she is not as good or capable as ‘we’ are, that leads to stereotypes and other forms of representation” (pp. 46).

The media often employs repetitive strategies when reporting on migrants and refugees, which tends to reinforce negative stereotypes, perpetrating dynamics of hate speech towards this category of people. Media's portrayals frequently depict migrants as either helpless victims or threats to societal stability, reducing their complex experiences to simplistic and often harmful narratives (Loughnan & Murray, 2022), and creating “artificial realities of hatred” (Drozd, 2016). In his article “Hate Speech in Media Discourses” (2016), Michal Drozd refers to a document entitled *Ethics in Communications* by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, to underline that hate speech plays a significant negative part in media discourses, in particular, when they are used to marginalize, isolate and alienate certain categories of people, consequently fomenting hate and conflict. As the above-mentioned document states media perpetrates hate speech by:

“Demonizing others and creating a mentality of “us” against “them”; presenting what is base and degrading in a glamorous light, while ignoring or belittling what uplifts and ennobles; spreading misinformation and disinformation, fostering trivialization and banality. Stereotyping – based on race and ethnicity, sex and age and other factors, including religion – is distressingly common in media” (Papiéska Rada, as cited in Drozd, 2016, p. 26).

Media tend to reproduce adverse public opinions on forced displaced people by representing them mainly in two ways: men are often represented as economic, socio-cultural, health and security burdens or threats to the host countries, while women as victims of war and conflict, often

collectivized, dehumanized, stereotyped, and homogenized. Both of these two ways of representing them are potentially harmful, as they can trigger negative attitudes towards migration and influence voting preferences, as well as making the process of reception and social integration even more difficult (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019).

Negative stereotypes are not the only narrative approach the media employs when covering stories about migrants and refugees. Collectivization and individualization are two opposite strategies that media use when they report on general events. The strategy of individualization tends to represent the actors involved as individuals, it gives specific information about them, humanizing them and raising empathy in the news' consumers. This is not the strategy used by media when they report on migrants and refugees, who are rather represented as abstract group members and voiceless individuals (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). Collectivization is a strategy that does not only appear at the textual level with collective terms such as "Syrians" or "children", but also at the level of the images that go with the text. We often find pictures of groups of anonymized migrants and refugees on boats, walking, crossing borders; they are represented as people without a past or a story, without a purpose, just groups of victims that need to be saved but also as victims who host countries need to protect themselves from. Photographs and images of refugees and migrants have a great impact on the news consumers because they require less mental effort and their cognitive and emotional effects on the audience are more immediate than words. The general perception is that photographs are nearer to the truth, but what spectators tend to ignore is that they can be modified as well, for example by cropping, selecting, digital retouching (Amores et al., 2019). Texts are also accompanied by numerical representations, most of the time statistics, that give the illusion of being neutral and reliable, but they simplify complex realities and create distance between the actors involved and the audience, who end up being detached from what is happening and from the victims (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019).

According to Amores et al. (2019) media report on events and actors in a specific way, selecting and emphasizing specific characteristics to make the event more appealing to the news' consumers. Media, indeed, deliberately choose how to represent the reality we live in, by selecting specific aspects of the events and therefore becoming a window to the world that sometimes reveals itself to be a curtain to the world.

2. Media narratives and perceptions of migration in Flanders

In recent years, the way the media represents refugees and migrants has become a topic of growing interest and debate in migration studies. As we have seen, media representation can significantly influence public perceptions and, consequently, the policies and social attitudes toward these communities (Chouliaraki, 2006; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2021). Several studies have highlighted how the media can contribute to creating negative stereotypes, influencing public perception, even when we consider people who rarely or never follow the news (Coninck et al., 2018), and contributing to a climate of fear and discrimination (Van Dijk, 1991; 2000; Kosho, 2016). In addition, studies on the phenomenon of *eco chambers* underline how media and social media often create environments (eco chambers, indeed) in which "the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (Cinelli et al., 2021). This phenomenon leads citizens to be exposed mostly to information that

strengthens their political views and beliefs, while remaining almost isolated from people with opposing views (Barberà, 2020).

In particular, Flemish media have come under scrutiny for their tendency to represent refugees and migrant in a stereotypical manner, often without giving them a voice, thus influencing public attitudes toward these groups of people (Jacobs, Meeusen & d’Haenens, 2016; Van Haelter & Joye, 2020).

In this regard, a recent Horizon 2020 research project, BRIDGES, has offered an innovative perspective on gender bias in migration narratives. This project examines migration narratives in Europe through an intersectional lens, revealing a significant imbalance: while migrants’ voices are generally underrepresented, migrant women’s voices are even more marginalised than migrant men’s. Furthermore, the project highlights a predominant trend in media coverage, where migration is often represented through stories of irregular entry, mostly attributed to men. This reinforces a highly masculinised representation of irregular migration, obscuring the diverse realities of the phenomenon (Güell, 2024). The narration of migration is not stereotyped only at the European level, but also at the countries’ level, and, specifically, research on Flemish media has revealed that both commercial and public broadcasters propagate stereotypes and negative imagery concerning immigrants and refugees. This practice fosters a dynamic in which members of the in-group attribute these negative characteristics to all individuals within the out-group, a phenomenon known as “out-group discrimination” (Coninck et al., 2018, p.4). This not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also perpetuates societal divisions and prejudices.

Building on aforementioned research, our focus is to examine the extent to which the narratives propagated by Flemish media influence societal attitudes toward immigration and, consequently, affect the integration of migrants and refugees in Flanders. As noted by Kiwan (2009) and cited in Hoops (2020), portraying immigrants as “dangerous others” serves to legitimize exclusionary practices and discrimination in key areas such as employment and education. This suggests that media representations can play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and, ultimately, the social integration of immigrant communities. On the other hand, a narrative characterized by empathy and recognition instead of by pity and victimization, could lead to a process of integration that has its starting point in immigrants and refugees’ capacities and expertise (Hoops, 2020).

First, it is essential to provide an overview of how Flemish media cover immigration, particularly through visual and narrative framing. Van Haelter & Joye’s (2020) research examines the reporting on the refugee crisis by both Flemish commercial (VTM) and public (VRT) broadcasters from 2015 to 2018. Their analysis highlights that visual framing often associates images of distressed situations with the term “chaos”, thereby linking immigration dynamics to disorder. From a narrative perspective, the study also reveals an overrepresentation of male refugees, which can contribute to feelings of discomfort and perceived threats among viewers.

In general, Flemish media tend to represent immigrants and refugees as a homogenous group without a voice, using the media strategy called “collectivization”. This approach leads to the anonymization and depersonalization of refugees, where their individual stories and voices are subsumed under a collective narrative. Additionally, immigrants are often decontextualized and silenced, which contributes to what Chouliaraki & Zaborowski (2017) describe as journalism’s “symbolic bordering.” This type of reporting further reinforces a detached and impersonal portrayal of refugees, ultimately influencing public perceptions and integration efforts (Van Haelter & Joye, 2020).

3. Research questions and methodology

Starting from a literature review on the topic, the aim of the investigation was to explore the experiences and perceptions of local population and refugees and migrants regarding media representation in the Belgian context. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both mentioned population categories. To limit biases in the conduct of the interviews, several group supervisions were carried out during the research period. In total, 10 interviews were collected with local people from the cities of Ghent and Antwerp and 7 interviews with refugees and migrants from Burundi, Afghanistan, Palestine, Melilla and Mexico.

Regarding the target population, the focus was on people who have been residing in Belgium, particularly in the Flemish region, for at least ten years (an indicative period that allows considering individuals in contact with Belgian media for a significant time) and adults, as well as refugees and migrants from non-European contexts. For both samples, there were challenges, particularly related to the recruitment process and the language barrier for migrants and refugees and related to the heterogeneity of thought for the local population.

The identification of key informants was conducted using the snowball sampling technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method used to access hard-to-reach or hidden populations, such as migrants and refugees. The process begins with identifying a small group of initial participants, known as “seeds” who meet the study’s criteria. These participants then refer to others within their social network, creating a chain referral system that expands the sample size (Noy, 2008).

This technique is advantageous for accessing marginalized groups and is cost-effective, but it can introduce bias as the sample may not be fully representative of the entire population. The effectiveness of the sample relies heavily on the initial participants and their networks (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

For the recruitment of migrants and refugees, which took place between April and July 2024, we relied on the asylum centers of the city of Ghent, which specifically directed us to the places in the city most frequented by migrants and refugees, such as integration offices (Amal for the city of Ghent and Atlas for the city of Antwerp), language centers (CVO in Ghent) and voluntary associations that interact with this category of people to provide mainly material help (Een Hart Voor Vluchtelingen Gent). These places helped in making contact with migrants and especially refugees, by providing information on cultural events to attend. By taking part in these events, we started to understand the linguistic reality of these people, who often combine their mother tongue with Flemish for integration purposes, often bypassing English. This aspect necessarily limited the number of people who could be interviewed.

The sample came out also limited in terms of geographical position; in fact, for the recruitment of the local population, we limited ourselves to places in the cities of Ghent and Antwerp where it was more likely to meet locals, such as universities, cinemas and even the same places where we managed to recruit migrants and refugees. In this case the challenge was mainly related to the diversity of thought of the interviewees, as most of them showed a very open mindset towards the topic of migration, willing to talk about it and very welcoming, making the sample of the local population very homogeneous from this point of view, but also pushing us to collect testimonies that distanced themselves from the typically anti-immigration political ideology of the region, as confirmed by the last political elections.

Once the data was collected, we opted for a qualitative analysis based on an adaptation of Gioia's methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). After transcribing the interviews, we carried out an open coding procedure (inductive approach) aimed at identifying first-order codes to give the terms, codes, and categories of our informants a fundamental role in inspiring the coding procedures. This allowed us to identify further second-order dimensions, which emerged from the first-order coding.

The thematic cores that we will explore shortly are part of two of the previously mentioned dimensions. The first, named "Integration" includes themes of language, discrimination, and socialization. The second, named "Media Representation of Migration", encompasses themes such as the correct use of terms, representation through images, and the selection of what is reported in the media.

From the data analysis and particularly within the just-described conceptual macro-categories – Integration and Media Representation of Migration – some significant thematic cores emerged concerning discrimination and hate speech. These two macro areas are intertwined since many themes from the "integration" macro area are also linked to the "media representation" dimension, such as the theme of discrimination. Moreover, integration should be a media theme within a multicultural society like the European one, particularly the Flemish. If we consider the media as our main means of information, we can deduce that they influence our perception of reality and, therefore, the migratory phenomenon as well. Thus, to what extent can the media representation of immigration in Flanders hinder or facilitate the integration of migrants and refugees within the Flemish community? This, along with other questions, was central to the interviews conducted, allowing for a better understanding of the integration process implemented by the Flemish region and how much of this process is not only reported but also facilitated or hindered by the Flemish media.

4. Analysis of representations, discriminations, and integration challenges

The interviewed samples emphasize that media representations consistently address the issue from a single perspective - namely, that of the host society - and often in a negative light. This approach facilitates the formation of stereotypes and fosters negative attitudes toward migrants and refugees. Rarely immigrants or refugees are depicted as a resource for the host country; more frequently, they are portrayed as a threat to Flemish culture or as individuals who benefit from certain state-provided advantages without offering any reciprocal value.

[...] Flemish media coverage on refugees and migrants is always characterized by these images and photos of refugee's streams, scary, angry. So, they really only show one side of the story (R.P., Gent).

[...] Media do talk about migration but they always represent migrants and refugees as the problem. We are never a resource to the host country; we are only a problem (S.H, Afghanistan).

[...] As far as images, they show immigrants and refugees as one big group and we are very dehumanized, it's always a "us vs them" narrative as if we are not as human as they are. Being a refugee is not a choice (Y.W., Palestine).

Equally important, alongside the use of images, is the correct use of terminology, which was explored during the interviews with reference to the proper use of the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee'. The initial focus was on assessing the interviewees' understanding of the difference between these two terms, followed by an examination of their usage within Flemish media. While Flemish media generally

strive to acknowledge this distinction in their narratives, the interviewed migrants and refugees pointed out that the media often alternates these terms with others that lack a legal connotation, such as 'illegaal' and 'allochtoon,' thereby adding a negative nuance to the individuals being depicted.

[...] Yes most of the times they do, but they use a lot of other terms, such as “illegaal”, which is really surprising to me, because most of the times there is no other way to flee war but with smugglers, because the richer countries do not give us the opportunity to enter legally. What are we supposed to do? Also, the media often talks about us as “allochtoons” which literally means “originating from another soil”, and then it refers to locals as “autochtoon” (S.H., Afghanistan).

[...] people need to understand the caring for another human being, they never show the Human aspect of migration, they tend to forget that they are talking about human beings. Also, media should pay attention to the words they use, because if they start calling someone “illegal”, that person will stay “Illegal” also when they turn legal (W.N., Burundi).

This passage points out an issue in the media's representation of migration: the tendency to depersonalize migrants through language and narrative framing. When the media does not focus on the human aspect of migration, migrants may be seen more as statistics or challenges rather than individuals with rights and personal stories. The use of terms like “illegal” reinforces this distortion by permanently labeling individuals, even if their legal status changes.

The interviews conducted often prompted respondents to reflect on how the media narrative of migration varies depending on the origin of the migrants or refugees being discussed, revealing additional aspects of discrimination. The most frequently cited example in this context concerns the large influx of Ukrainian refugees following the Russian invasion, towards whom Flemish and European media in general adopted a predominantly positive, albeit emergency-focused, narrative.

[...] It was a different situation when the war in Ukraine happened, the media coverage was very positive towards them but kept on being very bad towards anyone that was not white. That proves even more the point: you have the concept of “migrant” but based on your skin tone you can be a good migrant if you are white or a bad migrant if you are not white (R.P., Gent).

[...] This type of narrative is only true for migrants and refugees from the Middle East or from Africa, because for example since the war in Ukraine started, the media's narrative on Ukrainian refugees and migrants has always been positive, they were never portrait as threats but rather as people who needed help (S.H., Afghanistan).

The issue of discrimination is closely tied to the theme of integration, as the two dimensions are theoretically negatively correlated. This means that the more active the integration process within a community, the less discrimination should be practiced. However, in practice, this is not the case. Previous studies have shown that being integrated does not affect the likelihood of experiencing discrimination (Leone de Castris et al., 2021). Interviews with migrants and refugees revealed that discrimination persists not only in small Flemish towns but also in larger cities, such as Gent and Antwerp, and is often linked to the ethnic background of those who experience it. Migrants or refugees who do not appear foreign based on skin color often encounter discrimination when their spoken language reveals their migrant status (Dervin, 2016). Conversely, refugees and migrants from

African or Middle Eastern countries face discrimination earlier, based on their appearance, particularly skin color or the tradition of wearing the hijab. Discrimination affects the lives of refugees and migrants on multiple levels, including socialization with the local population and their participation and efficiency in the labor market. This creates a vicious cycle in which the media emphasizes the lack of social and economic integration of refugees and migrants, simultaneously leading the local population to be less inclined towards social interactions and employers to avoid hiring individuals from these groups.

[...] I started wearing my hijab when I was 18, and I started noticing people would behave a little differently with me. They would behave differently also before I started wearing it, but back then it was because I am brown (S.H., Afghanistan).

[...] I think a lot of people are racist and selfish; that's what I see. I experience it every day, at my workplace and also when I go out. (N.A., Gent).

[...] Today I went to pick up my son from school, and his bike chain was down. I was fixing it, and I was not in the middle of the street or something. At some point the teacher arrives and she could have just walked around me, there was space for her to walk, but she decided to stay still and watch me the whole time, and when I was finally done with the bike, like 50 seconds later, she walks by us saying "Oh my God these people" (C.T., Mexico).

The interviews also revealed other themes related to the broader area of integration, such as socialization with the local population, language issues – both of which are closely interconnected – and the media representation of the integration process of refugees and migrants. Focusing on the role of socialization in relation to language, both the local population and migrants and refugees emphasized the importance of learning Flemish for adequate integration into the community. Mastery of the language not only facilitates interpersonal relationships but also entry into the labor market. Proficiency in Dutch is considered a fundamental element of integration by both groups interviewed, as it enables the establishment of a common ground that goes beyond mere casual conversation, thereby fostering interpersonal relationships between the two groups.

[...] It would be a bit easier if someone speaks Dutch, because it is easier for me to connect with someone if they can also speak Dutch, because speaking in English or French is always a little bit more difficult. I guess that would be my only thing. I don't feel like I could be a 100% myself when I must speak English or French, and this is the only thing that would make someone different for me than any other Flemish person (E.D.S., Gent).

[...] I have been here since 2001, so I actually feel like a local myself. I feel comfortable when interacting with them, also because I speak Dutch fluently and that makes everything easier (S.H., Afghanistan).

The integration process is considered crucial not only for interpersonal relationships but also at an institutional level. However, in the media, the narrative of integration predominantly focuses on the acquisition of the Flemish language, placing the entire burden on migrants and refugees while neglecting the civic responsibility of the Flemish community in creating a conducive environment for integration. This partial representation of integration, which overlooks the active role of the host

community, fosters a narrative in which migrants and refugees are often deemed responsible for failed or insufficient integration. Moreover, this narrative prevents the local population from understanding the challenges that migrants and refugees face once integrated into the Flemish community, thereby hindering the development of empathy and a deeper understanding of their situation in Flanders.

[...] I think they only show situations where migrants and refugees have failed to integrate or situations where migrants or refugees commit crimes towards locals. I think it is a vicious circle, because we are what we see, so if media keep on saying that refugees and migrants are bad workers for example, we will not hire them, so they do not get a job, and if they do not get a job then they become what the media have said about them (R.P., Gent).

[...] No, I do not think that the media show that, because there are people who have integrated and it's only a few people that they show, like someone who started a restaurant with Syrian food, then that is a good Syrian. But Flemish media show too little of people who did integrate in our community because they only tend to represent what is sensational (N.A., Gent).

[...] I do not think that locals know. Most media have one narrative, and what they talk about is how migrants and refugees receive the country's social assistance, money from the government, medical assistance. These are the three things they talk about. (...) There are a lot of things that immigrants do but I have never heard it on radio or tv (W.N., Burundi).

5. Conclusions

Since the data collected through interviews is limited – both in quantitative and qualitative terms – to support media narratives as a cause of public perceptions of migrants, this study represents an exploration of the perceptions among the local population, immigrants and refugees regarding the media narrative of migration in Flanders. The ultimate aim of this investigation is to help develop hypotheses and future studies to detect the influence of media narratives on different aspects of migrants' lives, highlighting incidents of discrimination and hate speech triggered by the Flemish media.

The conclusions drawn from the literature and the experiences collected highlight a significant issue in the media representation of migration in Flanders, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the spread of hate speech. The unilateral and negative portrayal of migrants in the media not only reinforces existing prejudices, facilitating their normalization, but also creates fertile ground for social polarization.

This phenomenon has profound implications for social cohesion and democratic stability, as emphasized by the Council of Europe, which describes hate speech as a threat not only to those directly affected but to society as a whole (Council of Europe, 2022).

The initial step for both media and non-media organizations is to prioritize the voices of refugees and migrants. To ensure their respectful and accurate representation, it is crucial to train journalists to steer clear of sensationalism by establishing comprehensive training programs, guidelines, and codes of conduct (Loughnan & Murray, 2022).

Combating hate speech, therefore, requires a cultural and educational commitment aimed at developing critical thinking and reflexivity, which can serve as a shield against misinformation, slander, and stereotypes (Santerini, 2019). The role of educational institutions and non-governmental

organizations in promoting dialogue, raising awareness, and fostering counter-narratives is essential for combating hate both online and offline (Council of Europe, 2022).

Educating new generations on the importance of balanced narratives and recognizing the dangers of dehumanizing language can play a crucial role in reducing hate speech. Media literacy, which teaches individuals to recognize and decode media narratives, can help cultivate more critical and informed news consumers (Buckingham et al., 2005; Cappello, 2019) and raise awareness of the impact of words and images, encouraging people to reject hate speech and promote a culture of respect and inclusion (Pasta, 2023).

Moreover, schools and educational institutions can contribute to fostering empathy and intercultural communication, which are essential for countering the “us vs. them” narrative often perpetuated by the media. For instance, through an inclusive educational approach that values the history and experiences of migrants, the distance between groups can be reduced, facilitating the building of bridges of mutual understanding. In this way, education can be a powerful tool for achieving a more cohesive society that is aware of cultural diversity (Santerini, 2021; Crescenza, 2023).

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