Kevin Smets* and Çiğdem Bozdağ

Editorial introduction. Representations of immigrants and refugees: News coverage, public opinion and media literacy

Our perception of social reality is increasingly shaped by an interplay of representations in online and traditional media. Media representations also influence the public perception of immigrants and refugees as well as immigration policies. Thus, the way in which migration, immigrants, refugees or ethnic and religious minorities are represented across different types of media has certainly been one of the most prominent themes in European media and communication studies. A significant portion of that scholarship has focused on representations of Islam and Muslim populations in Europe (as mapped by, among others, Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Poole, 2016; Tsagarousianou, 2016). In recent years, the media representation of refugees and asylum seekers has become a nostable topic of research (for a brief overview of this emerging research, see Bozdağ and Smets, 2017, pp. 4049–4050, and De Cock et al., in this issue), with studies on social media becoming more prominent.

This special issue of *Communications* aims to show that these issues still matter and yet new topics and discussions keep emerging. Recently, the abruptly increasing number of incoming refugees from the Middle East to Europe in 2015 – by some framed as a refugee 'crisis' (for a critical discussion, see De Cleen, Zienkowski, Smets, Dekie, and Vandevoordt, 2017; Sigona, 2018; Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2016) – and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections formed major juncture points in the representation of migration and mobility. In this special issue, we argue that in order to understand how those representations influence the public perception of immigrants and refugees, we need to go beyond only analyzing the representations, and look at how different publics engage with these representations. We also need to take into account media use and media literacy. Furthermore, this special issue also aims to broaden the scope of studies on media representations of immigrants and refugees by including studies on both non-EU

*Corresponding author: Kevin Smets, Department of Communication Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium, E-mail: kevin.smets@vub.be.
Çiğdem Bozdağ, Department of New Media, Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey, E-mail: cigdem.bozdag@khas.edu.tr.

and EU immigrants, making cross-country comparisons, and offering an engaged research agenda and a critical perspective.

The theme and focus of this special issue arose in concurrence with a collaborative research project, IM²MEDIATE, which focuses on the dynamic interplay between media representations of non-EU immigrants and governmental and societal reactions. Recognizing the multifaceted issue of media representations and the wide range of actors involved, the project investigates not only textual and visual content related to migration, but also the way in which different stakeholders (policy makers, public opinion, media producers and immigrants themselves) make sense of this content. Comparisons between the Belgian and Swedish contexts form the central axis of the project. With the articles by De Cock et al. and De Coninck et al., this special issue presents the first key findings of that project, drawing our attention to the newspaper coverage of refugees, and public opinion towards them, respectively.

Using the vision of this project as a springboard, we set out to find complementing studies from other national contexts, using different conceptual and methodological frameworks. Indeed, we present here a series of papers focusing on Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States, in several cases comparing these national contexts. Besides this geographical diversity, we put forth here studies ranging from large-scale quantitative analyses of news coverage to participatory-action inspired research on media literacy with young immigrants. The dominant emphasis in the special issue is on newspaper coverage. Recent large-scale research on representations of migration in the European press (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore, 2015; Georgiou and Zabarowski, 2017) shows that newspapers remain highly influential. They are key actors in shaping public opinion and policy.

Representation is a central topic in media scholarship. Studying representation allows the patterns along which events, issues and social groups occur in media texts to be revealed. Anyone interested in the construction of meaning in mediated communication, in one way or another, passes through the notion of representation. Looking at dynamics of representation reminds us that media texts are contextualized constructions rather than objective reflections of reality. Applying this to a societally contentious topic like migration, De Coninck et al., in this issue, for instance, discuss literature that demonstrates how media coverage of migration and actual migration numbers are sometimes disconnected and thus misleading (see, e. g., Jacobs, Claes, and Hooghe, 2015; Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2007).

The existing body of research on media representations of immigrants and refugees indicates established patterns of framing, and a systematic bias in the representation of immigrants and refugees in different contexts. Studies on

media coverage in diverse countries show that despite contextual differences, immigrants and refugees are mostly not allowed to speak for themselves, but are rather represented by others and most commonly as "threats" to cultural values, economy and security or as "victims" (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Horsti, 2013; Van Gorp, 2005). Also during the recent inflows of Syrian refugees to Europe, the refugees were often framed either as "vulnerable outsiders" or as "dangerous outsiders", as the analysis of the European press by Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017, p. 3) shows. The representations of immigrants and refugees in social media debates do not necessarily diverge from these dominant stereotypical patterns in mainstream mass media (Bozdağ and Smets, 2017; Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016). These representations not only objectify, collectivize, and thus dehumanize the image of immigrants and refugees (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson, 2013), they also legitimize and delegitimize policies related to them.

In line with the dominant strand in the literature, several of the studies collected here point at the overall negative stereotyping of migration and immigrants in the media and its potential menace for constructive public debate. Continued critical analysis on this content and its dynamic relations with societal reactions to migration remains necessary. Critical media literacy education can be one of the important ways forward, as the contribution by Leurs et al. in this special issue points out. Observing today's media landscape as "an important battleground for inclusion and exclusion", Leurs et al. plead for a strengthening of the participation in media production of young immigrants and their self-representations as a political project. By presenting these studies on news coverage, public opinion, media literacy and participation alongside each other, we wish to highlight the ways people engage with systems of representation.

Broadly speaking, the articles in this special issue address three dimensions of media representations of migration. The first and most prevalent dimension is the representation in news reporting, which is still one of the key issues for understanding how public opinion about immigrants and refugees is formed. This is studied by De Cock et al., Demetriou, Hovden et al. and Ogan et al. As an outcome of the aforementioned IM²MEDIATE project, De Cock et al. present findings from a comparative, quantitative content analysis of the coverage in Belgian and Swedish newspapers of the 2015 'refugee situation'. While they reveal significant differences between the two countries as well as within the Belgian regions in terms of representation patterns and journalistic values, the striking similarity is the lack of voice given to refugees. Hovden et al. then look at the same time period and compare Norwegian, Swedish and Danish newspaper coverage. They observe important differences in the European coverage of migration, Scandinavian coverage generally being more positive (or less negative). The authors note congruence with immigration policies, public discourses and the media structure

in Scandinavian countries, again pointing at the entanglement of discourses, politics and society. A third content analysis then, by Ogan et al., looks at the coverage of migration in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Their study shows that the divisive rhetoric of Donald Trump on migration and refugees during the presidential election to a large extent set the framework of newspaper coverage of the elections. Thus, one of the significant findings of the paper is the correlation between the ideological leaning of the news sources and the tone of the media towards the immigration issue. Although also analyzing news reporting, Demetriou diverges from these three studies; firstly, by looking at both online news reporting and the comments from a discourse-historical perspective; and secondly, by turning her focus towards EU immigrants, whose coverage in the media is still an understudied topic. Her analysis demonstrates the "Balkanist" perspectives of newspapers when framing immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria as "benefit tourists"; an argument used to depict immigrants from Eastern Europe as threats to the UK economy and welfare system. These debates on so-called benefit tourism go hand in hand with the rise of Euroskepticism and welfare restrictions. The four papers on the newspaper coverage of immigrants and refugees demonstrate how economic, cultural and securitarian arguments are used interdiscursively to construct a logic of us and them in different types of newspaper.

The second dimension covered in this special issue is public opinion regarding migration. Media representations influence public opinion towards minority groups. In their contribution to this special issue, De Coninck et al. investigate this among a representative sample of Belgian adults while taking into consideration people's media consumption patterns, trust in the media and fear of terrorism as crucial dimensions. It is one of the first studies to differentiate between the public opinion towards immigrants, on the one hand, and refugees, on the other hand.

Finally, the special issue also looks at the dimension of immigrants' own perspectives and how issues of self-representation and media literacy can help us understand better the dominant patterns of representation and how to question them. In their paper, Leurs et al. present a study on media literacy, in which they adopted the approach of participatory action research and developed a program entitled "Media literacy through making media" for young immigrants with the aim of raising their awareness about politics of representation and engaging them in practices of media production for the purposes of increasing their resilience, socio-cultural inclusion and participation through self-representations.

Combined, the articles collected in this special issue offer at least four worthwhile conclusions in the context of recent migration in Europe and the U.S. Firstly, the studies provide further empirical support for the dominant modes of

representing migration and immigrants as cultural, economic or security threats or as victims. Furthermore, many newspapers adopt discriminatory language and exclusionary strategies while they are reporting about immigrants and refugees, and these in turn legitimize anti-immigration discourses by politicians, increases in restrictive immigration and asylum policies, welfare restrictions, and they go hand in hand with polarized perspectives towards immigrants and refugees in society as well as hate speech and violent actions against migrants. Secondly, partly connected to the previous point, is the consideration that the voices of immigrants and refugees are rarely present. The media representations contribute to the idea of immigrants and refugees as distant and voiceless others, still a dominant image in public perception (see Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017). Their voicelessness in news coverage is contrary to the way in which powerful (political) actors can shape the dominant discourses. Immigrants and refugees are not given voice or are presented through metaphors or as a 'crisis', which contributes to the strengthening of biased perceptions of immigrants and refugees as threats to security and the economies of the receiving countries, as discussed in the paper by De Coninck et al. Thirdly, the studies reveal at the same time a variety in representations across regions (e. g., the Dutch and French-speaking regions in Belgium) and countries (e. g., the Swedish-Belgian and Scandinavian comparisons), exposing different emphases and themes in representations of migration. We need to remain attentive to the social and political diversity across and within the countries studied, and not generalize findings on, for instance, British or American representations. And finally, the studies here demonstrate the diversity of representations even within the regional and national media landscapes, more particularly when it comes to different types of news outlets (for instance, quality versus tabloid press in Hovden et al.'s study), their ideological leanings (Ogan et al.), or the effect of the consumption of different types of media on opinion towards immigrants and refugees (De Coninck et al.).

The papers presented in this special issue, focusing both on the framing and perception side of news coverage, demonstrate the correlation between news coverage, policies and public discourses in different contexts. We argue in this special issue that understanding news coverage is still key for grasping how societies give meaning to recent movements of refugees and immigrants. However, it is also important to look at different levels of media representations and develop multi-level studies that look at the coverage and its reception at the same time. Furthermore, we also argue that research can and should adopt a more engaged approach in order to not only identify bias in media representations, but also to offer solutions and interventions for a more balanced representation of the immigrants and refugees from a humane point of view. The paper by Leurs et al. provides a good example of how research can adopt such a critical and engaged

approach. Engaging with the issue of media literacy and developing projects that encourage a more critical engagement with media representations, not only by immigrants and refugees but also broader publics and journalists who produce broadly shared media representations, remains a crucial task for future research in this field.

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