

How TV can help in understanding the refugee crisis

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In the last few years the topic of migration and refugee crisis has dominated TV and fueled many debates on how this issue should be dealt with. Questions about the coverage of the refugee crisis, such as the risks of the journey fleeing from home, the root of migration, and the different solutions discussed in the public sphere, were the focus of the panel “The refugee crisis – how can television lead to a better understanding”.

The speakers at the panel explained that the debate around the refugee crisis should stay focused on precise data while at the same time help audiences have a good understanding of the situation, rather than instill fear on the ground of religion and culture.

Informed opinions based on actual data

[Corrado Formigli](#), presenter at [Piazzapulita](#), believes that journalists who cover the migration to Europe – “one of the key events in this era” – should aim at an international debate based on facts and figures. Yet, media should make clear that there are people behind all these numbers. As long as opinions are based on real facts, it does not matter whether society is in favour or against migration. [Francesca Paci](#), Middle East correspondent at [La Stampa](#), highlighted that figures need to be placed into context. When journalists say that 1 million

refugees have reached the coast of Greece, for example, the audience should keep in mind that these are human beings, not just numbers.

Portraying refugees

Formigli explained that his team was inspired to present a new perspective on the refugees. “We never use the word ‘invasion,’” he said, as it has a negative implication and passes negative judgements. “We have to feel that migration is something permanent,” he continued, “a world that is coming towards us, a world that brings a lot of positive things – it can bring new blood to our old continent.” Journalists should not be concerned with this exclusively when it is “in our backdoor”.

Another issue related to the migration portrayal is the way some politicians present their solution to the drama of the refugees – by helping refugees in their home countries. According to Formigli, this is pointless because countries at war are destroyed and people who have fled from there “would prefer to die or even kill themselves rather than be forced to go back.”

Journalists should not shy away from covering refugees’ suffering and the places they have been fleeing from. Still, focusing on this alone should be avoided. The audience needs context. Not many people, for example, know the type of lifestyle that the refugees used to have before the war or that most of them were professors, lawyers, etc.

The focus on children’s photos

With the worldwide circulation of the photo of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, society seemed to realise that there had been a war in Syria. Since then, there had also been an increased usage of children’s photos, Paci noted. The main concern for her is that the depiction of suffering children might pose a risk of instrumentalisation. While agreeing, Formigli stated that those images are important proof that most refugees are in search for a better future. The fact that someone will bring their children overseas, even though they run the risk of dying, means that they are driven by a very strong belief of saving their lives. Such photos, Formigli said, have the power to change attitudes and political agendas.

[Barbara Serra](#), news presenter and correspondent at [Al Jazeera English](#), highlighted that the picture of Alan Kurdi was really striking and that it showed society what the real situation of the refugees escaping their countries was. “This is a blow to your stomach,” she said.

Formigli said he was against the ban of the usage of dead children’s photos and he would rather opt for self-regulation. His team was once fiercely criticised for showing the bodies of some dead Italian hostages, though their faces were not displayed. “If we have a picture of a dead child, should we hide it just because it will destroy our dinner?” After all, these are children, human beings who are dying, he concluded.

Serra added that one of the main problems of news organisations when they cover the refugee crisis is financial. Having correspondents on the Greek islands, the Turkish border, or at refugees' camps can be expensive. Yet, journalists should strive for quality journalism which means reporting the facts.

Where does the fear come from?

As for the widespread fears in society, Serra explained that this is not fostered by TV. "Fear is part of human nature," she said. Still, Serra continued, the depiction of refugees as a flow of Muslims entering Europe has very negative connotations. People are afraid of refugees because they do not understand them. These are the roots of fear and TV can be a very useful ally explaining the complexities of the refugee crisis.

Most people are unaware of important facts, Formigli concluded. For instance, many Italians do not know the differences between Sunnis and Shia and they have misconceptions about the war in Middle East and its relationship with Europe. Journalists should strive for quality journalism and provide a thorough explanation of the context to their audiences.

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