

chapter 2

choosing  
the topic

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groups/02B2/Literature\\_  
Review.html](http://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/02B2/Literature_Review.html)

In 1963, media researcher Bernard Cohen said<sup>2</sup> that while “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think,” it is “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” In other words, topics journalists choose do not only captivate people’s attention and interest, they also set agendas for society. Featuring something in the media means telling people: “This is important and you should think about it.”

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NGOs and civil society often act in similar ways, by focusing their attention on one issue at a specific moment. Since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, migration has been the centre of attention all over the world, across almost all sectors. But if we look at what is being published, how come certain topics are covered and others not? What is behind the decision to document certain aspects of migration but not others?

Participants in our workshops had different answers to these questions. Jelena Dzekseneva, the anthropologist in Lyon, said that the issue of migration is more than just a topic: “It is the whole world. Everything in terms of how we live our lives is based on the movement of people. Every path I take leads me to people who have changed countries, languages or cities. Migration is all around us.” Dzekseneva started to pay attention to why some topics are less represented in the media when she was taking classes in anthropology: “I started to ask why the media never speaks about my country, Kazakhstan. We changed the president last year, and we changed the name of our capital. That’s huge! But no one talked about it.”

Nour Ghoussaini, the journalist from Lebanon, said

that she lacks historical contextualisation when migration is portrayed in the media: “We discuss migration, identity and stereotypes but we don’t go back to the origins of things. To those who drew the geographical borders, those who combined people into groups and said: ‘You are Lebanese, you are German.’”

For both Dzekseneva and Ghoussaini, deep and complex discussions on migration don’t happen. This is partly due to the lack of diversity among journalists, editors and publishers. If those who are, as Cohen said, “stunningly successful” in setting the agenda are not a diverse group of people, stories will not be diverse either.



More diversity among storytellers translates into more diverse topics because interests and perspectives are more diverse. Samih Mahmoud, the video journalist working in Lebanon’s refugee camps, said that journalists living in the camps can understand people’s concerns better: “The difference for me as a journalist from the camp is that my life is research in itself. The topics I cover concern my own situation so there’s no need for research from the outside.” But Mahmoud challenges the idea that refugees can and should only write about ‘refugee issues,’ just as women don’t have to write only about ‘women’s issues’ or a specific minority about their own community. A journalist once came and asked him about what camp residents thought of global warming. “At first, I was like, ‘We don’t think about that, we have problems with electricity, water and security and you come to ask about global warming?’” Mahmoud said. “But then I thought, why not? People here can and should have opinions on other issues as well.”

Campji, the online media Mahmoud works for, has a big audience in Lebanon’s refugee camps, and while they mainly cover topics related to life in the camps, they also discuss many other issues. Past features include videos on gender, Lebanon’s Armenian community, revolutions, the Arab Spring and the Beirut port explosion in 2020. They don’t think that people who are refugees should only care about ‘refugee issues.’ “It is important that journalism plays

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the role of widening people's horizons," Mahmoud said.



Several participants expressed a preference for 'small stories,' snippets from daily life that do not confine people to singular categories like 'migrant' or 'refugee.' Simone Spera, a PhD student from Italy, does research on informal education among refugee communities in Lebanon. "In anthropology, we tend to start from the lived experiences of people. My research is on education in general but related to political activism. It looks more specifically at Syrian initiatives in Lebanon. My intention is to go beyond views on refugee education as sheer emergency responses to humanitarian crises, and see how refugees experiment and create in the process. That way, agency is brought back to the actors themselves," he said. Omar Saadeh, who worked with an international NGO in Lebanon at the time he attended the workshops, used to produce videos about refugee issues. But he said that he lacked diversity in the coverage he was asked to do: "I never saw stories about the villages where people came from. Or how they worked together in the camps. Or about this [Lebanese] fieldworker who said that it would be sad if everyone returned to their country because of all their new friendships in the camp."

Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, used to report on refugee issues in Lebanon. She said that she prefers everyday topics too: "They reflect the human side of life; people's daily struggles. And they portray people's backgrounds, where they come from and why they are where they are." Even if writing about people's daily lives may seem less complex, this is often not the case. 'Small topics' require the same awareness and self-reflective attitude, and consideration of privilege and positionality. Sam Mustelin, a writer from Germany, said that when researching a story on Germany's queer history, they realised that the story had many dimensions: "the same awareness and self-reflective attitude as other topics, and the same consideration of privilege and positionality." Mustelin questioned their own authority when writing about something that can be approached in so many ways: "I think that sometimes it is just not possible to tell the full story, the truths of all people. We should be aware of this. No one can answer all questions, and each story is just one part of the whole experience."



Several participants mentioned that journalists should seek out topics that matter to the community they cover instead of coming with set ideas in mind. Alhaji, who used to report on migration in Lebanon, said that a friend who is also a journalist asked her about topics she should cover in the refugee camps: "I told her to connect with people directly, because not everyone has the same experience. Of course, there are general issues that concern everyone, but there are also many individual experiences. You need to be in contact with the community before deciding which topic is interesting," she said. Mahmoud and his colleague Rayan Sukkar from Campji said similar things. "When we don't have ideas we just go out into the streets to talk to people. Sometimes we don't even have to ask, people tell us stories and raise concerns anyway," Mahmoud said. Often, people ask to be featured in Campji's videos. "They send us messages on Facebook, we don't have time to work on all of these stories. Someone might say, 'I live in the Nahr El-Bared camp and I have a story to tell, can you do a feature on me?' Or a girl who plays football may say, 'I saw this video that you did, can you come and meet me?' We are very happy about this," Sukkar said.

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However, letting communities set the agenda can be hard. Many factors play in when determining how stories will be framed in the media: readership numbers, funding, trends in what interests people at the moment. Spera, the PhD student from Italy, said that academics and journalists play an important role in shedding light on a diversity of topics: "Media has the potential to spread critical thinking on a larger scale." Still, he said, the media is never fully independent because it is "always connected to economic and political structures." Saadeh, the filmmaker, described how he often felt pushed to pick topics that would interest funders: "We did films to show what donors expected to see. If we wanted to be funded, we had to document misery. I don't like this approach." What is worse is the impact such stories have on refugee communities. "People got used to being portrayed this way. So when I went to film them, they would 'wear that face' again," Saadeh said. At times, he tried to suggest to the NGO to cover other topics: "I once tried to

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pitch a story about the weddings in the camp, and how people always brought a lot of music, to feature the role music plays in the lives of the camp’s residents, but it didn’t work. I don’t get it, why not give people tools to be more powerful?”



Sukkar from Campji thinks that mainstream media in Lebanon fails to paint a nuanced picture of the country’s long-standing Palestinian community. “Have you ever seen a story about a Palestinian who succeeds?” she asked. “The same goes for Syrian refugees, you never hear a positive story. If you don’t show the good sides of life, how can people get to know about them?” Sukkar questioned. Another journalist in Lebanon, Abby Sewell from the U.S., said that the global coverage of migration has been both good and bad in recent years, but a lot of it has been shallow: “You see a lot of different coverage. In Europe and the U.S., the Syrian refugee crisis was covered mainly in terms of the effects it has on the host countries, rather than covering the stories behind people’s migration.” This approach, Sewell said, dehumanises the subjects of the stories and creates unjustified fear and resentment on the part of the viewers and readers. “People become paranoid and believe that people will come into their countries and change their societies. Even with positive coverage, like the story of a Syrian refugee who opened a sweets shop in Berlin, the person’s whole history is ignored – maybe they were a doctor before leaving Syria, but that’s not told.”

As for her own work on covering migration, Sewell believes that it may accomplish something: “I guess it can help people understand the world they live in. I am less and less certain that journalism has a direct effect on how things happen in practice, like decision-making. But you can help people understand the world better,” she said. This means that selecting topics with attention indeed has an impact on the world around us. And if we trust Cohen’s premise that the media is skilfully directing people’s attention, then that impact can be huge.

## Questions in this chapter

Why are certain topics covered more than others in reporting on migration?

What can we gain from telling more everyday and ‘small’ stories?

How can more diversity among storytellers translate into more diverse stories?