

chapter 4

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The first chapter asked us to identify the storyteller in order to understand why migration is covered in certain ways. This chapter invites us to ask similar questions about the authorities and experts featured in articles and publications. Who are the people who get to share their knowledge and opinions? How do journalists find them and introduce them in their stories? Who are presented as experts and who are what journalists and editors call ‘cases,’ individuals asked to share things from their own lived experiences? And, consequently, what knowledge is presented as either valid and significant or subjective and unimportant?

In both academia and the media, experts are often male, White and from the West. Women figure significantly less as authorities, as do people who are Black and from other ethnicities. The more we get accustomed to this, the more we are convinced – often unconsciously – that White, Western and male expertise is more reliable and valuable. Indeed, the occurrence of all-male panels is so common that a word was coined to describe the phenomena: ‘manels.’ It is also common³ that women get assigned the role of moderators rather than panellists, which lets them elevate other voices, but not establish themselves as authorities in the field. Similarly, the absence of experts from diverse backgrounds gives the idea that Western voices have more authority than others. Colombian science journalist Ángela Posada Swafford said⁴ in a discussion about Latin American expertise in science reporting that researchers outside the West “are not cited enough” which is “like a catch-22:” since their expertise is seen as less important, they appear less frequently than colleagues from the West.

All of this is damaging not only for experts and researchers but also for us in general, readers, viewers and lis-

teners. We get deprived of a multitude of perspectives and opinions, and consequently get fewer chances to build diverse and more accurate understandings of the world.

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Many conversations during our workshops revolved around the issue of who is considered an expert or authority. Laure Makarem from ARM in Beirut said that journalists often come to them with set ideas of who is an ‘expert’ and who is not: “It is sometimes very explicit. First they want to speak to someone from the organisation and then take a testimony from one of the members,” Makarem said, referring to members of ARM’s migrant community centers. “You see the difference at conferences where all experts are White or Lebanese, and migrant workers are just there to share their stories – even though the migrant worker can speak so much more in depth about the kafala system [the legal structure regulating migrant work in Lebanon] than any of us.” Makarem said that many journalists don’t see migrants as the source of knowledge: “They don’t involve them in the process of producing knowledge. And they speak to us differently. As a staff member, I get questions that are more analytical or require more critical thinking.”

Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that it is important to see people’s migration experience as expertise: “Ask migrants to guide you and help you with your research. You are not the expert on what the community is facing, they are.” In reality though, this is not how journalism often works. While people who are refugees or migrants do get to share their personal experiences, they are rarely asked about larger political and systemic issues, like analysing the causes behind the conflicts that led them to migrate or escape.

Rifaie Tammas, a Syrian researcher and activist, wrote an article⁵ about when he was invited to discuss airstrikes on Syria on Australian TV. But instead of commenting he found himself featured for only a few seconds, “half in tears and conspicuously traumatised while mentioning the loss of my brother and father.” Meanwhile, “the clip continued with a white Australian observer who gave his ‘objective’ and scholarly analysis of the situation.” Sometimes, people who

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3 | www.opensociety-foundations.org/uploads/c3f34e39-bcc2-43bc-9cca-cab57e445869/and-to-manels-20180308.pdf

4 | www.theopennotebook.com/2019/09/24/invisible-science-why-are-lat-in-american-science-stories-absent-in-european-and-u-s-media-outlets

5 | www.opendemocracy.net/en/refugee-stories-could-do-more-harm-good/

6 | www.twitter.com/WIIS_Global/status/1295762953053114376/photo/1

7 | www.undark.org/2016/07/25/ferocious-dinosaur-in-visible-scientists-argentina/

are migrants and refugees are not included in the process at all. In August 2020, the organisation Women in International Security hosted a [discussion](#)⁶ on the impact of the Syrian crisis on women – without including a single Syrian woman on the panel. Similarly, in February 2021, a panel on the Biden administration’s policies on Syria at first did not include a single Syrian. Only later on, one Syrian-American was added to the five-person panel. Another example is the 2016 [discovery](#)⁷ of a gigantic dinosaur fossil by a team of archaeologists in Argentina. Several news outlets, including The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC and Science Daily, only cited American scientists from the team, not a single Argentinian archaeologist.

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This under-representation of non-Western expertise in the media and elsewhere not only contributes to obscuring entire groups of people in international affairs, it also limits our understanding of the world, since it presents fewer worldviews. In fact, the entire dichotomy between the expert and the so-called ‘case’ – where experts analyse and voice opinions while so-called ‘cases’ share personal experiences – leads to a narrow understanding of knowledge itself. It suggests that only scientific research constitutes knowledge, whereas experiential knowledge does not.

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Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD student from Poland, said that, “The main thing you have to acknowledge is that people have knowledge. If you don’t, the research is absolutely pointless.” This kind of knowledge, Hajdarowicz said, has more weight than technical or professional knowledge. Makarem from ARM said that many journalists requesting interviews with migrant workers don’t think like that. “People are multilayered and have their own journeys. I feel that journalists need to value people’s experiences and nurture interest in different stories. But they don’t see migrants as the source of knowledge on migration.”

Finding diverse voices and expertise may require dedicated work. The 2019 [Expert Sources Survey](#)⁸, done in collaboration with the news agency Associated Press, found

8 | www.expertfile.com/expert-sources-survey/

that journalists primarily locate sources in three ways: their own lists of contacts, through google searches and via referrals from colleagues. This brings us back to the enquiry in the first chapter: Who are the storytellers? In general, as humans, when asking for information we have a tendency to prefer people we perceive to be similar to ourselves. Lack of diversity among journalists and storytellers therefore leads to less diversity among our sources as well. It is often said in journalism that, “who you know is what you know.” So, in order to expand what we know, we first need to broaden who we know – and who we reach out to for input and expertise.

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There are several ways for storytellers to consult experts from different backgrounds. The idea to “check your biases” – to see if people you will interview are diverse in terms of gender, identity and background – helps to locate what perspectives are missing. Instead of reaching out to scholars at Western universities, storytellers can contact researchers elsewhere in the world. They can interview experts working locally instead of those giving analysis from afar. Social media is often a good place to find diverse voices (like the Twitter account Cite Black Women).

Apart from this, it is equally important with awareness in the approach – that storytellers recognise privilege, power dynamics and stereotypes when consulting their sources. That they ask so-called ‘cases’ as well as experts about complicated and analytical matters, and treat all input as valid and important expertise. That they give local know-how the same weight as information from international institutions. And that they let both men and women, whether experts or so-called ‘cases,’ speak in equal ways about political and professional matters as well as family-oriented things.

Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that her organisation makes sure to work in ways that build on refugee communities’ knowledge and expertise: “If people want to build a community centre, for instance, we get the funds and organise the logistics, and we connect them to the builders. But the community decides how to build it and use it. We think of ourselves only as facilitators.”

As outlined in this chapter, there are many ways to avoid some common pitfalls when looking for expertise or dealing with knowledge and information. These include using more diversified and locally connected expertise and treating input from both traditional experts and so-called 'cases' with similar weight. This allows us to expand what is seen as valid knowledge and consider the experiences of people who are migrants and refugees. It also broadens and deepens our understanding of migration, which leads to a more nuanced view of what role it plays in the world.

Questions in this chapter

Who are often consulted as authorities for stories on migration?

What is in general considered expert knowledge and what is not?

What kind of expertise and expert voices are often missing?

How can storytellers integrate more diverse expertise in their stories?