

chapter 1

who are the  
storytellers?

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Stories, whether written, filmed or recorded, are intimately connected to their tellers. How stories are told vary depending on who tells them, and where these storytellers come from. The same topic can be researched and narrated in different ways depending on the background, experiences, gender, class and other identities of the storyteller. The same place can be observed from different angles, and the same context can be related to in different ways. Stories of migration and mobility, consequently, are told in several ways, depending on who is the author. This is why, in the first chapter in this publication, we start by asking the question: Who is the storyteller?

The chapter looks at who tells stories about migration in the world today. It describes the impact lack of diversity has on our understanding of the topic, and how power dynamics in society influence who gets access to reporting and telling stories. It also points to the value of experiential knowledge, knowledge gained through experience, when covering migration and highlights how self-reflection can lead to better narration.



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First of all, in order to understand the impact that storytellers like journalists or communicators with NGOs have on our conception of migration, we must start by looking closer at who they are. We may be heading towards more diversity in newsrooms, academia and organisations, but we are far from a balance in representation. Stories still tend to be told from a mainly Western perspective and get published by outlets based in that part of the world. The same goes for major international non-profits, including their funders. Mi-

gration stories are regularly told by people who lack the lived experience of migration themselves. Much too often, they ‘look in from the outside.’

This issue was addressed by several participants from the workshops. Samih Mahmoud, a Syrian-Palestinian video journalist working with the online platform Campji in Lebanon’s refugee camps, said that his own experience of being a refugee who escaped the war in Syria gives him a different kind of understanding. “The fact that I am from the area I cover and face the same conditions as other people living there means that whenever I tell a story about something, I also tell my own story. People’s problems are also my problems,” he said. His colleague from Campji, Rayan Sukkar, who is a Palestinian born and raised in Lebanon, described something similar: “When I started working here, I felt that this was my place. That I can express myself here, and transmit messages better than someone from the outside.” Her insider position, she said, allows her to “present people the way they like to be presented.”

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Mahmoud and Sukkar produce videos that are published online and watched by both camp residents and many others. The idea from the start, they said, was to be a locally grounded voice, something that was missing before Campji. “Our slogan is ‘from camp to camp’ or ‘from refugee to refugee,’” they said. Fatima Alhaji, a Syrian journalist who now lives in Berlin, spoke in a similar way about the importance of lived knowledge. She recounted her experience when arriving in Lebanon with her family, and having to register as refugees with the UN. “This was at the beginning of 2014, so refugee stories were everywhere. At the UN there was a journalist with a big camera, and I thought to myself: ‘Maybe someone will see me on television’ and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to be seen like that,” she said. For Alhaji, these experiences put her in a different position than other journalists writing about migration: “I have the tools to tell these stories, and I can tell them in a way that people can identify with.”

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While personal experiences give an intimate understanding of the topic at hand, it does not necessarily mean better reporting. There are cases where an outsider’s view

is important, and others where reporting from ‘the inside’ is more valuable. The main problem with conventional media coverage on migration is that the former – people who speak from experience – is much too often absent.



Other kinds of direct understandings of a certain reality also have an impact on the produced narratives. Jelena Dzekseneva, an anthropologist who moved from Kazakhstan to France to study, spoke about the differences in perspective between people who have personal experiences of something and those that have not. “Not everyone realises that anyone can become poor, that anyone can lose their house. These ideas do not come naturally to people,” she said. People who experienced displacement first-hand, she said, may have a better understanding not only of migration but of other difficulties people face as well: “They can empathise with migrants, and maybe they understand poverty too.”

Shehrazad, a student and writer from France, said that the fact that her parents are from Morocco allows her to easily spot stereotypes in the media. “Since I was young, I have seen racism displayed on French TV towards people from North Africa and Africa in general,” she said. In many cases, this applies to Muslims too, not least women who wear the veil. “My mum wears the veil, so for me it’s difficult to identify with the images in the media.” Therefore, Shahrazad said, writing from our own perspectives is important: “We have to tell our own stories. We cannot just have allies and other people telling our stories. All minorities have to tell their own stories from their unique point of view.”

There are ways to be more aware of how the stories we tell are shaped. One of them is to acknowledge our positionality – the way socio-political identities influence our worldviews. Inga Hajdarowicz, a PhD researcher from Poland studying grassroots and feminist approaches to refugee women, said that she started to think like this early on in her life. “Spending time at my grandparents’ place in a working-class neighbourhood, attending feminist meetings and doing research trips with my mother, who is also a sociologist, impacted on me, as did growing up in a weird time of transformation

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in post-communist Poland and learning about my own family’s history of migration and exile. It all shaped how I could see who was being represented or heard and who was not.”

Nour Ghossaini, a journalist from Lebanon, said that her own experiences also impacted her way of thinking. At one point, she said, she realised that she had internalised racism: “I never knew I was racist, really. But sometimes, incidents or stories that people tell you, movies you watch or your parents’ stereotypes, influence you. All of this impacts the way you see life, whether you want it or not.”

Sukkar from Campji said that experiencing one kind of migration could lead to a deeper understanding of other people’s experiences in general. She recounts being interviewed by someone who, like her, had a background of migration in their family: “This was the first time I felt comfortable in an interview with a foreigner. I felt that he wanted to listen, not extract information. I felt that he understood me. I think this is because he has a migration experience of his own.” Although their experiences were not similar, Sukkar said that there was a connection: “I didn’t have to explain much even though we come from very different places. He told me that he himself struggles with issues of identity, so that was something we shared.”

The fact that experiential knowledge matters when reporting on migration is not to be confused with the idea that people who are migrants by default can tell stories about all kinds of migration – or that they should tell stories about only that. It is not uncommon that people with one kind of migration background are asked to comment on other topics. “People in France sometimes think that because I come from Morocco, I should be able to know what is happening in Iran or the Middle East,” Shahrazad said, “So I tell them that, ‘Sorry I don’t know Iran, I don’t even know Morocco well enough.’”



Some participants mentioned that it is important for people from refugee and migrant communities to be authors, not just subjects, of journalistic stories. Doha Adi from the NGO Sawa for Development and Aid that supports refugees in Lebanon said, “We can get a lot of positive effects from such

stories, because they show these individuals as people who are thinking, participating and contributing to society.”

The fact that this kind of refugee or migrant led storytelling is uncommon has to do with power dynamics in society. Depending on factors like social class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, ethnicity or nationality, people don't have equal access to education, information, support networks and job opportunities. Economic, political and cultural structures give way to inequalities: while some are privileged, others are discriminated against and oppressed. This applies to the worlds of media, academia and NGOs just like all other parts of society, and determines who has the chance to tell stories about others.

For Shahrazad, the student and writer in France, “this is a question of justice.” Across the world, access to journalism schools and university programs is not equal. “Many migrant communities live in poverty, we don't live in neighbourhoods with good schools. So we don't have a chance to influence the media,” she said. Dzekseneva, the anthropologist, recalled a journalism conference she attended after the Charlie Hebdo attack in France: “There was no diversity among the people who were at the conference. If you go out in the streets, people don't look like that. I thought, how can you then do journalism?”

Somehow, we got used to the image of the foreign correspondent or NGO worker as a White person from the West. Exceptions exist, but they are far from enough. Just imagine a world where reporters from Uganda, Guatemala or Bangladesh go to cover stories in the U.S. or Germany – oftentimes without speaking the language or being familiar with the context. In reality, instead of getting their own assignments, many journalists get hired as ‘fixers,’ combined translators and guides, for foreign reporters. The foreign reporter gets the byline for the story while the fixer – even when their contributions to the story are major – are often not credited at all. The difference between correspondent and fixer, says<sup>1</sup> journalist Priyanka Borpujari, is “not one of experience or qualification, but of geography.” In other words, access to the media corridors of power.

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1 | [www.cjr.org/special\\_report/fixers.php](http://www.cjr.org/special_report/fixers.php)



On more than one level, getting the opportunity to tell stories is a matter of privilege. Media and NGO doors are not open to everyone alike. On the contrary, access is contingent on social, political and economical structures in society. This is also true when it comes to storytelling on migration. Individuals who have experienced exile, displacement and migration seldom write stories of migration. Instead, they tend to be portrayed and represented by others. This does not only affect individuals who are excluded from media and other opportunities, it also narrows the worldviews of all others, who are deprived of hearing diverse voices. Inclusion of voices who have personal and intimate connections to migration would steer the conversation towards a more nuanced understanding of global migration.

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## Questions in this chapter

Who tells stories on migration in the world today?

How does the identity and past experiences of storytellers influence their stories?

How do power dynamics play in on the way migration is narrated?