# *From fragmentation to integration*: Addressing the role of communication in refugee crises and (re)settlement processes

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The phenomenon of massive forced migration is not new in our global history. In recent years, however, increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees have dominated headlines and political agendas across Europe and elsewhere. The 2015 'refugee' crisis at the Mediterranean Sea put significant pressure to Europe and emphasized the lack of cohesion between different policies and programs in this area, as well as the rise of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in many European countries, affecting the development of a unified solution to growing refugee challenge. At a more global level, forced migrations related with climate change processes are also bringing new challenges to a current status quo based on national boundaries and control of human movements. Both the extension and depth of these challenges call for an integral approach to their management, mainly because all expectations point to an increase and intensification in the coming years.

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In light of contemporary forms of forced migration, it is becoming extremely difficult to ignore the role and importance of different social actors in addressing the challenge of refugee integration within host societies (Alencar and Tsagkroni, 2019). Top-down approaches have limited potential to reach long-lasting and innovative solutions for the settlement of refugees. There is a growing consensus among scholars and policy-makers that governments alone cannot solve complex societal problems (Scholten et al., 2017), and that participation of non-government actors, stakeholders, media companies, civil society, and the refugee themselves is crucial to achieving more positive outcomes in the long-run.

In this special issue, we seek to contribute to this growing research field by exploring the issue in a variety of contexts, using different methodologies and with a focus on the inherent linkages between media, society and political authorities in the management of migration and integration processes. Communication Research, at its diverse layers and from a wide array of topics and methods, is expected to contribute to the analysis of social, political, demographic and cultural changes, so tackling the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean area is an opportunity to connect theoretical and methodological advances with a relevant topic which certainly requires practical, technical and applied contributions. In doing so, screening the online activity turns into an additional sphere to be kept under attention, as a new space for social discussion and action.

The origin of the special issue entitled 'From fragmentation to integration: Addressing the role of communication in refugee crises and settlement processes' is a Pre-Conference organized by the guest editors as part of the 68th Annual International Communication Association Conference held in Prague, in 2018. The main purpose of this pre-conference was to open a space for dialogue regarding the way refugee crises and integration processes are tackled by political, social and media actors, aiming to set some guidelines to avoid those mistakes previously noticed and leading to a more constructive and conscious coverage and social action. This event brought together researchers, policy advisors, NGO representatives and refugee migrants to discuss the intersections between refugee migration and communication processes. A selection of original articles that were presented at this event form the basis of this special issue.

The main themes addressed in the articles of the current special issue are: (1) inclusive digital forms of literacy and activism for/with refugees; (2) local responses to refugee crises, (re)settlement and their communication strategies; and (3) media representation of humanitarian crises and refugees in their receiving countries. This introductory article begins by laying out the theoretical and empirical dimensions of each theme and how the articles in our special issue contribute to adding knowledge of these fields.

## Inclusive digital forms of literacy and activism for/with refugees

Digital literacy has emerged as a critical concept and practice for addressing the problems of inadequate information resources, social connections, and skills

among refugees (Alam and Imram, 2015). At the same time, it is crucial to note how migrants and refugees use creative tactics with specific digital media to tell their own story, coordinate pathways through the bureaucratic and navigate other obstacles on their way to finding a new life (O'Mara and Harris, 2016; Witteborn, 2018). For a more inclusive digital society, we argue for the importance of understanding the refugees' multifaceted digital experiences, specifically regarding how they access, understand, challenge, share, and create digital contents that can potentially foster and/or hinder their participation in the host community.

In this special issue, the study by Bruinenberg, Sprenger, Omerović, and Leurs makes an original contribution to this field of research by exploring the media literacy competencies of young migrants vis-à-vis dominant media literacy education models, which are designed for mainstream student populations in the Netherlands. Consequently, the authors analyze how the needs, situations, and experiences of these young migrants regarding media and ICTs can be used to enhance their resilience in Dutch society. This study employs co-creation methods for the production, running and assessment of a critical media literacy curriculum that combines the perspectives of three main actors: the researchers (them as facilitators), the teachers and the migrant students involved. This approach is particularly relevant for advancing an integrated research agenda that emphasizes the need to further enhance our understanding of the role of multiple social actors in deploying technologies that can facilitate social inclusion of non-mainstream groups, such as migrant and refugee youth.

In this regard, it is also important to highlight the part played by digital technologies in promoting new forms of activism for/with refugees and how co-creation approaches can be used for bringing together different public and private actors to harness ICT for refugee inclusion (Benton and Glennie, 2016). Yet, much uncertainty still exists about the impact of digital technological innovations on the integration of refugees. The article by Kothari and Tsakarestou in this special issue offers new insights into a 'grassroots' approach that actively involve refugees as well as other structural actors (e.g., government, diplomats, NGOs, corporations and social innovators) to co-shape and initiate technological social interventions. In their case study of the 'Hack the Camp' hackathon event in Athens, the authors identify communication strategies employed by partners during the co-production process and how these strategies were used to help mitigate intercultural conflicts and promote a collaborative environment for the co-creation of digital solutions that can effectively address the needs and realities of diverse refugee groups.

## Local responses to refugee crises, (re)settlement and their communication strategies

The rapid increase of the number of asylum seekers across European cities has led to an increased polarized debate about the reception of refugees. A research report on the ways local communities in the Netherlands are responding to the refugee

crisis (Klaver, 2016) revealed that resistance to the opening of reception centers was mainly motivated by 'fears of social security, rising crime, as well as the presence of Islamic terrorists among asylum seekers' (p. 21). The report also highlighted the key role local authorities play in testing and encouraging innovative approaches that facilitate dialogue with the local population about their questions and concerns. Yet, little research had been found that map out the impact of government actions and their capacity to provide effective solutions in times of crisis. One contribution of this special issue provides an original perspective on the subject. Specifically, Beau Segers focuses on issues of identity, voice and materialities to better understand citizens' opposition to the local establishment of a (crisis) reception center in their community, while at the same time analyzing the communication strategies employed by government actors to address this crisis. The author states that the adoption of bottom-up storytelling approaches can offer a more nuanced examination of the fragmented nature of grassroots movements through engagement with local actors. By shifting the attention away from broad anti-immigration and radical right-wing political discourses and socio-economic challenges, this article suggests new avenues for a careful management of refugee crises at the local level, taking into account citizens' voices and experiences.

On the other hand, humanitarian organizations, companies and civil society have mobilized to develop and provide new digital services that can facilitate immediate arrival, including basic orientation, language translations, housing, mental health, training, intercultural connections, among others (Benton and Glennie, 2016). Studies focusing on NGOs and other non-governmental actors highlight that governments should take into account the capacity of these organizations to provide initiatives to integrate refugees into their host society (Scholten et al., 2017). There is an urgent need for building interventions that can create social capital and trust based networks to empower the refugees and host communities (Alencar and Tsagkroni, 2019). In this process, technology, communication devices, and social media can play a key role in bringing entrepreneurial and social network solutions to a larger scale. As stated above, Kothari and Tsakarestou suggest that hackathons and other entrepreneurial diplomacy initiatives should be implemented because they can benefit both the locals and the refugees who participate in the event.

## Media representation of humanitarian crises and refugees in their receiving countries

Literature on media portrayals of refugees demonstrates that these populations are often framed as either victims or threats to social cohesion and economic systems of host societies (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). Such approaches, however, have failed for the most part to address the consequences of these media frames on how citizens understand refugee situations across different contexts (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017), and the ways in which such frames enhance polarization in the

information environment. In this collection, Pöyhtäri and colleagues evaluate the impact of hybrid media systems on public's perceptions and attitudes towards refugees in Finland. A holistic approach is utilized, integrating mainstream news media contents, social media, and online discussions across different platforms through big data analysis. The importance and originality of this study are that it explores and integrates the complex dynamics between traditional media organizations and new media actors, and at the same time it highlights the key role anti-immigrant users and the different social media affordances play in causing polarization of the current refugee debate, instead of promoting democratic and pluralized networked framing practices.

In addition, far too little attention has been paid to media coverage of climate induced forced displacements and its consequences for policy developments in this area (Hartmann, 2010). The study by Sakellari presented in this special issue helps to address these research gaps by critically analyzing textual and visual narratives of climate migration in online UK news media, and how these narratives can potentially affect the integration of climate forced migrants. The findings highlight that media frames of climate migration contribute to both reducing the complexity of this issue and giving rise to anti-immigrant policies and attitudes. Ultimately, this study suggests that continuous efforts from journalists and media professionals are necessary to promote media narratives that can also depict (climate) refugees and migrants as creative and knowledgeable actors with voices, experiences, and aspirations.

Facing a challenging future in terms of climate conditions – rooted on a general scientific consensus about the drastic medium and long-term effects of this breakdown – an urgent call for an accurate media coverage is necessary to promote an effective integration of migrants in their new living scenarios. Language matters, and this relevance is turning more evident when journalism deals with keywords like migration, refuge, and climate.

## Conclusion

This special issue brings together contributions that deal with the role played by Media and Communication in refugee crises and integration processes, ranging from mass media representations of refugees to the mediated communication exchanges conducted in the social media scenarios, from political negotiation between relevant actors in the field of policy-making to the role played by hands-on intercultural and literacy mediation projects. Completing a holistic approach to a complex phenomenon was the aim of a special issue that attempted to merge the strengths of social collective action with both the theoretical and empirical contributions coming from recent applied research projects. In spite of its limitations, this special issue contributes in several ways to our understanding of the links between the fields of media and refugee studies and provides a basis for integrating the perspective of diverse social actors in diverse refugee contexts.

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