May, 2017

Egypt: Positive Stories but Questions Remain over Self-Censorship and Lack of In-Depth Coverage

Sarah El-Shaarawi
Abdulrahman Elsamni

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Egypt

Positive Stories but Questions Remain over Self-Censorship and Lack of In-Depth Coverage

Sarah El-Shaarawi and Abdulrahman Elsamni

Given Egypt’s location at the northern tip of Africa, its proximity to regional conflict zones and its shores as a gateway to the Mediterranean, the country has long been a transit point for migrants seeking better lives either through legal or irregular means.

How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?
A study by journalists, for journalists and policymakers
Migration media coverage in 17 countries from 2015 to 2016
ABOUT EUROMED MIGRATION IV AND THE STUDY

"How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?"

This is a Chapter of the Study “How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration?” carried out and prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network and commissioned in the framework of EUROMED Migration IV (EMM4, 2016-2019). The objective of this project, financed by the European Union and implemented by ICMPD, is to support EU Member States and ENI Southern Partner Countries in establishing a comprehensive, constructive and operational dialogue and co-operation framework, with a particular focus on reinforcing instruments and capacities to develop and implement evidence-based and coherent migration and international protection policies. In order to achieve this objective, EMM4 builds upon the results of the first three phases of the project (2004-2015) and tailors its activities around two pillars: the first pillar facilitates effective North-South and South-South regional dialogues and co-operation in the four main fields of migration and international protection-related matters (legal migration; irregular migration; migration and development; international protection and asylum). The second pillar focuses on capacity-building by applying a new outcome-oriented approach that includes sub-regional activities, tailor-made national training programmes and targeted technical assistance packages for committed partners. Both pillars are supported by a horizontal and cross-cutting thread aimed at accumulating evidence-based knowledge and establishing effective communication in order to contribute to a more balanced narrative on migration.

Find the entire study at www.icmpd.org/EMM4_migration_narrative

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In recent years, with crises in nearby nations ballooning, the influx of migrants to the country has spiked. This was particularly true when the 2003 USA-led invasion of Iraq forced millions to flee from their homes. By 2007, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that over two million Iraqis had fled the country. According to official registered numbers about 150,000 of them landed in Egypt.¹

Since civil war broke out in 2011, millions of Syrians have fled the war-torn country. Official statistics as of 31 October 2016 place the number of registered refugees residing in Egypt at just over 115,000 (UNHCR).² However, these numbers reflect only those registered, and the actual number is likely to be substantially higher. These figures reflect the numbers most frequently quoted in Egyptian media, which put the total number of refugees, including economic refugees, living in Egypt in 2016 at 5,000,000, with 4,000,000 of those African, 500,000 Syrian, and 400,000 Iraqi.

Since 2015 there has been a relatively consistent narrative pertaining to issues of migration in the Egyptian mainstream media, including both state run and private news outlets. There has also been consistent coverage, naturally peaking when major events take place.

However, given the political, social, and economic turbulence at home and abroad, particularly in the last year, stories about migration have not been at the top of editorial agendas.

This has meant that some issues related to migration are only covered in the context of other reporting. For example, 2016 was a particularly challenging year for the Egyptian economy with foreign reserves dropping, spiking commodity prices, and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound. As part of extensive coverage of economic issues across the board, a drop in remittances from Egyptians living abroad was widely reported.

While there are exceptions, the most widely read private and state run publications have generally maintained a favourable image regarding the country’s policies toward migrants. Private daily newspaper Youm7,³ for example, which according to Amazon Analytics company Alexa, is the fourth most visited website in Egypt (only lagging behind the local and international versions of Google⁴ and YouTube), has consistently maintained the state and government line and published content framing Egypt’s stance toward migrants in a positive light.

Despite often citing UNHCR, and other international and news organisations, the publication by and large avoided using the metrics from these sources, instead choosing to publish numbers consistent with those of the government as provided by officials in public statements. However, this was not the case across the board, with state media reporting both UN and government numbers. This reflects the fact that official numbers are widely underreported and accurately measuring the number of unregistered migrants in the country is, like in many other countries, virtually impossible.

The major media focus was on stories about refugees living inside the country, often telling the stories of positive experiences. However, the tone of articles discussing irregular migrants tended to be less favourable, centering less on individual human stories and more on taking a tough stand against people trafficking and illegal activities related to the exploitation of migrants and refugees.

In many instances, individuals – most frequently Syrians – were interviewed or quoted as thanking Egypt for its hospitality. Several articles featured Cairo-based community leaders of various nationalities expressing their gratitude, and in the case of Syria stating that their lives in Egypt were a stark improvement from that which they had fled. In October of 2016, a representative from the National Council for Human Rights was quoted as saying that refugees living in Egypt have fewer complaints than Egyptian citizens.

Articles taking a broader view have tended to focus on Egypt’s burden, and the lack of international aid the country receives despite housing such a substantial migrant population.

In this vein, several stories were published that in one way or another expressed the concern that Europe is attempting to “export” their refugee crisis to Egypt, amid reports of a German proposal to establish a resettlement centre in the country. This type of coverage has tended to be more sensationalist in tone, and generally framed the migration issue in the context of national security rather than as a matter of humanitarian concern.

Although rare, there were investigative pieces taking a deeper look at some of the challenges and risks faced by migrants. One recent (December 2016) example from Youm7 delved into the illicit organ trade specifically targeting African refugees in the country. (It should be noted here, that this same publication was strongly criticised in recent years for its overtly racist coverage of sub-Saharan African migrants in Egypt. The most notable example of this was from 2014, when a headline from their print edition read "Black Terror Gangs in Cairo", with the “N” word in English splashed in huge letters across the otherwise Arabic page.)

State media tended to report less on the issue of migration. The country’s main state newspaper Al Ahram⁵, for example, published a fraction of the number of articles relating to migration when compared...
to many of the private media and many of these reflected the issue from an international, particularly European, perspective. It should also be noted, however, that Al Ahram’s overall output is substantially less in terms of quantity of articles than the larger private publications.

State newspapers focused more on statements by President Abdel Fatah El Sisi, with many articles reprinting his comments on the financial burden shouldered by the state, highlighted remarks on the need for rehabilitation and access to social services for refugees, and international cooperation to combat illegal migration by providing more legitimate avenues for those seeking security and a better life abroad. President Sisi was also quoted by multiple outlets recounting efforts made by Egypt to treat refugees with dignity, highlighting the fact that Egypt has avoided the creation of refugee camps, and stating that refugees live “just like Egyptians without discrimination.”

There is little coverage of Egyptian migration – legally or otherwise – from the country, despite a history of being the top sender of migrants in the Arab region, due in large part to its sizeable population. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Egypt is also the country with the greatest number of unaccompanied minors irregularly migrating to Europe. There are, however, exceptions. The most notable recent example of this was the 21 September 2016 capsizing of a boat, bound for Italy and carrying at least 450 passengers, eight miles off the coast of Rosetta.

The victims came from many different countries, but the majority of the identified bodies and survivors were Egyptian. President Sisi’s comments in the days following the tragedy were widely covered, as he promised work on new development projects to improve living standards, and pleaded with Egyptians to stay, to stand by their country, and to open their wallets to help alleviate some of the financial burden and help fund national projects.

When covering the country’s migration experience, Egyptian media has by and large focused on personal human interest stories, almost exclusively about the Syrian refugees. While sometimes recounting stories of hardship, more frequently the narratives highlights the success stories of busy shops and restaurants, or other fruitful business endeavours of the new arrivals, and puts a focus on their resourcefulness.

This trend is apparent on television as well, where the majority of Egyptians still get their information. In the last year, several episodes of popular television shows featured Syrian refugees who have been interviewed or profiled, and generally casting a positive light on their experience in Egypt. A particularly noteworthy instance of this occurred less than a month after the Rosetta boat tragedy, when a programme on private satellite channel Al Nahar hosted two Syrian refugees who had successfully opened businesses in Egypt. They were hosted alongside two Egyptian survivors of the September disaster.

The episode questioned why Syrians are succeeding in Egypt, while Egyptians are attempting to leave. This confrontational style is common on Egyptian talk shows, and often raises questions about the editorial motives, the journalistic ethics at work, and levels of professionalism in the local media industry.

In sum, while there are exceptions, particularly from non-traditional outlets like Mada Masr for example, which publishes in both Arabic and English and offers articles that are both critical of and consistent with state narratives, the vast majority of media coverage paints an overwhelmingly positive picture of the Egyptian state in its dealing with issues of migration. This runs counter to criticism by international organisations and opposition press outlets (almost exclusively based outside Egypt) over the way the country has dealt with migrants. Egypt has long received flak from these groups for discrimination against migrants and

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refugees. In 2007, Refugees International, for instance, published a report after Egypt ‘closed its doors’, barring any further entry of Iraqi refugees into the country. This report and others like it paint a damning picture for refugees who do make it into the country, stating that they are not granted any official status, nor given access to social services.

There are several possible explanations for the general trend in reporting on migration; one of them is self-censorship which has been identified as a growing issue in recent years. Furthermore, in recent years, the media landscape in the country has become much less diverse. Egypt also has longstanding issues with professionalism and capacity shortfalls among journalists, editors and other media personnel. The media industry remains under-regulated, and attempts at passing new media laws since the ratification of the 2014 Constitution, which included commitments to draft progressive media laws and preserve freedom of expression, have been confronted with red tape.

Anecdotal evidence suggests a decline in discriminatory content relating to migrants in the country. This is likely the result both of greater awareness about the migration crisis, and the backlash that comes when media publish objectionable content.

Stereotypes that compartmentalise migrants in Egypt remain prevalent. Syrian refugees, for instance, are widely portrayed as being highly productive and resourceful, and coverage of them often focuses on their success in Egypt and their contributions to Egyptian society. On the other hand, while it appears that implicitly negative coverage of African migrants and refugees (or coverage including hate speech such as the example provided above) has diminished, there is relatively little reporting on them despite their significant presence in the country. In addition, the African migrant community is rarely identified by nationality. For example, in much of the reporting on the all too common sinking of migrant boats, despite often being the largest or second largest identified group of casualties, the bodies of those lost from sub-Saharan Africa are frequently referred to simply as “unidentified African migrants.”

As is the case with much of the coverage on migration internationally, there are often problems in the use of migration-related terminology. In Egypt, the term refugee is most ubiquitous and often refers to those fleeing conflict, as well as economic migrants, living in the country. However, when reporting on irregular migration, people trafficking or events associated with illegal migration operations, the term refugee is far less common. Instead words like “victims,” “migrants,” and “illegal migrants” are more frequently used.

While there appears to be a reduction in hate speech and discriminatory reporting, more work needs to be done to ensure transparency and representation of migrant voices in the Egyptian media. While, human interest stories are excellent vehicles for fostering understanding, empathy, and tolerance, the overall perception of refugees and migrants in the country could be vastly improved if there were more narrative accounts that better represent the actual migrant populations living in, and moving through the country.

Additionally, coverage of the challenges facing Egyptians and why many of them are attempting to leave – and risking their lives to do so – should be better documented in a more substantive, and less reactionary, way.

The reforms to guarantee the Constitutional commitment to free expression and press freedom need to proceed. For years, there has been dialogue and efforts toward reforming Egyptian media to help ensure professionalism, press freedoms, ethical coverage, and a balanced narrative. In order for sensitive and complex issues like migration to be covered fairly, the values enshrined in the Constitution need to be implemented as intended.

Sarah El-Shaarawi is managing editor of Arab Media & Society.

Abdulrahman Elsamni is a journalist who teaches Mass Communication in the Faculty of Arts at Ain Shams University in Egypt.

Links and sources

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