

Simulating Experiences of Displacement and Migration: Developing Immersive and Interactive Media Forms Around Factual Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is a highly politicised and emotive area of public discourse. During the peak of the so-called 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe, a number of EU politicians and mass media outlets manipulated the abstract idea of 'the migrant' as a scapegoat for a number of social ills including rising crime, unemployment and national security. Yet, during these years, some news organisations did seek to counter the dominant negative narratives around migration by exploring new modes of storytelling around interactive and immersive digital environments. This study examines four such media projects, all developed between 2014 and 2016. Their interactive narratives sought to break down popular discourses which portrayed migrants as "the other" by creating an emotional connection between media user and the experience of refugees themselves. For this research, journalists, editors, and producers were interviewed to determine the motivations of the content creators and the impact their storytelling techniques had on viewers.

KEYWORDS

Documentary, Immigration, Journalism, Migration Crisis, Politics, Refugee, Television, The Displaced, User Agency, Virtual Reality

INTRODUCTION

During the year 2015, an estimated one million people left their homelands to make the dangerous journey into Europe. According to the UNHCR, this "unprecedented" number of migrants were forced to flee due to "persecution, conflict and poverty" (UNHCR / IOM, 2015). Half of these displaced people were escaping the civil war in Syria. Others came from Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of these refugees endured the perilous voyage across the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Greece often in small and fragile inflatable boats. In the same year, about 150,000 crossed the Mediterranean Sea into Italy from North Africa. During the first five months of 2016, more than 2,800 were feared drowned in the Mediterranean. In May 2016, the G7 summit in Japan declared the 'large scale movements of migrants and refugees as a global challenge which requires a global response' (G7 Statement 2016).

It was a humanitarian emergency in the heart of Europe that spanned several years and still continues into 2019. During this time, as a number of studies have shown, many EU political leaders and media organisations sought to make political capital out of the crisis by portraying refugees as a threat (Wodak 2015, Crawley & Skleparis 2018). According to Krzyzanowski et al. (2018), these "politicized and mediatized visions" portrayed "mainly imaginary scenarios of migrants as

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a danger” (p.8). Pineo-Pineo and Moore (2015) describe the conscious manipulation of the public discourse on immigration as a “narrative or oppression” (p.4). In this charged social climate, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, warned about the escalation of “anti-foreigner sentiments” (UNHCR / IOM, 2015).

Public debate over the social and economic impact of the refugee crisis became distorted through a lens of right-wing mediatisation (Trianafyllidou 2017, La Barbera 2015). As this happened, once-commonly used terms in immigration discourse became loaded with ideological and populist rhetoric. In this way, the word “‘migrant’ comes implicitly to mean someone who’s travelling for economic reasons, rather than for as yet undetermined ones” (Kingsley, 2016). However, some media organizations did seek to counter these dominant negative narratives in popular discourse. In August 2015, for example, the TV network Al Jazeera banned the use of the word ‘migrant’ to describe those crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Barry Malone was the online editor at Al Jazeera who states:

The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative. (Malone, 2015)

In a similar vein, the categories of ‘refugee’, ‘economic migrant’, and ‘transitory migrant’, for example, became either redundant or misleading. According to Crawley and Skleparis (2018), “these categories prove largely incapable of adequately explaining the complex experiences and back stories of those crossing the Mediterranean in 2015.” (p. 51). Other researchers have warned against the use of the word “crisis” itself. Krzyzanowski et al. state, “referring to a migration “crisis” is both stigmatizing—especially for the migrants themselves—and adding an unnecessarily alarmistic connotation to this discourse” (2018, p.3).

Migrants Portrayed as “The Other”

This negative mediated narrative was cultivated over several years and, in many cases, was designed to raise doubts over the status of refugees and to solidify public support around their policies of exclusion and rhetoric of ‘border control’. As their agenda converged, both politicians and ring-wing newspapers manipulated the lexicon of immigration and portrayed the migrant ‘crisis’ through a simple vantage point: Ourselves against ‘The Others’. As a result, according to Triandafyllidou (2017) media reporting was “subjugated to dominant discourses on who belongs and who are the ‘aliens’, the ‘outsiders’” (p. 2). In discussing his notion of a “New(s) Racism”, Van Dijk (2000) describes that “ethnic issues provide ... polarized identification for most white readers: Us and Them” (p.37). At a time when European countries were still reeling from the financial crisis and dealing with the politics of austerity, these ‘others’ became a scapegoat who were blamed for all manner of social ills. At various times immigrants have been blamed for rising crime, social unrest, unemployment and national security concerns. “Anybody can potentially be constructed as dangerous ‘other’, should it become expedient for specific strategic and manipulative purposes” (Wodak, 2015). To La Barbera (2015), “migrants in Europe are still the most marginalised others” (p. 6). Fox describes the UK debate on immigration ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum: “it almost became a mythical fight against evil forces that had to be named, shamed and expelled from the country” (2018, p. 97).

In the midst of this emotive and politicised public discourse, the power of the metaphor was employed as an ideological tool. This was not a new strategy specific to the ‘migration crisis’ but the resurgence of an established practice of demonisation in media representation. In 2008, David Cisneros stated that “immigrants are framed visually and metaphorically, using similar representational strategies, as dangerous and destructive pollutants” (p.570). Such negative and loaded metaphors result in the de-humanization of refugees and asylum seekers. According to Pineo-Pineo and Moore (2015) “metaphors present a cultural narrative that affects the moral consideration of the characters involved in the story” (p.1). Such pejorative metaphors around immigration were not confined to

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