

Self-representation of Syrian refugees in the media in Turkey and Germany

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Refugees are increasingly creating alternative news media platforms in order to better represent their own perspectives.

When three young Syrian workers were burned to death at a factory in Izmir in Western Turkey, the racist attack was not featured in Turkey's main media outlets, and only became known 35 days after the incident when documented by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.¹ In another incident, Anas Modamani, a Syrian refugee in Germany, was photographed by the media when taking a selfie with Chancellor Angela Merkel. Based on a weak physical resemblance, Modamani was later wrongly claimed by the media to be one of the perpetrators of the suicide bombings in Brussels carried out by the Islamic State group. The selfie was circulated widely on social media and incorporated into a national security narrative that associated refugees with terrorism.

In an attempt to gain agency over their own narratives (and thereby to influence policies affecting them), Syrian refugees began to create alternative independent digital media platforms. On these platforms,² Syrians play an active role in collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news about the events and issues that involve or concern them in host countries. Although mainstream media portrayals often focus on the economic, social and political consequences of hosting Syrian refugees, refugee-run media bring to light the policies and practices of host countries that lead to isolation, alienation and discrimination. Of course, the mere existence of refugee-run media does not necessarily lead to the democratisation of the discourse on refugees. These platforms lack the power, authority and visibility that mainstream outlets have in shaping public imagination. Furthermore, the perspectives presented in refugee-run media often do not get picked up by the mainstream media.

Turkey and Germany offer interesting insights into how refugee-run media platforms function. Both countries host large Syrian refugee populations, with Turkey hosting around 3.6 million Syrian refugees and Germany hosting around 800,000 Syrian refugees. Turkey and Germany are the two countries in which we see perhaps the greatest level of demographic diversity within the Syrian refugee population, as well as the best examples of self-representation in various media outlets. Syrian journalists have been more active and vocal about the issues that concern them in these countries than in other Syrian refugee-hosting countries such as Lebanon and Jordan.

Refugee-run media in Turkey

Refugee-run media platforms in Turkey concentrate on several policy areas in their coverage, including:

The implications of Temporary Protection Status (TPS): Syrian refugee media activists argue that granting TPS, the legal status granted to Syrian refugees in Turkey, indicates that the State views the refugees' presence as a temporary condition and expects refugees to return to Syria in the near future.³

The government's social integration policies and programmes: Launched by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), the principal authority responsible for overall migration and international protection affairs in Turkey, these programmes are criticised as they only involve Syrians, whereas they should also engage Turkish citizens at the local, regional and national levels.

The dangers of political exploitation of Syrian refugee issues: A strategy adopted

by political actors to achieve electoral gains or consolidate power in Turkey.

The myths circulated about refugees in mainstream media and racist attacks towards refugees: In a context of economic crisis in Turkey, these myths mostly focus on the costs of hosting refugees and shape public perceptions. For example, hate speech by Turks toward Syrian refugees escalated in 2020 as Syrian refugees were increasingly presented as the major cause of the dire economic conditions and lack of job opportunities in the country.⁴

Refugee-run media in Germany

Refugee-run media in Germany has focused on a different set of issues, which include:

The limitations of the subsidiary protection status awarded to Syrian refugees: Between September 2015 and February 2016, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees offered Syrians refugee status, granting full protection for three years as well as travel documents. Syrians were also eligible to apply for family reunification. However, the German government introduced a set of more restrictive rules in February 2016. Under these new rules, Syrians were granted subsidiary protection instead of conventional refugee status, allowing them to obtain residency for one year only and requiring them to wait two years to apply for family reunification. Additionally, family reunification was suspended altogether between mid-2016 and 2018. Refugee-run media worked to raise awareness of these rules by illustrating the impacts of these policies on refugees' lives, such as separation, isolation and discrimination.

The consequences of lifting the ban on the deportation of refugees: The deportation ban was not renewed in December 2020, meaning that refugees convicted of serious crimes could now be forced to return to Syria. The illegal deportation of some Afghan refugees to war-torn Afghanistan in recent years aggravated fears among Syrian refugees.

Wider issues in German society: In an attempt to disrupt the presentation of refugees primarily as receivers of aid, protection and sympathy, the platforms also chose to give space and visibility to events in which Syrians acted as providers instead. For example, moved by images of devastating floods in southwest Germany, thousands of Syrian refugees (organised through social media) travelled to the region and provided aid and assistance.⁵ This was given extensive coverage in the Syrian refugee-run media in Germany.

Conclusion

In general, refugees' perspectives and stories hardly figure in the mainstream media. But as the means of mass media content production have become widely available through increased internet access, refugees have been able to develop the skills needed to disrupt the politics of representation and to influence policymaking in host countries – albeit to a limited extent. The quest for self-representation does not only help restore agency and a sense of community among refugees but also mitigates the influence of media cultures that prioritise the perspectives of external observers as opposed to the perspectives and lived experiences of the individuals or groups observed. Mainstream media news reporting has contributed to the perception of refugees as a threat to the cultural, economic, and political security of host countries. The incorporation of refugee-run media platforms into the refugee-related news ecosystem can help capture a diversity of perspectives and provide a more balanced view of refugees.

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1. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2021) 'Three Syrian workers burned to death in İzmir in racist attack' bit.ly/Syrian-workers-attack

2. Such as *enab baladi*, *almodon*, *intsyria*, *abwad*, *aljumhuriya*, *dubarah*, and *freedomraise*

3. Enab Baladi (2021) 'Who bridges the gap between the Turks and Syrian refugees?' bit.ly/turkey-syria-refugees

4. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (2020) 'A Comparative Study on Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence in Syrian Media - Second Monitoring Round 2020' bit.ly/Syrian-media-study

5. For example, www.abwab.eu