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## **“ARE YOU COMING FROM EUROPE OR THE MIDDLE EAST?” – ANALYZING ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE INITIAL COVERAGE OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN WESTERN MEDIA**

### **Abstract**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, forced thousands of Ukrainians to leave their homes and seek refuge mostly in Europe and the U.S. These new refugees laid bare a trend in Western media: in their initial coverage journalists in Europe and the U.S. made a clear distinction between what they called “white, European” refugees and their counterparts from the “Third World” and more blatantly – “Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan”.

This study uses the initial coverage of Ukrainian refugees in the West as a case study to be compared to the coverage of wars in the Middle East and the “refugee crisis” that hit Europe after Syrians were forced to flee their country in 2014. It looks at the conflicts through the ethical lens and explores more empathetic, comprehensive, and responsible ways of covering a conflict.

**Keywords:** ethics in journalism, refugees, Ukraine, Middle East, compassion.

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and started a war against its sovereign neighbor. For journalists around the globe, the war on European soil turned into the most important story they had to tell. While the efforts of Ukrainian journalists were recently recognized by the Pulitzer Committee for Excellence (Triesman 2022), some of their Western colleagues’ work was questionable.

TV stations in the U.S., UK, and France devoted much air time to the war. Initially, journalists kept comparing Ukrainian refugees arriving in European countries to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. They made a distinction between blonde, blue-eyed Ukrainians and refugees from other continents. These are some of the comments heard on air at the beginning of the war, “This is not a developing Third World Nation; this is Europe” (Hellyer 2022, § 3); “We are not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs of the Syrian regime backed by Putin” (Hellyer 2022, § 3). But the most memorable of all these reporters was Charlie D’Agata, reporting from Kyiv for CBS:

This isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan that has seen conflict raging for decades. You know, this is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen (Hellyer 2022, § 1).

This paper will analyze the wording D’Agata and his colleagues chose and will try to establish:

1. The influence of journalists’ choice of coverage on audiences.
2. Whether this choice of coverage adheres to the norms of ethics in journalism.

The paper will also cover some tools that aid journalists in forming more empathetic approaches to covering refugees.

### **Case Study: What Harm Can Journalists Do to Refugees?**

For many people, news is a means of creating an understanding of the world. News that the media organizations select as worthy of coverage serves as a sort of “material reference point, on which journalists act to construct meanings of objects and people” (Bauder 2010, 6). So, journalists have the ability to influence the attitudes and opinions of the public.

A vast body of literature has been dedicated to the role of journalists in shaping public opinion when it comes to topics of migration and ethno-national or religious differences. The aftermath of 9/11 shaped the perception of Arabs and Arab Americans as terrorists (Alsultany 2013). The same trend trickled into Western European media when Syrians made their way to the continent in 2014. European media often depicted “floods” and “rivers” of unwanted individuals who were desperately trying to “invade” their borders (Patrascu 2015, 5).

Comments by D’Agata and his colleagues referenced above are a sort of continuation of this ill-fitted tradition. They pitted refugees from different continents against each other and strengthened the sense that safety and prosperity are only attainable on European soil. In areas of conflict, however – let’s say in Syria and Afghanistan, even though those are two culturally and geographically different nations – war is a natural state of being that we all should be used to by now.

What meaning do such messages convey to audiences? They strengthen the sense of European supremacy and belittle the pain of people elsewhere. Such a train of thought was criticized in 2004 when some scholars established that some events, especially from the West, make it to the news as a moral outrage, while happenings in distant African countries are “tragedies” (Persson 2004).

When opting for this kind of coverage, Western journalists lay bare their Eurocentric bias and the sense of European superiority. Often, they lose their sense of accountability because they feel no pressure either from the audience or from their colleagues – D’Agata, for example, apologized for his remarks, but his career or that of his employer did not suffer any consequences.

Media scholar Sissela Bok devoted a lot of attention to news-making and the role of individual reporters and editors in the process. She reasoned that once communicators gain total freedom of shaping and delivering messages, their conscience becomes “very accommodating and malleable” (Bok 1989, 94). They fail to look at their own work critically and stop feeling accountable to audiences.

Checking accountability is possible through “publicity check” – a tool for self-reflection aimed mostly at strategic communications professionals. The idea behind it is simple: the communicator should be able to justify their actions not to themselves but to other “reasonable persons” (Bok 1989, 91). According to Sissela Bok, justification means giving adequate reasons why an action should be considered just, right, and proper (Bok 1989). If journalists fail to check themselves, they subsequently fail to assess the harm done.

### **Consulting Ethics of Journalism**

The question of cost – a benefit weighed against damage – is the question where the philosophy of ethics should be invoked. In the following pages, this paper will attempt to establish whether the word choice of Western journalists follows the standards of ethical journalism.

When discussing the processes of newsgathering and news-making, it is important to remember that many journalistic practices are bureaucratic in their nature (Shudson 1997). A lot of best practices are professionalized to the point where most newsrooms have resembling workflows. Thus, it is not surprising that some norms of ethical reporting are codified and widely accepted in the form of codes of conduct – like the SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists) Code of Ethics. Yet the code of ethics – or any other ethics document in the industry – is not universal and does not come with the obligation to follow it. When it comes to reporting on hard, emotional topics – trauma, violence, war, humanitarian catastrophes, or migration – journalists need to weigh each individual case and decide accordingly.

The paper already discussed Bok’s tools for self-checking and inner dialogue for journalism professionals. Now, I will consult ethical norms that, while not being limited solely to journalistic practices, can aid news professionals in decision-making. These are fruits of thought from thinkers who devoted much time to questions of virtue and morality.

### **The Golden Mean**

It is only fitting to start discussing ethics by talking about Aristotle and his virtue ethics. His idea of the golden mean is widely used in decision-making by media professionals (Wilkins et al. 2021).

The golden mean seeks the perfect balance between the extremities of deficiency and excess. For journalists, it means anticipating possible harm and benefits of the story they deem newsworthy – what would be the form that would do the story justice and tell it with the perfect amount of emotional weight? For Aristotle, virtue comes through practice, and the golden mean is found on a case-by-case basis (Wilkins et al. 2021). In this case, D’Agata and his colleagues had two extreme choices:

- a) They could have opted for a less factual but loud, sensational, and emotionally charged coverage that would affect audiences – and this seems to be the path they took.
- b) They could have chosen a dry coverage devoid of any human-interest stories.

As seasoned journalists, D'Agata and his colleagues should have been able to assess the results of each extreme choice and found something in between. D'Agata himself could have consulted his colleagues' reporting on war and refugees and come up with a factual yet empathetic take on the case of Ukraine, which would not feed on the humiliation of other nationals. If he wanted to contextualize the situation on the ground, he could have found more apt comparisons from the region – this is not Russia's first attempt to take over its neighboring countries by force. D'Agata could easily have found countries that have suffered from Russian aggression before or taken a plunge into the recent history of Russia and Ukraine.

In his quest to find the golden mean, D'Agata fell into excess and, therefore, delivered more harm than good. One could say with confidence that if faced with a virtue test from Aristotle, D'Agata's reporting would fail it.

### **The Categorical Imperative**

The next groundbreaking idea in the field of ethics belongs to Immanuel Kant. The German thinker came up with the concept of the categorical imperative: "I ought never to act except in such a way that my maxim should become a universal law" (Kant 1988, 93).

The approach is based on duty, which Kant valued above everything else as good in itself (Kant 1988). This approach also means that one should never use other people as a means to an end (Wilkins et al. 2021). In the instances mentioned above, however, Western journalists used non-Westerners – specifically, Syrians and Afghans – as caricatures for their sensational coverage. They trivialized the plight of displacement and loss of life.

Kant's categorical imperative also mentions the "universal law" aspect of human behavior. Put slightly crudely, this maxim would turn D'Agata's choice of reporting – a competition between refugees from different parts of the world – into the standard of reporting on refugees.

So, next time D'Agata is on air about refugees, Kant would ask him to remember the imperative and make sure to compare them to other refugees, underscoring how civil one group is, as opposed to the incivility of the other. Would Kant appreciate such an interpretation of good reporting and consider the ethics test passed? I am afraid not.

### **Utilitarianism**

D'Agata and his colleagues seem to be the most closely aligned with the idea of utilitarianism, so they might expect sympathy from John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism seeks to maximize the good for the greatest number of people: "That which brings about the most happiness or the least suffering, i.e., the best balance of pleasure over pain for the greatest number" (Dyck 1977, 55).

As opposed to Kant's categorical imperative, utilitarianism would allow D'Agata to use Middle Eastern refugees as a means to exemplify current affairs if:

- 1) Evoking their example would benefit most Ukrainians and would technically serve as a pre-factor for stopping the war altogether.
- 2) The mention of refugees across the globe caused the spike of compassion towards refugees in the highest number of audience members possible.

The phrases heard on air did not benefit Ukrainians and even less so the Middle Eastern and North African refugees that were mentioned in a humiliating manner. The coverage by these particular journalists did not elucidate current affairs; it also failed to bring any significant contribution to the analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war and what it meant to refugees. So, could we say that the coverage brought the most benefit to the largest number of people? Not really, so we could safely say that utilitarians would not jump to D'Agata's defense.

### **Ethics of Care**

Ethics of care, as a paradigm in the science of morality and virtue, is relatively new and stems from feminist readings of ethical texts from the past. It reasons that decision-making should be informed by interpersonal relationships and context. The approach is based on human interaction, connection, and personal involvement that can be later translated into public interest (Hossain and Aucoin 2018).

Communication and context-based approach allows journalists to immerse themselves in stories dealing with discrimination and other contexts that affect vulnerable groups, such as women, children, or refugees (Hossain and Aucoin 2018). Such an approach could eventually lead to more equity between communities (Buzzanell 2011) and, according to some proponents, should be adapted into a universal ethical approach in global journalism (Blum 1993).

Yet, the approach is not without opposition in scholarly circles because its interpersonal nature might collide with the concepts of impartiality and fair reporting – the famous “fly on the wall” metaphor (Wilkins et al. 2021) – that maintains that journalists should remain distant observers, rather than building personal relationships with their sources.

Ethics of care is useful when talking about refugees because it allows journalists to do in-depth reporting and tell refugee stories that are emotionally charged and highly compassionate. We saw ethics of care used in many human-interest stories detailing the plight of Ukrainian refugees, prisoners of war, and civilians in the later months of the war.

Yet, in this instance, it is safe to say that ethics of care – with compassion and personification at its core – did not even cross the minds of D’Agata and his colleagues. In their take on the refugees, they stripped their subjects of individual traits and pitted a whole different geographical region against Europe.

### **What Could Journalists Do to Improve Their Coverage?**

This paper offers a very brief review of tools and mechanisms that journalists can use to improve their professional standards in the field: they should be able to keep their Eurocentric bias in check and justify choices of form when it comes to reporting. They should be able to evoke arguments about the choices they made and ensure to reduce the anticipated harm to the best of their ability. They can do that through Sissela Book’s publicity check.

Despite not having universally tailored documents to fall back on when making ethical decisions, journalists around the globe have a wealth of knowledge accumulated throughout centuries – everything from the ideas of Aristotle in antiquity to modern feminist readings of ethical questions articulated in the ideas of ethics of care.

Yet the initial coverage in major Western countries of Ukrainian migrants coming to European countries – as exemplified above in this paper – showed that even top media organizations might struggle when making ethical decisions. Words chosen by D’Agata and his colleagues and approved by their editors and other upper-level overseers at their media organizations show that Western journalists might easily fall prey to self-perceived Eurocentric bias and forget to weigh the results and cost of their coverage.

We might assume that seasoned journalists are proud and thus slow to listen to media scholars who usually do not report from the field and offer mere theories. Yet there is hope and reason in assuming that journalists might want to share knowledge and learn from their own colleagues out in the field.

When we talk about refugees, we often forget that before the displacement, they led ordinary lives – many of them were even journalists! Sharing the knowledge and experience of journalists-turned-refugees will help their Western colleagues to gain perspective and stay alert about their biases.

One of the first successful instances of knowledge-sharing happened in the United Kingdom, where refugee journalists from Syria were integrated into British newsrooms under the “Refugee Journalism Project” (Refugee Journalism Project 2016-2023). The same year, Syrian journalist Tarek Khello came under the spotlight in Germany. The refugee journalist who spoke Arabic and had access to Arabic-speaking sources was able to uncover stories unique to the refugee population in East Germany. Without Khello’s involvement, his German colleagues would easily have overlooked the stories – most of what they were working on painted Syrian refugees in Germany either as terrorists or as tragic heroes (Alfred 2020). In reality, refugee stories are much more nuanced because each one of them is a person with a unique perspective and experience. When reporting about them, refugee journalists open our eyes to the everyday life of migrants and their struggles, showing us the people behind the labels.

Another approach that media organizations can adopt is hiring local professionals instead of parachuting their Western staff to conflict regions for a brief stint of reporting. Ukrainian journalists and photojournalists have been vocal about the importance of hiring locals, saying that covering the war in their own country and refugees feeling that war is “not another assignment for them; they are living it. They know the context, the culture, the people” (Murphy, Johnson, and Nieland 2022, § 13).

These brief examples can be useful for media organizations looking to diversify their reporting and incorporate more compassion and in-depth looks into their practices of newsmaking. Yet, when faced

with a specific situation, each media professional – be it a reporter, an editor, or an executive at the top of the media outlet – must make a choice on the spot. What scholars can do is analyze past coverages, speak out about insensitivities, and hope to lay a theoretical groundwork for the betterment of working professionals. With this, this paper calls for more analysis of contemporary problems in journalism ethics with more emphasis on compassionate coverage, care, and better standards of ethical decision-making.

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