

Improper Distance: The Refugee Crisis Presented by Two Newsrooms

Miguel Franquet Dos Santos Silva. Universitat Ramon Llull, Spain

Svein Bruras. Volda University College, Norway

Ana Beriain Bañares. Universitat Abat Oliba, Spain

This article examines how the two major newspapers in Spain and Norway between October 2015 and March 2016 covered the refugee crisis in Europe. Based on a quantitative and comparative content analysis of the Spanish newspaper *El País* and the Norwegian newspaper *VG*, the study finds that, in both newspapers, more than 50 per cent of the stories on the refugee crisis are about political and administrative issues. Politicians and governmental officials are the dominating sources, while far less space and attention are devoted to the refugees and their stories and opinions. Employing Roger Silverstone's concept of proper distance as a theoretical anchorage point, the study concludes that the aspiring proximity in the news coverage favours the politicians more than those affected by the politics.

Keywords: News, migration, refugees, proper distance, content analysis

The 'Refugee "Crisis"' in Europe

In the autumn of 2015, there was a considerable increase in the number of people seeking refugee status in Europe. While the total number of refugees arriving in Europe in 2014 was less than 300,000, the number rose to more than one million in 2015.

The arrivals were particularly numerous from August to December this year. Many of the migrants arrived in Italy and Greece after a perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea—a journey that has cost thousands of lives. The survivors tried to make their way to the north and west, to different European countries, seeking protection and safety. Most countries

in Western and central Europe were affected by the ‘refugee crisis’—some to a large extent, others to a lesser extent. And, of course, it became a major story in the news media. The largest groups came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Germany was by far the most popular recipient country, with 440,000 applicants. However, if we look at the number of applicants compared to the population of the country, the highest number recorded was in Hungary (17,700 applicants per million inhabitants) (Eurostat 2016b).

Norway is not a member of the EU, but is still a part of the Schengen agreement and the common border control in the Schengen area. After four years with a stable number of approximately 10,000 asylum seekers each year, the number of applicants tripled in 2015. This year, a total of 30,470 persons applied for asylum in Norway. More than half of the applicants arrived during the two months of October and November (UDI 2015).

In 2016, when measures to limit the immigration in Europe came into effect, the total number of asylum applicants in Norway dropped to only 3,460 persons. This is the lowest number since 1997, and a little more than one-tenth of the number the year before (UDI 2017). In relation to the population of the country, Norway received in 2015 5,898 applicants per million inhabitants.

During 2015, the number of people who sought asylum in Spain reached 14,780, which corresponds to just 1.2 per cent of asylum seekers in the whole of Europe. In 2014, asylum seekers that requested protection in Spain did not reach 6,000 (CEAR 2016). This represents 314 applicants per million inhabitants (Eurostat 2016b). More than half of the first-time applicants came from Syria (5,724) and Ukraine (3,420). In 2016, the number of asylum seekers reached a new high: 15,755 (Eurostat 2016a).

Following Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017), we place the concept of ‘refugee crisis’ into quotation marks to mark our critical stance regarding the biased use of the concept that has become common both in academic and public debates. Conceived within a Eurocentric perspective, the term ‘crisis’ refers generally to the negative effects caused by the growing arrival of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe, neglecting systematically the ongoing conflicts in Central Asia, in the Middle East and in Africa that forced so many people to leave their countries. Moreover, the debates around the ‘refugee crisis’ also neglect the hosting capacity limitations of countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and the fact that the rates of mortality amongst people seeking refuge in Europe have not decreased since 2015.

Framing Immigration and Asylum Seeking

The media coverage of immigrants and asylum seekers has been thoroughly examined by several studies. Two news frames have been identified as particularly important: Refugees as victims and refugees as threat (Van Gorp 2005; Innes 2010; Horsti 2013; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017).

The first tends to represent the refugees as suffering and innocent victims of persecution, war or famine, seeking protection and safety; the other tends to represent the refugees as intruders and illegal fortune hunters, and as a threat to the culture, the security and the welfare system of the recipient country. Both frameworks represent a stereotype and an understanding of the refugee as ‘the other’, not one of us.

Studies of media representations of refugees have also been occupied with the human-interest stories that portray an individual refugee or a family in a positive manner, as individuals with a face and a history, with emotions, hopes and dreams (Steimel 2010; Beyer and Figenschou 2014). In some cases, refugees obtain personalized media exposure thanks to support from ‘frame sponsors’ like human rights activists and campaigning groups, who promote a depiction of the individual refugee as a victim, but also as ‘one of us’, in order to increase the possibility for a residence permit. Studying these kinds of stories, researchers have noticed a tendency to ‘de-ethnicize’ the individual refugee, which makes him or her no longer a threat to society (Horsti 2013; Ihlen and Thorbjørnsrud 2014). Such stories can have considerable impact on the political agenda-setting (Dekker and Scholten 2017). However, as Ihlen and Thorbjørnsrud point out, these cases are ‘highly unrepresentative’. Most of the refugees will never achieve such a personalized media exposure. In fact, as recent studies have shown, in general terms, the representation of immigration tends to portray immigrants negatively (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006; Grobet 2014) and to associate them with crime, illegality, otherness and threat (Roggeband and Vliegenthart 2007; Franquet Santos Silva et al. 2016), often omitting their status as asylum seekers or refugees (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006).

Moral Distance and Suffering

The refugees appear on the screen—and for most of us, this is the only place they appear. We do not meet them elsewhere. We do not meet them face to face to hear their stories. But, on news websites, on television and on our mobile devices, we watch the dramatic arrivals on the Mediterranean shore, the rescue operations, the humanitarian assistance, the mass movement of foreign people seeking a safe haven in Europe—and the eruption of the discussion on how the authorities should deal with the flow of refugees. We watch it on the screen.

The debate on how the media should represent suffering and especially the suffering of the distant other is controversial. At the core of the debate is the question of how the dissemination of suffering will foster people’s involvement and political action. According to some (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006), the construction of the distant sufferer should take into account the fact that depriving them of the capacity to act upon their suffering dehumanizes them and inhibits people’s empathy and sense of pity, which would eventually lead people to act. In this sense, the media should avoid depicting

the sufferer in impersonal groups of helpless and unfortunate people, because it creates a huge distance between them and us. A paradigmatic metaphor of this type of representation is what Chouliaraki calls the ‘tableau vivant’, where suffering is depicted in a decontextualized, universalized and beautified manner (2006: 102). These observations are in line with the critical remarks of other authors for whom the aestheticization of suffering generates insensitivity (Barthes 1970) and neutralizes the distress that it aims to convey (Sontag 1990). As a result, the overexposure to images of people suffering would produce compassion fatigue and erode our sense of reality (Sontag 2003).

For others, compassion fatigue and the decreasing concern for distant others are not the natural consequence of exposing people to a continuous flow of news and pictures of people suffering, but rather the outcome of the ‘individual spirit that the global market wants to encourage’ (Cohen 2001: 195). In this sense, there would be no reason for not exposing peoples’ vulnerability and helplessness (Cohen 2001; Azoulay 2008; Linfield 2010) for ‘without patterns of vulnerability and dependency, there is no need for political altruism or social justice’ (Cohen 2001: 183).

Although some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim that the dissemination of pictures like the one of the little Alan Kurdi has actually changed people’s response to the refugee crisis, having contributed to increasing the humanitarian help and to fostering political action (CEAR 2016), a recent report by the International Organisation for Migration has shown that the number of people who lose their lives seeking asylum in Europe continued to increase after Alan’s death (International Organizations for Migration 2016). But the difficulty in establishing a clear causal link between the media performance and people’s responses should not divert our attention from the main point: the moral obligation to depict people in a fair way should not result primarily from its eventual political consequences, which the media cannot fully control, but from a selfless moral commitment to the other. In other words, it is not the consequence of our actions that should provide the ultimate rationale for qualifying those actions as good or bad, but the object of those actions and the intentionality with which they were performed.

Building on Emmanuel Levinas’s moral philosophy, Silverstone’s concept of proper distance provides a powerful alternative to judge the media performance in consequentialist terms. For Levinas, the naked face of the other, vulnerable and destitute as it is, commands me. The face-to-face encounter constitutes a ‘moral summons’ (Levinas 1969). Despite the difficulties implied in developing a whole moral theory upon the idea of the infinite otherness (Derrida 1999), by placing the absolute alterity of the other at the origin of morality, Levinas refuses to base moral obligation on any sort of previous rational grounds. Our responsibility towards the other is prior to any sort of philosophical enquiry.

Applying the concept of hospitality elaborated on by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) to media ethics, Silverstone (2007) contends that a fair representation of the other must acknowledge that their infinite otherness will always remain beyond our reach. Regardless of all good intentions, no journalistic report could ever fully account for the experiences that the refugees and asylum seekers are going through. When it comes to the representation of the other, and especially the other who is suffering, there is no ethical alternative than to create the necessary conditions for them to be seen, heard and understood—that is, to hospitality and to welcoming the other. According to Silverstone, a relationship with a proper distance is what we need—and what the media coverage should provide. Recognizing that it is impossible to establish a personal relationship with the distant other, news media should avoid creating a constructed image of the other as ‘the same’, which he is not. It would be too close. Neither should they promote a representation of the other only as a part of the crowd, or as a stereotype. That would be too far. Somewhere in between is the moderate proximity, the proper distance, which will maintain the other through difference as well as through shared identity:

Proper distance refers to the importance of the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated relationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility as well as understanding (Silverstone 2007: 47).

This is where, in Silverstone’s opinion, contemporary news media fail. They are captured by the stranger’s spectacular and visible otherness, and they devalue the possibility of connection and identification. Thereby, they also fail to acknowledge plurality and the rights of the stranger (Silverstone 2007). Despite providing a powerful theoretical tool for reflecting on the moral representation of the other, Silverstone’s concept of proper distance has been scarcely applied in practice. By means of a quantitative and comparative content analysis, this study constitutes an incipient attempt to fill this gap in the academic literature that might be used for further discussions on how to morally assess the actual media coverage of the other in terms of proper distance. In order to do so, eight different indicators were established. The first three constitute hermeneutical tools to assess the proximity through the text itself, while the other five focus on the visual representation of the refugees. Taken together, these different indicators provide a general view on the construction of the images of refugees by the press. Each one of these indicators has been associated with a different research question:

- News frames. RQ1: How often have the refugees been at the centre of the stories concerning their situation?
- Geographic context. RQ2: Do these news stories focus on national, international or global contexts?

- News sources. RQ3: How often have the refugees been heard?
- Photos. RQ4: How close/far are refugees being depicted? RQ5: Are they being portrayed in small/large groups or individually? RQ6: Is there any visual contact with them? RQ7: With whom do the refugees appear to be shown to interact? RQ8: Are these pictures empathic, distressful or conflictive?

Not willing to undermine the merits of other methodologies based on case studies, this research has prioritized a longitudinal assessment of the performance of the two most widely read newspapers in Spain (El País) and in Norway (VG) over six months, from October 2015 to March 2016.

Two Newspapers - Two Contexts

The present project is a comparative study of two European newspapers which both have a prominent position in their respective countries.

VG¹ is the largest news site in Norway, with a total of 2.4 million readers each day (Aldridge 2016). This includes readership on web, mobile and in print. VG's print edition has a daily readership of 368,000 (2015) and a circulation of 97,000 copies daily (2016) (Mediebedriftene 2016), down from a top of 390,000 copies in 2002. VG is an independent newspaper with no formal political affiliations. According to its own founding declaration, the newspaper 'is founded upon humanistic ideals and fundamental democratic values' (VG n.d.). The newspaper is owned by Schibsted ASA, a Norwegian-based international media group with 6,900 employees in 30 countries.

El País is the world's leading daily newspaper in Spanish and a trademark in Hispano-American journalism. Besides its regional editions, El País has a world edition available online in Brazil and Hispanic America. According to ComScore data, elpais.com is the most read online newspaper published in Spanish, with more than 11,000,000 unique visitors during the month of September 2016. It is also the most read print newspaper in Spain, with a circulation of 194,000 copies daily. El País is based in Madrid and belongs to the Spanish media conglomerate PRISA. Within the Spanish media landscape, El País is known for its progressive political views close to those of the Spanish Socialist Party.

The two newspapers, VG and El País, are different not only in size, style and editorial profile. They also represent two different media systems. Although Norway and Spain today both are democratic and pluralistic countries with a variety of media outlets along a broad political and aesthetic spectrum, there are historical differences and contextual variations between the media systems in the two countries. Hallin and Mancini describe the media system in central and northern Europe, including Norway, as a 'Democratic Corporatist Model', characterized by the historical coexistence of commercial media and media connected to social and political groups. In northern Europe, the state plays an active role as a regulator, and also

as a supporter of quality media and media diversity, but without performing any editorial interference. Still, according to Hallin and Mancini, the media system in southern Europe, including Spain, is characterized as a ‘Polarized Pluralist Model’, which comprises a closer integration between news media and political parties. The development of commercial media is weaker but, as in the north, the state plays a significant role in the media system.

However, media systems are changing, in our time quite rapidly due to commercialization, globalization and digitalization. A worldwide study by Hanitzsch et al. (2010) indicates a global move towards professionalization among journalists, while a European study by Fengler et al. (2015) asserts that journalists’ professional role models are converging towards the liberal model. Both indicate that common professional ideals gradually weigh more at the expense of national differences, at least in democratic countries. Other divergent features of the Norwegian and Spanish media systems are, still with reference to Hallin and Mancini (2004), a more commentary-oriented journalism in Spain and a higher degree of professionalization and institutionalized self-regulating in Norway. The Norwegian Press Council is the cornerstone of an effective and highly regarded journalistic self-regulation system (Newton and Brennodden 2015). Spain does not have any equivalent.

The differences mentioned above, in terms of the political relationship with the EU, the number of first-time asylum seekers that requested protection in Spain and in Norway in 2014 and 2015, and the different type of media systems, are expected to influence how the two newspapers reported on the European refugee crisis.

Methodology

This study centres its analysis on a sample of news items on refugees published online in El País and VG, between 1 October 2015 and 31 March 2016. Following Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2014), a stratified sampling method of constructed weeks was used. To obtain the sample, seven days of each month corresponding to different days of the week were randomly selected. Forty-two editions of each newspaper—84 in total—were analysed. Of the 355 articles identified as relating to refugees, opinion articles (79) were excluded with the aim of focusing the study exclusively on the news coverage of the refugees’ crisis. In total, 276 news pieces were examined, out of which 230 were accompanied by photographs (Table 1).

Coding Scheme

In order to respond to the research questions, the study analyses text and images. Regarding the former, and building on Guo, Holton and Jeong (2012) and Zhang and Hellmueller (2016), the following variables were coded: date of publication, news sources (see Table 2), frames used (see Table 3) and geographic story context (see Table 4).

Sample of the Study

	TOTAL	El País	VG
Total news	355	169	186
News without opinion news	276	131	145
News (without opinion news) with picture	230	102	128
News (without opinion news) with picture with refugees	92	51	41
News (without opinion news) with video	35	23	12
News (without opinion news) with video with refugees	12	12	–

Table 2

News Sources

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news	276	131	145
	%	%	%
Politicians and governmental institutions	57.2	61.8	53.1
Business	2.2	–	4.1 A
Police/Military	10.9	5.3	15.9 A
News Media	20.7	21.4	20.0
International Organizations	23.9	36.6 B	12.4
Common people	9.1	12.2	6.2
Civil Society Institutions	17.8	22.1	13.8
Experts	14.5	7.6	20.7 A
Confidential Sources	9.1	14.5 A	4.1
Refugees	12.3	16.0	9.0
Other	4.7	4.6	4.8
None	3.3	4.6	2.1

To determine the frames used in reporting on the refugees' crisis, a set of 25 randomly selected news pieces was examined using content-analysis techniques (Entman 1993). This procedure allowed the identification of a first set of frames most commonly used. Throughout the codification of the entire sample, new frames were added, which made it necessary to revise and update all previous entries (see Table 3).

Finally, and in order to examine the geographical context of the story, four categories were established: (i) individual, which refers to stories based on individual or family experiences and testimonies; (ii) national, when news stories are set at a national level (Spain or Norway); (iii) international, when stories involve between two and five countries; and (iv) global, when

Table 3

Frame

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news	276	131	145
	%	%	%
National policies on refugees	20.3	7.6	31.7 A
International policies on refugees	31.5	44.3 B	20.0
Humanitarian help home country	5.1	6.1	4.1
Humanitarian help abroad	7.6	8.4	6.9
Personal stories refugees home country	2.9	0.8	4.9 A
Personal stories refugees abroad	5.8	10.7 B	1.4
Death and suffering home country	0.7	0.8	0.7
Death and suffering abroad	0.7	0.8	0.7
Reactions against Ref.	5.1	7.6	2.8
Home Country Reactions against	1.8	0.8	2.8
Refugees Abroad	4.0	3.8	4.1
Other	15.2	9.2	20.7 A

Table 4

Geographical Space

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news	276	131	145
	%	%	%
Individual	8.0	8.4	7.6
National	30.1	16.8	42.1 A
International	34.4	38.9	30.3
Global	27.5	35.9 B	20.0
Total International & Global	62.0	74.8 B	50.3

stories involve more than five countries or an international organization such as the United Nations (see Table 4).

With respect to the use of images, and building on Franquet Santos Silva et al. (2016), pictures were coded according to the following variables: type of shot (see Table 5), number of people depicted in the photo (see Table 6), social interaction (see Table 7) and visual contact with the camera (see Table 8).

Because the visual representation of refugees influences the reader's emotions and assessment and stimulates people's feelings before reaching their conscience, photographs were coded according to the level of their emotional intensity. In his widely quoted 'hierarchy of photo categories', the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer and former photo editor of the Washington Post,

Table 5
 Refractors Internacionals

Type of Shot

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news with photo with refugees	92	51	41
	%	%	%
Very wide shot	42.4	15.7	75.6 A
Wide shot	23.9	33.3 B	12.2
Mid shot	27.2	41.2 B	9.8
Mid close up	4.3	7.8	–
Close up	2.2	2	2.4

Table 6

Number of People in Photo (Only Photos with Refugees)

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news with photo and refugees	92	51	41
	%	%	%
Individual	15.2	11.8	19.5
Less than 10 individuals	55.4	56.9	53.7
More than 10 individuals	29.3	31.4	26.8

Joe Elbert, identified four hierarchical categories to classify news photographs. According to Elbert, simple ‘informational pictures’ should be placed at the bottom, as they ‘report the facts without flavor’ (see Kobre 2008: 130). On the second rank Elbert places ‘graphically appealing pictures’ in which more advanced composition techniques are applied. The third level belongs to ‘emotionally appealing photos’, which, by capturing the subject’s emotions, do something more than repeating the facts. Finally, ‘intimate photos’ are the ultimate challenge in photojournalism because they bring the viewer close to the object’s world. Inspired by Elbert’s classification, and also by the Norwegian researcher Jamtøy (2011), pictures were coded according to the following categories:

1. Empathy and identification: the depicted refugees appear as authentic, visible and unique human beings. They appear as ordinary people, although in a difficult situation. The picture shows that we are of the same kind. We sense a personality behind the object in the photo. The photo may even be intimate, through eye contact or by vulnerability, but not necessarily. These pictures may be from everyday life, or from special situations.

Table 7

Social Interaction

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news with photo and refugees	92	51	41
	%	%	%
Among them (refugees)	59.8	58.8	61.0
With politicians	4.3	2.0	7.3
With police/military forces With health personnel	16.3	17.6	14.6
With member local community	3.3	3.9	2.4
With rescue workers	7.6	7.8	7.3
	8.7	9.8	7.3

Table 8

Visual Contact

	TOTAL		El País (A)		VG (B)	
	with refug.	without refug.	with refug.	without refug.	with refug.	without refug.
Sample: News without opinion news with photo	92	120	54	45	41	75
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	20.7	16.7	19.6	8.9	22.0	21.3
No	79.3	83.3	80.4	91.9	78.0	78.7

2. Emotional scene: this is stronger. It takes us into the drama. A picture one cannot be indifferent to. This is a photo with a potential to hit the reader: a new-born baby saved from a sinking boat; dead or wounded people on the beach; friends or relatives meeting again after months; feeling of success or of lost hope. These are pictures that move us. The object may be crying, cheering, furious, happy, exhausted, afraid, suffering.

3. Conflict: these are photos depicting aggression, despair, damage, demonstrations and protest, execution of power and rejection at the border, tension in local communities, mobilization of police, etc. Here we can also register pictures without people—for instance, of a demolished street in Syria, a reception centre on fire in Sweden.

4. Insignificant or non-dramatic: when no refugees are photographed (see Table 9).

Among all the variables analysed in the study, those that in principle may be more subjective at the time of their codification are the Frame variable

Visual Dramaturgy

	TOTAL	El País (A)	VG (B)
Sample: News without opinion news. with photo	230	102	128
	%	%	%
Empathy and identification Emotional scene	23.5	31.4 B	17.2
Conflict	8.3	12.7 B	4.7
Insignificant or none dramaturgy at all	12.6	11.8	13.3
	55.7	44.1	64.8 A

and the Dramaturgy variable. For this reason, two encoders codified a sample of 20 per cent of news pieces by the two newspapers. The minimum value obtained after checking the reliability of inter-raters, according to the Scott's Pi Formula, was 0.75 obtained in the Frame variable and 0.91 in the case of Dramaturgy (Riffe et al. 2014).

The information obtained was analysed using a t-test of proportions that allowed a comparison to be made, cell by cell, of the data in a table in categorical variables of independent samples (Wimmer and Dominick 2011). Using this test, the values in two cells on the same row can be compared with respect to the columns of the table. For each column, the test is carried out under the hypothesis that the population sizes of Case A and Case B are equal, versus the hypothesis that they are significantly different (whether by being much higher or much lower) at a confidence level of 95 per cent. The statistically significant differences are marked in capital letters.

Findings

News Sources

With respect to news sources, both newspapers relied mainly on politicians and governmental institutions as sources of information to report on refugees. More than 50 per cent of all news stories quoted politicians (see Table 2). The use of this type of official source of information helps to explain (or is eventually caused by) the fact that the majority of news published on the subject was centred on the political and administrative re-actions to the refugee crisis (see Table 3). These results contrast greatly with the minor role played by refugees themselves as sources of information. In fact, only in 16 per cent of stories published by El País and 9 per cent of those published by VG are refugees cited. Combined, these results empha-size that the general approach to the refugee's crisis has been mainly centred on the European political response to the arrival of millions of refugees to the continent in the case of El País and on the national political debate around integrating refugees in the case of VG.

The fact that very little attention has been devoted to hearing the refugees directly, in direct speech, raises questions regarding the effects that the journalistic discourse may have had on public opinion in terms of people's perception of the dramatic situation that those fleeing from war, violence, political persecution or famine have been going through. Moreover, it raises questions regarding the moral obligation of journalists to listen to the opinions of all those concerned in the news stories. Having migrant voices and listening to the communities that migrants and refugees have passed through are among the five-point guide for migration reporting put forward by the Ethical Journalism Network (Ethical Journalism Network n.d.). The findings of this study confirm that the newspapers hear neither the refugees nor common people to whom they could eventually relate (El País 12.2 per cent; VG 6.2 per cent).

News media are also among the most frequently cited news sources (El País 21.4 per cent; VG 20 per cent). This result stresses the importance for national media outlets to rely on international players, especially when it comes to covering foreign affairs. As Moore (2010) put it, the world is 'shrinking', as the information available about it becomes less and less diverse and plural.

It is also worth mentioning the use of confidential sources, which is more common in the case of El País (with 14.5 per cent versus 4.1 per cent in VG). In most cases, these confidential sources are associated with officials of different European institutions that, although not willing to be identified themselves as news sources, provide inside information of the moves of the most influential European political actors. Regarding these *modus operandi*, it is legitimate to ask whether journalists are not ending up (consciously or unconsciously) subordinating their journalistic role to political interests, voicing the opinions of political leaders who wish to test the reactions of the public to their possible moves before making decisions. Norwegian newspapers, including VG, have earlier been criticized for their extensive use of confidential sources (Allern 2001, 2007). It is therefore noteworthy that VG, according to this study, barely uses confidential sources of information.

Results also show that, in general terms, the coverage by El País is more internationally oriented than that of VG. For instance, El País cites far more times international organizations than does VG (36.6 per cent versus 12.4 per cent), which, on the other hand, quotes the police and military personnel more extensively than El País (15.9 and 5.3 per cent, respectively). Moreover, if we take into account the geographic context, VG centred its stories mainly on a national level (42.1 per cent) and El País on international (38.9 per cent) and global (35.9 per cent) levels (see Tables 2 and 4). The Norwegian newspaper, while not quoting international organizations and confidential sources so extensively, relies more on experts (20.7 per cent VG; 7.6 per cent El País). The heavy dependency on expert sources—and more generally elite sources—in Norwegian news media has been well documented by research (Allern 2001; Øvrebø 2012).

Frame

Immigration is a controversial political issue characterized by a multiplicity of news frames. Previous studies of media coverage of immigration have identified a few strong ‘master-frames’, including a human-interest frame, a threat frame, an economic frame, etc. (see e.g. Dekker and Scholten 2017, and also Vliegenthart 2007). In this study, we found it expedient to operationalize a set of predefined topical frames that allowed us to code the most salient theme of the story.

The most striking observation here is the fact that, in both newspapers, more than 50 per cent of the stories on the refugee crisis deal with politics, featuring politicians and political discussion, actions and decisions (El País 51.9 per cent; VG 51.7 per cent). The results from the two newspapers are almost identical on this point. However, if we ask whether the focus is on national or international politics, the similarity ends. While El País clearly puts emphasis on international policies on refugees, VG gives the highest priority to national policies on refugees.

In comparison, the refugees themselves received considerably less attention than the politicians. Personal stories on the refugees count for only 11.5 per cent of El País’s and 6.2 per cent of VG’s stories. And, again, El País presents stories from abroad, while VG has mostly focused on refugees in Norway. In this regard, there is a clear difference between the two newspapers. On news sources as well as on framing, the international perspective of El País stands in contrast to VG’s dominant national perspective. El País used inter-national organizations as sources three times more than VG. El País also focused its stories mainly on international policies (44.3 per cent) and personal testimonies of refugees abroad (10.7 per cent). VG, on the other hand, centred its analysis on national policies (31.7 per cent) and dedicated far more attention to personal testimonies of refugees in its home country than El País (El País 0.8 per cent; VG 4.9 per cent). If we take into account the geographical context from where the stories are collected, this tendency is confirmed. VG centred its stories mainly on a national level (42.1 per cent), while El País is occupied with the international (38.9 per cent) and global (35.9 per cent) perspectives (see Table 4).

Finally, it is still worth mentioning that negative stories, such as those dedicated to death/suffering and reactions against refugees, are very uncommon in both newspapers (see Table 3). As previous studies found, negative stories are those that raise more comments and increase audience participation, although not for the best reasons, for people use these negative stories to feed hate speeches (Miloni and Vadratsikas 2016).

Regarding the geographical context of news stories, findings show that little attention was dedicated to individuals and to their suffering (El País 8.4 per cent; VG 7.6 per cent). In El País, the coverage of the ‘refugee crisis’ focused almost exclusively on the international and global arena, while little attention was dedicated to the national context. In the case of the Norwegian newspaper, the distribution of stories set on a national level, on the one hand,

and on the international and global level, on the other, was far more balanced.

The Visual Reporting²

In general, the use of images (especially photographs) played an important role in the reporting of the international refugees' crisis. In fact, out of the 276 news articles published between October 2015 and March 2016, 83.3 per cent were accompanied by photographs. Nevertheless, the presence of refugees in the visual reporting was far less impressive. In fact, only 33.3 per cent of the photographs included refugees. The absence of refugees in the vast majority of the pictures reflects the fact that both newspapers have focused their reporting on the political dimension of the crisis (see Table 3). The use of video was not that relevant. In fact, only 12.7 per cent of the articles published during the period analysed employed footage.

The type of shots reflects the distance (physical and symbolic) at which the newspapers depict refugees. In this respect, the behaviour of the two dailies is significantly different. VG prioritized the use of very wide shots to represent refugees (87.8 per cent) whereas El País used mainly mid (41.2 per cent) and wide shots (33.3 per cent). Close-up and mid-close-up shots were barely used.

Regarding the number of people in the photos, both newspapers gave priority to publishing pictures where refugees were depicted in groups (El País 88.3 per cent; VG 80.5 per cent) and interacting with one another (El País 58.8 per cent; VG 61 per cent). In second place, but with a significantly lower frequency, refugees were depicted interacting with police and military forces (El País 17.6 per cent; VG 14.6 per cent).

Visual contact is also a relevant symbolic indicator of the distance at which news media depict the other. As Susan Sontag (2003) puts it, while commenting on Jeff Wall's realistic photomontage 'Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)', people stare at the camera looking for our help, to communicate with us, to denounce, to accuse. In this sense, the absence of a visual contact with the camera broadens the distance between refugees and those who watch them through the images that depict them. In the case of the two newspapers, results show that, in general, there is no visual contact with the camera, regardless of whether pictures depict refugees or not.

Following Jamtøy (2011), photographs were also coded according to their level of emotional intensity. This is another important indicator by which to assess the moral distance at which newspapers have visually depicted refugees. The results of this study show that most pictures published were not dramatic, either because no refugees were depicted or because they did not visually emphasize the unique humanness of people photographed, nor did they highlight the emotional or conflictive dimension of their actions. Considering all photographs published with news articles focused on refugees, it is

noticeable that VG used more non-dramatic pictures, whereas El País printed more empathic and emotional pictures (see Table 9). One explanation for this difference can be that VG generally is more focused on national policy. Another explanation can be that VG prefers to use its own staff photographers, and therefore ends up with more routine and easily accessible photo motifs, at the expense of more demanding and time-consuming motifs.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to assess the moral distance at which the two most read newspapers in Spain and Norway covered online the refugee crisis in Europe.

Taken together, the findings of this study, which has examined the performance of the two newspapers over a period of six months, indicate that both El País and VG represented the refugee crisis at an improper distance, which does not foster ‘a duty of care, obligation and responsibility as well as understanding’ (Silverstone 2007: 47).

First of all, the most frequently occurring frame in the coverage of the refugee crisis, in El País as well as in VG, is the political reaction to the crisis (RQ1). In both newspapers, more than 50 per cent of the stories on the refugee crisis were about political and administrative issues. Stories focused on personal stories of refugees remained below 10 per cent, while those centred on humanitarian help only counted for 12.7 per cent of the total. Furthermore, by paying so much attention to the political debate on the refugee crisis and so little attention to the refugees themselves, news media suggest that people do not need to worry nor to engage in political action, for all that should be done is already being done by those who can actually help (Chouliaraki 2006). Unfortunately, although the number of people dying trying to reach Europe has continued to increase year by year since 2014, stories focused on refugees’ deaths and suffering represented only 6 per cent of the total of the news pieces published. When it comes to the differences between El País and VG, findings show that the Norwegian newspaper has dedicated far more attention to national political debate than El País. These results could eventually be related to the fact that VG is considered to be a tabloid newspaper, while El País is regarded as a broadsheet newspaper. Nevertheless, and bearing in mind the Spanish government’s ‘slow compliance with the European commitment to receiving refugees’ (CEAR 2016), it is striking that El País has only dedicated 7.6 per cent of its stories to national policies on refugees (RQ2). These features bring into question the role of the leading Spanish newspaper in holding power to account.

Besides not being at the centre of news media coverage, refugees are barely ever listened to as sources of information. They are too far away for their voices to be heard (RQ3). The power and the ability to communicate are not equally distributed among people and, during a demanding situation like the refugee crisis, this becomes particularly visible. The politicians and the

refugees are each at the extreme point of the scale: one is in a favourable position and has every opportunity to influence the discourse, the other has very few. To use Roger Silverstone's own words: the one is media-powerful, the other is media-weak (Silverstone 2007: 137). Our findings on this point are in line with previous studies on the subject. For instance, Philo et al. (2013), looking at the situation in the UK, found that four out of five quoted statements came from politicians, while only 3 per cent came from refugees. In a more recent content analysis of newspapers in eight European countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Serbia and the UK), Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) found that quotes from migrants or refugees were present in only 16.6 per cent of the sample, while 66 per cent of the quotes were from politicians. Studies focused on Norway and Spain got the same results (Benson and Wood 2015; Franquet Santos Silva et al. 2016). By denying refugees the right to speak on their own issues and concerns, journalists show disrespect for a fundamental human right (Phillips 2003) but they also contribute to shape refugees as having an 'ambivalent humanity as both vulnerable and lethal ... Whether victims or terrorists, refugee are never human' (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017: 621). It is also worth noting the low opportunities given to common people and members of the local communities to express their views on the subject, for those voices would have introduced into the public debate first-hand testimonies and experiences that would have eventually challenged the dominant political discourse. In this respect, no statistically significant differences were found between the two newspapers.

Other findings of our study reinforce the idea that the news coverage portrayed refugees and asylum seekers through an improper distance. While 40 per cent of the photos published included refugees, very few of them depicted refugees at a close range (RQ4) and, in the majority of these pictures, there is no eye contact with the reader (RQ6). These findings are also in line with previous studies on the matter (Igartua et al. 2006; Batziou 2011; Bleiker et al. 2013; Franquet Santos Silva et al. 2016; Zhang and Hellmueller 2017). Moreover, photographs depicted refugees mostly in groups (RQ5), generally interacting with one another (59.8 per cent) or with police and military forces (16.3 per cent). The visual depiction of refugees therefore fosters a dehumanized image of the sufferers (Chouliaraki 2006), which does not promote people's sense of pity that would eventually encourage political action (Cohen 2001; Chouliaraki 2006; Silverstone 2007) and that associates refugees not with a humanitarian challenge, but with threats to sovereignty and security (Bleiker et al. 2013).

Finally, with regard to the photographs' emotional intensity (RQ7), results show that most pictures do not capture people's suffering. Pictures coded as not having emotional intensity, which represent more than 50 per cent, do not even depict refugees. As these photographs portray mainly politicians, they end up adding to their predominant voices a very privileged space of visibility that sets refugees and their suffering at a maximum moral distance.

In addition, 12.6 per cent of the pictures were found to reflect conflictive scenes, either focusing on negative reactions against refugees or on police and military interventions. These pictures foster a public image of refugees as a threat, which makes it easier for politicians to defend restrictive measures towards asylum seekers (Bleiker et al. 2013). Among the pictures that depict refugees and their personal suffering, only 8.3 per cent were found to be as hard as to hit the reader (8.3 per cent). Opposing the theses that argue that the dissemination of pictures of people suffering promotes insensitivity and compassion fatigue (Sontag 1990, 2003), the authors of this study believe, like Cohen (2001), Reinhardt (2007) or Linfield (2010), that these kinds of images need to be shown for, more than any other, they humanize suffering and promote political action. Moreover, there are good reasons to be wary of some of the ethical statements that contend that these pictures violate people's privacy. Previous studies suggest that the suppression of hard pictures is generally not motivated by ethical concerns, but by a complex set of instrumental factors (Zelizer 2010; Bleiker et al. 2013).

One of the difficulties involved in applying the concept of proper distance to morally assess the performance of news media has to do with the fact that it does not refer primarily to a physical distance, which would make it easier to be measured. The proper distance is essentially a moral concept that must be understood in the larger context of Levinas's moral philosophy. It refers to a middle point between silencing or being indifferent to the suffering of others and trading with their misery and misfortune. It has to do with hospitality and with welcoming the other, regardless of any further consideration. But the difficulties in applying the concept of proper distance in practice should not refrain us from trying to provide empirical evidence to support our ethical judgments (for it would be unfair). By evaluating the coverage of the refugee crisis through the analysis of eight different indicators during a period of six months, this study has tried at the same time to overcome some of the limitations of quantitative content-analysis techniques when it comes to interpreting meaning. It has also attempted to avoid the risks of basing moral assessments on specific case studies that might eventually not be representative of the longer-term practices.

All in all, and considering some interesting exceptions, the findings of this study allow us to conclude that, in general terms, the coverage of the refugee crisis has represented sufferers improperly. This is mainly because it has constantly silenced them and shown them as a threat, and because it has focused excessively on the political debate around the crisis.

1. VG is an abbreviation for 'Verdens Gang', a Norwegian expression that is impossible to translate. It means something like 'How the world goes on ...' or 'The course of the world'.
2. In order to emphasize the editorial decisions regarding the visual reporting of the refugee crisis, only pictures depicting refugees were taken into consideration.

- Aldridge, ø. (2016) 'Flere enn åtte av ti nordmenn leser norske medier hver dag', *Aftenposten*, 20 September, <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/Flere-enn-atte-av-ti-nordmenn-leser-norske-medier-hver-dag-604917b.html> (accessed December 2017).
- Allern, s. (2001) *Nyhetsverdier: Om markedsorientering og journalistikk i ti norske aviser*. Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget.
- Allern, s. (2007) *Flokkdyr på Løvebakken?* Oslo: Pax forlag.
- Azoulay, a. (2008) *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.
- Batziou, A. (2011) 'Framing 'otherness' in press photographs, the case of immigrants in Greece and Spain'. *Journal of Media Practice* 12(1): 41–60.
- Barthes, r. (1970) *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Beyer, a. and figenschou, t. u. (2014) 'Human-Interest Fatigue: Audience Evaluations of a Massive Emotional Story'. *International Journal of Communication* 8: 1944–1963.
- Benson, r. and wood, t. (2015) 'Who says what or nothing at all? Speakers, frames, and frameless quotes in unauthorized immigration news in the United States, Norway, and France'. *American Behavioral Scientist* 59(7): 802–821.
- Bleiker, r., campbell, d., hutchin, e. and nicholson, x. (2013) 'The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees'. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48(3): 398–416.
- Boltanski, l. (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cear (2016) '2016 Report: Situation of Refugees in Spain and Europe Executive Summary', <https://www.cear.es/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Executive-Summary-2016-Report-CEAR.pdf> (accessed December 2017).
- Chouliaraki, l. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.
- Chouliaraki, l. and zaborowski, r. (2017) 'Voice and Community in the 2015 Refugee Crisis: A Content Analysis of News Coverage in Eight European Countries'. *The International Communication Gazette* 79: 613–635.
- Cohen, s. (2001) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dekker, r. and scholten, p. (2017) 'Framing the Immigration Policy Agenda: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Media Effects on Dutch Immigration Policies'. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 22(2): 202–222.
- Derrida, j. (1999) *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Entman, r. m. (1993) 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm'. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.

- Ethical journalism network (n.d.) ‘Ethical Guidelines on Migration Reporting’, <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/infographics/ethical-guidelines-on-migration-reporting> (accessed December 2017).
- Eurostat (2016a) ‘Asylum and First Time Asylum Applicants—Annual Aggregated Data (Rounded)’, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1> (accessed December 2017).
- Eurostat (2016b) ‘Asylum in the EU Member States Record Number of Over 1.2 Million First Time Asylum Seekers Registered in 2015: Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis: Top Citizenships’, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6> (accessed December 2017).
- Fengler, s., eberwein, t., alsius, s., baisné, e, o., bichler, k., dobek-ostrowska, b. *et al.* (2015) ‘How Effective Is Media Self-Regulation? Results from a Comparative Survey of European Journalists’. *European Journal of Communication* 30(3): 249–266.
- Figschou, u. and thorbjørnsrud, k. (2015) ‘Faces of an Invisible Population: Human Interest Framing of Irregular Immigration News in the Unites States, France, and Norway’. *American Behavioral Scientist* 59(7): 783–801.
- Franquet santos silva, m. f., real rodri guez, e., beriaín bañares, a. and lópez talavera, m. m. (2016) ‘The Distant Other: The Depiction of Immigration in Four Spanish Daily Newspapers’. *Journalism Practice* 11(5): 592–605.
- Georgiou, m. and zaborowski, r. (2017) ‘Media Coverage of the Refugee Crisis: Council of Europe Report DG1(2017)03’, <https://rm.coe.int/1680706b00> (accessed November 2017).
- Grobet, a. (2014) ‘Responsible Reporting and Perceptions of Migrants in an Era of Unprecedented Mobility’. In Dell’Orto, G. and Birchfield, V. L. (eds) *Reporting at the Southern Borders: Journalism and Public Debates on Immigration in the US and the EU*. New York: Routledge, pp. 47–61.
- Guo, l., holton, a. and jeong, s. h. (2012) ‘Transnational Comparative Framing: A Model for an Emerging Framing Approach’. *International Journal of Communication* 6: 1918– 1941.
- Hallin, d. c. and mancini, p. (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanitzsch, t., anika, m., berganza, r., cangoz, i., coman, m., hamada, b. *et al.* (2010) ‘Modeling Perceived Influences on Journalism: Survey of Journalists Evidence from a Cross-National Survey of Journalists’. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 87(1): 5–22.
- Horsti, k. (2013) ‘De-Ethnicized Victims: Mediatized Advocacy for Asylum Seekers’. *Journalism* 14(1): 78–95.

- Igartua, j. j., otero, j. a. and muñiz, c. (2006) 'Imágenes de la inmigración a través de la fotografía de prensa: Un análisis de contenido'. *Comunicación y Sociedad* XIX(1): 103–128.
- Ihlen, ø. and thorbjørnsrud, k. (2014) 'Making News and Influencing Decisions: Three Threshold Cases Concerning Forced Return of Immigrants'. *European Journal of Communication* 29(2): 139–152.
- Innes, a. j. (2010) 'When the Threatened Become the Threat: The Construction of Asylum Seekers in British Media Narratives'. *International Relations* 24(4): 456–477.
- International organizations for migration (2016) 'Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A Global Review of the Emerging Evidence Base', http://publications.iom.int/system/files/smuggling_report.pdf (accessed December 2017).
- Jamtøy, a. i. (2011) 'Bildet av politikk'. *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 18(3): 241–264.
- Kobre, k. (2008) *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press.
- Lakoff, g. and ferguson, s. (2006) 'The Framing of Immigration'. *Cognitive Policy Works*, <http://tmiller.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/tmiller.faculty.arizona.edu/files/The%20Framing%20of%20Immigration.doc> (accessed December 2017).
- Levinas, e. (1969) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Linfield, s. (2010) *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mediebedriftene (2016) 'Medietall 2016', http://www.mediebedriftene.no/globalassets/opplagstall_ukepresse/presentasjon-medietall-2016-enedelig.pdf (accessed December 2017).
- Milioni, d. l. and vadratsikas, k. (2016) 'The (Golden) Dawn of Audiences? Assessing the Audience Empowerment Thesis through a Framing Analysis of Immigration in the Greek Media'. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 7(1): 59–83.
- Moore, m. (2010) 'Shrinking World: The Decline of International Reporting in the British Press'. Media Standards Trust, <http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/11/Shrinking-World-FINAL-VERSION.pdf> (accessed December 2017).
- Newton, j. and brennodden, l. (2015) 'Victims at the Margins? A Comparative Analysis of the Use of Primary Sources in Reporting Personal Tragedy in Norway and the UK'. In Savigny, H., Thorsen, E., Jackson, D. and Alexander, J. (eds) *Media, Margins and Civic Agency*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 102–115.
- Ovrebø, t. (2012) 'Nyheter i konkurranse'. In Brura, S. (ed.) *Nyhetsvurderinger: På innsiden i fem redaksjoner*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Høyskoleforlaget, pp. 37–58.

- Phillips, a. (2003) 'Recognition and the Struggle for Political Voice'. In Hobson, B. (ed.) *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 263–273.
- Philo, g., briant, e. and donald, p. (2013) *Bad News for Refugees*. London: Pluto Press.
- REINHARDT, M. (2007) 'Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique'. In Reinhardt, M., Edwards, H. and Duganne, E. (eds) *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 13–37.
- Riffe, d., lacy, s. and fico, f. (2014) *Analyzing Media Messages*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Roggeband, c. and vlienghart, r. (2007) 'Divergent Framing: The Public Debate on Migration in the Dutch Parliament and Media, 1995–2004'. *West European Politics* 30(3): 524–548.
- Silverstone, r. (2007) *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sontag, s. (1990) *On Photography*. New York: Picador: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sontag, s. (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.
- Steimel, s. j. (2010) 'Refugees as People: The Portrayal of Refugees in American Human Interest Stories'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23(2): 219–237.
- Udi (2015) 'Asylum Applications Lodged in Norway by Citizenship and Month (2015)', <https://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/asyloknader-etter-statsborgerskap-og-maned-2015> (accessed December 2017).
- Udi (2017) 'Laveste antallet asylsøkere siden 1997', <https://www.udi.no/en/latest/laveste-antallet-asylokere-siden-1997/> (accessed December 2017).
- Van gorp, b. (2005) 'Where Is the Frame? Victims and Intruders in the Belgian Press Coverage of the Asylum Issue'. *European Journal of Communication* 20(4): 484–507.
- Vg (n.d.) 'Redaksjonelt regnskap', <http://www.vg.no/spesial/2014/regnskap/#sec6> (accessed December 2017).
- Vlienghart, r. (2007) 'Framing Immigration and Integration: Facts, Parliament, Media and Anti-Immigrant Party Support in the Netherlands', unpublished doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit. Amsterdam.
- Wimmer, r. and dominick, j. r. (2011) *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Zelizer, b. (2010) *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, x. and hellmueller, i. (2016) 'Transnational Media Coverage of the ISIS Threat: A Global Perspective?'. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 766–785.
- Zhang, x. and hellmueller, i. (2017) 'Visual Framing of the European Refugee Crisis in Der Spiegel and CNN International: Global Journalism in News Photographs'. *International Communication Gazette* 79(5): 483–510.