

How do the media report on immigration, in France and Europe?

Interview with Marie Moncada, post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics

Hi, I'm [Marie Moncada](#), I am a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, in Sciences Po, and I am currently involved in a European project called [BRIDGES](#).

What is the BRIDGES project about?

The [BRIDGES research project](#) is about assessing the production of migration narratives and how they contribute to the polarisation of European society.

A narrative is a story that combines a plot, archetypal characters (heroes, good guys, bad guys, etc.) and a final moral. In politics, the plot is the problem and the moral of the story is the policy outcome. The primary function of stories is to stimulate political action by making it easier to understand an event.

This project is funded by the European Commission. It started in 2021 and brings together for 3 years about forty researchers from 6 European countries. The French team consists of Virginie Guiraudon, H  l  ne Thiollet —both CNRS researchers here in Sciences Po— and I. We have been studying how immigration is covered in France, most notably in the media, but also in politics and in more technical administrative documents.

What kind of narratives are conveyed in the media in France?

The results I am going to present are developed in [a report available on the project website](#). I compared national and local newspapers, evening news programmes on two main TV channels, TF1 (private) and France 2 (public), and Twitter. This analysis was supplemented by interviews with journalists. Virginie, H  l  ne and I first selected three events for this study:

- illegal crossings of the Channel Tunnel, which reached a media peak in 2015, against the backdrop of a 'migratory crisis' in Europe;
- the burkini controversy in 2016, which was sparked off by a number of anti-burkini bylaws;
- and finally, the stabbing at the basilica in Nice in 2020, perpetrated by a young Tunisian man who had arrived in France illegally just two days before committing the attack.

What narratives are conveyed in the media about these three events?

With regard to the illegal crossings of the Channel Tunnel, newspapers and television news have a similar discourse: they insist on the measures taken to reinforce the level of security. They also focus on the death toll among the migrants who attempted intrusions, but only by giving numbers. They do not dwell on the profile of the victims. Finally, in the case of Twitter, we see an anti-migrant stance.

With regard to the burkini controversy, the three types of media convey different views. The newspapers establish a link between the burkini and terrorism (and this is reflected in interviews with journalists). On Twitter, the emphasis is again on "anti-migrant" sentiment. As for TV news, they simply highlight the existence of a political and legal controversy by presenting the "pros" and "cons".

Finally, during the Nice attack, newspapers and Twitter focused on border controls, foreigners' expulsion and restrictions on the right of asylum. Newspapers also questioned the compatibility between Islam and France and the ability of Muslims to integrate. Twitter conveys allegations that NGOs facilitate terrorist attacks. So, in the print media and on Twitter, a triple amalgam is being spread: between immigration and terrorism, between Muslims and terrorism, and between NGOs and terrorism.

For all three events, the people most cited by newspapers and on Twitter were male politicians. The television focused more on ordinary people interviewed in the street, which meant that women were represented on an equal footing with men.

For these three events, right-wing and far-right discourse prevailed in all the media. In interviews, journalists told me that it was quite normal to treat the French far-right political party 'Rassemblement National' [National Rally] in the same way as other parties, that the party's poll numbers justified broadcasting its discourse, and that the right and far right had more to say about immigration than the left and far left.

Tweets about these events came mainly from men supporting Éric Zemmour [the founder of another far-right party, Reconquête].

Are these findings consistent across Europe?

Marcello Maneri, a sociologist at the University of Milano-Bicocca, [compared](#) my results with those obtained in the 5 other countries under study: Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the UK. The same method was applied to each case, with an analysis of media coverage of terrorism, border crossings and debates over the integration of immigrants. All the reports are available on the [BRIDGES website](#).

Marcello Maneri shows that, in all six countries, immigration is presented in the media as a problem but not as a solution.

He notes that, for these three types of event, the primary storytellers are male politicians. The voices of immigrants are virtually non-existent.

He also notes that right-wing and far-right politicians are over-represented, because they tell a straightforward story about the "good guys", the "bad guys" and the measures to be taken. This is what makes these stories so successful.

In his view, France is probably the country where the national debate on integration and citizenship has been the hottest.

Any lessons to be drawn?

In the course of this work, I found that *Le Figaro* [one of the daily newspapers of record in France, right wing] and Twitter propagate hate speech against immigrants and Muslims. Some highly contested terms are used by these two media, such as "the Great Replacement" (which is defended in articles published by *Le Figaro*), "remigration" (present on Twitter), and finally the expressions "Français de souche" ["pureblood" French] and "islamo-leftism" (which journalist from *Le Figaro* mentioned to me in an interview).

The work I've done can provide some ideas for countering this hate speech. Here are three examples.

Firstly, from the interviews, it would appear that ethnic minorities are poorly represented among journalists, in particular in the case of newspapers. A more mixed editorial staff could help to reduce the negative discourse in the print media in general.

Secondly, as regards the people quoted, the media favour right-wing and far-right male politicians. This ratio could be balanced by quoting more left-wing and far-left politicians. The voices of women as well as those of migrants and their descendants should also be encouraged.

Thirdly, as hate speech is illegal in France, certain opinion articles in *Le Figaro* should be examined by experts to check whether they fall foul of the law. Similarly, Twitter should be compelled to improve its detection of hate speech.

*Interview by Véronique Etienne, Knowledge Exchange Officer,
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