

# Introduction: conflict, media and displacement in the twenty-first century

When we embarked on the work that informs this book, the term ‘refugee crisis’ had only recently re-entered European debate. Since that time, considerable energies have been devoted to explaining and critiquing the framing of crisis and the events leading to unprecedented numbers of people in need moving across the globe. This project also reflects on this context where displaced populations meet anti-migrant anxieties, but we have attempted to reframe the discussion to unsettle what has become an increasingly predictable and frozen interchange between irreconcilable points of view.

The book explores how global conflicts are understood as they relate to the European refugee crisis, which has been framed simultaneously as a humanitarian emergency and a security threat. We examine how ‘global conflict’ has been constructed through media representations, official and popular discourses, and institutional and citizen-led initiatives (such as the many Facebook groups that developed – if only for a brief moment – for hosting refugees and sending donations to refugee camps). We explore how this understanding in turn shapes institutional and popular responses in receiving countries, ranging from hostility – such as the framing of refugees by politicians, as ‘economic migrants’ who are abusing the asylum system – to solidarity, as in the grassroots citizen initiatives we have mentioned.

The book focuses on the UK and Italy, two countries that have experienced mistrust towards European institutions (intertwined

## **How media and conflicts make migrants**

with debates around migration in relation to conflict), connected to disaffection with mainstream politics. Both have faced internal political controversy in response to population movement in the wake of conflict. In both countries, concerns about the role and efficacy of European institutions have converged with debates about borders and sovereignty. In the UK, this is exemplified by the Brexit vote and the mobilisation of xenophobia by the campaign to leave the EU, and in Italy by the anti-asylum and anti-NGO policies of the right-wing coalition government and especially of the Euro-sceptic, far-right former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. Both countries have also seen the development of grassroots refugee solidarity movements, though – as will be seen – these have their limitations.

Our work began with a question about how popular understandings of global conflicts come about. The discussion of Europe's responsibilities to people in movement has resurrected questions about the interdependency of the international community, our responsibilities to each other and the terms of international law. We argue that limited knowledge about the histories and challenges facing different regions of the world – particularly involving the legacy of Western intervention in these countries – leads to an inability to comprehend contemporary global conflicts and also those who have fled those conflicts. In so doing we consider the habits of media use that inform audiences in Italy and the UK, as well as the frameworks of representation utilised by mainstream media to depict global conflict and European interests. We begin from the perspective that the range and manner of contemporary media use is a significant factor in analyses of attitudes to migration, not only in relation to the representation of migrants and migration but also in relation to the larger framing of global interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. In particular, media representations play a central role in popular understandings of global conflicts and other international events. In times of changing global relations and large-scale population movements, what is understood and

## **Introduction**

believed about global events becomes uncertain and, we argue, this uncertainty shapes attitudes to political institutions and to migration.

## **War and media**

Popular understandings of war in recent decades have been refracted through media representations, both the adventures and emotions of war movies and the changing framing of news reporting. Until recently, scholars of international relations and of media studies could feel confident in their identification of the central media accounts of influence. Media institutions could be placed alongside other pillars of power and influence, with overlapping membership and interests charted. We might employ techniques from audience studies to explore the diversity of interpretations in play, but there was a sense of agreement about which text were under consideration.

The emergence of a media landscape far more fragmented, diverse and uncharted than could have been imagined until recently demands a revisiting of this earlier certainty. These matters have remade the study of media (Klinger and Svensson 2014; Noto and Pesce 2018), but have not yet been integrated into the conceptual repertoires of other disciplines. Although we have learned, somewhat slowly, that media representations are of interest to social and political scientists and to those studying international relations and the politics of migration, it is all too clear that we no longer know how audiences put together their media use. Techniques of collating, assembling, sifting and cross-referencing are all developing very rapidly, with studies struggling to keep pace (Pentina and Tarafdar 2014; Schroder 2015; Westlund and Fardigh 2015).

In the field of migration studies, this raises some challenges. The role of the media in creating and sustaining anti-migrant feeling has been a central theme in the field (Szczepanik 2016; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). In the UK, the tabloid press, in particular, has been regarded as central to any examination of

## How media and conflicts make migrants

*xeno-racism* in this country, with this understood as the processes through which ‘old racisms’ can be redirected towards those made other through their foreignness or alleged foreignness (Sivanandan cited in Fekete 2001). Even the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has rebuked the British press for whipping up hatred against refugees and asylum seekers. Among scholars of racism, it has become accepted that popular media, in particular newspapers, have contributed to a climate of hostility towards migrants of all kinds (Philo, Briant and Donald 2013; Bhatia, Poynting and Tufail 2018). Throughout this project, participants also pointed to the role of the media in encouraging hatred. As we will discuss in relation to the research carried out in the UK, the tabloid press continued to be a cause of concern to migrants, and it was this negative tabloid representation that they sought to challenge. Yet what we learned about news consumption through our survey of media users suggests that emerging news audiences employ a far more flexible and fragmented approach to news coverage. Whatever relentless campaign of demonisation is expressed through the pages of the popular press, this set of meanings may not match the interpretations of media users who increasingly distrust all media sources and, instead, combine multiple sources to construct a composite account of news events.

In response to this changing landscape of media use, and informed by the insights and reminders of our project participants, we have tried to give space to sometimes overlooked debates. These include the impact of Eurocentric modes of understanding global events on the attitudes of media audiences and discussion of the desire of (some) migrants to reposition the events of the twenty-first century in a longer history of colonial relations. These questions, raised repeatedly by participants in the project, lead into the second half of the work: a collective analysis of the institutional processes of ‘becoming migrant’ and an examination of how scholars and activists might move beyond a fixation on the individual testimony to learn to participate in the co-production of such collective

## Introduction

accounts. Later chapters take up each of these themes in more detail.

The representation of international events continues to replicate the representational frameworks of Empire. Mainstream media forms such as film and newspapers perpetuate depictions of most of the world as uncivilised and savage, of a world of victims and saviours, of civilising missions against inexplicable terror, of hordes of needy people who appear out of nowhere. There are few spaces to reflect on the longer histories that bring us here. It is difficult to find any acknowledgement of the histories of dispossession that link North and South and form the background to current conflicts and migratory journeys. As we have learned from the careful analysis of the Glasgow Media Group, news coverage with limited or misleading contextual framing skews the understanding of media audiences (Philo, Briant and Donald 2013). For example, in relation to the struggles for Palestinian rights and self-determination, the preponderance of sympathetic accounts of Israeli priorities, combined with an absence of historical contextualisation, has led British audiences to view Palestinians as the occupiers and Israelis as the occupied.

It is tempting to offer an alternative ‘corrected’ account of conflicts that acknowledges the impact of imperial histories and regional context. We ended the work on this book with a strong sense that British and Italian audiences needed access to reminders of recent events of significance when reading/watching news about wars. The participants in the research project which served as the basis of this book argued repeatedly for greater engagement with Britain’s imperial histories, particularly in relation to countries and regions where populations continued to be displaced by violence. However, we also questioned the idea of ‘completing’ uneven knowledges. It is true there are glaring gaps in mainstream media accounts of global conflicts. However, these absences cannot be corrected only by adding missing facts. The overall framing of global relations in media and popular accounts shaped by imperial forgetting must be called into question.

## How media and conflicts make migrants

As one contribution to this process, in this book we have tried to move away from collecting the sad stories of migrant journeys. We appreciate the power and importance of such narratives, including the political insight and leverage gained from the tactical circulation of such experiential narratives in times of extreme dehumanisation of migrants. However, we also felt uncomfortable with another unquestioning replaying of other people's pain. We recognised the danger of critiquing the weaknesses of mainstream media accounts, including the post-imperial amnesia displayed in relation to global events, and then offering the personal accounts of migrants as a more 'truthful' or 'accurate' version of events. This structure of argument and activity remains closely tied to imperial logics. In particular, the placing of researchers as saviour-translators who can collect and decipher tragic tales, in the process humanising imperial narratives that have lacked this injection of personal experience, seems to misunderstand what is happening and what can happen in the research context. We accept and understand that we cannot 'fix' things. No amount of shared attribution or documenting of voice can make amends for the suffering arising from being deemed irregular.

Instead of proclaiming ourselves as beneficent advocates for the voiceless, we have tried to open the discussion of collective approaches to the development of performance to 'answer back' to the mainstream depiction of migrants, including by offering 'worlded' accounts of history and our global interconnections. Later chapters offer examples of this work.

However, in relation to the representation of migrants, it was not so easy to avoid the demand for positive or better images. In a context of constant vilification in mainstream media and overtly hostile policies from the state, our research participants agreed that there was an urgent need to counter public narratives about migrants and the background to migration. The majority of those we interviewed for this book were or had been in the asylum process. However, a significant proportion came from countries from which migrants

## **Introduction**

entered through a number of routes, not necessarily asylum (regardless of the role of political unrest and violence in shaping migratory choices) but also as workers, students or through some other means – but then, through various personal and political circumstances, found themselves on the wrong side of the immigration system.

The recurring complaint was not that the authorities refused to recognise the veracity and urgency of any individual claim, although this urgency was there. Instead, what emerged in discussion was a larger critique of the strategic role of Western know-nothingness. The repeated demeaning representations of migrants, including the almost open incitement to hatred, relied on the silencing of histories of colonial exploitation, resource-grabbing and earlier border-crossing. This silencing of imperial pasts limited what could be communicated or understood in relation to contemporary conflicts and served to absolve European audiences of a sense of connection and responsibility to other parts of the world. This, in turn, undermined individual claims by confirming a view of global relations consisting of a put-upon affluent North and a desperate and needy South.

### **Being made into migrants by the state**

This topic is a central theme throughout the book. The active limitations that are placed on the lives of ‘migrants’ in the name of sovereignty and border control have been well-documented. However, there are other less formal ‘demands’ that arise with the status of migrant, and contradictory pressures that are placed on them. Migrants, if vulnerable, must not plan ahead or plan to travel or plan to return – because they must demonstrate constantly that they are building roots here (at the same time as immigration restrictions make it difficult for people to live a settled existence). Migrants must not be too resilient, because this can damage their application for regularised status (which, in the case of asylum claims, is based on demonstrating suffering and need). Migrants

## **How media and conflicts make migrants**

must show that they make a contribution, but the contribution must not be too competent or too lucrative or too highly qualified or too unskilled lest they be accused of stealing jobs from locals. Most of all, migrants must not take their attention for a moment from their precarious immigration status. To do so is to potentially destabilise their claim, literal and metaphorical, to gain a place of stability.

In our interviews and workshops held in London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Pisa and Bologna as part of the research project which served the basis of this book, we asked asylum seekers and refugees to critically reflect on how they have been constructed as migrants in their encounters with the state, public institutions and with members of society. Our participants interpreted this primarily in two ways. The first, which was the most obvious, was about the formal conditions of their immigration status, which both in the UK and in Italy are extremely restrictive. Asylum seekers in the UK, for example, are not allowed to work; those who have been in the country for 12 months awaiting a decision are able to seek work, but can only access jobs on the shortage list, which on a practical level is impossible to many (Fletcher 2008). They rely on benefits currently totalling £37.75/week (less for those whose claims have been refused), which are significantly less than for those on Jobseeker's Allowance. They are housed in temporary accommodation which is managed by G4S, a global private security firm with a history of controversy around human rights abuses. In Italy, asylum seekers are allowed to work after two months, although their residency permit cannot be converted into a work permit. However, in practice they face difficulties accessing the regular labour market being therefore highly vulnerable to exploitation (Fileria Sporca 2016). Moreover, since 2018, asylum seekers face obstacles in registering to municipal registry office, and they no longer have access to language courses and training. They are housed in reception centres, some of which are in remote locations, making it difficult to find work and integrate into society. Being a migrant, for our participants, was about the strictly circumscribed existence of living under such

## Introduction

restrictions, which one of our participants revealingly characterised as ‘life in handcuffs’. Overall, our work seeks to understand the multiple practices that construct this cage of constraint and to understand the connections between these constraining processes and our understandings of war and international law.

### About the research which produced this book

The book arises from the AHRC-funded research project entitled *Conflict, memory, displacement*. We discuss the findings of our research in detail throughout the book. However, we will briefly set out the key findings from our project here:

- 1. The mainstream media only covers some of the conflicts in the world.** Several conflicts and regions (such as Eritrea or Colombia) receive almost no coverage, or only in relation to people seeking asylum. When there is coverage, there is no context given for the conflicts – news coverage tends to be about day-by-day military operations, ‘terrorist’ incidents or individual examples of suffering, but little about the history or geopolitics of the region, or the causes of the conflicts.
- 2. Mainstream media coverage of conflicts is generally filtered through an idea of ‘Western interests’.** The notion of ‘Western interests’ may vary according to the situation, including the involvement of ‘our troops’ on the ground, the kidnapping or killing of fellow citizens, the impact on ‘our national security’, ‘our economy’, ‘our access to natural/energy resources’, etc. In recent years conflicts, in particular in Syria, have been represented as of interest to Western audiences because they result in ‘mass migrations’ towards Europe, producing the so-called ‘refugee crisis’.
- 3. Where direct Western intervention has been a central factor (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya), mainstream media have often presented conflicts as resulting from the**

## How media and conflicts make migrants

**failures of ‘great men’.** In the UK much coverage of the Iraq War returns to the allegedly flawed character of Tony Blair and his personal responsibility for the military intervention. A similar interpretation occurs also in the coverage of Libya, in relation to his rapidly changing relations with the country and its former leader Gaddafi. In Italy, this focus on the flawed personalities of ‘great men’ also overshadows any other deeper explanation of ongoing wars.

4. **Mainstream media coverage offers almost no route to understanding histories of Empire, i.e. colonialism and neo-colonialism, as a factor in contemporary conflicts and the management of human displacement.** In addition, asylum seekers and refugees feel that British and Italian populations know little about their countries, in general, and about the histories of Empire in particular. They also argue that this absence of knowledge hampers their understanding of the causes of contemporary migration and also reinforces the sense of Western entitlement.
5. **While mainstream media sources are still frequently consulted, people are increasingly looking to alternative news sources in order to understand global conflicts, including social media and news comedy programmes.** Consumption of news media has been undergoing a process of rapid change, with traditional media being supplemented with social media and other sources (Gordon, Rowinski and Stewart 2013; AGCOM 2018). Our interest is in how these changes might enable different narratives about conflict and migration, or alternatively, perpetuate new forms of xenophobia and racism.

In the UK and Italy, the young people we surveyed as part of our research expressed suspicion of the media and its ‘hidden agendas’, due to media ownership, and/or political interference. In Italy, the suspicion extended to online content, because of the perceived widespread use of ‘fake news’ and the fear of

manipulative practices such as clickbait. In general, people chose to consult a range of news in order to piece together accounts that could be verified by multiple sources. In the UK, people use alternative media to 'check' international news, especially from countries that they know or to which they are connected.

**6. Global and national institutions are increasingly seen to be ineffective in the resolution of conflicts and the management of displacement, which produces radical distrust.**

In the UK, Eurosceptic mainstream media coverage framed European and British foreign aid as supporting corrupt regimes and conning the British taxpayer. In the Italian mainstream media, the main targets of criticism included EU institutions, who are accused of 'leaving Italy alone' in the face of unprecedented numbers of arrivals by sea between 2014 and 2016. This radical distrust was also present in the initiatives studied in our online ethnography. In the UK and in Italy, for those with strong anti-immigration views, this radical distrust can be filtered through a conspiratorial frame in which immigrants, particularly Muslims, are seen to threaten social cohesion, and governments who let them in as either deliberately or unwittingly facilitating social breakdown. In Italy, popular distrust has extended to NGOs engaged in search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, who are suspected of colluding with organised crime networks.

**7. Refugees and their supporters make use of social media platforms to organise mutual aid, in the absence of state support and official hostility.**

In the UK and Italy, local populations who want to help refugees will engage in mutual aid practices (such as donating necessities or raising money for charities) in the absence of lack of state support but also to counter perceptions of British or Italian society as uncaring and intolerant. Refugees themselves also use social media platforms for sharing information and mutual support in the face of an immigration system which seems

## How media and conflicts make migrants

cruel and impenetrable, and in the absence of safe and legal means to travel.

### **8. Migrants are stereotyped as tellers of sad stories by the media, the government and the voluntary sector.**

Both media and the immigration process demand that people present themselves as ‘deserving victims’ and that they share stories of personal pain. Migrants recognise this but also question the benefits to them of repeatedly retelling their stories to every audience – and migrants are concerned about what will be done with their stories (including by researchers). At the same time, the participants in the UK were unwilling to identify times they have had fun, due to the fear that this could be used to undermine their claim to be ‘deserving’. In effect, this expectation forces those seeking status to constantly retell their ‘story’ in order to ‘prove’ their case to every person they meet.

In Italy, respondents expressed the feeling of being under suspicion of lying in order to receive protection. This was also reflected in media coverage which stressed the need to distinguish between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ (often stigmatised as ‘illegal aliens’), or showed suspicion towards those who were fleeing persecution, but did not come from countries at war.

### **9. People are ‘made into migrants’ by the government, the media and members of society.**

By this we mean that the category of ‘migrant’ is constructed actively as a means of erasing other identities and as a process of creating a new social identity that is demeaned and constrained by official processes. A sense of being ‘other’, illegitimate and undeserving lie at the core of this identity.

### **10. There is a blur between being ‘made a migrant’ and racialisation – and even being a ‘model immigrant’ is no protection against this.**

However, although many respondents spoke of facing racism on the grounds of how they looked, they also described additional or distinct experiences

## Introduction

as a result of their immigration status. In our initial view, the processes of migrantification and racialisation reinforce each other at key moments, but remain distinct.

- 11. Faith, music, comedy, self-organisation and knowledge of history (including legacies of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles) can be important resources in challenging injustice and dehumanisation.** These resources both undo migrantification, by forwarding different ways of being, and provide a politicised critique of Eurocentrism and the limited knowledge within Western society of other parts of the world.

### Researching conflict, media and displacement

In undertaking this research, we bring together important recent debates in media and cultural studies about media use and the status of ‘news’ media in the articulation of popular consciousness, with central questions from migration studies concerning popular responses to global events and the displacement of people. We argue that there is a need for a critical appraisal of audience interaction with news media and how this impacts our understanding of population movement.

This research also represents an attempt to learn from the analytic insights of those who have been displaced. A range of engaged scholarship has focused, understandably, on reinserting the voices of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers into public accounts of movement and the impacts of bordering. However, we wished to avoid making yet another request for personal testimony, not least due to the parallels between state bordering practices that demanded repeated performances of painful life stories as evidence of entitlement to entry. Instead, we tried to organise our discussions with migrant participants around terms of shared analysis, taking guidance from those who had been made into ‘migrants’ in shaping our discussion of attitudes to world events and population movement.

## **How media and conflicts make migrants**

In order to explore these interconnected questions, we carried out the following fieldwork:

- Media analysis of two UK and three Italian newspapers covering a selection of countries experiencing conflicts and people seeking protection, including some which have been largely visible in the media (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya), and others which have received less attention despite still experiencing conflicts and sending many asylum seekers (such as Eritrea and Somalia).
- A survey of over 200 people aged 18–33 in the UK and Italy about how they use the media and how this use helps them understand global conflicts, displacement and the role of political institutions.
- Online ethnography of citizen solidarity initiatives (including Facebook groups for addressing refugees' basic needs, hosting refugees in private homes, and crowdfunder pages) and anti-refugee or anti-migrant groups.
- Semi-structured interviews with over 30 asylum seekers and refugees in the UK and Italy, where they were asked to critically reflect on their experiences within the asylum system and in the receiving countries, and the political situation in their country of origin. Our interest was in the construction of 'migrant' as a new identity, one that appeared to override all other aspects of identity. These interviews were constructed to avoid requests for sad stories and we tried to convey our different focus to those we interviewed.
- Workshops in which material from media analyses and interviews was shared in order to encourage critical reflections about the asylum process, encounters with non-migrant populations, memories of conflicts in their country of origin and the impact of bordering processes on everyday life. From these workshops, our participants devised two theatrical performances, one in Italy and one in the UK and created an exhibition of an imagined

## Introduction

alternative newspaper called *The Double Standard* which spoofed mainstream media from a migrant perspective. We also created visualisations of key ideas relating to the process of being made into a ‘migrant’. The visualisations and the spoof newspaper have been reproduced in the third and fourth interludes, and can also be accessed online at [conflictmemorydisplacement.com](http://conflictmemorydisplacement.com).

### The structure of the book

In our opening chapter we consider media accounts of the ‘European refugee crisis’, including the construction of crisis as a threat to Europe. This chapter builds on our analysis of mainstream media in Italy and Britain and the manner in which issues of international politics, war and population movement are presented and framed in news accounts. In particular, we consider the role of mainstream media in creating a concerted amnesia around Europe’s history in relation to other parts of the world, a syndrome that we refer to as ‘postcolonial innocence’.

In the second chapter we revisit questions about the representation of war and conflict and the impact of these representations on popular understandings of war. We frame this discussion in relation to changes in the theorisation of war and of global politics. By discussing these matters with media users in Italy and Britain,<sup>1</sup> this chapter points to the uncertainty and uneven knowledge of the world that is inculcated by mainstream media platforms.

The third chapter follows on from this consideration of mainstream media to think about the utilisation of alternative media, including by migrants and by those seeking to build solidarity with migrants. We include here a discussion of how migrants use social media as a method of retaining a connection with their home country and also with other migrants. Alongside this, this chapter outlines the use of social media as a platform through which to organise solidarity actions and to create new spaces of political affinity. We also explore how social media platforms have been used by anti-immigrant groups.

## **How media and conflicts make migrants**

Chapter 4 considers in greater detail the manner in which people in movement are transformed into ‘migrants’. This includes consideration of the manner in which official processes, structured to marginalise and, apparently, stigmatise migrants, work alongside popular antagonism to migrants and the everyday racisms embedded in Italian and British society.

The final chapter returns to the demands for performance placed on people in movement. Our project included collaborative work with theatre practitioners and workshops with participants where questions of ‘migrantification’ were used to devise performances. Here we critique the continuing demand that migrants tell their ‘sad stories’ and consider the tactics that can emerge from thinking about performance critically and imaginatively.

Between chapters, we include brief pieces that exemplify key moments of the project and the voices and thoughts of our participants. Our research gathered this other kind of material as an alternative to the first-person narrative of migration/displacement that is so easy to objectify. Jokes, songs, tableaux and alternative readings of mainstream media, on the other hand, place individual voices in networks of shared meaning and (sometimes) laughter. Much of this laughter was the dark laughter of dark times, but it is still a laughter that unsettles the disciplinary demands of proving your ‘status’. The interludes give the reader a flavour of this other mode of talking about and to each other. Other visual outcomes of the project can be seen at [www.conflictmemorydisplacement.com](http://www.conflictmemorydisplacement.com).

## **Why analyse media in an era of distrust?**

The power of the media is under question in our time. Not the reach or the ubiquity or the manner in which popular consciousness is mediated, but the sense that media organisations can present messages that are received in any form of coherence by audiences. Audiences have learned that mainstream media outlets can be considered as extensions of the elite, and, in times of disaffection

## Introduction

with the state or with the power of elites, media messages can be challenged or ridiculed.

In the chapters that follow, we offer an initial account of the interplay between a world of diversifying but distrustful media use, uncertainty about the shape of global politics and the impact of these overlapping and highly partial understandings on those who are displaced by conflict. If we have an over-arching point it is this: not only the world itself but also how people learn about the world is changing rapidly. Understanding attitudes to migrants and other apparently 'local' political concerns demands a step back to consider this unstable global context of (mis)understanding. Together we hope that these modes of analysis and discussion offer a different framing of some key questions of our time. As we stumble towards (or away from) some new or renewed understanding of international responsibility, these questions of popular understandings through media use and the impact of such popular understandings on our relations to each other demand attention.

## Notes

- 1 Translations of survey answers, interviews and media sources from Italian to English are provided by Federico Oliveri.