

Europe / Mediterranean:  
Media Treatment of the Immigrant

Emilianina Mangone & Emanuela Pece

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**1. Authors' information**

University of Salerno

**2. Authors' contact**

Emilianina Mangone: emangone@unisa.it

Emanuela Pece: epece@unisa.it

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# *Europe / Mediterranean: Media Treatment of the Immigrant*

EMILIANA MANGONE\* & EMANUELA PECE\*

University of Salerno - Italy

## **Abstract**

People define their own behaviour on the basis of their perception of Others, as well as of the expectations they have towards them, paying particular attention to the socio-cultural context of belonging and the reference values they ascribe to the other party and to the relationship existing between them. These dynamics are strongly influenced by the information conveyed by mass media in their dual role as both mediators of reality and opinion leaders, often becoming a “distorted reflection” of reality. In support of the above, the present paper aims at illustrating, as an example, a comparison of the “representations” offered by some of the main European national newspapers of two events associated with the phenomenon of migration: the “immigrant march” of Belgrade on January 2017, and the shooting at the Munich shopping center on July, 2016.

**Keywords:** Europe; Media; Mediterranean; Migrant; Social representation

## *1. The theoretical framework*

Social representations are formed, consolidated and disseminated in the texture of social life. They do not stem from single individuals, but are rather socially generated: they involve social objects or social phenomena and they are shared by all members of a group. As the extensive literature has shown (Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 1984; Duveen & Lloyd, 1998) in the study of social representations, we must analyse the relationship between complex cognitive systems of each subject and the existing symbolic relations systems of social actors (individuals and groups). These representations are cognitive processing of reality that guide individual *sense making* processes: although they are not produced by the individual

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\* Both authors contributed to the whole paper. However, Emiliana Mangone has specifically composed the first section and Emanuela Pece has developed the analysis in the second and third sections.

actor, they are constantly re-thought, re-named, re-presented at a microgenetic level. The representations systems existing in a given culture are transmitted to us, and they are the product of a whole sequence of elaborations and changes occurring through time (Laszlo, 1997).

From a “structural” point of view, social representations consist of two dimensions: the iconic one (image) and the symbolic one (meaning), they are interdependent on each other (Abric, 2001; Guimelli, 1994). The representation of an event, a phenomenon or an object corresponds an image to an idea, and an idea to an image. Underlying this process is the need to rebuild the “common sense” or the form of understanding of social events that creates the ground layer of images and meanings without which no community could operate. Indeed, society could not function without having formed those social representations – based on a more or less structured set of theories, ideologies, “worldviews” – that constitute the symbolic and cultural humus allowing for the interaction between people (Moliner, 1996). One of the prerogatives of social representations is that it allows for the transformation of ideas into collective experiences and of interactions into behaviours. Unlike sciences, that are the instruments through which to understand the “reified” universe, they concern the “consensual” universe. They restore the collective consciousness by giving it form, explaining objects and events in order to make them accessible to all and to make them coincide with our immediate interests. It seems therefore obvious that the purpose of all representations is to turn something unusual, or unknown, into something familiar (Moscovici, 1984). Unfamiliar things attract and intrigues the community, alerts the individuals, forces them to explicit the implicit assumptions at the basis of consensus.

The act of representation is a way to transfer what disturbs us, what threatens our universe, from the outside to the inside, from a distant place to a space closer to us. When theories, information and events multiply, they must be reproduced at a closer and more approachable level; they must be transferred to the consensual universe, defined and re-presented. In order to convey a familiar feel, we need to activate two thinking mechanisms. The first mechanism (anchoring), strives to anchor unusual ideas, to reduce them to ordinary categories and images, placing them in a familiar context. The purpose of the second mechanism (objectification) is, instead, to objectify these ideas, i.e., to transform something abstract into

something almost tangible. This mechanism turns the unusual into usual by making it manifest, accessible, concrete and, consequently, more controllable. We thus move from the abstraction of an idea to the reality of an image. When an idea enters common (that is, everyday life's) knowledge, it tends to become reality. As Moscovici (1961; 2000) has shown, the image of the concept ceases to be an indication and becomes a replica of reality: what is perceived takes the place of what is conceived and the images become real factors rather than thought-related factors: thus the distance between the represented object and its representation is compensated.

It follows that attitudes towards people depend largely on the idea that we build about them, from their interpretations of their past and present actions, and from the predictions about what they will do in the future (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Attitudes (positive or negative orientation) towards something or someone are driven by the perception that we have of them (Mangone & Marsico, 2011): social reality stems not only from social meaning, but also from the products of the subjective world of individuals. When an individual or a group places the responsibility of its critical condition and/or suffering upon another individual or group, it creates a situation where it attaches false guilt to a person or a group recognized as an *enemy* (Girard, 1987), which then becomes the scapegoat.

## 2. Social representations and moral panics

The allocations of responsibility suggest solutions to social problems, while the rules determining the veracity of explanations can both contain and increase violence and/or control the social order.

The latter aspect is important when considering the media's ability to offer the public social representations on which to base and restructure their interactions and social actions. A concrete example are the news stories involving immigrants (the problem of immigration has been in the European as well as in the Mediterranean basin political agenda for several years) that act as a sounding board for some themes and social issues related to crime and the protection of people and society. It may happen that isolated

episodes, that are nevertheless the object of detailed and extensive media coverage, become a *social problem* giving rise to situations that Cohen (2002) defines as *moral panics*, i.e., *generalized alarm*, also due to the fact that the information is disseminated globally but appropriated at a local level (Thompson, 1995) differentiating the actions/re-actions. The media has the ability to convey images and information that may reduce socio-cultural distances, or extend them by reproducing representations that reinforce in the people oppositional attitude towards immigrants. The latter are represented according to different interpretations and depending on the proximity to the phenomenon (the problem of migration is dealt differently in the southern European countries than in the continental or Nordic ones): they are *illegal immigrants*, *asylum-seekers*, *refugees*, *criminals*.

The media select episodes that, if inserted within their production processes, are “transformed” into news, *news-making* (Wolf, 2001). It is equally true that in daily affairs there are events (and problems) claiming their uniqueness and importance within the social context. In this sense, the media have the ability to represent certain sections of reality for which people do not have direct knowledge (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and, in some cases, can contribute to the formation of typified images of *another culture / a different culture* through their information role – such as when, for example, they spread news regarding other countries, or facts involving a foreign national residing in a certain reality (Gili, 2009).

In any case, the attitudes we adopt towards *others* are related to the perception we have of them within a given relationship. In cases where this relationship is perceived as confrontational, we may perceive the *other* as a threat to our security and to our cultural system of reference. In general, *realistic* and *symbolic threats* (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) are related to the perception of a danger to the safety and the cultural system caused by groups of people who have different interests (economic, political and material) and lifestyles. These situations can be influenced (and amplified) by the media helping to trigger *moral panic*, i.e. the perception of a widespread climate of concern, mistrust and social alarm associated with groups that are represented as deviant or socially dangerous, or as a threat to the security and the values of a society (Maneri, 2001). Moral panic, moreover, can be considered as the result of media overexposure of some real facts and problems into social ones.

Many studies, therefore, associate the creation of a *social problem* in what Griswold (1994) calls cultural object. In other words, in order to create a *cultural object* and then define it as a *social problem*, it must be articulated with a set of ideas and institutions intersecting each other. This also explains how “public issues” and “risks” (Barbieri & Mangone, 2015) are usually constructed in a specific way rather than in equally possible other ways. On these dynamics, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) consider civil society as a real arena hosting a competition between situations that can be defined as social problems that comply with specific characteristics.

In this way, the media perform a dual function: on one hand, they have the ability to “reduce” the distances between the members of different cultural groups; on the other hand, they may tend to overexpose some facts (or social phenomena) compared to their real effects, thus favouring a distorted representation of reality (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002). The media representation of immigrants is thus an example of how the process of personification operated by the media swings between two poles. An emblematic case is when some *real problems* (integration and social cohesion, the landings’ emergency and illegal immigration) may be perceived as *social problems* that generate conflicting feelings in the local public opinion – and beyond.

The dual mode with which people “see” the immigrant can thus be influenced by the way in which the news is presented, the type of language that the media choose for the construction and the representation of an event, and the keys provided for its interpretation to the general public, that are able to reproduce stereotypical images of “otherness”, or to provide extreme generalizations. The immigrant is either the perpetrator of criminal acts, or starring in events with dramatic implications. However, we can associate various “positions” to this interpretive dichotomy of the media in the discussion and presentation of a story to their target audience. If, for example, we consider *contextualization strategies* (Wolf, 2001), each media acts on the basis of *hierarchical* criteria, conferring a precise importance to each episode. The events are therefore organized according to their exposure, length of the news, more or less detailed nature of the text and according to the variety of languages used to enrich the written text (photographs, images, videos, graphics). This means that placing a

news story on the front page or an inside page, on the top or bottom of the page, adding comments, interviews and photographs is in itself a judgement.

### 3. *Media treatment of the immigrant*

Based on the above, as an example, we aim to present a comparison between two cases in the news: what we will call the “immigrants' march” in Belgrade on January 2017 and the shooting at the Munich shopping centre on July 22, 2016 .

The corpus consists of representative newspapers of some European countries: *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* (Italy), *El Pais* and *El Mundo* (Spain) and *The Guardian* (England). The selection was made through a database search of the historical archives of the official websites of each newspaper (online) and of websites dedicated to press reviews of printed newspapers<sup>1</sup>. We choose not to include German newspapers – so as to avoid potential distortions – as one of the episodes happened in Germany. For both cases we selected the pages referring to the day when the news was published by the press.

The analysis takes into consideration three aspects: 1) the way in which the news is constructed: space devoted to the event (centre, side or bottom of the page) and presence (or not) of in-depth information boxes; 2) the presence of photographs; 3) the way in which headlines are constructed.

The “march of the immigrants” stuck in the Serbian territory was published between 10 and 17 January by Italian and foreign newspapers, who gave wide coverage to the story, who employed the evocative power of photographs as their main way of recounting the facts. The publication of several shots testifying the living conditions of immigrants in those days, exacerbated by the scarcity of food and the extreme conditions, attracted strong interest from the media and emotionally shook the general public. From a first comparison between the newspapers, it appears that the story has been mainly told via the photos that could *independently* represent the

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.internationalwebpost.org> and [googlenews](http://www.googlenews.com).

news (Papuzzi, 2010), followed by brief, essential captions. On the basis of this specificity, it was possible to divide the images into three groups.

The first group includes photos in which the people are arranged in a line, wrapped in coats and blankets, waiting to cross the Syrian border. These shots seem to attest, with a kind of objectivity, what was happening (Fig. 1- *La Repubblica* and *El Pais*).

Fig.1 – *La Repubblica* and *El Pais*



The second group consists of those images with a strong emotional charge in which shots not only tell a specific moment of the event, but they seem to go beyond a “neutral” meaning of the images by capturing other aspects. This case is a clear example of an image intended as a pause: the picture is accompanied by a short caption, illustrating just the essentials.

Fig. 2 – *El Pais* and *La Repubblica*



In this way, the newspapers seem to want to direct public opinion not so much towards what the photo shows, but rather to what the picture

represents, namely, a real problem (the barriers and borders of some European countries and the management of migration flows) that requires interventions and actions by a common front (Europe). In these photos, for example, we can read: “problem is borders”; “We are human” (Fig. 2 – *El Pais* and *La Repubblica*).

Fig. 3 – *El Pais, La Repubblica*



The last group is composed of images recalling moments of everyday life, such as eating and bathing, for which readers can perceive a “common feeling” with their daily lives. However, the dramatic element of each image evokes the idea of *social disorganization*: indeed, the interest of the media appears to be directed towards the inadequacy of the social system and the political world (especially European), and an inability to offer decent living conditions and protections for migrants (Fig. 3 – *El Pais* and *La Repubblica*).

This story appears, therefore, expression of a *social problem*, but also testimony of the dramatic human condition experienced by migrants. Once inserted in the media circuit, it can elicit emotional reactions in public opinion, but at the the same time, it can draw attention to issues of more general interest (*e.g.*, asylum applications, reception policies, etc.).

The reading perspectives proposed by newspapers are part of two opposing interpretive frames. On the one hand, the media representation of the *Other* is entrusted to a “common understanding” with the reading public that seems to shorten the “us/them” distance, revealing a perspective based on positive attitudes and an idea of welcome and social inclusion. On the other hand, however, this story becomes the symbol of a “complaint” (more or less explicit) to a socio-political system unable to cope with the emergency, demonstrating the fragmentation and lack of homogeneity of European reception policies.

If in this case the newspapers have preferred to report the news through the evocative power of photographs, for the shooting incident in Munich on July 22, 2016, text has reinforced the images.

For what concerns the methods of construction of this story, we must take into account two fundamental aspects: first, the *form*, *i.e.*, the manner of presentation and placement of the news on the front page of the newspaper; second, the lexical aspect, that played an important role in the definition and interpretation of the story.

The shooting that took place in Munich thus rests within a double "frame": on the one hand, there is the narration of the event, that refers to the issue of security in European cities, the phenomenon of terrorism able to hit those places (in our case, the mall and fast-food) that the public opinion is more likely to recognize and perceive as familiar. On the other hand, the use of expressions such as *attack*, *bomber*, *terror*, may have helped in creating a rather similar interpretation among the newspapers, suggesting the idea that the event could be linked to a terrorist act, fuelling a climate of fear and insecurity and, more generally, a sense of mistrust towards others in itself already present due to previous terrorist incidents.

The rather fixed, almost stereotyped, interpretative frames proposed by the various newspapers are recognizable in the opening titles of the news: "*Giorno di terrore a Monaco*" (Il Corriere della Sera); "*Terror en Munich*" (El Mundo); "*Varios muertos en el ataque a un centro comercial de Munich*" (El Pais); "*Europe stunned again by multiple shootings in Munich*" (The Guardian), also because, just like a German policeman says: "If a man with a gun in a shopping centre opens fire and eight people are dead, we have to work on the assumption that this was not a normal crime and was a terrorist act" (TheGuardian.it, July 23, 2016).

The "march of immigrants" and the shooting at the Munich shopping centre offer examples of a media representation of the immigrants which includes both a positive outlook, based on the concept of inclusion, acceptance and integration of the *Other*, and an approach that, instead, consolidates stereotyped and negative images, based on the juxtaposition "immigrant-criminal", towards whom public opinion holds hostile and "closed" feelings because it creates moral panics.

This case study shows a consistent media coverage (especially for the “march of immigrants”), and a general conformity on the interpretation of the event in Munich. The way in which these episodes were addressed by the media confirms, once again, that there is no single communication binding Europe and the Mediterranean, but rather a communication differentiated on the basis of the territorial realities – first of all for what concerns the phenomenon of migrants. This does not only determines the definition of the political agendas of different countries – creating disparities on the basis of their proximity to the problem – but also promotes stereotypes in public opinion leading to value orientations that do not always translate into positive actions towards the other.

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