

## Reporting Syrian Refugees: Building Communities of Understanding in Turkey

PROF. DR. NİLÜFER PEMBEÇİÖĐLU  
İstanbul Üniversitesi

### The Past and Current Situation In Turkey

Wars are sometimes unavoidable. Though it was difficult to estimate a war in Syria just by the beginning of the millennium now we are finishing almost six years in war in the area. During the first three years nearly 1.8 million refugees from Syria's war have been maligned and scorned by many in the region, leading to sporadic acts of violence against refugee camps and setting up the potential for retributive violence against refugees. There were 571,000 UNHCR registered refugees in Turkey according to May 2014 reports. Their situation is very critical even if most of them are provided large campsites, food, education, sanity and health opportunities by the government, yet, for those who are not in the campsites life is much more difficult. Even if the two communities have a shared, long and deep past and have mutual positive feelings towards each other, in terms of media reporting of the crisis in Turkey, newspapers and media seem to be often superficial and characterized by misinformation, stereotyping, scapegoating and xenophobia mostly blaming the refugees for creating a strain on resources and sparking economic problems, especially inflation in food and housing costs, causing social disorders, etc. The newspapers covering the Syrian refugee's stories seem to be a bit sided and even negative, targeted the refugees even if the headlines try to be somehow transparent. It seems that recognizing the uneasiness in society, media adds more fuel to the fire reporting extensively on this tension and consciously or not, through the news, the general audience was activated against the refugees. Also, the government's attitude was criticized due to their 'politenesses. Without regarding the situation of the refugees were in, the governmental bodies were accused in the news for providing the refugees free health care, free high education, free residential permissions and job opportunities, etc. However, this kind of reporting serves the interests of neither refugees nor host communities. All these coming together, neither the individual refugee stories

nor their life conditions were questioned but the more 'able' situation they were put is characterized. Yet, any kind of illegal action, any fight or disagreement situation is also associated with the refugees' being 'there' in the country and in general all this reflections were shown to be the refugees' fault as if it were their own choice. That's why individual or group narrative stories of the refugees' positioning them into the front layer would help them to mean themselves in general public. These rather 'direct' stories would also help the general audience understand the situation without mingling it with the stereotypes, hatred or governmental issues and put the things in a rather transparent and objective position. This would also help the refugees to see their past and present situation and project their hopes for the future expectations. Putting all these together, there seemed to be a need for a media project using peace journalism to help the host communities better understand the situation, to reduce the tensions that naturally occur between refugees and host communities.

### **The Project**

The Project titled "Reporting Syrian Refugees: Building Communities Of Understanding In Turkey" is a collaborative one between Center for Global Peace Journalism at Park University in Parkville, Missouri USA and Istanbul University Faculty of Communication, Istanbul, Turkey. The Project is funded by the US State Department and US Embassy in Ankara, Turkey. Starting by August 2014, the project partners, Prof. Dr. Nilüfer Pembecioğlu and center for Global Peace Journalism's Director Prof. Dr. Steven Youngblood collaborated actively to work on it. The key concepts addressed by the project include improving the living conditions of refugees by giving their concerns deeper and greater media attention; encouraging and nurturing a more stable peace between host communities and refugees; and empowering local journalists to employ peace journalism tools that foster reconciliation and discourage division and violence. The project suggests that the press, employing peace journalism, can help bridge this gap, and open essential dialogues, and aid refugees.

### **Two Seminars**

The Project first aimed to feature two seminars in Southern Turkey, Adana, specifically for local journalists and provide some field reporting experiences that seek to defuse the tension in the area. This peace journalism-style storytelling seeks to add depth and context to reports about refugees. The seminars helped this objective not only by reaching the local and regional journalists of the area, but also the communication faculty, journalism department staff and students of Çukurova University in Adana.

The seminars and the following up field study including visits to the refugee camps concentrated on the objectives as to be accomplished by defining the do's and don'ts of PJ (Peace Journalism), criticizing the published material in newspapers and telling the stories of refugees in a way that helps host communities understand the scope of the crisis.

The seminars included two day sessions on Peace Journalism and applications aiming to find out the myths and stereotypes perpetuated by the media. During the seminars the collaboration and mutual understanding between the local journalists as field workers and training students as future journalists yield many interesting aspects as to be discussed and shared. The team including the coordinators of the project, journalism department and political sciences professors were also invited to take part in a live television program questioning the situation. <http://m.tvvarsivi.com/trtturk-21-01-2015-651526y.html>  
<http://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye/kilis-elbeyli-konteyner-kentinde-neler-oluyor>

### **The Field Work**

The most important part of the project was not only the two days seminar part of the program but the hands-on reporting trips to Syrian refugee camps in Adana. For both the practicing and future journalists, it was interesting to feel the camp life, observe the facilities and daily life experiencing the hopes and fears of the real refugees. The field seminars were including camp visits for observations of these new cities established to keep them safe and healthy as to find out the impact of the refugees on the social life, uneasiness and problems created. The visits to the tent cities of about 650 refugees living under difficult and limited conditions, using only their own sources and public facilities to make a life without any expectations or future was also touching.

This experience is expected to provide the participants an insight for their future news making process as to cover the stories through more humanistic approach making right choices regarding story selection, language, tone, possible consequences of the publication. In the context of this project, reporters were expected to improve knowledge and skills about how to most effectively give voice to refugees and the issues that confront them, and how their reporting can help build bridges of understanding and tolerance. The project's proposed outputs were the media and multimedia about Syrian refugees and their relationship to the larger community in Turkey. The participants of the project were expected to share their stories during the International Peace Journalism Summit by 24-25-

26 May 2015 in Istanbul. The summit also welcomed international specialists from other countries to analyze the past and current work and situation.

One of the participants of the summit, Gloria Laker Aciro discusses the impact of media coverage on Syrian refugees in Turkey, and the benefits of a peace journalism approach (<https://www.insightonconflict.org/blog/2015/08/need-peace-journalism-increases-turkey-syrians-see-refuge/>) In her blog she states that Michael Dean, a peace journalism student at the University of Park in the US, also thinks that there is less coverage of Syrian refugees in the media: “From what I have seen personally, I would say most media coverage does not give a balanced portrayal of Syrian refugees. Most of the coverage seems to center around the problems caused by the migration of people, rather than solutions or even the underlying causes. Some coverage seems to even label them as menacing, and this in no way helps the situation, I believe more stories covering peace makers, people who are offering solutions to problems, could not only help the situation but entice more people to participate or empathize with the plight of the refugees, as well as the citizens of Turkey”.

She also mentions that Dr. Metin Ersoy, from the University of Eastern Mediterranean, putting forward the general tendency of Turkish media as problematic: “At the beginning of the refugee movement, the Turkish media atmosphere was positive to this movement. Later on, and we do not know exactly when that changed the media coverage, it became more dramatic. The issues are covered with limited and essentially elite sources. They cover any issues related with Syrian refugees, but journalists are not asking the ‘why’ question in order to investigate the conditions and problems the refugees are facing.”

The last step of the project was hold in Malatya, during November 2015. During the education seminar, İnönü University Faculty of Communication were all involved in the seminars as well as the local journalists. Around hundred participants, the senior and junior students took part in the discussions as well as the academic staff. Two documentary films were screened during the event. The concept of “refugee” and the language of hatred reflected in the media were the hot topics to be discussed. Most of the participants reflected their own point of view and their individual changes throughout the time. How people feel about the ongoing war situation and the current events were getting more and more dramatic in the third phase of the project. One of the documentaries was focusing on the success story of a teenager girl expecting to become a doctor in the past, before the war but making her mind up to become a civic leader in the future after all

her experiences. The other one was more on the impact of war on children. How the education process was influencing these young people's future hopes and fears. Some of the children could find ways as to join the education in Turkey, in the camps. The schools in the camps are in high conditions and classes are conducted by the team teachers one having Arabic and the other one having Turkish language. This could be accepted as a great advantage of bilingualism yielding and developing better understanding skills. Yet, out of the camps most of them were not recognized as to become students in ordinary schools and they have to fight against poverty, unemployment, war conditions, unknown atmosphere and situations as to join the education races involving more than 53% of the youth and youngsters in Turkey. In 2016-2017 most of the elementary schools welcomed only part of the Syrian children who could have a refugee status to attend to schools. The others who have not been recognized yet are still yearning for some other alternatives such as attending to the district schools opened up by the civil society initiations or non governmental organizations. With the help of the national and international NGOs and the Turkish society, they would brighten up their future. In such a situation, unlike the camp conditions, their parents are not with them most of the time. Most of them having uneducated parents, not only the kids but also their families need educational support. The participants of these schools are experiencing a bilingual content and curriculum both covering the ones in Turkey and in Syria. However, we still have more hope rather than the sorrow because, the psychology of these students are higher than ever even if they had a four years loss. However, they have the advantage of learning Russian, French, English, Arabic and now Turkish. So, we hope a bright future would be facing them if they could overcome the difficulties of the last few years.