

Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception

by Alberto Tagliapietra

ABSTRACT

The relationship between media and perception is essential to securitisation processes. Through the adoption of specific wordings and narratives the media can and do influence the public perception of a given phenomenon as a challenge or even an existential threat to public security, economic prosperity, social stability or cultural homogeneity. Media narratives are exploited by political actors, which promote and/or instrumentalise securitised issues in order to present themselves as the only actors able to provide a solution. During the years of the "migration crisis", many media outlets in Europe created a perception of the magnitude of migration phenomenon that had little basis in empirical data while also portraying it as inherently threatening. The securitisation to which migration was subjected led to a much worsened perception of migrants by the public and consequently to a greater political appeal of parties that made anti-immigration the core of their public discourse.

Media | Public opinion | Migration | Security

keywords

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Introduction

Mass media play a fundamental role in our daily life and society at large. They are widely used to get information and stay updated on what is happening around us. This makes them a fundamental actor, which can bring to us events happening worldwide in real-time. But media also have downsides. One is the degree to which they can be trusted and, particularly, the effects they can have on us. Many studies suggest that mass media have a significant bearing on the public and its perception and interpretation of events. Consequently, it is important to understand how mass media can shift perceptions and promote particular wordings, orienting the public toward a certain line of reasoning. This is even more relevant if we think that this process could trigger a securitisation process, with a complex phenomenon being reduced to just an existential threat.

For this reason, it is relevant to analyse the potential connections between the two different fields, that of media studies and of securitisation. Merging these two theories can be useful to provide a better understanding of how mass media can be used to set up a securitisation process, but also of how mass media can become a securitarian actor themselves. This process was particularly significant during the so called "migration crisis" that took place in Europe between 2014 and 2016. During that period, the portraits made by many news outlets contributed to create a shift in the public perception of many EU countries toward the phenomenon of migration, also offering to different political parties the chance to increase their share of votes by presenting themselves as the solution to a phenomenon that have been increasingly perceived as a threat.

1. The securitarian perspective

The main question of the securitarian approach can be posed as follows: what makes a specific issue a security issue? To answer, we first need to know what

* Alberto Tagliapietra is programme assistant at the Mediterranean Policy Programme of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) in Brussels.

securitisation is. According to Buzan et al., securitisation is a process through which

a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what [is] “normal politics” [...]. The process of securitization is what in language theory is called a speech act. [...] By saying the words something is done [...].¹

Another important definition is the one provided by Balzacq:

[securitisation is] an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artifacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object [...] by investing [it] with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development.²

Therefore, the idea behind securitisation is that an issue becomes a security issue when the public perceived it as such. This aspect is fundamental because, from this perception, the securitarian actors could find the legitimacy to address an issue through the tools they present as adequate. It can therefore be said that securitisation combines the process of definition of an issue with the process of governance of it.³

Within the securitarian approach, there are two main schools of thought: the Copenhagen school and the Paris school. The Copenhagen school follows a constructivist tradition and maintains that an issue becomes a security issue just when it is perceived as such.⁴ According to this perspective, securitisation is a social construction that turns a phenomenon into a security issue thanks to a discursive rhetoric focused on threat. A rhetoric that can also legitimise the usage of special measures placed outside the ordinary procedures of political decisions and actions.⁵

¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder/London, Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 24, 26.

² Thierry Balzacq, “A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants”, in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory. How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, London/New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 1-30 at p. 3.

³ Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard and Jan Ruzicka, “Securitization Revisited: Theory and Cases”, in *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (December 2016), p. 494-531.

⁴ Jef Huysmans and Vicki Squire, “Migration and Security”, in Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, 2nd ed., London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 190-236.

⁵ Ibid.

The Paris school, on the contrary, argues that the creation of a realm of insecurity should be traced back to the practices chosen to manage certain phenomena. It contends that to securitise an issue is not the exceptionality of the issue itself, but its routine, the usage in the long period of a language, and of practices that are not different from the normal political process.⁶

Finally, one of the most relevant concepts of the theory of securitisation is constituted by the audience.⁷ As stated by Balzacq, the audience has a fundamental role in this process, being the main target of the securitarian actor, which, to achieve its aims, needs its support. The importance played by the audience is recognised also by other scholars, such as Buzan, according to whom an issue is securitised only when the public perceived it as such.⁸ Reversing the definition of securitisation and putting at its core the concept of audience, we understand that securitisation is nothing more than a process aimed at convincing a public that a specific issue represents an existential threat that warrants special action to solve. However, it would be wrong to conceptualise the audience as just a passive actor. As Côté argues, security is a concept socially and linguistically defined, which must be justified, authorised, accepted, or at least tolerated by individuals or groups.⁹ Thus, securitisation is not a unilateral process between a securitarian actor and a “passive” audience, but a deliberative process between actor and audience.¹⁰

2. Media influence and public opinion

The question of how media can influence public opinion, to which degree and in which way, is largely debated in the literature. Notably, we can identify two main perspectives: the first one, linked to the work of Lippmann, maintains that media can create a distorted perception, leading to the creation of biased attitudes in the public. According to the second perspective, exemplified in the work of Klapper, it is true that media play an important role, but their effect is just limited to a process of attitudes reinforcement rather than attitudes creation.

In his work titled *Public Opinion*, Lippmann noted that media are a primary source of the pictures we create in our heads about the external world, which in his view is out of reach and out of sight for most citizens.¹¹ The point is that pictures inside people’s heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside, and, on

⁶ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁷ Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard and Jan Ruzicka, “Securitization Revisited: Theory and Cases”, cit.

⁸ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, cit.

⁹ Adam Côté, “Agents without Agency: Assessing the Role of the Audience in Securitization Theory”, in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (December 2016), p. 541-558.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/CDFinal/Lippman/header.html>.

the contrary, they often mislead people's perceptions of the outer world.¹² What is relevant in Lippmann's perspective is the role played by stereotypes in the formation of the images inside the public's head and how these turn into public opinion. In this context, the narratives shared by media about events that people do not experience directly will lead to the creation of these potentially misleading mental images. Thus, media play a fundamental role in influencing the perception that people have of reality and persuading them to create new attitudes toward a phenomenon.¹³

A second fundamental author in the study of media influence is Klapper. In one of his works called *The Effects of Mass Communication*, he shifts away from the perspective of Lippmann. According to him, the effect of mass media is still relevant in society. Still, it is something different from that of attitude-creation and more oriented toward a process of attitude-reinforcement.¹⁴ From this point of view, the effect of media consists of reinforcing the beliefs and attitudes of the public, due to a process of selective exposure implemented by the audience. What Klapper means is that individuals choose to expose themselves to information which are in line with their beliefs and try to reinterpret information not in line with their ideas to make them consistent with their views, even if this implies mystification.¹⁵ According to this perspective, the media can amplify a shift in public opinion reinforcing certain attitudes, but they cannot create one. The concepts developed by these authors represent two of the main strands in the studies of media influence. They give us two important frames which analyse and interpret the role that media play in everyday life of people.

First, they provide us with a similar starting assumption: people have often no direct experience of an issue. For this reason, the public is widely dependent on media to get informed, and consequently, it is more suitable to get influenced by them. However, even though they substantially agree on the paramount informational role of media, Lippman and Klapper diverge on its consequences, positing different salience on the media effect on public perceptions. Yet, it is clear that according to both these authors the nature of the messages communicated by media have an impact on attitudes.

Finally, in the literature there are also some theories that analyse media functioning, for example the "media framing theory". The latter focuses on the influence of news coverage on the development of public opinion through the analysis of frames embedded in news content, which emphasise particular features of depicted topics.¹⁶ "Frames" thus comprise organised sets of assumptions imposed by news

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communications*, Glencoe, Free Press, 1960.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Zhongdang Pan, "Framing of the News", in Wolfgang Donsbach (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, Malden, Blackwell, 2008.

professionals on events' coverage aimed at simplifying complex phenomena for audiences,¹⁷ potentially leading to a biased outcome. It is precisely through this process of framing and simplification embedded in the process of news creation that media can alter the perception of reality.

In conclusion, it is widely accepted in the literature that the nature of the messages communicated by mass media can have an impact on the public's perception. The debatable thing is whether the role of media is attitudes-creator or attitudes-reinforcer.

3. Merging theory with reality: The migration crisis

From 2011 an increasing number of people started to move towards Europe from the Middle East and Africa due to the outbreak of civil wars in Syria and Libya. These flows, which peaked in 2015, involved around three million migrants entering Europe between 2011 and 2016.¹⁸ This was presented to the public as "the migration crisis".

Leaving behind the correctness of labelling this event as a crisis, what is interesting is the role that media coverage has played in portraying this phenomenon as a "crisis". It is also important to understand how this attitude towards the "crisis" can have played a role in the emergence of the so-called populist parties, which have based a large portion of their appeal on the issue of migration, as found by Norris and Inglehart.¹⁹ The media's role is so crucial in this context due to their diffusion, their high rate of usage, and the high level of confidence that individuals have in them (as the figures in Appendix A show). For example, Kosho found that in Italy and Greece (the countries most interested by migration influxes), news coverage was fuelling hysteria about immigrants, boosting an anti-immigrant consensus.²⁰ This is in line with what other scholars have found. Notably, Eberl et al. argue that media coverage of the migration issue can have considerable effects on public attitudes toward immigration and the perceived impact of this phenomenon.²¹ Jacobs et al. contend that the relationship between immigration media coverage

¹⁷ Bryan C. Taylor, "The Movie Has to Go Forward: Surveying the Media-Security Relationship", in *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2017), p. 46-69.

¹⁸ Frontex website: *Migratory Routes*, <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/western-mediterranean-route>.

¹⁹ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

²⁰ Joana Kosho, "Media Influence on Public Opinion Attitudes Towards the Migration Crisis", in *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (May 2016), p. 86-91 at p. 89, <http://www.ijstr.org/paper-references.php?ref=IJSTR-0516-14212>.

²¹ Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al., "The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review", in *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2018), p. 207-223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452>.

and real-world developments is overall low²² and, in a similar fashion, Klingeren et al. maintain that media visibility of immigration increases public anti-immigration attitudes irrespectively of real-world developments.²³

What all these scholars agree on is that the way in which the media portray immigration, both on a “quality” and “quantity” level, have a consequence on people’s perceptions. This point is of fundamental importance because it sheds light on a problem that Lippmann pointed out already: media are a primary source of the pictures we create in our heads about the larger world, a world which is out of reach and out of sight for the most of citizens.²⁴ Thus, from what Lippmann and Balzacq state about the public and its vulnerability, it follows that analysing how media portrayed the “migration crisis” is crucial to understand why the migration flows have been framed as a “crisis”. Merging the fields of media study and securitisation give us an important framework with which to analyse the world in which we live.

The starting point of the analysis is the media framing theory. As mentioned above, this theory posits that media frame a certain phenomenon in different ways, leading to different outcomes. There are two main ways in which media can portray migrants: they can be defined as a threat (through narratives aimed at representing migrants as intruders) or as victims (through narratives that underline the struggles migrants have to face in their homelands).²⁵ The used frame is crucial, as scholars have found that negative portrayals of migrants can have a dehumaning effect and sow a sense of social crisis even when there is not such a situation. It is also important to remember, to better understand the deep connections between media and the securitisation process, the importance of “speech acts”. It is indeed by labelling something as a security issue that it becomes one.²⁶ In this process, media can have a crucial role due to the implementation of frames (which are mostly speech-acts) that portray something as a security issue.²⁷ For example, by stressing certain convictions, or relaying only part of the facts, or even publishing falsehoods, media produce a biased perception in the public.²⁸

²² Laura Jacobs et al., “Back to Reality: The Complex Relationship Between Patterns in Immigration News Coverage and Real-World Developments in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers (1999–2015)”, in *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2018), p. 473-497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1442479>.

²³ Marijn van Klingeren et al., “Real World Is Not Enough: The Media As an Additional Source of Negative Attitudes Toward Immigration, Comparing Denmark and the Netherlands”, in *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (June 2015), p. 268-283.

²⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, cit.

²⁵ Joana Kosho, “Media Influence on Public Opinion Attitudes Towards the Migration Crisis”, cit.

²⁶ Ole Wæver, “Securitization and Desecuritization”, in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 46-87.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rabea Haas, “The Role of Media in Conflict and their Influence on Securitisation”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (December 2009), p. 77-91.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that European media started to consistently portray migrants as a threat particularly after the terroristic attacks perpetrated in Europe in 2015,²⁹ even though terrorist attacks and migration flows were not linked. This shift was also caught by a research on European media commissioned by Euromed, which found that after 2015 media in different countries started to consistently employ a threat narrative toward immigration.³⁰ This shift is important because how media cover an issue can influence people's perceptions of political actors and, as a consequence, also their voting behaviour. This, in turn, can help political actors to gain an increasing share of votes thanks to the implementation of a securitisation process which portrays them as the only actors able to give a solution to a threat they have created themselves.

Several academics recognise the salience of this process. For example, Burscher et al. state that the more news media report on immigration, the more people tend to vote for parties with an anti-immigrant stance as they are perceived to be the most competent about the issue of immigration.³¹ It is so clear how migration can be a fundamental topic on which parties can capitalise, presenting themselves as the ones that have the answer to a phenomenon that is slowly but increasingly being perceived as a security issue.

But is a shift in the perception of immigration happening in the EU? According to Eurobarometer's data,³² it is. From the Figure 1, it is clear that after 2014 a shift in the perception of the migration phenomenon happened, and it continued until 2016 when it became less intense (even if it remained visible in most countries).

It is useful to analyse this situation through a supply-demand framework, which helps us better to understand the possible roles of media and securitarian actors. From the demand side, it is important to understand how a security demand can be created, as the proposals of solution from the supply side originate from that demand. Media strongly contribute to the creation of a context favourable to the initiation of a securitisation process. As the director of Ipsos Yves Bardou maintains, the media's bombardment of the public with news stories about migrants arriving on EU shores (and the linkages they created between migration and security issues such as terrorism) helped create a climate of hostility and fear.³³ Furthermore, on

²⁹ Lilie Chouliaraki et al., *The European 'Migration Crisis' and the Media. A Cross-European Press Content Analysis*, London, London School of Economics, 2017, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/358069>.

³⁰ Ethical Journalism Network, *How Does the Media on Both Sides of the Mediterranean Report on Migration?*, Vienna, International Centre for Migration Policy (ICMPD), 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/how-does-the-media-on-both-sides-of-the-mediterranean-report-on-migration>.

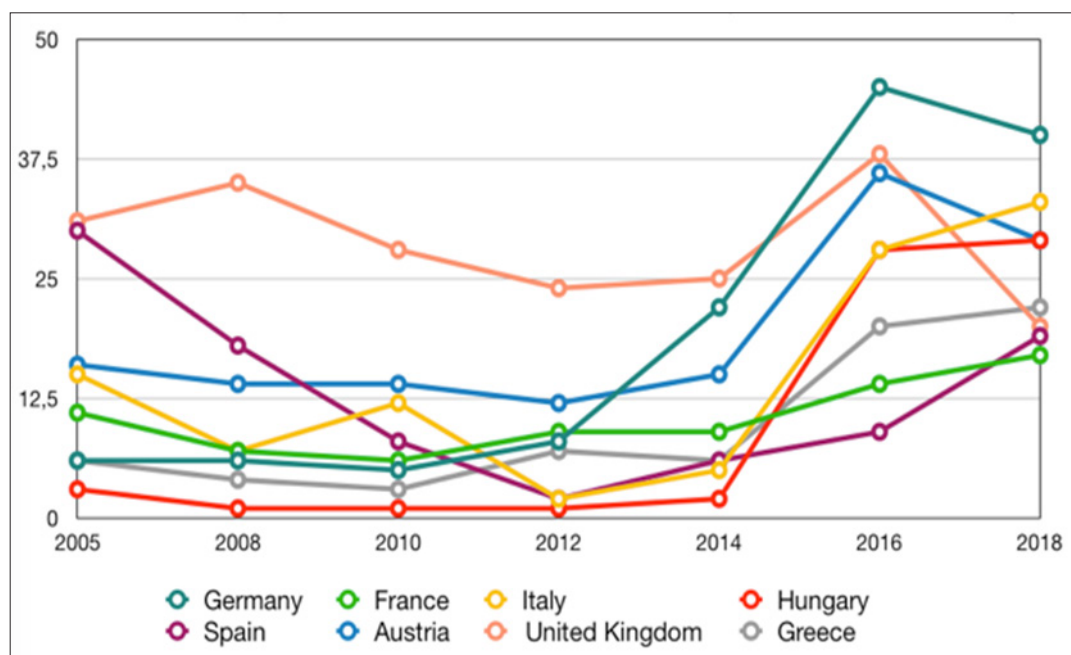
³¹ Bjorn Burscher, Joost van Spanje and Claes H. de Vreese, "Owning the Issues of Crime and Immigration: The Relation Between Immigration and Crime News and Anti-Immigrant Voting in 11 Countries", in *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 38 (June 2015), p. 56-59.

³² Standard Eurobarometer, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all/series/4961>.

³³ Ethical Journalism Network, *How Does the Media on Both Sides of the Mediterranean Report on Migration?*, cit., p. 26.

the supply side, we find several political actors that advance political discourses aimed at responding to this security demand with the purpose of gaining a share of votes.

Figure 1 | Percentage of people which choose immigration as the most important issue for their country



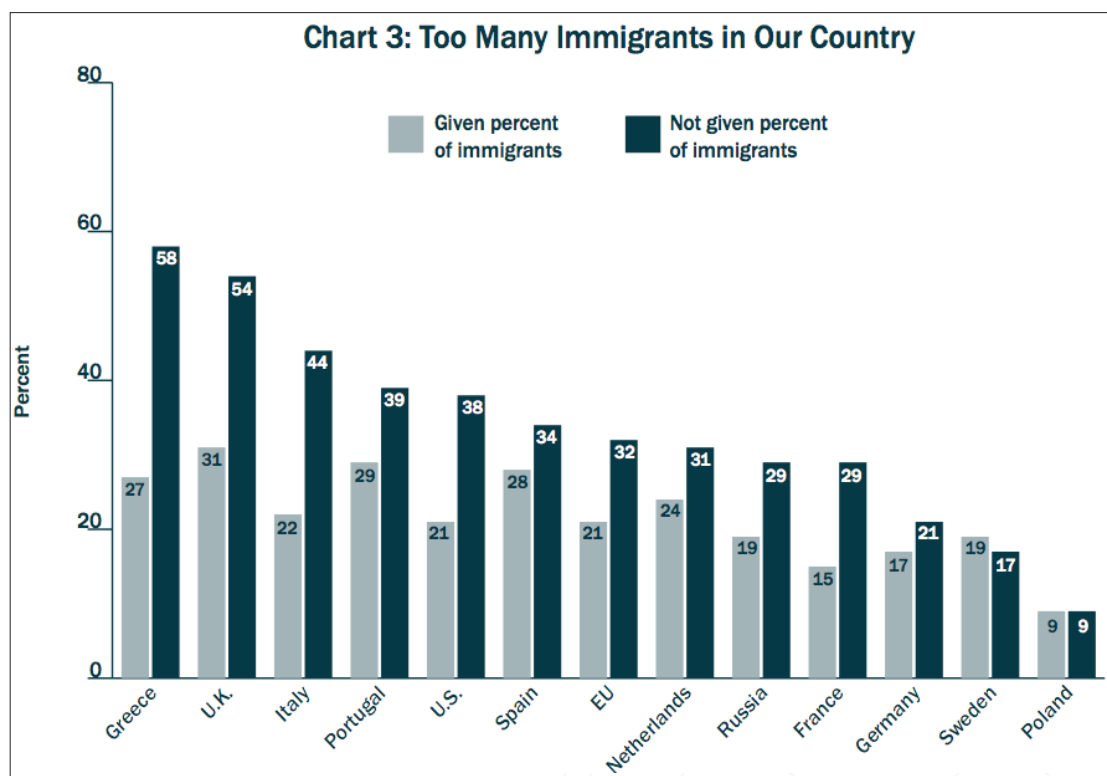
Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurobarometer's data.

As evidence, the latest political campaigns all over Europe highly stressed the perceived threat of immigration under several perspectives, from culture to welfare. This was also found by Ivarsflaten, who states that all successful populist parties have gained support thanks to the immigration issue.³⁴ These aspects were visible in different European countries, like in France with the Rassemblement National, in Spain with Vox or in Germany with Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). This also happened in Italy, where in 2018 Matteo Salvini, the head of the right-wing League party, became Minister of the Interior thanks to a strong political campaign played on the necessity to restrict the migration flows headed toward the country. In all these cases, we are assisting to the implementation of a strong “weaponised” narrative from these actors, which in order to serve their political interests exploit the climate of hysteria which media contribute to create around the migration phenomenon. Therefore, as the European situation shows us, media can and do create in the public a specific demand for security, and as a consequence a number of political actors claim to supply such security.

³⁴ Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, “What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases”, in *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (January 2008), p. 3-23.

An interconnection between media and political actors can sometimes exist, as found out by the Cardiff School of Journalism. What emerged in their research (conducted in five EU countries and focused on the principal newspapers of each country) is that the main sources used by media when talking about migration and immigrants are political actors.³⁵ Moreover, Euromed has also found that in many cases media in 2019 indulged the political debate rather than supported an understanding of what was happening.³⁶ Euromed research has also found that this attitude was brought to the point of contradicting the empirical evidence clearly showing there was no major emergency, as was the case in Italy.³⁷ The result of such biased-information is the creation of a perception which is distant from reality and real-world developments, as emerged from a survey commissioned by the German Marshall Fund.³⁸

Figure 2 | Overestimation of immigrants number



Source: German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends: Mobility, Migration and Integration*, cit., p. 9.

³⁵ Mike Berry, Inaki Garcia-Blanco and Kerry Moore, *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*, Geneva, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html>.

³⁶ Ethical Journalism Network, *How Does the Media on Both Sides of the Mediterranean Report on Migration?*, cit., p. 46.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 47-51.

³⁸ German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends: Mobility, Migration and Integration*, 2014, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/7619>.

As Figure 2 shows, European citizens abundantly overestimate the number of immigrants in their countries.

Finally, the specific context of the migration “crisis” has made the role of media even more important. As Chouliaraki et al. state, their role has been more impactful than usual for two main reasons:

[First of all,] the scale and speed of events in the second half of 2015 meant that public and policy makers depended on mediated information to interpret developments on the ground; [secondly,] the limited, if any, previous knowledge about the new arrivals, their histories and the causes of their plight meant that many Europeans depended exclusively on media narratives to understand what was happening.³⁹

This context clearly confirms what Lippmann meant when saying that the vast majority of people rely on media information to understand the wider world. Moreover, it also exposes how this dependence is a significant vulnerability that can be exploited when media cease their “watchdog” function in favour of the adoption of narratives presented by other actors who cultivate particular interests.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the relationship between media and securitisation processes is potentially strong. Media can play different roles in the process of securitisation. Firstly, they can be used to spread speech acts by securitarian actors. Secondly, as the media framing theory maintains, due to the process of framing and simplification media can produce a biased outcome that is not always coherently representing reality, potentially leading to the creation of a demand for security. The latter points to a common position between media studies and the securitisation theory: the notion that the public has only a partial knowledge of the world and that, for this reason, it can be subjected to processes of influence. The importance of this statement is made even more salient if we think that, as maintained by Cooper et al., media have a social-cultural position which make it possible for them to legitimise particular narratives⁴⁰ and that, according to Garreau, humans are animals which need to rely on a narrative to make sense of the world.⁴¹ Narrative is therefore a key concept as it is through stories that people perceive reality. In such a context, mass

³⁹ Lilie Chouliaraki et al., *The European 'Migration Crisis' and the Media*, cit., p. 3.

⁴⁰ Samantha Cooper et al., “Media Coverage of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Regional Australia: A Critical Discourse Analysis”, in *Media International Australia*, Vol. 162, No. 1 (February 2017), p. 78-89.

⁴¹ Joel Garreau, “Attacking Who We Are As Humans”, in Brad Allenby and Joel Garreau (eds), *Weaponized Narratives: The New Battlespace*, Centre on the Future of War, March 2017, p. 10-14, <https://weaponizednarrative.asu.edu/node/39>.

media importance lies precisely in their ability to influence people, an influence which can contribute to normalise “weaponised” narratives that certain actors try to implement to create a context of fear and polarisation aimed at portraying themselves as the only solution to an emergency that, in reality, does not exist. This has happened in several European countries for what concerns migration. In fact, a fundamental shift has taken place in their migration policies, which are now more security-related and oriented towards returns and exclusion rather than on integration and humanitarianism.

Therefore, how migration was portrayed by media, together with the adoption of a “weaponised” narrative aimed at triggering a securitisation process, has had an impact on public opinion, generating a shift toward a threat perception over this phenomenon.

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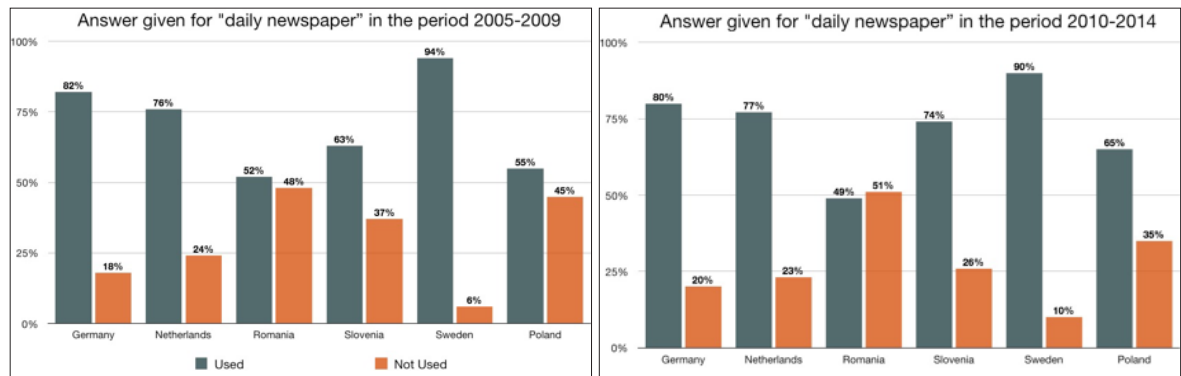
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Appendix A

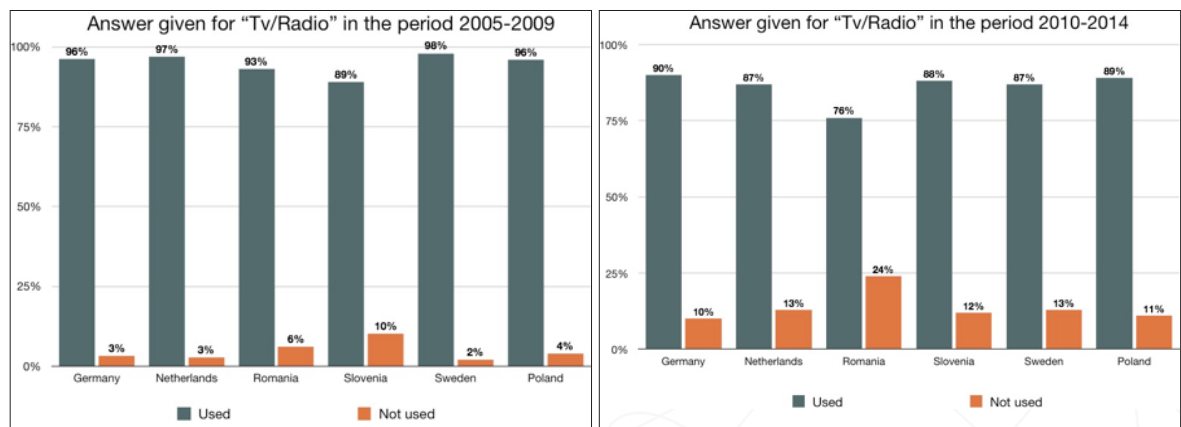
Figure 3 | Answer given for daily newspaper in the period 2005-2014



Answer given for daily newspaper at the question: “People use different sources to learn what is going on in their country and the world. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you used it last week or did not use it last week to obtain information”.

Source: Author’s elaboration on World Value Survey data, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

Figure 4 | Answer given for television/radio in the period 2005-2014



Answer given for television/radio at the question: “People use different sources to learn what is going on in their country and the world. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you used it last week or did not use it last week to obtain information”.

Source: Author’s elaboration on World Value Survey data, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

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