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Transnational contextualisation seeing the world from there, here and in-between

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses experiences harvested when communicating migration research from an academic position as media researcher, partly influenced by other positions. It discusses transnational literacy illustrated by the case of Afghanistan and Afghan refugee experiences, arguing for a more holistic contextual approach to the phenomenon of flight and all its processes. A critical human rights perspective in media research proves useful guidance to approaching marginalisation and the 'silenced other'. This also entails a critical approach to methodological nationalism and media domestication, and 'unlearning privilege as loss'. Furthermore, it discusses how researchers within certain fields (such as migration) may be associated with (or accused of) political correctness.

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1. Prelude: Abdul's travels

During a visit to Afghanistan in 2003, I travelled with exiled Afghans who had not seen their home country for a very long time. Optimism was in the air following the fall of Taliban. In that spring of hope, a large number of newspapers, TV and radio stations had (re)appeared, often financed by enthusiastic institutions abroad. Suicide bombers were elsewhere, not heard of in Afghanistan. People were of course aware of the 9–11-terrorists, but then again, these were not Afghans.

Two years onwards, the situation had changed; suicide bombings started happening. I met my 'Afghan family' that year as part of my Kabuli routine. One member was Abdul, a boy I had known as an orphaned child in the late 1980s. He had later been taken care of by Islamist extremists in refugee camps

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in Pakistan and Iran. After difficult years with this group, he fled and made it to Sweden. He lived there for two years as an asylum seeker with a work permit. However, with a change of government, many single male asylum seekers were forced to leave. Back in Afghanistan, he married his second cousin, moved in with her family and started looking for a job. The once playful boy I had met in exile in Peshawar in the late 1980s had become a thin, wiry man, with hollow cheeks and an unarticulated sadness, perhaps from living in the home of his father-in-law without being able to contribute to the household.

My visits continued, and so did Abdul's efforts, while other Afghan friends' optimism dwindled proportional to increased terror attacks and Taliban growth. After trying for several years to obtain a permanent job, Abdul left the country again, while his wife and two small children remained. A year or two later he was in Italy, using his language/translation skills to help local authorities with newly arrived refugees.

2. Introduction: 'expert'/researcher

This article presents the perspective of an 'Afghanistan expert' and researcher when communicating on migration issues. It draws on personal experiences; thus applies a more essayistic, experimental form than that of a traditional research article. As signalled above, I present Afghanistan as a case of migration, flight and (de)contextualisation. Furthermore, I try to connect a variety of interwoven experiences into a transnational media approach, contrasted by more domestic (media) horizons.

After a short background on Afghanistan, the article addresses some role distinctions, which may apply to researchers within the field of migration. Second, it presents theoretical approaches such as 'transnational literacy', 'objectivity' and a human rights perspective as a means to communicate migration in a comprehensive way. Third, it outlines observations on how this may be done from a media and journalism researcher perspective by a three-thronged (there, nowhere and here) approach to flight/migration, suggesting a holistic researcher (and reporter) position. Before concluding, it discusses this author's own experiences when speaking from this position.

2.1. *The Afghanistan case*

The choice of Afghanistan is not haphazard, as a majority of refugees/migrants in places such as the ill-reputed Moria camp at Lesbos is Afghan, and Afghans constitute one of the larger groups of refugees/asylum seekers to Europe. Furthermore, the 'I' of this essay/article, has ample experience from Afghanistan and some of its neighbouring countries.¹ Thus, in my contact with media as well as when lecturing in various fora, I have been asked to

comment on Afghanistan and Afghan refugees in addition to research on migration and media. Still, 'I' am not 'them', being a female media and journalism researcher from a white middle-class background. On the other hand, I have travelled and resided for more than three years in the South Asia region, not as a privileged diplomat or rich aid worker, but closer to ordinary people and in the case of Afghanistan, to actual war events.²

Afghans, particularly young men, have been one of the largest groups of asylum seekers to Norway in recent years.³ Additionally, Norway has returned a larger proportion of Afghan asylum seekers than most other European countries and in one single year (2016) 'stood for 64% of all Afghan refugees returned from Europe'.⁴

A test research in the Norwegian media database Retriever, revealed that the concept 'Afghan asylum seeker' occurred 252 times during a two year period (December 1 2017-December 1 2019), while it was combined with the word 'war' only 26 times (roughly ten percent).⁵ This may indicate that the provision of (journalistic) context to the situation from which these asylum seekers have fled is low. However, since there has been a strong, civic engagement for some of the asylum seekers sent back to Afghanistan or those threatened with deportation, several media stories have focused on the difficulties they face there.

2.2. *Connections and distinctions*

In an overheated world (Eriksen, 2016) where war, climate change and migration are major and interrelated issues, it makes sense to combine studies on how media treat the world 'out there' and of refugees/migrants who arrive 'here'. The rationale behind this is to enhance a deeper understanding of global connectivity as well as the individual background of 'newcomers', among citizens in countries on the receiving end. Related is the admittedly normative conviction that media de-marginalisation supports the development of democracy, in other words "*a society benefits from all voices being heard*".⁶

The late media professor Barbara Gentikow emphasises the distinction between *academic* and *intellectual*, and warns media researchers from giving 'points of view' not grounded in their research. One of the most important differences between the two positions has to do with 'different forms of recognition. While the academic field [...] primarily relates to the norms and practices of its discipline or practices an autonomous form of recognition, the journalistic field depends more on heteronomous recognition, i.e. success in way of audience' (Gentikow 2009, 382). In my case, this advice represents a particular challenge, since I have published on Afghanistan in a variety of genres including journalism, fiction, non-fiction, and research articles on media representation of the country (Eide 1994, 1998; Eide and Skaufjord 2014; Eide 2016a, 2016b, 2017, Eide 2020). I mention this particular identity of in-between-ness⁷ here to provide context for the presentation of dilemmas a media

researcher may experience in the public sphere. My encounters and travels may have taught me a lesson about seeing the world from *elsewhere*. An exercise after spending much time abroad, may be to try and see Norway for example through the lenses of a young (male) newly arrived asylum seeker from Afghanistan or the Middle East, who has been brought up in a gender-traditional society. During such an attempt, it may at times hard not to associate to the Occidental stereotypes of western, decadent, promiscuous life styles (Buruma and Margalit 2004; Carrier 1995).

In this essay, I also try to combine elements of my mixed backgrounds as a media/journalism researcher, (non-fiction) writer and reporter, the commonality being that all these roles/positions at their best are trying to do decent research and aim to tell the truth, albeit with a varying degree of in-depth scrutiny and self-reflection.

3. Transnational literacy, contrapuntal reading

Transnational literacy is a key contribution to raising a decent public debate on flight and migration, as well as to other fields of research. According to 'post-colonial' critic Gayatri Spivak, transnational literacy 'allows us to sense that the other is not just a "voice", but that others produce articulated texts, even as they, like us, are written in and by a text not of our own making' (2006: 4). In a sense, we are all structured by contexts (texts), and the colonial history has allowed for enduring strands of hierarchical thinking when it comes to the value of lives, and 'stages of development', which deem the subaltern *other* as inferior, less-developed, and less articulate (see also Spivak 1988, Eide 2011).

3.1. Contextual objectivity and contrapuntal reading

This article will argue that research and discussion on migration without keeping the colonial history as well as modern warfare in mind, is missing in 'contextual objectivity' (Iskandar and El-Nawawy 2004). Contextual objectivity is defined as 'the perpetual tension between the decontextualized messages of the news deliverer and the nuanced and coloured perceptions of the receiver of news messages' (ibid. 321). This notion treats *receivers* as correctives of routine news delivery (which leaves them with scant understanding of news background), as the ones who constitute the contextual, with their biases, experiences and knowledge. Thus, the news deliverer (journalist institution, reporter) has to navigate between audience appeal and 'objective' coverage.

On the other hand, if one looks at the 'decontextualized message' as symptom of conventional news delivery, in conflict situations strongly influenced by the political field, the *context* may take on a wider meaning, that of historical background. The ideal reporter (researcher), then, may operate

within the tradition of enlightenment and the public's *right to know* (Merrill 1967). In a globalised world, this entails research (scientific or journalistic) with transnational perspectives.

Transnational literacy may also connect to *contrapuntal reading* (Said 1994), applied to an intellectual repertoire of approaches to migration studies. Edward Said's field of research was mainly literature, although he also studied media representation (Said 1981). He used this critical contrapuntal reading in particular in his approach to the canon of French and British literature. In (among others) a case study of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), he observes how writers from European Empires communicate a process by which 'the metropolis gets its authority to a considerable extent from the devaluation as well as the exploitation of the outlying colonial possession' (Said 1994, 70).

Said introduces contrapuntal reading – originally a musical term to describe relationships between themes [Said was a skilled pianist] – as a way of analysing works in which the colonial relationship is taken for granted, such as in *Mansfield Park*, where the Bertram family have amassed their wealth through sugar plantations in Antigua. Said finds that Antigua is hardly mentioned in the novel, even if the family's riches depend on this 'territory' (Said 1994, p. 100–117). His ambition is not to deprive the 19th century canonical works of their literary quality, but to make his readership aware of alternative, oppositional readings. While realising that the modern Afghan refugee situation is very different, the connection may be the textual ignoring of geopolitical and historical context. Additionally, such *othering* may render refugees and migrants 'as objects lacking full human subjectivity' (Collins 1986, 18).

The case [in *Mansfield Park*] of the *unmentioned* is a crucial element in Said's reading. In analysing text, Norman Fairclough (2003) recommends registering the 'not-there's', as well as the presupposed (taken for granted) elements; those backgrounded, as well as those being foregrounded, reminding us of the significance of not only what is there in a text, but also what is neglected or marginalised. In *Mansfield Park*, the colonial relations are almost not mentioned, and simultaneously taken for granted and naturalised, as in many other works of this era.

3.2. *The unmentioned*

'The unmentioned', or lack of transnational contextualisation of migrants and migration may take many shapes. Psychology professor Nora Sveaas, who has worked for decades with traumatised refugees, said in a comment (NRK radio 24.10.2018) that refugees arriving in Norway are interviewed about tuberculosis (being a potential burden 'here'), but not about potential trauma they might have, related to the war-torn countries from which they have fled (their burdens 'there'). This de-contextualisation of their experiences is contrary to a contrapuntal (transnationally literate) reading. A narrow focus on a medical

discourse in relation to newly arrived refugees contrasts the need for a wider historical-sociological and indeed social-psychological contextualisation. Experiences from refugee therapy reveals these contexts:

Most of the families had been exposed to serious human rights violations prior to leaving their country of origin or during their flight: political prison or concentration camp (32%), physical and psychological torture (38%), witnessed executions of family members (14%), serious threats, combat experience and life in war zones (85%). More than half of the families had lost close family members as the result of war, torture or executions. (Sveaas and Reichelt 2001, 121)

In the case of media representations of contemporary flight, such war and conflict drivers are oftentimes not part of the story. This partly prevents 'the receiving end' from understanding the refugees' or migrants' particular plight and potential traumas. The subjects of the former Empires arrive 'here' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989), but the challenge of trans-historical or transnational literacy remains. From the home desk, it is perhaps easier to adhere to political discourses of the (un)sustainability of the (European/Norwegian) welfare state. Below, I try to develop these perspectives in the afore-mentioned case presentation.

3.3. Domesticated approaches

Throughout the years, I have encountered many Afghans and migrants/refugees originating from other nations, and have witnessed how they have struggled to acquire the competences required to obtain permits and work to sustain themselves and their families. Through the long and troubled road to exile, they have gained unique expertise on survival, as well as the special qualifications generated by prolonged in-between-ness.

These qualifications contribute to new, transnational spaces of experience, which may challenge both the nation-state confined 'we vs. they' as well as methodological nationalism (Alghasi 2011; Tsagarousianou 2004). Methodological nationalism is particularly identified in sociological studies, and involves ignoring the national framing of modernity, and 'taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing them or making them an object of an analysis in its own right' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, 304). Events and processes of a global nature, such as flight/migration, are oftentimes rendered local (i.e. domesticated) by national media, by way of restricted prisms or a domestic filter (Curran 2005; Nossek 2006). We may draw a distinction between a *professional* and a national-patriotic frame in media coverage of conflicts (Nossek 2006, 47). On the other hand, a degree of domestication may be needed and appreciated to connect local people's experiences to overarching processes (Eide & Kunelius 2012). However, such a degree does not exclude contextualisation.

4. Flight and contexts

Contextualisation in the ‘media and migration’ field presupposes a holistic approach. In the following, I try to examine the migration processes as a field of research, by dividing it into three connected areas, and using my own experiences from all three, convinced that such approaches may contribute to a more informed public debate on migration.

Connecting research on foreign and domestic reporting on migration helps to build the latter into a solid knowledge base of migrants and refugees’ countries of origin and/or regions where several states are involved in or ridden by violent conflict. In the case of Afghanistan, where safety is precarious, acquiring such information ideally requires knowledge of Afghan history and culture, the situation for minorities and women and their (constitutional) rights.

4.1. From the ‘there’

Afghanistan has been in a situation of war or violent conflict since the Soviet-supported coup d’état in April 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion in December 1979. For a long time, the country was the world’s largest ‘provider’ of refugees, mainly to the neighbouring countries Iran and Pakistan. Civil war between the resistance leaders (mujahedeen) followed the Soviet withdrawal, which in turn facilitated a Taliban take-over in 1996.⁸ Taliban ruled the country until the U.S.-led invasion in October 2001, and were for a while considered as largely defeated, while in recent years their offensive and brutal fight has gained them control over roughly half the country. This history is rich in detail and paradoxes, and since the country has no ethnic majority, it has a wide range of special conflicts.

Historically, the Hazaras (mainly adhering to Shi’ite Islam) have been the most oppressed group (Eide and Skaufjord 2014), and had another ‘peak’ during the Taliban rule⁹; which helps to explain why a large proportion of asylum seekers to Norway and elsewhere belong to this minority.

Abdul left Afghanistan during the Taliban reign, and was deported back home after their fall.

4.2. From the ‘nowhere’

To understand the potential traumas of many refugees/migrants, their experiences when travelling to presumed safety are important. Underway, refugees find themselves in a situation, where they ‘do not change places, they *lose* their place on earth and are catapulted into a nowhere’ (Bauman 2007, 45). Those who leave their country of origin do not do so light-heartedly. During flight, they face many risks, not least when traversing (in the case of Afghanistan) Iran and Turkey, oftentimes being subject to ruthless smugglers. Besides, the

journey to Europe is increasingly prevented by new treaties and by an increasing non-acceptance. A recent report indicates that 75% of the returnees leave the country again¹⁰ despite the hardships experienced underway.

Abdul belongs in this statistic, having left the country twice and spent years searching for a safe place in Europe. His first flight lasted for two years before he reached Sweden.

A particular focus on travel experiences has been on the usage of modern cell phones as an indispensable tool while underway. These studies document situations of risk and deep distress, but also demonstrate how modern technology has facilitated refugee travels (Kaufmann 2016, 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Eide 2020). Experiences from in-depth interviews with Afghan asylum seekers, indicated that their chances of gaining asylum were slim (Eide, Ismaeli, and Senatorzade 2017).

4.3. From the 'HERE'

After arrival, the situation therefore remains complicated. Some refugees are rejected and sent home, but soon leave the country again. Others, who have obtained the right to residence, face integration challenges. Some wait, while nursing meagre hopes; some disappear from the surface to obtain an insecure status as 'illegals'.

Abdul has experienced all these situations, in at least three countries.

The nation-confined 'we' vs. 'they'-relationship in the public sphere has previously been confirmed by a project where media actors with ethnic minority background shared their experiences with this researcher. Having done studies on media *representation* of migrants and refugees', my motivation was to let 'them' articulate their own media experiences and strategies. When talking to journalists, these media actors (several of them born and raised in Norway) at times experienced being (too) strongly associated with a presumed 'homeland culture'; or, post-9-11, in many cases a 'Muslim culture'. Some were asked by journalists to distance themselves particularly from terror attacks or from female genital mutilation, being subject to a journalistic 'collective responsibility' approach, due to their presupposed foreign-ness, while they demonstrated more interest in political conflicts in Norway. Besides, they strongly emphasised their urge to be treated as individuals, and not as categories or groups (Eide 2010, 2011).

4.4. The 'here' and 'there'

Some journalists, who had worked on the 'migration beat' for a long time and thus had the chance to 'dig deeper' and challenge stereotypes or essentialization, have tried to combine these two situations. One reporter travelled to Pakistan to understand more of the society from which many of her immigrant

sources came. There, she lived with relatives of one of the families she had interviewed in Norway. After her visit, she admitted in a research interview (Eide 2002) that before travelling: 'I thought it was strange that "they" had not adapted more to Norwegian society. As I came back, I thought, how far they have come! The perspective was turned around'. She added that she had learned that 'other ways of organising one's life can be adequate, that other systems than "ours" are adequate. This may be learning as a human being'. (Eide 2002, 295). This journalist's transnational (contrapuntal) experiences are not unique, but economic constraints in today's media may limit such efforts.

My own experiences when staying in Lahore, Pakistan (spring 2006), at the peak of the 'cartoon crisis', included witnessing how most politicians, public figures and media in a highly religious country regarded freedom of expression differently from mainstream European media, while some media also had some room for a diversity less acknowledged in the 'West'.¹¹ Among the people I met, were journalists who claimed that 'our, Western' freedom of expression practices indirectly lead to a tougher situation for 'their' freedoms. In addition, the accusations of 'our' double standards concerning human rights were amply present, not least in the elite (English language) press. 'The Empire' did indeed write back (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989; Eide 2007; Eide, Kunelius, and Phillips 2008). It helped me to see 'my own' (personal background, 'culture', country and region) from 'outside' (see Harding below), the way 'they' perceived me, oftentimes as a 'representative' of the 'West' (comments such as 'You (i.e. the West) published the blasphemous cartoons').

4.4.1. Norway's Afghanistan legacy

Norway has long been involved in military action in Afghanistan, still has a group of elite soldiers in the country and has spent several billions of NOK on these efforts. We may presume that all nations involved in these war¹² and reconstruction efforts, have a self-interest in providing positive information of progress due to their own involvement. By painting a positive image of the country to defend their nation's involvement, may in its turn affect the Norwegian authorities' arguments in debates about asylum seekers' 'safe' return, but this special contextualisation is rarely explicit in mainstream media. As an 'expert of sorts' I have also tried to mention such perspectives in my media encounters, which entails opposing national mainstream politics, realising that this perspective seems to be shared by groups of journalists as well. Whether being a seasoned journalist educator entails having a more easy report with journalists, is a topic deserving of a separate article, but the possibility cannot be excluded.

4.4.2. Transnational refugee stories

In spite of much political migration debate being de-contextualised and focused on welfare state sustainability (which seemingly depends on

reducing the number of refugee arrivals), some few media stories have focused on the brutal situation in Afghanistan, when individuals or families have been deported or in danger of being sent back. One reason may be that several independent experts (including this author) have written and spoken of the dangers Afghans face in the prolonged war situation. Probably more important is the emergence and resilience of local support groups, who refuse to accept deportation of families and individuals, to whom they have become attached.¹³

In some earlier asylum cases concerning Afghan refugees, I have experienced a 'clash of definitions' when it comes to updated knowledge about the country, not least regarding what may be defined as 'safe' places/cities/regions for eventual returnees. Asylum seekers originating in one province where the situation is considered unsafe have been referred to 'safe' return to Kabul. However, a list of bomb attacks in Kabul tells of a massive increase in numbers in 2018,¹⁴ the situation being unsafe to the extent that for example American and other diplomats travel by helicopter within the city.¹⁵ They still (2020) do.¹⁶

In later years, it seems as if the (decontextualised) argument of 'practicing strict migrant policy' overrules arguments concerning safety or ethnic and religious minority vulnerability, when it comes to Afghan refugees. Media coverage show that key witnesses having visited and researched or lived in Afghanistan, use their transnational competence in asylum court cases. A former high-level diplomat and chief of UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) has witnessed in favour of asylum families.¹⁷

5. Migration, values and resistance: the writer's self

Through my own numerous visits to Afghanistan, I have remained in close contact with the Afghan extended family, to which Abdul belongs, and with other people, not least within the cultural field (media, literature). In 2018 alone, 18 journalists and media workers were killed in Afghanistan, the highest number ever in one single year, and thus Afghanistan became the 'deadliest country for journalists'.¹⁸ In almost all cases, the situation is one of impunity for the assassins.

5.1. Ambiguity and positionality

When in Afghanistan, I am deeply concerned with the massive ongoing brain drain depriving the country of educated, resourceful people, followed by a deep admiration for the resilience of those who choose to stay, in spite of threats and intensified war. Several hundred journalists have left the country during the last few years. On the other hand, having witnessed the precarious situation, including meeting individuals who receive threats from Taliban and

other extremists, it is hard not to sympathise with those who search for a peaceful life elsewhere, including those who seek asylum in Europe. Thus, I have found myself in another ‘in-between-ness’-dilemma, understanding the critical attitudes of those who stay on towards the ones who leave; but also the situation of those who take to the road of flight to find a safer future elsewhere. It is hard to communicate this ambiguity.

It is also hard to recognise the limits of knowledge. As Harding (1995) iterates in her discussion of standpoint approaches, ‘what we *do* in our social relations both enables and limits (it does not determine) what we can know’ (1995: 341). She adds that ‘standpoint theories *begin* from the recognition of social inequality’, and contrasts their conflict models to ‘the consensual model of liberal political philosophy assumed by empiricists’ (ibid.).

All human thought necessarily can be only partial; it is always limited by the fact of having only a particular location – of not being able to be everywhere and see everything, and of being ‘contained’ by cultural assumptions that become visible only from outside that culture (...) (Harding 1995: 341)

Harding recommends to start a research project ‘from *outside* those conceptual schemes and the activities that generate them’, from ‘marginal lives’ and their locations (ibid. 342); I guess as a remedy against the ‘containment’. Such a positioning may relate to Spivak’s unlearning one’s privilege as loss (Landry and MacLean 1996). As Porter holds, such an unlearning ‘is a key element of doing good cross-cultural research. It requires critical reflection on how we have come to value our own knowledge and practices and investigating why that knowledge is privileged’ (Porter 2007, 105).

5.2. Journalist ideals, media expectations

In Norwegian mainstream media, opinionated items and even reportage supportive of individual asylum seekers do occur. Many journalists adhere to their watchdog ideals and draw attention to specific cases, where those considered as expertise become interesting sources.

Journalism research involves relating to knowledge and practices of journalist ideals. Professionals are supposed to be part of the ‘fourth estate’ ideal, an independent institution able to correct the other ones with regard to citizen interests. Furthermore, they are supposed to be neutral, balanced and fair. Interpretations of these ideals vary, as demonstrated by Melin (2008). These conflicting ideals may connect to differing journalist approaches to migration. Some professional work would reflect pressure from the political field, whose mainstream actors advocate strictness. Related is a practice adhering to the ‘neutral’ ideal, *reporting the news*, of arrivals, refusals, and the political tug-of-war. Yet others may reveal themselves as *spokespersons*

(ibid.) for asylum seekers or support groups and risk being perceived as partisan, eager to change public opinion in favour of these groups.

Media representation of underprivileged groups has been revealed as a challenging task. My own findings indicate that the ways in which journalists refer to their professional ideals, may be selective and related to sets of *values* held by the reporters and their institutions (Eide 1991, 2000). When a marginalised group struggles to defend/obtain certain rights, does the watchdog/fourth estate ideal take the front seat, of the neutral observer?

More importantly in this context: How does this diversity of professional practices connect to academic research? In an historical account, Nyre distinguishes between several streams of research, such as ‘progressive’ research, ‘administrative’ research and ‘critical research’ (leaning on the Frankfurt School) claiming that:

Researchers communicate a value orientation also when they contribute “neutrally” to the empirical understanding of a social practice, because the public’s knowledge of an already dominant behavior is expanded instead of being refocused on something different (Nyre 2009, 9).

To cover inequality without addressing injustice may, then, support the status quo, at least not contribute to change. However, there is a difference between the professional researcher neutrality in empirical research, and the motivation behind preferred research fields. The latter may well be value-driven. As a researcher having worked for many years with media marginalisation and representation of less empowered groups, be they women, migrants, sexual and other minorities, I admit to having internalised certain values associated with de-marginalisation from the outset of my academic career. My choice of the migration field, though, is also inspired by the long-lasting international experiences mentioned above. Nevertheless, I have seemingly chosen a path considered ‘politically correct’ (PC) by critics. As Norman Fairclough observes, this correctness ‘and being “politically correct” are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents’. He also characterises the PC impositions as ‘a form of cultural politics, an intervention to change representations, values and identities as a way of achieving social change’ (Fairclough 2003, 21). While Fairclough takes a critical stance towards this labelling, he recognises trends of ‘arrogance, self-righteousness and puritanism of an ultra-left politics’, giving the PC critics a ‘plausible target’ (ibid. 25). This may have helped a broader usage of the term, where attackers or critics substitute arguments for the PC label.

5.3. Challenges

In Norway, migration and refugee politics is currently perhaps the most divisive political question, attracting substantial public interest.¹⁹

Much journalism *research* seems to relate to the normative ideals of journalism (Lindholm 2015). This does not, however, entail having journalist norms as a guiding principle for research. Nevertheless, the 'professional approach' may still distinguish journalism academics such as myself (whose main task in addition to research it is to educate media professionals, or other 'representing intellectuals') from for example sociologists, who do not cater to a particular *profession*.

5.3.1. Norms, threats and critique

An overarching norm in research at institutions catering to education of professionals is that projects should contribute to the improvement of the professional fields (OsloMet 2018).²⁰ Another aim is to '[F]ollow up and further develop the action plan for *diversity* in cooperation with relevant stakeholders in the region'. (ibid.). A constant dilemma, then, is to what extent a researcher should cater to the needs of the profession as defined by significant leaders (stakeholders) therein, or to what extent the researcher may allow herself to venture into alternative problematics, including independent ideas concerning the presumed (strategic) needs of the field. Clearly, norms may contradict each other and sometimes the collision may result in pragmatist approaches.

As a critical researcher, I am obliged to preserve my role of independent scrutiny vis-à-vis the journalist field, for instance ongoing media bias or neglect or marginalisation of underprivileged groups. Far from all media researchers work with migration or indeed marginalisation, and in the past both migration and gender research may have been considered less prestigious than other media research, such as for example digitalisation, being such a large part of media development. The speed, with which this changes the journalist field, is impressive and begs researcher involvement, which may push migration research within the field to the back seat, if not integrated properly.

Concerning the risk of being labelled as PC and/or receiving threats, as mentioned above, I am no exception to the trend. Many years ago, a person with a nickname expressed hopes on email that my family and I would be 'raped by Muslims'. Another more recent critical comment was directed at a co-researcher and myself for our contribution of an article addressing media representation of migrants in general, and the overwhelmingly negative press representation of people with Somalian background in Norway. The critic asked whether the 'press should refrain from telling about negative conditions since this might be "casting suspicion"? Fact is that only 25% of Somalian women are working [outside the home] and well below half of the men, which is visible from the income statistics'. Furthermore he claimed that the two of us (both labelled 'left wing radicals') insisted on keeping Somalians in a 'victim position'.²¹ Representation of Somalians was a short part of an

article treating difficult journalist choices. While mentioning negative representation, we also highlighted some more optimistic representation (Eide and Simonsen 2010). Our approach, however, included regarding *negativity* and *conflict* as part of journalistic *doxa*, arguing that this may still have other consequences for marginalised groups than for majority people.

This critique did not allude directly to the intensified debates/critique during the last two decades. A critique oftentimes articulated is that majority left-leaning intellectuals (not least researchers) have tended to ignore malpractices in migrant milieus, driven by the infamous PC. This may have been partly true, and can be understood as a misguided anti-racism, ignoring concern for severe patriarchal and homophobic attitudes in certain migrant milieus. Besides, it may be connected to fears for taking the white 'missionary position' towards vulnerable groups, instead of supporting elements within the groups who themselves fight (supposedly more efficiently) against malpractices.

Whether left-wing radical and/or PC, I have in very few cases been met with actual critical scrutiny of my *research*. The reason for receiving less critique than some other researchers may be that as a *media researcher* one does not map *society* as such, rather the *relationship* between media and society. This may be considered more peripheral to political controversies than indicated when it comes to sociologists (Andersson 2018).

As a public speaker, though, I have encountered critique²² for advocating dialogue and deliberation with people from other backgrounds or for defending minorities. This happened not least in connection with the cartoon crisis (2006-), where I defended freedom of expression but questioned the wisdom of provocation. Some of this critique looks like blame for not being anti-Muslim or anti-Islam (enough) and was voiced mostly in 'alternative, right-wing media', which also have found other opportunities of attack. However, as with the rest of my research profile, critics have rarely focused on the *media research* done on the Cartoon crisis, which tried to apply contrapuntal reading, i.e. seeing the 'event' (and indeed the cartoons) from different locations and contexts (Eide 2007; Eide, Kunelius, and Phillips 2008).

6. Conclusion

I write this piece guided by the conviction that in a globalised world, researchers need to look across borders (beyond Europe and 'the West') to contribute to the decency of current migration debates. Afghanistan has been used as a case study, since Afghans represent a large proportion of refugees travelling westwards, and live in precarious conditions both within and outside the European borders; and not least since most European countries have been involved in war efforts there for the past 19 years with very limited success.²³ De-contextualisation and methodological nationalism in

media research as well as in journalism will leave citizens less fit to evaluate migration policies and perform their democratic duties.

A question raised in this very important debate, is whether some *research fields* (such as for example media and marginalisation) themselves attract people who believe research can provide platforms for societal change, *and/or* whether researchers prioritising such fields of research to a larger extent than other researchers risk being regarded as PC and/or normative (Andersson 2018). Another interest worthy of further consideration is whether researchers within such a controversial field have themselves experienced marginalisation.

Nevertheless, if it is PC to try and connect the ‘theres’, ‘nowheres’ and ‘heres’, if it is PC to remind professionals within the journalistic field of their variety of roles and ideals, including speaking for the voiceless or vulnerable, that will leave me little choice but to accept the characteristic. To twist the concept (PC) has been part of my strategy since a monography in 2004, referring to several positions having to do with a human rights perspective. As written in an article on the emerging *citizen journalism*, at stake in (regular) news reporting is ‘its perceived capacity to create discursive spaces for empathetic engagement – of bearing witness – at a distance, especially where human rights violations are concerned’ (Allan, Sonwalkar, and Carter 2007, 373).

7. Epilogue: constantly in ‘nowhere-land’

About seven years back, Abdul managed to invite his wife and two children to join him in Italy, I learned through Facebook updates. They did not say *how* the three of them travelled, whether he went back to accompany them, and whether they went by road or plane, but they settled in the Southern part of Italy.

Abdul, with his numerous years of migration experience, is in many ways more of an expert on flight than many academics. Two years ago, I understood that he was in France, perhaps due to the increasing strictness in Italian migration policy, and that he and the nuclear family are struggling to obtain a permanent legal status after many years in Europe. He seems to have left Facebook, but through other relatives, we learn that he is still trying his luck, perhaps hoping too much.

Notes

1. Before embarking on an academic career within the field of journalism and media studies, I worked as a journalist and aid worker in Peshawar, Pakistan (1987–1988), surrounded by Afghan refugees. Later, I have visited Afghanistan many times both during the reign of Taliban (1996–2001) and after.
2. I have stayed in India/Pakistan and Afghanistan as an NGO worker, freelance journalist and academic in several periods.

3. Only Turkey had a higher number in 2018; 429 came from Afghanistan, among them 167 minors (below 18), and a large majority were male. <https://www.udi.no/statistikk-og-analyse/statistikk/asylsoknader-etter-statsborgerskap-aldersgruppe-og-kjonn-2018/> Accessed 04.12.2018.
4. <https://www.newsenglish.no/2017/10/05/calls-rise-to-halt-afghan-returns/> Accessed 04.12.2018.
5. Search done 07.02.2020.
6. The sentence is a quote from theatre director Marit Moum Aune many years ago. In reality this is of course also complicated, and the complexity plus ongoing debates on where to draw the line when it comes to threats and hateful speech will however not be an issue in this article.
7. Quite a few journalism/media educators in the Norwegian academic world have worked as journalists, and some, including this researcher, continue to do so.
8. The Mujahedeen parties ruled in Kabul from 1992 to 1996, and in this period, probably due to lack of superpower intervention/presence (Galtung and Ruge 1965), media coverage was limited.
9. Taliban and other Sunni extremists consider Shi'ites as heretics.
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/25/violence-forces-refugees-to-flee-afghanistan-again>. Accessed 05.12.2018.
11. There were columnists in elite media who actually defended the publication of the twelve cartoons.
12. Throughout the years, Norwegian political elites have, with some exceptions been consistently unwilling to apply the notion 'war' about the goings-on in Afghanistan.
13. An illustrative case is the deportation and the subsequent judicial treatment of the Farida Khurami case. Farida and her Hazara family were deported to Afghanistan when she was 9 ½ years old and had been well integrated in Dokka municipality, where she made many friends at school. She is born in Iran, and had before the deportation, never visited Afghanistan. The family's appeal won at all levels in court, but the migration authorities rejected their return to Norway (Line Fransson, Dagbladet. Journalists have interviewed her from the family's hiding place in Kabul, where they almost do not venture out due to the threatening situation. A support group, including her teacher, funds the family, and Farida is able to study at her Norwegian school. In this case, the Immigration appeal's board (UNE) found the situation in the family's original home district Jaghori, Ghazni province 'continuously improving', while some months later, at the time of the court appeal case, Taliban attacked the district, and several families fled, some over to Pakistan.
The support group at Dokka received the Norwegian Amnesty award in November 2018. This media coverage of the Farida appeal case transcends the national approach, by connecting to Kabul and simultaneously giving voice to local people at Dokka and to expertise with transnational experiences.
14. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_terrorist_attacks_in_Kabul Read 18.12.2018.
15. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/18093/us-uses-a-private-helicopter-force-to-get-around-kabul-and-intel-woes-might-put-it-at-risk> Accessed 09.02.2020.
16. This author's own observations in Kabul, late 2019.
17. Martine Aurdal: 'Faridas helvete' (Farida's Hell), Dagbladet 21 November 2018. Accessed 09.02.2020.

18. <https://rsf.org/en/news/more-journalists-killed-first-nine-months-2018-all-2017> Accessed 04.12.2018. RSF claims 15 journalists have been killed, local observers, such as NAI, puts the total number at 18, including media workers, since media institutions have been attacked as such.
19. TNS Gallup demonstrates that both in 2015 and 2016, migration was on top concerning citizen concern. https://kantano.no/contentassets/70cebbf9270741bbb0adfd1ec82e95a3/tns-gallups-klimabarometer-2016_pre_sentasjon_for-publisering.pdf Accessed 03.12.2018.
20. The main slogan of OsloMet is: 'New knowledge – new practice'. Strategy 2024: 'Our study programmes will be of high international standard, based on research, close contact with professional practice and up-to-date, student-active forms of learning. Our research will be relevant and capable of solving the challenges of tomorrow'. <http://www.hioa.no/eng/About-HiOA/Virksomhetsstyring/Strategies> Accessed 18.12.2018.
21. Jon Hustad: «Eit politisk byråkrati» (a Political Bureaucracy), *Dag og Tid* 4. March 2010.
22. Most of these comments are found on the extreme right-wing website *Document.no*.
23. The recently published 'Afghanistan papers' demonstrate how leaders of the Western war efforts in Afghanistan have admitted to not knowing enough of the country, but knowing that they could not win. See Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/Accessed 02.02.2020>.

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