

**To cite this article:** García-Castillo, N., Bueno Doral, T., & Hänninen, L. (2024). Perception of the Media Discourse on Migration in Spain before and During Covid-19: Different Stakeholders' Views and Good Practices. *Anuario Electrónico de Estudios en Comunicación Social "Disertaciones"*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/disertaciones/a.13093>

# PERCEPTION OF THE MEDIA DISCOURSE ON MIGRATION IN SPAIN BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19: DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS AND GOOD PRACTICES

La percepción del discurso mediático sobre migración en España antes y durante el Covid-19: opiniones de los diferentes *stakeholders* y buenas prácticas

Percepção do discurso da mídia sobre a migração na Espanha antes e durante a Covid-19: visões e boas práticas de diferentes partes interessadas

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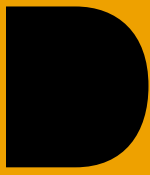
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*Received: March 23, 2023*

*Accepted: July 10, 2023*

*Prepublication date: November 27, 2023*



## ABSTRACT

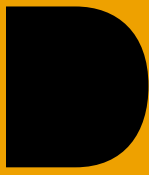
Owing to Covid-19, migration was not a main media topic in Spain in 2020. However, the spring of 2021 witnessed an upturn in media coverage of migration, which coincided with the regional election campaigns and the Ceuta migrant crisis. In this study, our main objectives were to i) analyze the opinions of various stakeholders, both individuals and civil society organizations, regarding media discourse on migration and forced migration before and during the pandemic, and ii) compile and propose good practices to improve these narratives and hence their potential effect on the integration of migrants. For this purpose, we conducted 25 interviews in 2019 with highly vulnerable, forcibly displaced people. We also administered an open-ended questionnaire to 16 representatives of national and international stakeholders, including policy-makers, non-governmental organizations, researchers, educators, businesses, and migrants, in the spring of 2021. The collected data displayed a wide range of perspectives from different stakeholders regarding the potential consequences of media discourse on migrants. In addition, we compiled the existing and novel proposals for good practices that may counteract biased communication and, consequently, give rise to the development of new measures for potential replication in other regions.

**Keywords:** Migration discourse; Covid-19; forced migration; good practices; media effects.

## RESUMEN

La migración no figuró entre los principales temas mediáticos en España en 2020 por el Covid-19. Sin embargo, la primavera de 2021 fue testigo de un repunte en la cobertura mediática de la migración, coincidiendo con campañas electorales autonómicas y la crisis migratoria de Ceuta. Nuestros objetivos principales son: primero, analizar las opiniones de varios *stakeholders* (individuos y organizaciones de la sociedad civil) sobre el discurso mediático acerca de la migración y la migración forzada antes y durante la pandemia; y segundo, compilar y proponer buenas prácticas para mejorar estas narrativas y, por lo tanto, su potencial efecto en la integración de los y las migrantes. Para ello, realizamos 25 entrevistas en 2019 a personas desplazadas forzosamente en situación de alta vulnerabilidad. También administramos un cuestionario abierto a 16 representantes nacionales e internacionales (miembros de la administración, organizaciones no gubernamentales, investigadores/as, educadores/as, empresas y migrantes) en la primavera de 2021. La información recogida representa las opiniones de diferentes *stakeholders* respecto a las posibles consecuencias del discurso mediático sobre los migrantes. Además, hemos recopilado propuestas de buenas prácticas que pueden contrarrestar la comunicación sesgada y dar lugar a nuevas acciones que podrían replicarse en otros lugares.

**Palabras clave:** discurso migratorio; Covid-19; migración forzada; buenas prácticas; efectos de los medios.



## RESUMO

A migração não esteve entre os principais temas da mídia na Espanha em 2020 por causa da Covid-19. No entanto, a primavera de 2021 testemunhou um aumento na cobertura da mídia sobre a migração, coincidindo com as campanhas eleitorais regionais e a crise migratória de Ceuta. Neste artigo, os nossos principais objetivos são: primeiro, analisar as opiniões de várias partes interessadas, tanto indivíduos como organizações da sociedade civil, sobre o discurso mediático sobre migração e migração forçada antes e durante a pandemia; e, segundo, compilar e propor boas práticas para melhorar essas narrativas e, portanto, seu efeito potencial na integração dos migrantes. Para tanto, realizamos 25 entrevistas em 2019 com pessoas altamente vulneráveis e deslocadas à força. Também aplicamos um questionário aberto a 16 representantes de partes interessadas nacionais e internacionais, incluindo formuladores de políticas, organizações não governamentais, pesquisadores, educadores, empresas e migrantes, na primavera de 2021. As informações que coletamos nos permitiram apresentar uma ampla gama de perspectivas de diferentes partes interessadas sobre as possíveis consequências do discurso da mídia sobre os migrantes. Além disso, compilamos propostas existentes e novas de boas práticas que podem neutralizar a comunicação tendenciosa e, conseqüentemente, dar origem a novas ações que podem ser replicadas em outras regiões.

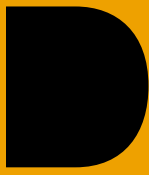
**Palavras-chave:** discurso migratório; Covid-19; migração forçada; boas práticas; efeitos da mídia.

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## Introduction

### The migratory context

Immediately before the pandemic, the immigration scenario to Spain had only just recovered after several years of economic crisis, representing 14% of the Spanish population in 2019 (González Enríquez, 2019), and signifying that the number of foreigners increased by 395,168 people that year (INE, 2020). However, as a consequence of human mobility restrictions owing to the pandemic, the trend of increased immigration to Spain was broken in 2021 with only 49,612 foreigners entering the country (INE, 2022). Specifically, regarding forced migration, for the first time in 2019, Spain became the third country in the European Union to receive asylum seekers, a position that was also maintained in 2021. However, in both years, the percentage of asylum seekers who obtained international protection was considerably lower than the average for European countries in general (CEAR, 2020a, 2022).



The pandemic significantly affected highly vulnerable groups in Spain. The states of emergency and lockdowns further exacerbated the previous difficulties experienced by migrants and refugees resulting from “administrative, financial, legal, and language barriers” to access the health system (WHO, 2018, p. 12). The situation of people on the move during this period has been defined by the United Nations (UN, 2020, p. 2) as “three interlocking crises” due to health, socioeconomic, and protection factors. Although the pandemic has evidenced the positive contribution of the migrant population in Spain, xenophobic attitudes have increased (CEAR, 2020b). In a survey conducted by IPSOS (2021) on the overall attitudes toward refugees, 44% of the Spanish respondents suggested that the borders should be entirely closed to refugees. The mistaken perception that asylum seekers are economic migrants is also becoming more widespread.

The spread of fake news during the pandemic has reinforced populism and reduced support for non-government organizations (NGOs) that work with the migrant population (Thomas et al., 2022). Migration has increasingly become a political tool as some leaders attempt to divide communities over this issue (IOM, 2020). During the regional election campaign in Madrid in the May of 2021, Vox, a Spanish right-wing populist party, fueled the social construction of immigration as a problem with an explicit anti-Muslim discourse that characterizes the party’s propaganda (Fernández-Suárez, 2021) rendered through a campaign poster targeting unaccompanied migrant minors.

However, as stated by the UN (2020, p. 3):

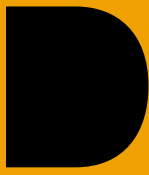
Exclusion is costly in the long run whereas inclusion pays off for everyone. [...] People on the move are a part of the solution. They are at the frontline providing healthcare services and keeping our global food production and supply chains going. We need to value and recognize their contributions to our societies. [...] This crisis therefore offers an opportunity to evaluate the positive contributions of people on the move to societies and the critical role of migration in countries of destination more broadly.

## Media discourse on migration and forced migration

Media discourse on migration has been analyzed from various perspectives. One of the main frameworks for all linguistic levels is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), defined as “discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talks in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). This interdisciplinary approach specifically focuses on media narratives that delegitimize and dehumanize migration using metaphors of objects and commodities, natural phenomena, and terrorism, as well as the opposition of “them” and “us” that forms a part of an ideological discourse (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018). This ideological discourse: “Is generally organized by a general strategy of positive self-presentation (boasting) and negative other-presentation (derogation). This strategy may operate at all levels, generally in such a way that our good things are emphasized and our bad things de-emphasized, and the opposite for the Others whose bad things will be enhanced, and whose good things will be mitigated, hidden or forgotten” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 126).

Other common patterns have been observed, such as the criminalization of migrants, primarily concerning Muslim and African immigrants (Eberl et al., 2018; Galyga et al., 2019).

Forced migration is defined by the European Commission (2023) as “a migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes”. Media



representations of forced migrants are often over-simplified, frequently portraying them as victims or heroes who risk their lives (Eberl et al., 2018; Horsti, 2008). Another common stereotype is that of “good” asylum seekers in contrast with “bad” ones who are considered sources of illnesses, insecurity, riots, sexual aggressions, and terrorism (Dāvidsone & Galvanovska, 2019). The dehumanization of forced migrants in media discourse also occurs through the use of images of large groups of depersonalized migrants that can potentially “dilute compassion and cultivate a culture of fear” (Bleiker et al., 2013).

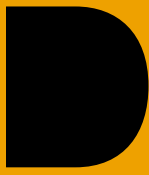
Moha Gerehou (2021), a Spanish journalist of Gambian ancestry, criticizes the use of terms such as “illegal immigrants” or “floods”, the protagonism attributed to voluntary workers, the generalization of life stories, and the overuse of images of injured migrants. These aspects may jeopardize the creation of positive media narratives and the construction of an inclusive and compassionate imaginary toward migrants and can even maintain negative perceptions in the mainstream due to the media’s key role in establishing the agenda of actuality and “guiding” our focus in a particular aspect of the news. According to the Framing Theory, the salience of these topics and specific attributes related to migrants are transferred from the media to the entire population (Eberl et al., 2018). The negative framing of political issues such as immigration can influence policy (Mendelsohn et al., 2021), resulting in restrictive immigration policies (Eberl et al., 2018; Theorin et al., 2021) and the development of public opinion with more negative attitudes toward immigration (Mendelsohn et al., 2021). Negative migration discourses may even influence audiences’ behaviors and “lead to the success of anti-immigrant parties” (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 211), thereby aggravating the segregation of migrants (Esmer, 2017). However, positive framing, such as focusing on personal experiences, exerts a powerful effect in fostering positive attitudes (Theorin et al., 2021), and hero narratives could promote social change toward the development of more humane immigration policies (Eberl et al., 2018).

Criticisms have also targeted the scant participation of migrants in media discourse, to the extent of “taking away their leading role in their own life experiences” (Hänninen et al., 2013, p. 50) since “it appears that the representation of migrants in discourse is mostly controlled by elite actors” instead of the migrants themselves (Galyga et al., 2019, p. 31). Similar conclusions were observed by Van Dijk (2008, 2013), who are the main theorists of CDA.

Other recent studies have focused on an analysis of social media, especially since the growth of parties on the extreme right with a marked anti-immigration discourse that primarily resorts to these new media (Eberl et al., 2018; IOM, 2020), as in the case of the Vox party (Aladro & Requeijo, 2020).

Despite the numerous studies that have analyzed media discourse, research on the opinion of different stakeholders regarding media discourse on migration is much less frequent, as media representatives (Bittencourt, 2021; Dāvidsone & Galvanovska, 2019; Mertens et al., 2019), migrants (Bellardi et al., 2018; Esmer, 2017; Smets et al., 2019), and NGO representatives (Hänninen et al., 2013; Bueno Doral et al., 2022) tend to be examined as separate entities.

Terminological confusion between refugees and migrants and the dissemination of sensationalist information are the main communication difficulties faced by NGOs working with forced migrants (Hänninen et al., 2013). During the lockdowns of 2020, these organizations encountered greater difficulties in reporting the situation of migrants in Spain due to “the infodemic” and the fact that several journalists specializing in migration were instead obliged to cover events directly related to the health crisis (Bueno Doral et al., 2022). Recently, Bittencourt (2021) studied the motivations and difficulties of journalists working in the media who deconstruct negative stereotypes associated with migration. Last, but not least, according to the migrants themselves, the media discourse influences their self-perceptions of safety, pride, and integration (Esmer, 2017). In fact, as concluded by one of the few studies that



delved into forced migrants' perceptions of media discourses, media victimization of refugees, far from being a positive stereotype, prevents them from demonstrating their abilities and resilience as reflexive agents (Smets et al., 2019).

The application of the emerging discipline of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) to the social sciences (García-Castillo et al., 2020) and, specifically, to media discourse on migration and forced migration, can provide a more holistic vision for the deeper understanding of the phenomenon as well as the of possibility of obtaining proposals for real and responsible solutions. Responsive and adaptive change as well as diversity and inclusion are among the basic pillars of RRI (Stilgoe et al., 2013), which, in the current context, refer to the media's capacity to interpret migration in a global setting, understanding the changing character of the vulnerability context related to this phenomenon, and the ability to foresee future migration scenarios. The capacity to obtain insights and include the migrants themselves in the narratives is directly related to the active and joint participation of related stakeholders, especially the migrants and forced migrants themselves.

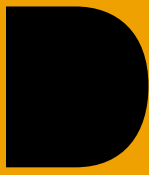
No study has simultaneously analyzed the opinions of the representatives of different stakeholder helices of the RRI approach as the present paper does. Thus, this study provides the necessary framework for interpreting research that analyzes media content through qualitative and quantitative analyses of journalistic discourse.

## 1. Methodology

This study was conducted within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project “Reshaping Attention and Inclusion Strategies for Distinctively vulnerable people among the forcibly displaced (RAISD)”, the main objective of which is to provide tailored attention and inclusion strategies for distinctively vulnerable people among the forcibly displaced ones. This project is based on a participatory methodological approach that triangulates RRI, action research, and Socio-Ecological Models.

Co-design from the RRI approach has been studied by previous authors of diverse fields toward promoting the social inclusion of groups (Di Giulio et al., 2016) as well as to generate ethical and socially desirable futures with the participation of the different types of stakeholders (Van Oudheusden & Shelley-Egan, 2021) —including vulnerable stakeholders (Ruggiu, 2020)— involved in social problems.

On one hand, RRI has certain points in common with the other approaches, such as collaborative ethnographies (CE). RRI and CE consider “different experiences of participatory research [...] based on the configuration of a subject of critical and reflective knowledge” (Katzer et al., 2022) and “direct cooperation” with the social groups (Hale, 2001). In addition, both RRI and CE imply “exceed conventional methods for generating academic ‘data’ [...] by resorting to meetings, exchanges, and workshops” and “a questioning, an opposition, a form of response to the most traditional and hegemonic forms of research” (Katzer et al., 2022). However, RRI is a discipline that offers a more in-depth, holistic application to research in diverse fields. RRI recognizes the need to co-create research and innovation (R&I) activities, where all relevant stakeholders play an active role in the definition, execution, and evaluation from the earliest stages of the research. Furthermore, RRI has, as key pillars, the factors of anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Thus, RRI ensures that R&I addresses societal challenges, opens R&I to all actors and at all levels, and aligns R&I with societal values, needs, and expectations.



The Socio-Ecological Models aim to analyze a social setting holistically at different levels of abstraction and from different perspectives. Therefore, the use of the Socio-Ecological Models implies, as with EC, that “social-historical context” —considered in our research through the micro, meso, and macro levels and their interrelationships (RAISD project, 2022)— “constitutes a starting point to examine the conditions that intervene in the process” (Pacheco de Oliveira, 1999) of R&I.

Action Research contributes to the RAISD methodology employing context-dependent procedures developed through inquiry in a specific setting, instead of the application of general standardized practices. Therefore, the project implements a specific participatory AR approach to study the vulnerable groups among forced displaced people.<sup>1</sup>

The RAISD project operates through action research units (ARUS) located in 7 countries that form a consortium. These units constitute permanent laboratories wherein all R&I actions are co-designed with the remaining participating social actors, who represent the quintuple helix of RRI: 1) refugees themselves, NGOs, and other members of civil society; 2) policy-makers; 3) researchers; 4) businesses, and 5) representatives from the field of education.

The collaborative nature of the work conducted by the Spanish ARU attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How did forced migrants perceive the media discourse of migration before the pandemic?
- What perceptions do different stakeholders have on the evolution of media discourse during the pandemic?
- Are there good practices that could counteract negative media messages?
- To answer these research questions, the present study considered the following objectives:
- To analyze the opinions of the abovementioned stakeholder groups regarding media discourse on migration and forced migration and their influence before and during the pandemic.
- To compile and propose good practices to improve these narratives and thereby their potential effect on the integration of migrants.

To achieve these objectives, we qualitatively analyzed 25 interviews conducted with highly vulnerable, forcibly displaced people (August-October 2019) and 16 open-ended questionnaires administered to the representatives of the quintuple helix of RRI (June 2021) considering civil society (migrants, NGOs, and media representatives), business, policy-makers, researchers, and educators.

The face-to-face semi-structured interviews with forced migrants included questions concerning media discourse in Spain regarding migrants and forced migrants, how it personally influenced them, and their knowledge of good practices.

The open-ended questionnaire included questions about the change in media discourse on migration and forced migration before and during the pandemic, the consequences of this media representation, and the identification and proposal of good practices. The answers and opinions expressed in the responses were personal and did not represent the general opinion of the respondents’ organizations.

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1 To access more detailed information on RAISD project’s methodological triangulation, see <https://raisd-h2020.eu/>



Informed consent was obtained before the interviews began. Regarding the criteria for the selection of participants, in the case of interviews with forced migrants before the pandemic, the participants were selected based on the characteristics established by the ARU. Thus, the participants were of age and considered especially vulnerable among forced migrants in the Spanish context. The questionnaire respondents formed a part of the Spanish ARU. The project, as a whole, was previously approved by the Ethics Committee of Complutense University of Madrid and adheres to the EU regulations on the privacy and protection of vulnerable persons. Especially, in the case of forced migrants, a scrupulous anonymization process was applied. The guidelines established by the Ethics Plan of RAISD project, as approved by the European Commission, were observed at all times.

A qualitative content analysis was applied to all collected data. No specific tool was used for the analysis of the stakeholders, but Atlas.ti was used for the analysis of the interviews with forced migrants.

**Table 1. Interviews of the forced migrants**

Code	Sex	Age	Nationality	Time in Spain
201901030202	Woman	Mid-30's	Ukrainian	Around 2 years
201901030101	Man	34	Venezuelan	Almost 3 years
201901030302	Woman	40	Colombian	18 months
20198211212	Woman	32	Georgian	1 year and 4 months
20198261232	Woman	41	Georgian	4 months
20198291241	Man	71	Colombian	9 months
20198291512	Woman	66	Colombian	1 year and 1 month
20198301251	Man	36	Venezuelan	3 years
201901030401	Man	Between 25 and 30 years old	Bissau-Guinean	
20199041262	Woman	21	Peruvian	1 year and 3 months
20199041712	Woman	23	Ivorian	1 year
20199051721	Man	40	Mauritanian	4 years
20199101272	Woman	25	Cameroonian	1 year and 2 months
20199101282	Woman	31	Venezuelan	2 years
20199111292	Woman	25	Salvadoran	6 months
201991112102	Woman	29	Colombian	1 year
201991112113	Other	23	Moroccan	4 years



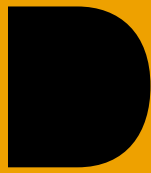


Code	Sex	Age	Nationality	Time in Spain
201991112122	Woman	36	Moldavian	1 year
201992412131	Man	49	Syrian	2 years
2019100812141	Man	21	Saharan, Moroccan	More than 2 years
2019101112151	Man	36	Salvadoran	1 year and 8 months
2019101112162	Woman	31	Venezuelan	3 years
201910161732	Woman	25	Guinean	1 year
201910161742	Woman	26	Ivorian	2 years
2019102912172	Woman	21	Guinean	1 year and 1 month

Source: the authors.

**Table 2. The participating stakeholders**

Person/organization	Position	Descriptor	Helix
32 Puntos	Project manager	Project development, direct contact with refugees	Business
Anonymized		Activist	Forced migrant
Refugees Welcome Spain	Social care	Citizen platform for solidarity with refugees	NGO
Asociación Tayba	Former President	Association of Young Muslims	Migrant and NGO
CEAR	Social worker	Inclusion of refugees	NGO
ACCEM	Communication	Inclusion of migrants and refugees	NGO
Asociación Madrid Empleo y Desarrollo	President	Employability of people in situations of social exclusion	NGO and business
Fundación La Merced Migraciones	Educator	Inclusion of migrants and refugees	Migrant and education
Fundación La Merced Migraciones	Social responsibility	Inclusion of migrants and refugees	NGO
Red Cross (Spain)	Migrant people projects	International organization	Policy-maker and humanitarian organization
Mundo en Movimiento	Coordinator	Inclusion of migrants	NGO
La Rueca Asociación	Office Coordinator	Inclusion of migrants	Policy-maker and NGO



Person/organization	Position	Descriptor	Helix
City Council of Madrid	Head of the Section for Attention to Immigration	Local government	Policy-maker
Institute of Migration Studies	Researcher	Research center	Research
Rey Juan Carlos University	Associate professor	Researcher and documentary filmmaker	Education, research, and media
Reporters without Borders	Journalist	Right to freedom of information	Migrant and media

Source: the authors.

## 2. Results and Discussion

### 2.1. Interviews with forced migrants before the pandemic

#### 2.1.1. Negative frames before the pandemic: stereotyping and politicization in media

Several interviewees highlighted the sensationalism and politicized use of migration as already observed by Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018):

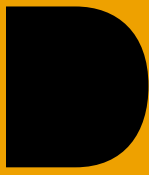
The media is really sensationalist (2019101112162, woman, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain). (Personal communication, October 2019)

Sometimes there are good messages, but sometimes there are inappropriate ones (201910161732, woman, Guinean, 1 year in Spain). (Personal communication, October 2019)

They always speak badly about immigrants (2019100812141, man, Saharan, more than 2 years in Spain). (Personal communication, October 2019)

Sensationalism, one hundred percent, is an awful lot of sensationalism [...] they always go for the nationality angle (20198301251, man, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain). (Personal communication, August 2019)

On one hand, interviewee 20198291241 (man, Colombian, 9 months in Spain) directly related the most negative discourses to the Vox political party, as also observed by Aladro and Requeijo (2020) and by other experts to have become a global trend with parties on the extreme right (Eberl et al., 2018; IOM, 2020). In these discourses, the migrants are framed as a threat to the nation and undeserving of the services of welfare states, which should be preserved for the local population. However, interviewee 20199041262 (woman, Peruvian, 1 year and 3 months in Spain) observed that the politicization of migration discourse depended on a specific medium. These observations are the manifestations of the same global phenomenon, which is the use of migration as a political tool to divide the entire population (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; IOM, 2020; Van Dijk, 2006): “In my country and Spain, the television works the same way, [...] the thing is some channels are in favor of people coming and asylum and others say no, that there’s a lot of people, that they need to leave (20199041262, woman, Peruvian, 1 year and 3 months in Spain)” (personal communication, September 2019).



Interviewees criticized the dissemination of fake news, for example, about the actual level of aid offered to the migrants or accusations that ships such as the Open Arms encouraged “migratory mafias” or the “pull effect” considering that the forced migrants are unaware of the routes they will be taking when they are obliged to leave their countries. As already summarized in the state of the art, the spread of fake news regarding migration has important consequences, as, even during the pandemic, these discourses reinforced populism and reduced support for NGOs (Thomas et al., 2022).

Interviewees believed that the negative image of migration can be attributed to the poor economic situation in Spain and the high level of unemployment among Spanish citizens, and, as some interviewees expressed, an understanding of certain anti-immigration positions. Surely, this observation will continue or even exacerbate the economic and social crisis derived from Covid-19, as reflected in recent opinion studies among the Spanish population regarding their attitudes toward refugees (IPSOS, 2021).

I understand that if maybe the domestic situation was better here, they wouldn't care as much that so many foreigners are arriving (2019101112162, woman, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain). (Personal communication, October 2019)

I understand that here Spanish people will say: look, we can't take them all. I understand that (20199101282, woman, Venezuelan, 2 years in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

However, they believed that media organizations should improve their behavior and provide more context. Several interviewees shared that the difficulties encountered by migrants with respect to integration in Spain arise from the lack of information among the general population. As such, the forced migrants who were interviewed were themselves aware of the power that the media wields in public opinion. Two interviewees analyzed the information that should be provided, but is silenced:

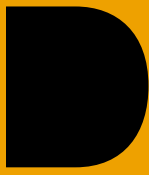
Nobody talks about the background, or afterward, when these people arrive here, what happens to them, because lots of these people are on the street, and they're out on the street (20198301251, man, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain). (Personal communication, August 2019)

People don't talk about real problems. They only see what's in front of them. [...] Because it's only people who don't know about Africa's history, who don't know what's happening in Africa, who try to disparage immigrants (20199051721, man, Mauritanian, 4 years in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

Some interviewees were deeply affected by images shown on television, so much so that they preferred not to watch this medium, especially in relation to migrants arriving by boat (a negative framing present in the images previously analyzed by Bleiker et al., 2013). Previous studies (Esmer, 2017) and the questionnaires administered to different stakeholders during the pandemic yielded similar outcomes on the effect of exposure to the media among the migrant population itself:

Every time I see it I feel bad, because I see the stuff about the boats, I have friends who came in boats [...] I've chosen to stop watching television (20199041262, woman, Peruvian, 1 year and 3 months in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

Yes, I see it, but only a very little, it makes me sad (201901030302, woman, Colombian, 18 months in Spain). (Personal communication, August 2019)



It hurts me because there are people who don't know what's happening to other people (20199101272, woman, Cameroonian, 1 year and 2 months in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

A lack of ethics and humanitarian vision was observed among the journalists as the key goal seemed to be obtaining information while ignoring the reality of forced migrants. This critical analysis is one of the starting points that encourages the proposal of new forms of regulation of the journalistic profession, as mentioned by several stakeholders surveyed in the present study: "Sometimes they go too far [...] Sometimes, somebody, even though they agree voluntarily to talk or tell their story, they take advantage of what we tell them, abuse because they're trying to get as much out of it as possible and sometimes, they add things (201991112113, other, Moroccan, 4 years in Spain)" (personal communication, September 2019).

Moreover, as also reported by Bleiker et al. (2013), an interviewee condemned the overuse of stereotypical images of forced migrants arriving in boats that ultimately homogenize migrants' life stories: "A Jamaican friend [...] gave him asylum and they interviewed him a month ago [...] his face was shown and all the violence was shown, and he left Jamaica, but he came by plane and they showed a boat with loads of people. What's that doing there? Why are they showing a boat if he came differently? (20199041262, woman, Peruvian, 1 year and 3 months in Spain)" (personal communication, September 2019).

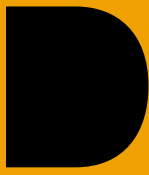
In contrast to previous studies, a difference observed between the perception of the migrant population in general and forced migrants, particularly, is that the interviewees of the present paper (forced migrants) were more concerned about the lack of measures toward protecting their anonymity when providing testimonies rather than about the scant participation of forced migrants in media discourse. They felt that journalists seemed unaware of the risks involved:

They don't see it from the person's perspective, that they're going to put them in danger [...] some things can be said so that people understand and so that there's help and all that, but there are other things that can't. [...] I don't want them to show my face [...] They want to film your face, put your full name and address and everything. But I, no, if you want me to do the interview, well with my back turned then, or film my hands or whatever [...] And also my name, I always give another name, it's not my real one (201991112113, other, Moroccan, 4 years in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

With my name, I'm X, I'm an asylum seeker, I'm from this country [...] publicly revealed here [...] I don't want to do that, because afterward, everyone will know that I'm a refugee and they're going to treat me worse (20199041262, woman, Peruvian, 1 year and 3 months in Spain). (Personal communication, September 2019)

As also experienced by Eberl et al. (2018) and Galyga et al. (2019), interviewee 20198301251 observed that news about migrants of African origin was more abundant, especially in social media: "More than anything it's about Africans [...] People from Africa, I mean, sub-Saharan Africa or Arabs [...] I've heard a lot about them. [...] it's more against (20198301251, man, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain)" (personal communication, August 2019).

The interviewees also mentioned the influence of the media on the native population. In agreement with Theorin et al. (2021), they contended that if media discourse were to improve, it could have a very positive influence on society and migrant integration:



These are the right messages, at least spread awareness because if we can't raise awareness, that won't be good. [...] If you haven't received the message conveyed by journalists or on social networks correctly, you'll see me and you'll say: "She's a freeloader, she's a thief, she's taking advantage". It's not a good idea that will come to mind. Never. You'd keep a safe distance. This safe distance isn't right though. If you look closely, it isn't right. Why might that be? It's because of the media (201910161732, woman, Guinean, 1 year in Spain). (Personal communication, October 2019)

### *2.1.2. Good practices and proposals to counteract negative migration discourse*

Only one interviewee (20198301251, man, Venezuelan, 3 years in Spain) knew of an example of good practice that improved media discourse on migration, and he participated in this initiative that consists of an "anti-fake news campaign for migrants". No further information is provided in this regard to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewee. Similar initiatives are included in the following section by different stakeholders. Among them, initiatives, such as this one, that foster the direct participation of migrants and forced migrants, are of particular interest.

## 2.2. Open-ended questionnaires completed by stakeholders during the pandemic

### *2.2.1. Worsening of media discourse during the pandemic: invisibilization and criminalization of migration*

Regarding the evolution of media discourse before and during the pandemic, the majority of respondents shared that it had worsened or that it continues to show dehumanizing images and messages that render migrants invisible and generate new forms of criminalization. Thus, the media would maintain a negative framing and an ideological discourse regarding migration described in the state of the art:

I could say that there has been no change, but there has been an intensification of negative discourses about migrants. (Personal communication, June 2021)

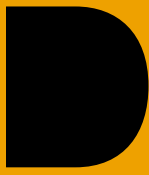
At times, migrants have been portrayed as the main risk factor for increasing cases and community transmission. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Media coverage has been used much more to polarize opinions on migration during the pandemic than before. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Migrants did not stop working throughout the pandemic, most were migrant caregivers, and this did not appear in the media. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Migrants continue to be portrayed as criminals or potential criminals. (Personal communication, June 2021)

In recent months and years, the discourse on immigration has seriously deteriorated. Discourses and actions that represent a frontal attack on the rights of migrants have started to become normal. (Personal communication, June 2021)



In general terms, the media did not show how the health situation affected migrants. Before the pandemic, the discourse focused on the arrival of migrants on the Spanish coast without delving into the real causes or reasons for the migration. This news coverage disappeared during the pandemic due to restrictions on movement and because all reports focused on Covid-19, but it has resurfaced with an improvement in the health situation:

Media discourse continues to be discriminatory and loaded with stereotypes. The media does not address the origins of migration, nor does it reflect the reality of this problem in such a way that gives society a different perspective. (Personal communication, June 2021)

In recent months, the migratory phenomenon has once again been presented as a spectacle [...] with a focus on the striking or dramatic aspects of news items. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Reports on migration are mainly concerned with arrivals, conveyed in alarmist and criminalizing terms, and the use of hyperbolic and belligerent language. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Although the work of migrants was recognized at the beginning of the lockdown, some interviewees believed that it had been under-represented and did not have a sufficient impact on the native population. This analysis is similar to the results of recent opinion studies in Spain regarding the collective attitudes toward refugees (IPSOS, 2021).

Very positive recognition, but in my opinion, utilitarian. [...] It turns migrants into a low-skilled labor force necessary to carry out certain jobs. [...] We cannot “accept migration” only when it interests us. (Personal communication, June 2021)

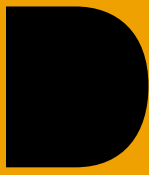
“There was a small, sweet moment”, but this was followed by “a wave of polarization and change of discourse reported by the media”. (Personal communication, June 2021)

However, some interviewees clarified that criticism should not be generalized to all media: “It is not appropriate to talk about the media in general, because this would omit committed, truthful, and high-quality practices on the issue of migration” (personal communication, June 2021).

The invisibility of forced migration in the media was even greater, with interviewees considering the prevalence of insufficient distinction made between economic migrants and asylum seekers. There had been a time when their situation in the country was reported in relation to the closure of borders and changes in regulations, “but later this passed unnoticed”. The media tended to conceal certain realities, such as “the rapid return of people based on questionable ethical criteria”, as these people may have been eligible to request asylum in Spain. Clearly, as maintained in different media effect theories, these framing and biased discourses influence public opinion.

Regarding the migrant groups mentioned by the Spanish media, the interviewees agreed with the findings of Eberl et al. (2018) and Galyga et al. (2019), which highlight the criminalization of sub-Saharan migrants, primarily the unaccompanied minors. The respondents were particularly concerned about the criminalization of migrant minors that “used to be more protected by public opinion than now”. They also condemned the authorization of the Vox campaign poster targeting unaccompanied migrant minors, who were pictured as undeserving beneficiaries of larger social help than retired people, perceiving this as “criminalization legitimized by judges”.

The Asian population came under the media spotlight when they were accused of being responsible for the pandemic. Moreover, in the summer of 2020, a message of insecurity was transmitted regarding infections among seasonal workers in agriculture. Thus, the pandemic has provided an excuse to attribute greater prominence to



the negative framing, which has already been in the picture for several years, of migrants and forced migrants as sources of illnesses (Dāvidsone & Galvanovska, 2019). “The pandemic has provided a new loophole for allowing hate speech and xenophobia, seeking scapegoats, and continuing to stir up fear of outsiders” (personal communication, June 2021).

The respondents believed that this type of discourse derived from the politicization of migration and the media themselves, as mentioned by some forced migrants who were interviewed before the pandemic and other academics mentioned previously. However, one interviewee highlights the importance of citizens as consumers of information: “The media responds to citizens who follow this news out of concern or interest”.

It is in their interest to show this in order to justify the maintenance of an inhumane migration policy. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Some sectors in the media and the political parties have opted to speak of an invasion in order to generate fear and win electoral support. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Media coverage is linked to political issues [...]. It is instrumentalized coverage based on current circumstances. (Personal communication, June 2021)

The spread of fake news is an added problem, as also mentioned by forced migrants who were interviewed before the pandemic: “No effort has yet been made for years to dismantle hoaxes and structural hate speech, which is why the same false claims continue to be repeated year after year” (personal communication, June 2021).

A migrant respondent had been contacted to collaborate with a media source that eventually rejected her participation so as not to increase the “pull effect”. Facts such as this, motivate some of the proposals of actions that could be conducted to improve the media representation or the general perception of migrants that have been presented at the end of this section:

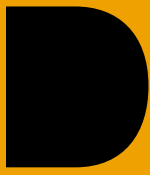
Spain has been multicultural and diverse for several decades, and they want to conceal this. (Personal communication, June 2021)

When this positive aspect of migration is ever spoken of, they relate it to creating a pull effect. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Finally, a journalist emphasized the shortage of migrants working in the Spanish media. Therefore, the opportunity to participate in discourses that directly affect the social group is taken away from them (Galyga et al., 2019; Hänninen et al., 2013; Van Dijk, 2008, 2013): “It is very unusual to find foreign presenters on television programs. Foreigners only appear on television when they are on the news” (personal communication, June 2021).

Some respondents provide conclusions similar to those of the studies provided in the theoretical framework regarding media effects: “As agents of socialization and a source of knowledge, [the media] can create narratives about our realities”. “Prejudices”, “hate speech”, “dehumanization”, and “lack of empathy” negatively affect the inclusion of migrants and “perpetuate the situation of vulnerability of these people”, as these discourses “criminalize certain migrants”, “divide society”, and “create insecurity”, and, with it, increase hate crimes”:

The increase in hate speech in the generalist media creates the perfect breeding ground to promote hatred and confrontation. (Personal communication, June 2021)



Difficulties in finding housing or employment, or in simply being seen as a human being with rights, are exacerbated for immigrants as a result of how information on immigration is presented. (Personal communication, June 2021)

As already concluded by other authors (Eberl et al., 2018; Theorin et al., 2021), the consequences go even further and affect decision-making at the political level:

At the political level, decisions are made depending on ideology and on satisfying the electorate. Politicians use migrants to win votes. (Personal communication, June 2021)

The discourse has a very strong performative power in political decision-making. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Media discourse personally affects the migrants, as Esmer (2017) already observed. In the case of the stakeholders surveyed in this study:

It encourages native citizens to display xenophobic attitudes and refuse to accept people who are migrants. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Above all, this media discourse affects girls and women who choose to wear the hijab and who encounter great difficulty in accessing the labor market [...] there are also difficulties in renting a home since owners prefer to rent their flats to non-immigrants. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Users of this NGO do not feel valued or accepted. (Personal communication, June 2021)

We have perceived greater worries and fear [...] in some people a greater degree of defenselessness, and anger in others. (Personal communication, June 2021)

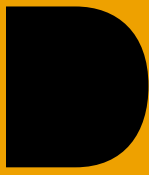
Some respondents have shared that they have been professionally affected in their work with migrants, as they have to “prioritize work on the construction of alternative narratives that counteract hate speech and xenophobic messages” and “many organizations have decided to adopt a low profile when working with integration processes”.

## 2.2.2. *Good practices and proposals to counteract negative migration discourse*

From the open-ended questionnaires, we collected the following good practices that could improve media representation or the general perception regarding migrants:

- PorCausa is a team of journalists and researchers who offer an alternative explanation of migratory phenomena through debate and the contribution of information (<https://porcausa.org/>).
- Diarios para el Reencuentro [Reunion Diaries] (<https://youtu.be/KZNN62Aln4>) coordinated by La Merced and Nielsen. Economic migrants and forcibly displaced people participated directly in awareness-raising videos during the lockdown.
- Boletodeida (<https://www.boletodeida.site/>) is an activist who publishes online content on immigration and personal situations in Spain.
- Anti-racist spaces run by racialized people, such as Courage, Espacio Afro [Afro Space], Sindicato de Manteros [Street vendors' labor union] (<https://manteros.org/>), and Comunidad Negra Africana y Afrodescendiente en España [Black African and Afro-descendant Community in Spain].





- The “SALAM Project” in La Merced, focused on the promotion of intercultural coexistence and the prevention of intolerance.
- Mundo en Movimiento, Iridia, and Oxfam promoted “We Are More” ([www.wearemore.xyz](http://www.wearemore.xyz)), a project presenting new narratives in collaboration with migrants or racialized people.
- ONG Rescate and La Rueca have focused on avoiding the construction of negative stereotypes among young people (<https://www.ongrescate.org/redalrescate>).
- Some good practices focus more specifically on refugees:
- The “Refugiados en el Cine” [Refugees in Film] season is organized by ACCEM.
- PorCausa has launched “Baynana” (<https://baynana.es/es>), as an initiative promoted by Syrian refugee journalists in Spain to reflect diverse voices.
- The “Creamos cultura de bienvenida” [let’s create a culture of welcome] campaign, organized by Refugees Welcome Spain.

As the work developed by the journalist Moha Gerehou (2021) already mentioned in the state of the art of this paper, these collected actions already are, or generate, discourses with a positive framing that help counteract the abuses of power and inequalities present in other discourses (Van Dijk, 2015). With these examples, the integration of the migrant population is favored, and their complex reality is divulged beyond the over-simplified representations predominating in the media discourse (Eberl et al., 2018; Horsti, 2008; Smets et al., 2019) that fuel a culture of fear in the native population (Bleiker et al., 2013). Furthermore, they are new tools that try to dismantle a “political tool” that aims to confront the entire society in a “them” versus “us” (Arcimaviciene & Bağlama, 2018; IOM, 2020; Van Dijk, 2006).

Regarding future actions toward improving the media representation or the general perception of migrants, various action fronts have been mentioned, including the incorporation of more information professionals of the migrant origin, legislative changes, or the creation of codes of ethics, and inclusive audiovisual and information projects that portray the positive leadership of migrants in Spain:

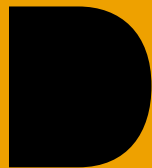
Open the media to migrants to include them in the workforce, enrich the work of the media, and contribute to a change in society’s perception of migration. (Personal communication, June 2021)

If the media is unable to self-regulate its discourse, it will be necessary to implement other measures. (Personal communication, June 2021)

Conduct a media campaign promoting inclusion and the normalization of multiculturalism in Spain. (Personal communication, June 2021)

We need public spaces for listening and debate in which displaced people are the protagonists talking about their own stories [...], showing the diversity that exists in migration. (Personal communication, June 2021)

As is required by RRI, different stakeholders, including migrants and forced migrants themselves, propose local responses to a global challenge such as the media representation of migration, as well as the general perception of migration by the collective population. Some stakeholders directly emphasize the importance of placing the migrants themselves at the center of the media narrative as information professionals so that the migrants and forced migrants are no longer passive subjects exposed to a framing approach and an ideological discourse



generated by the media alien to them. Thus, as has been demanded previously, migrants and forced migrants can regain control of the discourse of their own lives (Galyga et al., 2019; Hänninen et al., 2013).

## Conclusions

In line with our study objectives and research questions, we analyzed the opinions of various stakeholder representatives from the quintuple helix of RRI regarding the media discourse on migration and forced migration as well as its influence before and during the pandemic. Our collective data provides the necessary additional focus and framework for interpreting research that explores media content through qualitative and quantitative analyses of journalistic discourse.

The stakeholders' testimonies evidenced a worsening of media discourse on migration in Spain, as well as the perpetuation of negative aspects already mentioned by those interviewed before the pandemic, such as the lack of contextualization when reporting migration that stereotypes the reality of a complex phenomenon. The common perception is an increase in criminalization and politicization. During the pandemic, the lack of representation of migrants was exacerbated by the "infodemic", especially in the case of forced migrants. Although positive examples have been observed during this period, they have been insufficient and with a short-term impact.

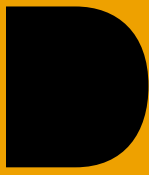
Regarding the differences observed in forced migrants' responses before the pandemic, due to the language, the migrants of Latin American origin, especially those who have been in Spain for a longer period, are most exposed to Spanish media and express a more developed opinion about migratory discourse—even establishing differences between different media sources. However, insightful and relevant contributions from people from other regions have also been collected in the study.

The participants in the study reported that the media discourse affected them both at the personal and professional levels. The worsening of this discourse, fueled by the politicization of the migratory phenomenon, may have a very negative effect on the general perception of migration among the Spanish population. This trend has become more evident in the latest public opinion surveys, exerting a direct and negative influence on the integration of economic and forced migrants.

A differentiating aspect regarding media discourse on migration and forced migration is that forced migrants interviewed in this study are more concerned about the potential journalists' failure to anonymize their testimonies than about their limited participation in the said discourse. There is a consensus that media discourse should explain the causes of forced and economic displacement and avoid the homogenization of migrant people. Thus, diverse testimonies presented by the migrants themselves would undoubtedly be helpful, respecting their anonymity wherever necessary.

Similarly, good practices to improve these narratives and thereby their potential effect on the integration of migrants have also been compiled and proposed. These suggestions include new inclusive audiovisual and information projects, the incorporation of migrant or racialized journalists, and the development of codes of ethics and even legislative modifications.

Owing to the confidentiality commitment required by the participating entities, we could not analyze the differences between the distinct helices in the second part of the study. As the objective of developing an exploratory study of the perceptions of the migratory discourse from the joint reflection of representatives of different helices



of RRI has been fulfilled, the study detailing the different perceptions of each helix can be considered as a future line of work rather than as a limitation of the current study. Moreover, the recommendations provided by the stakeholders are interesting proposals for future research that could be approached from participatory methodologies, such as the analysis and development of media ethics.

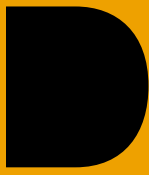
Finally, and as previously reported by Smets et al. (2019), it is worth highlighting the importance of the active participation of migrants in academic studies on the subject so as not to perpetuate the invisibilization of migrants that is so widely criticized in academia whenever observed in media discourse. The application of RRI to media discourse on migration and forced migration represents a clear interpretative and methodological advantage as RRI emphasizes inclusiveness, open participation, transparency, and responsive change with local responses to address global challenges. Furthermore, with the application of RRI, migrants and forced migrants become the focus of the R&I process as well as of the media narrative. With this background, we believe that the correct application of the principles of RRI would be very helpful for future studies in this field.

## Acknowledgments and financing

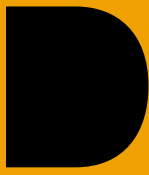
We gratefully acknowledge the interest and efforts of the persons and institutions that have participated in this investigation, financed by the European Union through the Horizon 2020 program for project “Reshaping Attention and Inclusion Strategies for Distinctively vulnerable people among the forcibly displaced (RAISD)” (grant agreement 822688).

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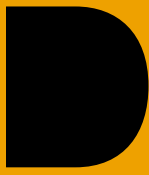
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