
Migration in the UK media

Interview with Rob McNeil

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Rob McNeil is a Researcher for COMPAS examining the social environments from which news stories and narratives about migration and migrants emerge; how media debate affects migration policy decisions (and vice versa); and how information gaps affect the way these issues are discussed. He lectures on migration and the media for the MSc in Migration Studies. Rob is also the Deputy Director and Head of Media and Communications at the Migration Observatory. He was part of the team who launched the Migration Observatory in 2011 and, since then, has been working to embed Migration Observatory analysis in public debates. He is responsible for public relations strategy, parliamentary and community outreach and news and commentary work. Rob is a former journalist and joined COMPAS in November 2010 after two years as the Media Director for the US environmental organisation Conservation International.

Título Migrações nos media do Reino Unido

Rob McNeil é investigador do COMPAS e examina os ambientes sociais dos quais emergem notícias e narrativas sobre migração e migrantes; como o debate mediático afecta as decisões políticas migratórias (e vice-versa); e como a falta de informação afecta a forma como estas questões são discutidas. Ele dá palestras sobre migração e os meios de comunicação social para o MSc em Estudos Migratórios. Rob é também o Director Adjunto e Chefe dos Media e Comunicações no Migration Observatory. Ele fez parte da equipa que lançou o Migration Observatory em 2011 e, desde então, tem trabalhado para incorporar a análise do Migration Observatory nos debates públicos. É responsável pela estratégia de relações públicas, divulgação parlamentar e comunitária e trabalho com notícias e comentários. Rob é ex-jornalista e ingressou no COMPAS em novembro de 2010, após dois anos como Diretor de Comunicação da organização ambiental americana Conservation International.

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Observatório da Emigração (ahead OEm) – We would like to know a little bit more about your professional background and how you gain interest in the subject of migrations, has your career in journalism had a strong impact? Could you tell us a little more about it?

Rob McNeil (ahead RM) – My interest in migration happened by mistake, really. My career began in journalism – I was a newspaper reporter in the UK, and wrote about general issues, from crime to politics to showbiz – for about a decade, until I became disenchanted with the profession. I'd become a reporter because I wanted to make the world a better place, and thought that journalism was the way to do it, but after a while it started to feel a bit like a profession that caused as many problems as it solved. I was very interested in environmental issues and international development, so I moved into working for WWF – the conservation organisation, doing public relations work and from there I moved to Oxfam, doing similar things. During this time I became very interested in how people use media strategically to affect public attitudes to issues. I then went to work in the USA for an environmental organisation called Conservation International, but after a couple of years had decided I wanted to go back to live in Oxford, and I saw an interesting role being advertised at the University for a Senior Media Analyst in a new project that was being set up called "The Migration Observatory". My honest view at the time was that it was interesting, but that I'd probably only do it for a year or two. The main aim was just to get me back to Oxford. But as soon as I started to engage with the issue, I realised how utterly fascinating migration issues are and how totally fundamental the issue is if you are interested in media, politics and the strategic instrumentalisation of narratives (not to mention economics, sociology and pretty much anything else). The whole team – which was run by Martin Ruhs, a political economist now based at EUI in Florence – was really inspiring, and our timing was great – at around the time we launched in 2011, migration became one of the biggest issues in politics and the media, and we were at the heart of that debate. As time went by, the job that I had taken as a route home from the USA became a passion – it's an incredible area to work on and I feel excited and privileged to have such a great role.

OEm – The issue of migration in the UK is a topic that is highly represented in the media, almost on a daily basis, why do you think this happens?

RM – There are lots of reasons, so it's hard to pin it down, but it's worth remembering that the UK has been changed fundamentally by migration time and time again – so perhaps it's not that surprising that people are interested in it. Nevertheless, there are a few things that probably explain why it is such a significant factor in the UK press: the first is that the UK has seen a long period of net immigration, and that has often been at significant levels – and that means that people are constantly encountering 'change' – which can be interesting, and exciting, but is also, often, challenging. Journalists and editors are aware that people are

sometimes excited about change, and sometimes challenged or threatened by it, and as such they know that it makes for good stories – stories that contain emotional content. News products, be they newspapers, or TV shows, websites or whatever, are marketed to specific groups of people and editors create what my former colleague Professor Bridget Anderson refers to as ‘communities of value’ – groups united by certain perspectives on what matters in the world. Migration is often a flagship issue in the creation of these communities of value, and media organisations – particularly UK newspapers – have used the issue as a means of building and reinforcing their place within these communities of value. The second – which is linked – is that migration has been heavily politicised in the UK, over the last decade. It was used first to undermine the credibility of the Labour party in the UK with the argument that they “lost control of the borders” during the Blair and Brown years, and this line of argument subsequently morphed into the anti-EU positioning of UKIP and the Vote Leave campaign in the referendum. The nature of the print media in the UK, which is dominated by right-leaning newspapers, meant that migration stories had significant political value for many of them. The final aspect is that the government of David Cameron made a rash promise to hit a simple numerical target to reduce net migration to the UK to the “tens of thousands”. This promise (which was doomed to failure from the get-go) – coupled with the quarterly publication of net migration data by the Office for National Statistics – created a drum-beat of migration stories that appealed to media from both sides of the political spectrum. For the right-leaning media this story was framed as “immigration is out of control and Government needs to crack down” and for the left it was framed as “Government lied to you and cannot deliver on its promises”.

OEm – What is your opinion on the way migration is addressed in the media in the UK?

RM – You can’t really say that the UK media covers migration in one way or another. There’s no comparison between the Today Programme on BBC Radio 4 and the Nigel Farage Show of LBC, or between the campaigning journalism of Amelia Gentleman in the Guardian, the economic analysis of Robert Wright or Helen Warrell in the Financial Times or the vitriolic ranting of Katie Hopkins in the Sun or the Daily Mail (though both have let her go now). News media in the UK is a broad church, and ranges from the carefully regulated broadcast sector to elite and highly respected broadsheets to the tabloid newspapers, which can be hugely impactful, but can sometimes prioritise sensation over thoroughness.

OEm – We have a perception, which may be the wrong one, that in the UK the closer the newspaper is to the right the more stories about immigration are published, is this the reality? If so, what justifies it?

RM – I don’t think that this is necessarily true. Where media organisations have strong party political affiliations, their likelihood of publishing migration stories depends on whether this is

likely to benefit them or not. In the 2015 general election campaign, when it was clear that the Conservative party had seriously failed to meet their net migration target, much of the right-wing press stopped covering the issue as much as they previously had been. It seems likely that this is because it may have damaged the Conservative party's chances of re-election and pushed right-leaning voters toward UKIP.

OEm – In the UK, television and the written press have different rules, how do these rules affect the discourse on migration?

RM – The broadcast media in the UK is regulated by OFCOM, which means that they cannot take a politicised stance on issues such as migration, while newspapers are not governed by the same limitations. Nevertheless, media organisations tend to follow one-another's stories up. This means that a politicised agenda set in the newspaper media can end up becoming part of the broadcast media's mix of stories.

OEm – Do you think that this polarisation found in the written press in the United Kingdom is a feature of the UK or is this also the case in other countries?

RM – In the UK the polarisation is largely a facet of the newspapers, but in different countries, different media cultures exist – in the USA, the roles are reversed, with newspapers largely playing the more 'grown-up' role, while highly partisan TV channels generate much of the sound and fury on migration.

OEm – The latest expansions of the EU seem to have contributed a great deal to the debate and extreme positions taken in the United Kingdom. Are there correlations in the increase in immigration news with these periods?

RM – The initial expansion of the EU in 2004 created a huge demographic change in the UK but it took a while for people to realise that the change had taken place, Polish workers – the biggest group – were not a visible ethnic minority in the UK, the economy was booming, and the migration numbers were not being monitored by the press very actively. After the economic crash in 2008, public concerns about migrants competing for jobs began to rise, and awareness of the scale of the inflows from the new EU member states began to generate a media backlash. By the 2010 election, migration was weaponised against the Labour party. The second expansion – Romania and Bulgaria – went largely unreported when it actually happened, in 2007, as this was before the crash, and the Government had put in place transitional restrictions on access to the labour market, but by 2014, when these restrictions came to an end, the UK media was at the height of its obsession with migration. The prospect of a second wave of mass migration from Eastern Europe – particularly when conflated with negative narratives about Roma communities – created something of a perfect storm and a big

increase in migration reporting.

OEm – The Brexit "leave" campaign focused heavily on immigration containment issues.

How was this seen by the population and the media?

RM – Concerns about the level of EU migration to the UK were at the heart of the Leave campaign. In 2016, net immigration to the UK reached 330,000 per year – with a substantial proportion of that coming from the EU. That represents an increase to the population of nearly a million every three years, and the leave campaign was very capable in using these numbers to stimulate public concerns about public services in the UK buckling under the strain, housing and infrastructure being unable to cope, and the UK having no ability to control the flows. It was potent messaging and had a big impact. I strongly feel that the British public's sense of powerlessness on migration control is a (possibly 'the') fundamental reason the UK left the EU.

OEm – I know this question is probably answerable, but do you think that it is public opinion that shapes the way the media deals with migration issues or is it the media that shapes public opinion?

RM – They are inextricably entwined.

OEm – Rob was among the team that created the Migration Observatory, why did you feel the need to create this observatory?

RM – The Observatory was created because it was felt that public debates on migration – both media and policy – were characterised by assertion rather than evidence and that we could – and should – intervene to do something about that.

OEm – What were your initial objectives in establishing this Observatory? Do they continue today or have they evolved over the years? What have been the main difficulties?

RM – The objectives haven't changed – we aim to inform public debates on migration in an independent and strictly evidence based way. The biggest difficulties are now, and always have been, that data is often flawed and that there are rarely simple answers, even to simple questions.

OEm – How do the media, politicians, academia and other audiences perceive the Observatory? Do you think you're getting your message out?

RM – We have a great reputation, and we are used by all sides of the debate and all media. We have regular external evaluations undertaken, and thankfully we are generally seen to be a successful and necessary project.

OEm – The Migration Observatory published a very interesting paper "Migration in the news" in 2013, can you talk a bit about the main conclusions of this publication?

RM – Well, there's too much to condense into a short answer and we did an even better one in 2016 called "A Decade of Migration in the British Press". The conclusions are more about the benefits and limitations of quantitative analysis of media, rather than specific critiques of media coverage of migration. I think the key thing is that undertaking massive scale data analysis of media content tells you a lot about a broad direction of travel in a national debate, and provides lots of very useful insights about the nature of policy debates and the ebb and flow of issues, but to really comprehend how and why debates are happening in the way they are, you need to combine quantitative findings with insights from qualitative analysis.

OEm – Rob participated in the REMINDER project on the role of European mobility and its impacts in narratives, debates and EU reforms, which had a strong media and social media component. Can you start by explaining what this project consisted of and what the main objectives were?

RM – REMINDER actually emerged from the Migration Observatory concept – we wanted to create something on a European scale that combined the detailed social and economic analysis of migration with analysis of public debates – and to understand how these two sides – what the actual impacts are vs how they are discussed and understood at a national level – related to one another.

OEm – Focusing on the issue of the media, I would like you to summarise the main conclusions of the two research questions: How has intra-EU mobility been covered by media outlets in Europe? What accounts for the different ways in which the topic is treated?

RM – Generally, intra-EU mobility hasn't been covered very much, other than as a general 'migration' flow and in very little detail except in the UK. In most of the EU reporters tended to think of 'migrants' as a different class of person than 'hard working' 'Europeans' in most places. However, in the UK intra-EU mobility has been something of an obsession. A certain section of the UK media and policy debate is constructed around a concept that the UK is 'apart' from Europe – and therefore should be able to control flows of European migrants, while the levels of migration from the EU were very high. Meanwhile the depiction of the 'European migrant' in the British press moved from highly skilled and highly educated to 'low skilled and low paid' with the eastern expansion of the EU.

OEm – Rob, thank you very much for coming to talk to us in the context of the 10 years of the Emigration Observatory and for agreeing to give this interview.

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Observatório da Emigração

The Emigration Observatory (OEm) is an independent technical and research structure within the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES-IUL) of ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon. The Observatory is based on a partnership between the CIES-IUL, the Institute of Sociology (IS-UP) of the University of Porto, and the Centre for Geographical Studies (CEG) and the Centre for Research in Economic and Organizational Sociology (SOCIUS/CSG), both of the University of Lisbon. The Observatory is supported by the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs under a cooperation agreement.

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