

NATIONAL RESEARCH ON IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN THE ITALIAN MEDIA

The results

**Enlarging the Dark Side**

Abstract

An enlargement is the product of a photographic process which alters the form and dimensions of an image in order to highlight or emphasise a particular aspect of it. The same type of process happens when we look at immigration in Italy. To a great extent, we are faced with a photograph, a film frame - of a phenomenon in constant evolution - that has remained unchanged over a period of thirty years. The media seem to be content to present this **static and apparently unchanging picture** and have chosen a specific angle to enlarge and bring to the fore. What they have highlighted is the dark side present in all human activities, the problematic side that is linked to crime, to distressing emotions, to fears of invasion and decay.

This enlargement of immigration and foreign presence on Italian soil is imposed on the dimensions of emergency, security, and the “naturally” problematic vision of the phenomenon. In extreme summary, this dark enlargement is the major finding of the research presented in this report: “**National Research on Immigration and Asylum in the Italian Media**”. The study aimed to reconstruct the principal mechanisms used to represent the phenomenon of migration and the issue of asylum in the Italian mass media, in particular, in the news. The results fall along **three lines of inquiry** derived from the three questions upon which the research is based: What is the **picture of immigration** painted in the news media? What **interpretations, themes, and issues** contribute to the representation of the migratory phenomenon and define the **public debate** on the issue? What is the **language** used to describe the protagonists of news articles and, in this regard, are there instances of only partial observance of the **code of best practice and ethics** by some Italian journalists? The following three sections try to provide answers to these questions.

You cannot have immigration without crime

The research confirms the findings from data collected over the past 20 years. The image of immigration furnished by the news media seems as if it is frozen in time. It is cemented in the same modalities, the same news, the same narrative style and in some cases the same fixations and stereotypes. **News related to crime and legal proceedings** make up the majority of material dealt with in daily news formats, **reaching an unprecedented level of almost 60%** in television news programmes. At the same time, the “good news” is the **decrease in the number of articles that have foreigners as protagonists**, even if this figure is still significant and higher than what could be expected given the number of foreign residents on Italian soil.

More worrying findings come from the analysis of the news media's **portrait of persons of foreign origin**. **In over three-quarters of cases (76.2%)**, foreigners appear in television news as **authors or victims of crime**. There is however a **recurrent difference in the treatment of the people involved in the news stories on the basis of nationality**. For example, **foreigners** appear in the news media **more frequently than Italians** when they are **perpetrators of crimes** (59.7% versus 46.3% in television news, 42.9% versus 35.7% in the press). Another possible source of distortion may derive from the type of crimes reported in the news. In general, there is an overrepresentation of certain crimes, such as those against the person. During the period of observation, **foreigners appear more frequently than Italians** when they perpetrate or are victims of **particularly violent crimes**, such as **sexual violence** (24.1% versus 7.2%, more than triple), **assault** (24.1% versus 10.9% , more than double), **kidnapping** (17.0% versus 4.4%), or **theft** (11.3% versus 8.7%).

The **portrait of foreigners** perpetuated by the media can be summarised as follows: he is often a

criminal, **male** (in almost 80% of cases) and his personality is reduced to the single detail of his nationality or ethnic background (which often forms the title of the news article). This characteristic is also the link explicitly reported by the news source to explain these events and connect them to others: the protagonist's **ethnic group** or **nationality** is **linked to the event reported in almost two of every ten cases (18.6%)** and **to the issue of immigration in slightly more than one of every ten pieces of news.**

Playing on fears: you cannot have immigration without security

Immigration is rarely treated as an issue that needs to be looked at in depth and, even when it happens, it is combined with the aspects of crime and security. For example, **only 26 of 5,684 television news stories** shown during the period of observation **dealt with immigration without linking it to a specific criminal event or the issue of security.** In practice, all the other aspects of the migratory phenomenon (economic, cultural exchange, integration, social solidarity, etc.) that could be highlighted are present only in these few stories. The **association and overlapping of these two aspects (migration and security)** appears to be the interpretative key favoured by the media in reporting current trends in the Italian context. Not only does a single event get linked back to immigration as such, but all the recent interest in the issue of security seems to concentrate around the presence - always seen as an emergency or something extraordinary - of persons from different countries (in Italy).

Observing the **characteristics of the debate** that is developing in the media on the issues of migration and asylum, a clear element is the disproportionate **presence of politicians** as opposed to other people, such as representatives of the police, judges, and above all from the communities of foreigners, involved in the debate. The near omnipresence of politicians excludes all other voices and **shifts the attention more to the ideological debate between the political parties rather than on the real content of immigration-related measures.**

The same few, already seen words: you cannot have immigration without stereotypes.

The news stories about migrants seem to constantly tread the line between the duty to tell the news and the respect of an individual's privacy. There is a trend to report information and images undermining the dignity of the people involved (directly or not) in news stories especially when the protagonists are migrants. In this regard, the behaviour of the two news media analysed does not seem to be uniform. Television news more often shows images of migrants involved in crimes, while newspapers dedicate more space to information about victims and their families, including minors. **Sixty-five of 163 television news stories contain information and images that could lead to the identification of (adult) persons who are guilty of violent acts (39.9%).** This figure is almost ten points higher than news about crime that doesn't involve migrants, 29.7%. Looking at the newspapers, 36.8% of articles that involve migrants contain information or images that could lead to the identification of people guilty of violent acts (compared to 35.5% of general crime news).

This picture is overshadowed by the label of underground immigration which, more than any other term, defines immigration as such. Roma are the ethnic group and Romanians are the nationality that are most frequently cited in the headlines of television news. In newspaper headlines, issues related to immigration seem **even more linked to the legal situation of immigrants and instances of crime.** In this way, words in the media contribute to creating a theme around the presence of immigrants that carries a strong reference to the threat constituted by foreigners to the security of Italians.