THE POTRAYAL OF REFUGEES IN SOCIAL MEDIA
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Abstract: Since 2015, refugees and asylum seekers have become more visible to the Western world. Contrary to the promotion of diversity, social solidarity and non-discrimination, refugees often face prejudices and rejection. The current refugee crisis in Europe leads to many disputes in the cyberspace (social media - online platforms where users can create and disseminate various types of content: audio, video, text or photo) also due to religious and cultural differences. Following the extremist actions of terrorists (and not only), Muslim refugees are facing stigma, marginalization, social exclusion and even criminalization. In contrast, in social media we also find statements that encourage and support refugees and promote non-discrimination as there are Europeans who are sympathetic to their struggle. Still, we cannot ignore online abuse and the backlash that is evident in social platforms such as Twitter. As an example, we mention the hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome. Thus, this article makes a content analysis of the way in which refugees are portrayed in social media, aimed primarily at social networks like Facebook, Twitter but also websites and forums.

Keywords: stigmatization, refugee, immigration, social media

Introduction

Social media as one of the main components of the informational society (Vasiluţă-Ştefănescu, 2015) includes technologies, tools and online platforms, places where users can create and disseminate various types of content (audio, video, text or photo), but can also form social networks. The best known examples are: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, YouTube, Skype, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Wikipedia, Whatsupp, blogs, forums, etc.

Diana-Maria Cismaru defines social media as a whole that "consists of all types of communication and interaction achieved through the virtual environment (...). The entire virtual environment tends to turn into social media, because the interaction tends to encapsulate as a model everything that is in the online space (...)". (Cismaru, 2012, p. 20)

According to Kaplan and Haenlein, the term "social media" began to be used with the success of the MySpace and Facebook sites, since 2003. According to the authors mentioned above, social media was initially found in blog formats. A blog is generally managed by one person who can communicate with other users through the "comments" section. Famous brands use blogs to demonstrate transparency, but also to publicize important events: Adobe, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, etc. Communities that publish audio, photo or video content (Flickr, YouTube, etc.) sometimes raise questions regarding the distribution of material protected by copyright. Although there are regulations to restrict these situations, they cannot be fully controlled. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)

The same can be said about negative posts, which are often subject to no control or supervision, usually found on forums and the "Comments" section of various platforms/websites. Any action, more or less organized can quickly be disseminated through social networking sites. The information, either real, distorted or invented can influence critical decisions and individuals, especially those who do not verify information from multiple sources. Moreover, the individual's identity can be conditioned by the media today (Țîru, Goian & Runcan, 2011)

Currently, migration is frequently a headline in the press and in social media, since the beginning of the European refugee crisis (or migrant crisis). The migration phenomenon is complex, global, often determined by economic motivations. Migration, "consists in the movement of people from one area to another, followed by a change of address and/or integration into a form of activity in the arrival area." (Zamfir & Vlasceanu, 1998, p. 351)

International migration is characterized by two major processes: emigration (an individual or a group is leaving the home region) and immigration (reception of individuals who emigrated). Related to these two processes, there are several forms: legal migration and illegal migration; voluntary migration and forced migration; individual and mass migration; temporary or permanent migration; return migration. (Cormos, 2011, p. 18)

A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave his/her country because of war, persecution, violence or a natural disaster whereas an asylum seeker is a person applying for asylum, for the right to be recognized as a refugee. (http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/, accessed in March 2017)

The migration of more than a million refugees to Europe in 2015 has sparked controversy on how to deal with their situation and integration. The origins of people seeking asylum in Europe are various: Syria (the conflict the country is facing being the primary reason for migration), Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo,

Pakistan, Nigeria, etc. (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911, accessed in March 2017)

Since 2015, refugees and asylum seekers have become more visible to the Western world. Contrary to the promotion of multiculturalism, diversity, social solidarity and non-discrimination, refugees often face prejudices, stereotypes and rejection, they are stigmatized and talked about in a language that may enhance their social exclusion, even if this type of language is used by professionals who should be helping them (for example, social workers, who play an important role in supporting the integration of migrants). (Goian, 2010, p. 87)

Also, the ambiguity of language semantics in social work (but also in general language) can contribute to reducing the recuperative effects of social intervention. It is a deontological responsibility to use always the „cleanest" concept when referring to refugees and migrants. (Tomiță & Goian, 2009)

The current refugee crisis in Europe leads to many disputes in the cyberspace also due to religious and cultural differences. Following the extremist actions of terrorists (and not only), Muslim refugees are facing social exclusion and stigma.

As Mihaela Gavrilă-Ardelean states, stigma results from the lack of information and this will create prejudices that lead to negative attitudes which in turn lead to discrimination. (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2016)

The possible partial or incorrect information appearing in social media (and mass media) about refugees, along with little knowledge of their culture and values can easily encourage suspicions about them. In contrast, in social media we also find statements that encourage and support refugees and promote non-discrimination as there are Europeans who are sympathetic to their struggle. Still, we cannot ignore online abuse and the backlash that is evident in social platforms such as Twitter. As an example, we mention the hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome. Thus, this article makes a content analysis of the way in which refugees are portrayed in social media, aimed primarily at social networks like Facebook, Twitter but also websites and forums.

Refugees in social media

This article will deal with positive and negative portrayals of refugee in various social media networks, aiming to see how the refugees coming to Europe are presented in social media and also the way various internet users are talking about them, focusing on themes and similarities across various websites and platforms, commonly used words and phrases.

The unfavourable representation of refugees, especially Muslims is present across Facebook and Twitter. We mentioned the Twitter hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome, a hate speech, where the Syrian male, Muslims and refugees in general are portrayed as a potential terrorist or rapist. For instance, "Truth_Raker", a Twitter user recently posted "Europe needs to defend its borders

with lethal force to stop the migrant invasion" and "These refugees are criminal migrants. Smash them". Amy Mek, another user posted that "More Muslim refugees mean more terrorist attacks. It is an inescapable fact of history!". These are just two detailed posts, among others that repeat the same themes, more or less: comparing the muslim refugees to the Trojan Horse, meant to destroy the destination countries from within, calling them invaders, beggars, urging everybody to defend Europe, saying they should all be deported, calling them "rapefugees". (*https://twitter.com/search?q=%23 REFUGEESNOTWELCOME*, accessed in March 2017)

Facebook may be the most popular social networking platform and regarding refugees, the most controversial posts are the ones that are accompanied by images or videos along with messages that lean towards contempt and hatred directed to people with refugee status.

The search bar of Facebook let's you see the number of people talking about certain keywords. When the content analysis for this paper was made (08.04.2016), there were over 90,000 #refugeesnotwelcome posts, as well as #RAPEfugeesNOTWelcome (86,000 posts) and 88400 contain the #antimuslim hashtag.

Facebook can end up spreading rumours rather than information. This was the case with an article posted on a Romanian Facebook page (the page of a news channel) about people attacked by "a group of immigrants who were very aggressive". The article features a false testimony and the website's forum that published the "alert" was invaded by anti-Muslim messages. Shortly, the false news began to be shared by other websites that spread extremist propaganda regarding Muslims and refugees. (*http://adevarul.ro/locale/timisoara/cum-s-a-inventat-timisoara-povestea-romanului-terorizat-musulmani-manipularea-5-arabi-agresivi-ajuns-politie-facut-valva-internet-1_5707b5925ab6550cb8c338a3/index.html*, accessed in March 2017)

The positive image of refugees in social media is focusing on their vulnerability as victims of war and the moral responsibility to help them. We can find various "Welcome refugees" groups on Facebook, using slogans like "Say it loud, say it clear, refugees are welcome here". (*https://www.f acebook.com /RefugeesWellcome/?fref=ts*, accessed in March 2017)

These groups feature posts about how to help newly arrived refugees but also encouragement, posts on embracing diversity and tolerance. Also, there are various social media platforms that provide important information to migrants. Through social media, people from all over the world can get in touch for a common goal: for some of them, that goal is to support the victims involved in this humanitarian crisis that Europe is facing.

There are several ways in which social media has helped refugees recently, proving that it can do more than share information and offer a chat space: Humans of New York is a popular Facebook page (gathering more than 17 million Likes)

and has raised awareness on the difficulties of refugees. (*https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork*, accessed in March 2017)

Gissun Simonarson tweeted the now famous #BuyPens hashtag, along with a photo of a Syrian refugee (Abdul al-Attar) selling pens on a Beirut street with his 4-year-old daughter in his arms, and the ensuing campaign raised more than $200,000 for him and his family. (*https://twitter.com/Buy_Pens*, accessed in February 2017)

This migration is highly documented and many journalists and reporters have shared images, making sure the world tracks and understands the struggles of the migrants. Thus, there are powerfull accounts on Instagram (a popular platform for posting and sharing everyday photos and videos). Such an account belongs to David Maurice Smith, a photographer from Sydney: he has posted photos focusing on stigmatized communities and cultural issues.(*https://www.instagram.com/davidmauricesmith*, accessed in March 2017)

We should remember our moral duty to support those in need, in any way we can: *"Let us not forget that solidarity can be effectively learned: that means also that solidarity can be effective only through dialog and other communication's skills"*. (Bărbat, 2015, p. 139)

Instagram has users that are mostly supportive, the search bar giving results of various accounts like: refugeeswelcome, no2racism, refugeestories, refugeeswelcomehere.

Conclusions

We can say that some of the current opponents of refugees had arguments against them even before the start of the so-called "refugee crisis". The reasons are varied and touch social policy, existing infrastructure and the economic situation of the destination country, suspicion and concern about the behaviour or actions that may occur due to radical differences of beliefs. Some of these suspicions have been validated by rude behaviours or violent actions done by some of the immigrants. These delinquent actions are constantly uploaded on social networking giants like Facebook and Twitter. Each such post stirs a new controversy, eventually bringing an addition to rejecting refugees as a whole.

Recurrent themes refer to refugees (especially Muslims) being perceived as terrorists, criminals, rapists, ill-intended people coming to Europe to cause disaster, a threat to national security, to prosperity and civilization, being associated with invasion and conflict. However, there are still compassionate people who are willing to support refugees and fight for their rights.

The ongoing discrimination that these people are facing can contribute to mental health issues. In the creational process of the social world, people design their ideas on the external environment, becoming real and changing it (Vasiluță-Ștefănescu & Vasiluță-Ștefănescu, 2012). Mental health is a crucial aspect in solving the problems that inevitably arise along with the refugee status and, as

Gavrila-Ardelean states, mental health is not only the absence of a disorder but also involves a state of well-being, inner peace and balance and is also a requirement for social integration. (Kelemen et al., 2016)

This article cannot be exhaustive and is only a brief analysis of how refugees are portrayed in social media, given that there are thousands of posts, a high number of online communities (of which some are closed groups where you cannot see the content without membership).

Social media now has the power to change public opinion, to dismantle prejudices, to help people connect with each other but also to maintain and spread hate messages.

Still, we can rely on social media to organize quickly, to set up events and crowdfunding. This can be helpful for incoming migrants. Social media should not be used as a tool to perpetuate abuse, harassment, stigma and negative portrayals that are dehumanising.

Creators of internet content, whether they belong to the press or not should focus on sharing fact-based information of immigrants and refugees and also avoid posting negative messages that instigate hatred.

Solidarity should come before everything else: *"we can see that the solidarity term acquired the ethical connotation of belonging together: in the last resort, the assistance of helpless individuals remains a moral duty. It becomes clearly enough that nowadays solidarity has a particular significance in our context of interdependence and globalization"*. (Bărbat, 2015, p. 136)

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