

## 20. From journalist to refugee – and the long road back

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I survived the attack, the bomb and a year in hospital. It was after I came to Norway that I realized that I had lost my identity. My identity as a professional woman, as a journalist. I understood that most refugees never get their original identity back.

(Hasina Shirzad, Oslo 2018)

Scandinavia, as well as the rest of Europe, experienced a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants and refugees entering in their countries in 2015. The majority came from Syria, as the conflict there escalated and the possibilities for a solution were slim; however, refugees also came from countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Eritrea. Most of the refugees, including refugee journalists, left their professions behind when they fled their homelands. In 2015, 21,000 individuals applied for asylum in Denmark – an increase from 14,815 in 2014 and 7,557 in 2013. These numbers are still quite low compared to neighbouring Sweden's 162,877 asylum seekers in 2015, and even though the number of citizens is 9.8 million, compared to Denmark's 5.7 million, the relative number is much larger. Norway was situated somewhere in between its two neighbours, but still much closer to Denmark, with 31,145 asylum seekers, one third of these were from Syria. At its peak, the flow of asylum seekers into Norway rose to more than 8,000 a month. Historically the highest number of asylum seekers arriving in Norway prior to 2015 was in 2002; that year the total number

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was 17,480. However, suddenly, in 2015, Norway received three times as many refugees as it had in preceding years.

The three Scandinavian countries reacted quite differently to the influx of refugees. The Danish regime met the new situation by introducing a range of initiatives to convince refugees not to come to Denmark. The government cut back social security support to refugees by 45 per cent and it was proposed to remove refugees physically to camps outside the urban areas (Reuters, 2016). Danish authorities may confiscate belongings whose value is in excess of \$1,450 (USD) from asylum seekers in order to defray the costs of supporting the migrants' during their stay in the country. Furthermore, the minimum time for family reunion<sup>1</sup> increased from one to three years. The sceptical attitude towards migrants is also seen both in ordinary day-to-day life and in the media (Associated Press, 2016). Foreign minister Inger Støjberg published a statement in Middle East newspapers telling how unattractive it was to be a refugee in Denmark. The campaign was met with opposition, also among other Danish politicians and groups such as "Refugees Welcome to Denmark" and #Peoplereachingout, which stressed the need to bid migrants welcome.

Swedish people, from across the political spectrum, have generally shown an open and generous attitude towards the refugees, except for the anti-migration party Sverige Demokraterna (SD, an anti-immigration party). However, the Swedes changed during 2015. In September, 2015, 30 per cent wished to reduce the number, in December, when the country had received more than 16,000 refugees, 55 per cent of the citizens argued that Sweden should accept fewer refugees (Nelson, 2016). Again, Norway was situated somewhere in between its neighbours. Increasingly, the Norwegian public debate was characterized by growing worries of the society's inability to receive and integrate such large numbers of refugees. Seventy per cent of the asylum seekers arrived between September and November; the numbers seriously challenged the existing reception system. Furthermore, 5,000 people arrived through a new refugee route in the northernmost part of Norway, crossing the Russian border at Storskog, many on bicycles.

The unexpectedly large number of arriving asylum seekers in the Scandinavian countries became the dominant political issue during the last months of 2015; this resulted in extensive media coverage as

well as explicit and mediated ideas about what a refugee “should” or “ought” to be and do. An example of the latter is how mediated images of young men photographing themselves with the aid of a “selfie-stick” just after their safe arrival on a Greek island provoked many Europeans who viewed these images and wonder how refugees who could afford a smart phone actually fitted into the European idea of a “real refugee”.

Several scholars have stressed how the refugee crisis represents a challenge to journalism (Abu-Fadil, 2017; Di Salvo, 2016; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Greenslade, 2015). We do not know much about how the refugee situation represented a crisis to the journalists who fled. The focus of this chapter is on refugees with a journalistic background, who struggled to find their way back into journalism, with some illustrations from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Through qualitative interviews with five refugee journalists in Norway, Sweden and Denmark as well as a close reading of the material they produced, this writer has explored the experiences of refugee reporters in Scandinavia. The project leader of a Danish project for refugee journalists was also interviewed. The explorative approach serves to give some insights into the “borderland existence” of being in the situation where one is somewhere between a refugee and a journalist. Hopefully the resulting insights reveal what such journalistic points of view may have to offer the so-called ‘receiving’ countries.

### **A journalist – full stop**

The experience of being a refugee was a shock. I felt like a criminal. Like being accused of something I was not even aware of (Shirzad, 2018).

Hasina Shirzad came from Afghanistan to Norway in 2015. At the age of 22 she had just finished her bachelor’s degree in journalism and was working for an election commission when the office car in which she was riding blew up. Whereas Hasina’s boss and his young son were killed, she survived, with wounds covering much of the right side of her body and which found her subsequently hospitalized for three months. It took her about a year to manage to walk properly. Then her mother decided to sell all her belongings so as to let Hasina flee the country.

For a long period of time that was all I was – a refugee. This status created a barrier between me and the world. I tried to accept the loss of my identity. I saw all the people around me who gave in and somehow came to terms with the new situation. I thought – Why can't I be like the other Afghan girls and boys who accept their fate. They told me – give up. Your education will never be recognized here. But I have always been this person who dreams big. I couldn't give in. It was larger than me. It was like a curse, but, if I accepted the new role I was given, there would be no meaning to my life.

According to the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) 25 per cent of highly-educated refugees find work which involves low levels or no level of educational qualifications. Among job-seekers whose background is Norwegian this percentage is two. Women have particular difficulties to find a job relevant to their education and training. There are no numbers for journalists in particular, but as all Norwegian media houses publish in Norwegian, it is probably even more difficult for highly educated refugee journalists to find a relevant job. “Nobody saw me as a journalist anymore, as a perfectionist, as the person I used to be in my home country. I was just an asylum seeker. Just a number, that was all I had become” (Shirzad, 2018).

Hasina learned Norwegian and fought a long battle to have her studies from Afghanistan recognized in Norway. From within the project “Akademisk Dugnad” which supported “students at risk,” she found a position as an intern in the large Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*. She stresses how refugee journalists may contribute to better reporting in the countries of arrival:

When I read the stories from my own country, the context is often lacking, no wonder people here feel that Afghanistan is a far-away country, with people it is hard to understand or feel connected to. The information often goes through so many agencies, so many institutions, that the real analysis is missing. Nobody asks why, and people feel alienated. If the journalist doesn't understand, how will the readers do so?

Step by step Hasina reclaimed a professional identity. In *Dagbladet*, she became a resource; her expertise was useful about a region, a country, its culture and language. In this way she became a valuable addition to

Norwegian journalism. She describes how she felt different from the Norwegian journalists, who all, with the exception of a “second-generation” immigrant from Iran, were all blond. Together with Norwegian colleagues, Hasina participated in reporting on the so-called “October children”; these were a group of 130 seventeen-year-old refugees who turned 18 between September and December 2017 and subsequently were refused permanent residency in Norway; they risked being deported to Afghanistan. In cooperation with her colleagues, Hasina gave these October children faces and voices, contextualizing their lives through a series of articles on these young asylum seekers.

There are many factual errors. For instance, you read that in Afghanistan women only have a first name. That is not even true. From the media perspective, Afghanistan always feels like an alien place. I am the first Afghani most Norwegians have ever spoken to, and they are surprised: You seem so normal, so much like us. I want to bring that perspective into Norwegian journalism.

However, covering the stories of Afghan refugees was not sufficiently satisfying for Hasina, but, in line with other research, she found taking the step from being an “immigrant journalist” to a “journalist” to be a difficult process (Orgeret, 2008).

“I am not necessarily so interested in writing about Afghan asylum seekers, my motivation for being a journalist is to get the truth across.” Hasina’s attitude echoes that of the Norwegian journalist Kadafi Zaman who ten years earlier described how his Pakistani background was an additional strategic asset when it came to covering cases related to South Asia. Conscious of this advantage, Zaman nevertheless stressed that he refused to play the role of a “multicultural” or “Norwegian-Pakistani journalist”. He wanted to be respected as “a journalist – full stop” (Zaman, interview, in Orgeret, 2008).

The experience of journalists with a mixed or foreign background in a Scandinavian country may be seen as a double edged-sword: Such journalists’ particular backgrounds are their strengths and their particular expertise, in terms of languages and multiple cultural understanding. At the same time taking the step from being an “immigrant journalist” or a “refugee journalist” to a “journalist – full stop” may be challenging.

## Information

Friday 9 October 2015, the Danish newspaper *Information* published a unique issue, both in terms of size and content. Whereas an ordinary Friday issue is 20 pages, this issue was 48 pages, entirely produced by refugees with a journalistic background. Around ten journalists from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Thailand and Kenya participated in the process, which continued for three weeks. The majority had recently arrived in Denmark. Many of them were highly experienced journalists in their home countries. Some had even been imprisoned due to their professional activities and sacrificed a lot for the idea of free and vibrant journalism. It was when the number of refugees arriving in Denmark “exploded” in 2015, that the Danish Union of Journalists (DJ) came up with an idea of creating a network of refugees in Denmark who had a journalistic background. The idea was to try to connect the refugee journalists in a network and also allow them to come closer to the Danish media organisations. This was how the newspaper *Information* came in contact with refugee journalists and proposed the idea for a special issue. The refugee journalists were actively involved in the process from the very start. They decided the content and the focus of the articles:

We had lived the stories we were writing about, had experienced first-hand, had an unrivalled context to the stories. It was almost a citizen journalism with a professional touch kind of thing. We had contacts to sources that only we could get, and this was very valuable in telling in-depth, eye-opening stories (Interview, Helsinki, 2016).

*Information’s* issue represents an alternative platform for communication between the refugees and the Danish newspaper readers. Most of the articles are about the refugee situation or contextual topics such as IS or the role of Russia and Iran in Syria. The stories cover a large spectrum – from politics, discussions in the Danish Parliament, and bureaucratic rules for asylum seekers. There are also feature stories depicting the friendship between a Danish family and a refugee family from Libya, and about how a new language is most easily learned in a workplace. Most of all, the newspaper gives refugees a voice, and many get to share their very diverse stories: from a Somalian couple who were refused asylum but who could not be returned to Somalia;

to 28-year-old Mohammed Anowar from Myanmar, who just wants “a legal job”. As a whole, the newspaper presents a varied and complex representation of what refugees and their very different lives may be. The articles present stories and angles that are seldom found elsewhere in the mainstream media, a mainstream that mainly presented negative interpretations of the refugee crisis and “very rarely as a case of political responsibility or long-term visions” (Kryzanowski et al., 2018). This was also the point made by *Information*’s project leader, Charlotte Aagard: “One million refugees came to Europe the autumn of 2015, but our media lacked largely one core perspective: that of the refugees themselves!” (Interview, May 2016).

In the issue of *Information*, voices and perspectives which we not often get to hear are included, such as in an extensive interview with human smugglers Abo Hassan, 28 years old, and Lakman, 30 years old from Syria, and the vendor of plastic boats Murat, aged 50, from Turkey. *Information* opens up for a wide spectrum of migrants and challenges the stereotypical ideas of a migrant as *either* a passive sufferer *or* an aggressive criminal. Also, views which are common misconceptions are challenged. In the editorial entitled “No peace – no prize”, written by journalist Zach Khadudu from Kenya, he urges the Norwegian Nobel Committee not to award the Peace Prize for 2015:

We are living in an extraordinary chaotic time which calls for extraordinary actions. When human suffering is in epic proportion, and children are swept to death by raging waters of the Mediterranean, it cannot be business as usual (...) While it is of course important to recognize that there are many unsung heroes working hard to build peace – and who perhaps deserve a Nobel Peace Prize – in these extraordinarily times the Nobel Peace Prize 2015 should not be awarded. (Khadudu, 2015)

Several of the articles in *Information* have a particular political or analytical perspective aimed at influencing policy-making, such as, for instance, the story “The Kurds are Leaving Kurdistan” and “Three Myths that Define the Refugee Crisis”. One of the journalists expressed in an interview:

Of course, we want to be heard by those in power, by the politicians and form opinion. *Information* was an arena, a possibility to reach

out, to get heard. Becoming a refugee what I missed most was exactly the privilege of having a platform, a possibility to reach out. (Interview, Copenhagen, November 2016)

*Information's* publishers Christian Jensen and Mette Davidsen-Nielsen described the refugee journalists as follows:

Each of them has their own story, their destiny, their professionalism and their dreams for the future. But we hear them so seldom and only sporadically. For the politicians, the refugees are solely a problem to be solved as soon as possible, and most of them prefer to do so without even looking them in the eye – such as Immigration Minister Inger Støjberg who in spite of a ten days warning has not found time to give an interview to the news team.

As the Minister did not reply, the journalists eventually filmed their questions and distributed them on Youtube with the final words: “Inger Støjberg you can still make it. Deadline is 7 pm, Thursday 8 October. We do hope you can find 15 minutes”. The fact that the questions were left unanswered somehow gave them additional rhetorical strength.

A number of cultural and professional differences were found in the process of creating the *Information* issue. The project initially wished to leave all writing and editorial work to the refugees, while the process of making the newspaper in all other aspects should run as usual. However, it soon became clear that the members of the group of refugee journalists varied a lot in terms of language skills, professional experience and culture. As a result it became evident they had different approaches to what “good and effective journalism” is. This echoes earlier studies of diverse journalistic cultures, for instance the one by Thomas Hanitzsch (2007). To obtain a final product that was in compliance with *Information's* general quality requirements, several articles ended up being written in cooperation with Danish journalists. The process was both enriching and challenging for those involved, not least did the different cultures of journalism and practices come to light during the cooperation (Interviews, 2016). For instance, whether a journalist could explicitly take side in a news story was a burning question wherever there were quite diverging views, and hence a topic, which was vigorously debated during the process (Interviews, Copenhagen, 2016).

*Information's* project manager Charlotte Aalgard described the culture of Danish journalism as one where independent reflection is considered a prerequisite to obtain good results. Thus, there can be collisions with this culture its expectations when journalists new to Denmark possess on one hand a high level of respect for the prevailing institutions of power, and on the other hand express loudly and stridently opinions and feelings. Aalgard also explained that she had met a new and somewhat challenging situation where, in guiding these new colleagues, she had to deal with persons not used to having the license to voice their own opinions and disagree with their workplace superiors.

Cultural perspectives were clearly present within the particular Special Issue of *Information*. The article "A Small Story about Arabic Poetry" includes several Arabic poems written by refugees from Syria, and lucidly illustrates how poetry may be a fruitful avenue for expressing issues linked to development and social change by using genres other than those of traditional political journalism. The visual perspective is taken well care of, not least in Swedish photo-journalist Magnus Wennman's powerful series "Where the Children Sleep". In early 2015, Wennman traveled through seven countries in the Middle East and Europe where he met refugee children. He had asked them to show him where they go to sleep at night. Another example is the film review about Jonas Carpignano's film *Mediterranea*, which was launched in June 2015. This illustrates how art and culture may be a very convincing point of entry for presenting a complex reality and working for social change. The story of the feature film is so topical to this issue of *Information* that it could have been taken from its headlines, as it depicts an account of the plight of African fruit-pickers in Southern Italy and their dreams about Europe. The "debate articles" in *Information* provide a refugee/integration perspective, from international politics to close contemplation of Danish culture – as presented from the standpoint of an outsider: "It takes time to get used to dogs on a leash".

In the refugee journalists' issue of *Information*, nine of the fourteen refugee journalists were women, and it is particularly the women who introduce and feature gender perspectives to the articles. The front-page story "When the Men Flee, the Women Pay the Price", describes a situation where 75 per cent of those who flee are men, as in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. The story discusses what this implies for the women



Screenshot:  
*Information*, 9 October 2015. Headline:  
When the men flee,  
the women left behind  
pay the price.

through the voices of women, whose point of view we otherwise seldom hear. The Thai journalist Yechiela Pojanamesbaanstit describes how women from Thailand are often mistaken for prostitutes in Denmark: "Nobody thinks that I am a proud woman". The Syrian journalist Lilas Hatazhet's dialogue with her close friend Sham, who still lives in Damascus, contributes with a touching female perspective on war and flight: "after a journey – as long as a difficult birth – I applied for asylum in Denmark". It is a powerful dialogue of two women who share the feelings of loneliness, difference and loss, although under very different circumstances. Some of the journalists came from traditionally patriarchal and gender divided societies, but also expressed that there were large internal differences in these countries. As one of them stated, it is unfortunately a fact that it is those men who are most open-minded in terms of gender equality who leave, and it is the most conservative men who stay (Interview, 2016).

The *Information* project was limited to a single issue – that of October 9th 2015. After the production of this issue, a couple of the journalists were offered more assignments for the newspaper, but for the majority the project did not lead them to further developments. This was what the journalists found the most negative about the experience:

There is so much more potential in this network of refugee journalists. We could have made some extraordinary investigative stories if the project was continued. There was so much resource material of people who had contacts in places where a “standard” journalist on assignment would not go. There were people with trusted contacts and access to human smugglers, to refugees in closed camps, to militants, to authorities. These journalists being refugees themselves, and from places of conflict affecting the world’s peace today, would unravel some valuable issues by embedding or going undercover and blending in. (Interview, Copenhagen, 2016)

Some of the refugee journalists said that the best part of the process was that they were more conscious about their own norms and values through the cooperation with journalists from other backgrounds (Interviews, Copenhagen and Helsinki 2016). Brigitte Alfter describes the processes, which arise when journalists from different journalism cultures are to cooperate: “The will – and over time – ability to cross cultural borders in thoughts and dialogue is an indispensable tool in cross border journalism”. (Alfter, 2015: 125)

Although the *Information* refugee journalists felt included, they expressed in interviews that they did not necessarily see themselves as having taken charge of the project. However, the networking experience that the *Information* case involved for the journalists should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the refugees’ stories reached an audience where otherwise many would receive very little firsthand information from refugees. A study made for the Red Cross in 2015 showed that 77 per cent of the Danes have no contact, or hardly any, with refugees and immigrants. There are in today’s world of information, more chances than ever to be part of the world, to learn about political and social conflicts elsewhere. However, it seems that most audiences stick to their local media even other opportunities to connect to the world are highly present. Hence the main responsibility for introducing the

world to the audiences still lies to a large extent with the national media institutions. Here newspapers such as *Information* can play a major role, offering their publication as an arena for new journalistic perspectives and provide a stepping stone for refugee journalists wanting to continue in their profession.

### **Building bridges between new and old Swedes**

When he arrived as a refugee in the small town of Landskrona in Sweden in 2014, journalist Ali Abdallah, took the initiative to start his own *News Café*. The idea was to invite Swedes and migrants to the local library to discuss current affairs with a guest such as a local politician or communal worker. The aim is to give refugees or the “New Swedes” as he calls them, insight into Swedish politics and current debates. The discussions were recorded and shared on Youtube to inform both the Swedes and the newcomers about what was happening in the city, in Sweden and out in the world:

The idea emerged soon after I arrived in 2014 and started reading the Swedish newspapers to learn the language. I found the Swedish media lacked the newcomers’ perspective and I found it interesting to engage with newcomers and share their views, rather than simply being talked about. (Ali Abdallah, Interview 2016)

Ali Abdallah started the *News Café* on his own, but was also dependent on the local authorities to support him with the locale and technical equipment. Ali Abdallah included both local citizens and other refugees in his plans from the very start to ensure their active involvement and ownership to the project.

A number of the *News Café* programs present issues that may enlighten and inform both newly arrived refugees about the Swedish system and society, as “ell as sharing knowledge about the background of some of the “New Swedes” to the “Old Swedes”. For instance, in September and October 2015, Ali Al Abdallah invited representatives from the local public sphere to discuss and share knowledge about the Swedish health system, local social services and the role of youth in the region. Ali Abdallah and some of his migrant guests explained what they were finding new, difficult and interesting in Sweden, compared to their own backgrounds.

Al Abdallah invited guests to the local library in Landskrona and talked with them in front of an audience who were free to participate with questions. The sessions were filmed and then published on YouTube, so as to reach a broader audience of both Swedish citizens and refugees. A lot of people commented on Facebook during and after the programmes, and some of the comments were included in the process of making new programs.

Al Abdallah used his own perspectives as a Syrian journalist, seeing things a bit from outside, but stressed that he has also learned from Swedish journalistic traditions and culture. The Swedish influence is illustrated by how he uses the popular Swedish pop group Abba as the soundtrack accompanying his website.<sup>2</sup>

Refugees as a minority are very concerned about what's happening in Sweden. And so the initiative came from that need to provide more balanced information to and about newcomers. Another aim is to teach the language, and let newcomers get a glimpse of what appears in the Swedish media, and specifically things that relate to them.

I think unbalanced reporting has resulted in a negative image about newcomers in Sweden. I am trying to change that. My aim is to educate my entire public, wherever they are from. (Al Abdallah, Interview 2016)

The challenge of getting politicians who are critical toward refugees and immigration aboard was also experienced by Ali Al Abdallah in Sweden. Several times, politicians from all parties (particularly the right-wing populist SD) accepted his invitation to the program. Al Abdallah explained that an overall aim with his programs was to promote policy change by making the voice of the refugees more widely heard in Swedish society (Interview, 2016). Al Abdallah found the mediated discussions concerning the role of Swedish companies and the business sector in helping the newcomers to be the perhaps most important contribution to bridging the gap between new and old Swedes.

## **New angles**

Refugee reporters offer new angles to society in general, and migration in particular. This is important as several studies establish a clear relationship between media coverage of migration and to what degree most

people are interested in the topic (IOM 2011). The stories provided by the refugee journalists present alternative perspectives to most stories involving migrants in the mainstream media, which often are cases of crimes or tragedies. A review of academic work on European media coverage of refugees reveals a scholarly consensus arguing that news media presented refugees as a problem or a “crisis” for Europe (Chouliaraki et al., 2017). European media often portray the immigrant in a negative and even “dehumanizing” manner (Esses et al., 2017) and very rarely do we find examples of immigrants or refugees successfully inserted in society (Ketabchi, 2013). As most of the serious challenges facing our world today transcend national borders, communication cannot exclusively operate within national or cultural borders. The refugee journalists’ contributions often bridge the gap between the local and the global. Their stories may support the process of increasing audiences’ media literacy about foreign cultures and of moving in the direction of what Ulf Hannerz (2004) has called a “well-informed cosmopolitan citizenship”. The relationship between the media and the real world is never one-to-one, and the more multifaceted and nuanced the stories we receive are, the more realistic our impressions of the world existing outside our own localities.

Several of the journalists interviewed stressed freedom of expression as the largest difference between working in their home country and in Scandinavia: “It was a delight to meet the concept of press freedom and to be able to express all my opinions freely! Not like when I worked in Syria as a journalist where there was no press freedom in the media” (Interview, Copenhagen, 2016).

Although of very different nature and scale, the examples shown here demonstrate that it is very important that different groups of a given society are given the possibility to engage in an ongoing, constitutive conversation where, in spite of different intentions and conflicting positions, individuals have the possibility to take part in thinking about, adapting to, and changing society. Perhaps the most important change to have been generated by the initiatives discussed here is that they challenge the often static and binary opposition of senders and receivers common in reporting on conflict, and they emphasize that to get one’s own story heard is also a part of a broad understanding of freedom of expression. The experiences shown here are examples of

different ways to report the complex phenomenon of migration without reinforcing simple stereotypes. And perhaps the most important dimension is seeing the refugees as rich human resources not as a social or political burden.

In terms of finding one's way back to one's professional identity, the cases here illustrate that it is often a long and cumbersome process, but it may also be highly rewarding both for the individual journalist and the society.

## Notes

1. Those who apply for family immigration are usually the spouse or child of someone who lives in Denmark. <http://xn--familiesammenfring-t4b.dk/betingelser/?lang=en>
2. <http://alialabdallah.hemsida24.se/integration-32861745>

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