

## **PodMag July 2016**

### ***The PodMag***

#### **Karen Foley:**

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, the audio news magazine from Social Sciences at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and in this July/August edition we take a look at Exodus and the refugee crisis more generally. Exodus is an OU and BBC production and it shows over three consecutive nights the plight of refugees from Syria across Europe.

Now what's different about this programme is that much of it is filmed by refugees who were given smartphones in 2015. In a way the method used to film this programme are very innovative and almost ethnographic adding a depth and complexity to what is being shown. Yet despite a long time in the making and much preparation for the launch of this on 11<sup>th</sup> July in post-Brexit Britain there is some controversy now over the series. And so in this edition of the PodMag I'm taking to Victoria Canning, Marie Gillespie and Eddie Wastnidge about this and about their takes on the situation and the programme.

First I asked Victoria Canning from Criminology about issues around criminality and legislation.

So Vic what kinds of reaction have there been to Exodus and what are you expecting?

#### **Victoria Canning:**

Well there have been mixed reactions that I've seen so far with the Exodus some ranging from people who are quite emotional about what they see. It's the first opportunity that they've had to see the real human element of the refugee crisis which is the individuals who are experiencing borders rather than just seeing people as numbers.

The other side of the spectrum is people who seemed to have been a little bit more negative about Exodus in terms of the current and ongoing anti-immigration sentiments that there seems to have been across part of Europe especially in the lead up to the EU Referendum. So some of those have been questioning why people are coming to Britain in the place. Are people coming here for welfare and why can't people go back to other border countries. And the answers to those of course I think are quite well answered by Exodus the series itself.

#### **Karen Foley:**

And some aspects of immigration are of course illegal and I wanted to talk to you about things from your perspective, I mean as a criminologist. How effective would you say that criminalisation has been in terms of deterring illegal immigration?

**Victoria Canning:**

Well I think the first thing to recognise and it's one of the things that we've addressed in the Open University's online sites. One of the first things to recognise is that parts of immigrating have been illegalised rather than being inherently illegal. So it isn't the people who are inherently illegal it is that some of the actions that they take part in to be able to move across borders have been made illegal through legislation or through different social policies.

So in some ways it depends what your perspective would be on how effective things are. If it's in terms of the ineffective deterrent then we have, you know, Britain has effectively deterred a lot of people being able to cross, for example, the Mediterranean or other parts of Europe to get through Britain's borders.

If from a humanitarian perspective or from a social justice or social harm perspective we might see that as actually something that is quite problematic. Because what criminalising safe passage for asylum does means that people generally will take more dangerous routes to be able to enter countries to flee either poverty, persecution or forms of conflict related violence that they may have experienced beforehand.

**Karen Foley:**

And finally I'd like to talk about the timeline that you've written that's available on OpenLearn. And this outlines the illegalisation of asylum seeking and the consequences that it can have on people seeking sanctuary. So this series Exodus has a potential to give another perspective or to educate people about the lived experiences of refugees.

So I wanted to ask you how much of an impact do you think that things like this, you know, educational assets will actually have?

**Victoria Canning:**

I think that that's a really good question. And I think that what we really want to draw back to considering in relation to that is public opinion and how public opinion has been informed a lot by quite often fairly inaccurate accounts of immigration in the media and particularly as I said earlier in the run up to the EU Referendum. So I think there is capacity for real impacts on the educational programmes that we've developed at the Open University alongside being able to see the lived reality of crossing borders. People will have the opportunity to see how law has changed in relation to immigration. How parts of immigration which used to be legal have now become illegalised which of course means more people are criminalised under immigration laws and legislation.

What we've looked at specifically are the impacts that these can have on criminalising people outside of Britain as well whenever people aren't able to leave their countries of origin or who are stuck sometimes in a kind of limbo in other countries trying to get towards northern Europe for example.

So I think there's capacity for real impact and for people to be able to see an alternative to immigration which is in some ways closer to the reality for immigrants and refugees themselves than is sometimes represented across the broader media.

**Karen Foley:**

Thank you for filling us in on your opinion Vic. I really like your timeline on OpenLearn, you know, it breaks things down into a really nice bite size chunk. And it's a really, really useful asset so I hope people do enjoy it.

**Victoria Canning:**

Thanks very much Karen it's been lovely to speak with you.

**Karen Foley:**

I then spoke to Marie Gillespie from Sociology about smartphone use amongst refugees.

Marie refugees were given smartphones and much of the programme around Exodus uses content from these. Now smartphones are arguably one of the most vital resources that refugees have whether they're in camps or travelling. They're both a way to access information as well as stay connected with families back home.

So what I wanted to know is can you tell us some of the ways that refugees are accessing digital information and why these smartphones are such an important tool for survival?

**Marie Gillespie:**

Well when we did our research the refugees we worked with told us that smartphones were more important than food and water in some circumstances. Every refugee as they leave Syria, for example, in their backpack they have a smartphone and a t-shirt because the navigation tools, the translation tools, the phone, the photograph, the audio, all those tools are used on the way to help navigate. To stay in touch with family as you point out and also crucially to keep in touch with refugees who've made the journey and gone ahead so they can warn them of dangers, of borders closing, of problems on the way.

**Karen Foley:**

And as well as that sharing information they're also a way of sharing experiences. And in some of your work you've talked about this idea of digital witnessing. I wondered if you could tell us more about that and how as a researcher you deal with receiving information that you're then asked to share.

**Marie Gillespie:**

It's a really good question. We all use our smartphones now as a kind of archive and repository of our lives. So you can imagine for a Syrian refugee leaving war on Damascus

say, he or she may have photographs or footage of torture, violence, of ISIL attacks and that will be part of their archive but similarly their journeys. The journeys that they make from departure and all the way through are recorded very diligently and shared with family and others.

And indeed in the research that I've done it's really interesting how the first thing that refugees we've worked with have done is they get their smartphones out and they show you video footage of the boat crossing. And, you know, those iconic images of arrival and the jubilation and joy of arriving on European soil. So that archive contains both devastating images of torture and abuse and the war that they're fleeing as well as the images of joy and jubilation upon arrival at safety.

**Karen Foley:**

And what do you then do when you're asked to share some of that? Is that something that you see as part of that research process?

**Marie Gillespie:**

Well I've recently done research in refugee camps in Lesbos. And it really is amazing since I've come back, I mean, every day I get images, videos of refugees who are making their journey or about protests within camps. I recently wrote an article for The Conversation and showed one of those photos with children saying, we need breakfast because there was a scarcity of food in one of the camps on Lesbos. Similarly there were riots there when one of the guards beat a child.

So this is all very valuable research material but it has to be treated with the highest level of ethical consideration because refugees are very vulnerable groups. Their journeys are often illegal. They have been criminalised so you have to be very, very careful not to reveal identities where that could endanger people. Not to show the faces of children where that might lead to harm. But equally if you have the approval and in addition you've done your research it can also help to make the case for refugees. For example, the images that they may share on their phone of torture I could hold those because to have those on their phone actually makes their phones a liability and if they got in to the wrong hands then that could endanger them.

So I could then return those images of torture when it comes to the time that they make an asylum claim and that could support an asylum claim.

**Karen Foley:**

Interesting. You were starting to talk about some of the more negative aspects I guess of having a smartphone and having that access to a digital network. What are some of the other negative sides?

**Marie Gillespie:**

Well I think Vickie has talked about the criminalisation of refugees, the closure of borders and the change in legal frameworks which has actually made it hugely difficult for refugees to travel legally and safely.

So you can imagine young Syrian men and there have been in the first phase many young men made those journeys and they travelled in groups and they used GPS. So the authorities and officials were able to track them in places may be where they shouldn't be. Or, for example, because of fears of security they go underground digitally and use closed Facebook groups and that exposes them to further risks and dangers. Exposing them to, for example, criminal networks of smugglers, of people selling organs. I mean you really would not believe how many young children have gone missing. It is grotesque. But children disappear, their organs are sold. So the digital underground can expose refugees to further dangers and it allows them to be tracked and traced by authorities.

I mean not very many people know but the UK have extended powers to hack in to refugee phones to check whether they're actually bona fide.

**Karen Foley:**

Well interesting, very, very interesting. Marie Gillespie thank you very much.

**Marie Gillespie:**

Thank you Karen.

**Karen Foley:**

So we've taken a look at legislation and how smartphones are being used. And Marie and Vic have given an insight in to the lived experience of these refugees. But although we can see this as a refugee crisis there's also an argument that it's a policy and political crisis.

So I talked to Eddie Wastnidge from Political Studies and International Relations to see how he interprets all of this.

So Eddie, Exodus is a really good example of the tensions between the media being used and to both inform and also shape the way that situations are perceived. And this is done not always in the way that we expect.

So I wanted to ask you does soft power relate in any way to this programme?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

I think that's a very interesting question, yeah. If I just start by explaining what soft power is if I may very briefly. It's really about kind of states and it's a very top down state idea. So it's about how states get what they want out of relationships through co-opting or attracting other states rather than the kind of the traditional sort of what's in

the hard power of kind of coercion or payment or military might. So it's about using kind of tools of attraction sort of culture public diplomacy that kind of thing. It was originally written in relation to kind of **US 00:14:22** influence in the form of the Soviet Union and been applied to lots of different case studies since.

Now what's interesting I think in terms of the question you asked is recent work on soft power has actually looked at how these kind of ideas are communicated internationally and how they kind of form narratives at how a state wants to be seen. So, you know, by using different forms of media, social networks, etc.

Now the example **you 00:14:43** use is interesting it makes you think about soft power in a different way because I guess, you know, the relevance of soft power comes in terms of the kind of policy and the perceptions of the states to which refugees in question are aiming to get to. So if we look in Europe, for example, Germany it's shown itself to be a kind of broadly compassionate welcoming destination. The government there has done that. And that's an image that is kind of crafted of itself and that has, you know, I think important ramifications as to how it's perceived both as a destination for refugees and also by other states. So it's seen as a kind of leader of this, you know, kind of more compassionate model in the EU.

We look at other states with soft power as well I mean Turkey is a country that's invested lots in its soft power, you know, in the kind of public image. You know crafting itself as a kind of democratic model for Middle Eastern States to follow and things like that. But, you know, arguably it's soft power, you know, it's taken a bit of a battering recently and some scholars have even argued that, you know, because the ways it's handled the refugee crisis as well. It's actually, you know, changed its international standing. So although, you know, soft power is about states primarily, you know, it's in a kind of field of perceptions and influences that it does relate to the refugee crisis.

And the other thing as well I think, you know, states, you know Britain for example actually extends its soft power by promoting certain initiatives. So it might promote good governance or better institutions for example. And that's, you know, doing so towards the kind of upstream as they say or sending countries, so the countries that are sending the refugees as well or the countries that are escaping from shall I say.

So, you know, the British Council for example, you know, it's kind of, you know, expanded its educational outreach in these countries. Sponsoring the civil society groups, youth groups, women's groups, you know. Groups **??? 00:16:25** in democratic participation and things like that. And that is important because that promotes greater stability arguably. That's the kind of objective for them and then that will hopefully, you know, reduce the, you know, the problems of, you know, refugees having to flee a country.

And the other thing as well actually is, I was thinking about this, is there's a kind of a darker side as well to soft power. So, you know, we've seen in Europe this kind of rise of kind of right wing nationalist groups using a kind of, sort of like an aggressive soft power stance in a way. So they're using kind of cultural reference points so say, you know, for some of their rather nationalist groups in Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia. They're using kind of white Christian identities. Saying you're not welcome, you know, to refugee groups.

So I think it does have some **??? 00:17:09** that's quite interesting looking at it this way and then, yeah, I think it's, you know, a field of further study potentially.

**Karen Foley:**

No, very interesting and very varied and, you know, in particular post-Brexit and right now there's a very fluid state about how we perceive migration and immigration right now. So I wanted to ask you, you know, in terms of international relations. How is the way that the refugee crisis is currently perceived in this political climate right now?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

OK. Well I think it's hugely influential. You know, obviously within the UK context we've seen how it, you know, as you mentioned really hijacked the referendum debate. And that was, you know, **??? 00:17:46** a lot of ways because, you know, UK had opt outs. It had all the part of the Schengen Agreement so it developed out from the kind of EU-wide quotas on accepting refugees. But also, you know, we had that poster that UKIP, that Farage produced as well, you know, saying that UKIP was at breaking point in using images of, you know, refugees.

And I think also domestically it's become a big issue in the leadership debate that we're seeing at the moment in the Tory party, you know, to candidates both, you know, wanting to be seen as tough on migration. And then also in the Labour party debate as well at the moment, you know, in this sense of trying to win back the disillusioned working class Labour heartlands which voted, you know, for a Brexit as well. And so it will always be as issue. Now I think unfortunately these kind of debates and attempts at kind of political point scoring, you know, this sense that you've got to be tough on immigration it really unfortunately I think it shapes wider perceptions of the refugee crisis as well.

So I think that actually has, you know, a horribly dehumanising effect and it smacks of a lack of compassion. I mean, you know, I have a personal interest in this kind of thing myself as well. You know, my grandparents are post-War, World War II refugees from Poland so perhaps I'm a little biased, you know. But I think it's problematic the way it's affected the local climate.

And internationally, I mean in some sort of study of international relations it's quite interesting as well because migrants and then refugees are being increasingly

securitised. So it means that they're kind of being seen as a potential security problem as well. And, you know, you see the kind of that shapes state policies as well. So you see the responses from France and Belgium in response to the attacks in Paris and Brussels for example. You know, and the kind of fear that, you know, for some there might be some elements within the refugee populations that are coming over that may have, you know, ulterior motives for coming to Europe, i.e. you know, taking part in terror attacks. So, you know, it is kind of become securitised by that sense and that, you know, that can also be very problematic and quite dehumanising I think as well.

**Karen Foley:**

I wanted to sort of touch on that side of things because, you know, you're obviously talking at a policy level and very categorically. And, you know, Vic and Marie have talked about the plight of these refugees and there's a human side to all of that. And I know in the past we've talked about how, you know, soft power with images and personal stories can be used to communicate I guess more broad political agendas.

So lastly I just wanted to ask you then about this idea about this media being filmed by refugees, you know, methodologically it's a whole different ballgame. Do you think this is a good idea in terms of how this sort of assess I guess can influence international relations and general understanding?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

I think it is. I mean it's great to see. I think it can be seen as a very empowering thing. I mean, you know, as we've both picked up on, you know, there's this kind of tendency to dehumanise, depersonalise so this puts a bit of power back in the hands of those, you know, that are suffering I think.

And I think it's all too easy to look, you know, purely from a kind of state down very much top down perspective, you know, from the say the ruling governments. And these, you know, governments they'll just place refugees just as a kind of number, you know, or kind of pawns. And they kind of shamelessly exploit for political gain and you know.

And I think what things like the Exodus programme and certainly the messages that are applied, you know, using smartphones and things like that I think, you know, it helps illustrate the human story, you know, which is what it's all about at the end of the day. You know, that's incredibly powerful and one hopes that this kind of filming and this use of media will have a political impact. That's, you know, an ideal. I mean hopefully I'm thinking about it if can change opinions and in a sense kind of re-humanise so that the wider immigration debate becomes less polarised and more about, you know, human actions then that's all for the better.

And I think it's just really interesting as well methodically, you know, that we have a kind of, it's kind of like citizen journalism but by non-citizens, you know, because obviously we are looking at, you know, stateless people here. And it's really showing that, you



know, the human consequences of the actions of political decision makers, you know, being at policy level and ??? 00:21:52 in terms of, you know, decisions to go to war or engage in civil conflict, you know, in the countries where they're coming from as well.

So yeah really important work I think.

**Karen Foley:**

And that is unfortunately all we have time for in this edition of the PodMag. We hope you enjoy the sunshine and that there is some of it nearby you over the next few weeks. Stay in touch with us on Facebook and Twitter in the meantime.

Bye for now.