



opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration

How to Empower Migrants to Share Their Stories in Public Discourses on Migration and Integration

Recommendation for Action for Journalists, Representatives of NGOs, and Activists

Carolin Gebauer (University of Wuppertal) and Roy Sommer (University of Wuppertal)

Exemplary Storytelling in Public Discourse

Humanitarian approaches to storytelling in journalism, work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and activism on migration often pursue the same objective: They seek to strengthen migrants' agency by empowering them to have a voice in public discourses on migration and integration. The goal is to increase the inclusiveness and diversity of societies based on the principles of an open, welcoming, and participatory culture. To achieve this aim, journalists, NGOs, and activists often draw on anonymous exemplary migrant stories in news stories, social media campaigns, migrant advocacy, or fundraising. That is, they tell somebody else's story, speaking on behalf of migrants.

These practices of exemplary storytelling certainly are an important endeavor which is pursued only with the best intentions in mind. As [recent research](#) by the OPPORTUNITIES project has shown, however, they also come with some caveats, given that typical uses of migrant stories in humanitarian discourses also pose several problems:

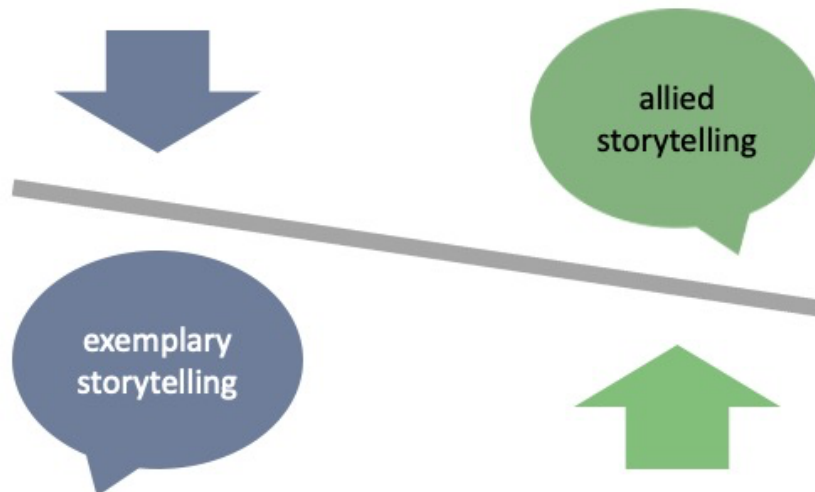
- ☞ Exemplary storytelling tends to reduce the life stories of migrants to formulaic patterns that categorize people with labels such as *migrant*, *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, or *displaced person*.
- ☞ Exemplary storytelling tends to rely on stereotypes (e.g., poverty, vulnerability, etc.) by using images and depictions of migrants traditionally perpetuated in public discourses on migration.
- ☞ Exemplary storytelling tends to deploy conventional frames – such as the 'from-rags-to-riches' theme or the story of the 'good refugee' – which easily contribute to the victimization of migrants and refugees.

Exemplary Storytelling in Humanitarian Narratives: 3 Issues

- 💡 Fundraising campaigns by NGOs often reduce migrant's life stories to brief, exemplary case stories, with the result that the person's complex experience disappears behind a label.
- 💡 Representations of migration in news media tend to depict migrants as a homogenous group of people, all of whom share the same experience of flight and forced displacement. Rather than challenging such practices of biased representation, journalists often pick up the stories of individuals to illustrate and substantiate stereotypical images and notions of migration prevailing in public discourse.
- 💡 When depicting refugees and asylum seekers as victims of humanitarian crises (e.g., war, persecution, violence, or oppression) in an appeal to the public to help and support these groups, NGOs and activists involuntarily contribute to representations of migrants and refugees as receivers of aid and support for which, in turn, they should be thankful.

What can you do to circumvent any untoward effects of exemplary storytelling? How can you help migrants to share their individual stories in public discourses on migration and integration without reducing their role to that of marginalized members of society? In other words: *How can you do justice to the full potential of migrant stories?*





A fair debate on migration means that all perspectives need to be included.

Toward New Forms of Allied Storytelling

In order to truly empower migrants and refugees as well as to enable them to get a voice in public discourse, it is important not to fall into the trap of exemplary narratives which typically use migrants' stories merely to support narratives on migration that depict the phenomenon from an outside perspective. Instead, it is recommended to draw on forms of allied storytelling which, unlike conventional forms of exemplary storytelling, actually foreground stories of migration by presenting the phenomenon from an inside perspective – i.e., the perspective of migrants and refugees. A fair debate on migration in public discourse requires a more balanced, or leveled, relation between practices of exemplary and allied storytelling (see Figure 1).

A Step-By-Step Guide to Allied Storytelling

STEP 0: Examine your assumptions about migration: In how far is your own attitude toward migrants and refugees influenced by stereotypical representations in the media?

STEP 1: Listen carefully to migrants and refugees as they tell you their stories. Pay particular attention to questions that reveal their motives of sharing their experiences with you: What stories do they tell you? What can you learn about the storytellers' personalities, self-

images, and expectations? Which stages of their life do they foreground in their personal accounts? Which stages of their journeys from countries of origin to countries of arrival do they emphasize?

STEP 2: Collaborate with migrants to co-create their stories with them. Make sure to share your retelling of an individual's story with that person: Do they agree with your depiction of their experiences or would they prefer you to rework certain parts and aspects? You should not forget that you are telling someone else's story, which requires you to respect the wishes and needs of the person who actually owns the story.

STEP 3: Try to avoid any stereotypical representations that reduce migrants' stories to their status as migrant, refugee, or displaced person. You should always bear in mind that the role of being a person on the move only makes up a fractional part of the identity of the individual whose story you relate.

👉 The OPPORTUNITIES project has devised a new methodology that serves to help you collaborate with migrants on joint storytelling projects – the Cross-Talks. If you would like to learn more on the Cross-Talks methodology, please access our [manual](#).

STEP 4: Try to put yourself in the migrants' shoes. Do not present their stories from *your* personal point of view, but try to adopt *their* own perspective as best as you can: What is important to the individual whose story you recount? What are their wishes, desires, and aspirations? What kind of life do they wish to lead? What kind of person do they want to become? In what kind of society would they like to live?

STEP 5: Try to avoid instrumentalizing migrants' stories for political, economic, or ideological purposes.

STEP 6: Show your retellings to the story owners before making these narratives public. Let the migrants have the last say about what they want to share with a public audience.

The Benefits of Allied Storytelling

Why should you choose forms of allied storytelling over other forms of exemplary storytelling? In addition to empowering migrants by introducing their voices to public debates on migration and integration, allied storytelling can serve to change public opinions and attitudes toward migration and migrants. For the more often you make use of allied narratives, the more you contribute to challenging conventional practices of stigmatizing and marginalizing migrants as well as of instrumentalizing their stories for political, economic, or ideological purposes. What is more, by refraining depicting migrants as a homogenous group, you help to raise awareness to the diverse experiences of migrants and refugees and hence put emphasis on the fact that they are not different from other members of society. Quite the contrary: they are people like you and me, who share similar ideas about what it means to lead a good and happy life in a welcoming society.

A Best Practice Example of Allied Storytelling: *Refugee Tales*

Organized by Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, *Refugee Tales* is an activist project which organizes annual "Walks in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Detainees" to protest against indefinite detention of asylum seekers all around the world and especially in the United Kingdom. Inspired by Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, a medieval narrative about a pilgrimage from Kent to Canterbury on which the pilgrims tell each other stories as a means of entertainment, *Refugee Tales* brings together artists, social workers, activists, and former refugee detainees in order to collectively retrace the fictive pilgrims' route as well as re-enact the storytelling scenario staged in Chaucer's famous work with the aim of establishing a new welcome culture in today's society. While walking from Kent to Canterbury, the refugees, as well as the people who closely work with them, tell the artists of their experiences; the latter then transform these stories into narratives to be publicly presented in the various villages and towns that the march crosses as well as to be published in one of the famous short story collections edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus (2016–2021). Thanks to its formation of an alliance between artists, social workers, activists, and former detainees, the project succeeds in empowering migrants and refugees not only by giving them a voice in public debates on migration, but also by acknowledging their individual experiences and recognizing their different needs, wishes, and aspirations. Rather than depicting the affected refugees as a homogeneous group, *Refugee Tales* stages multiperspectivity, thus foregrounding the diversity of migrants' stories that should be heard in public discourse.

Do you want to learn more about allied storytelling? Please feel free to get in touch with us at: opportunities@uni-wuppertal.de

For more information on the OPPORTUNITIES project, please visit our website at: <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/>

