

Social media in shaping perceptions: human curiosity as mediator

Rima MARROUCH

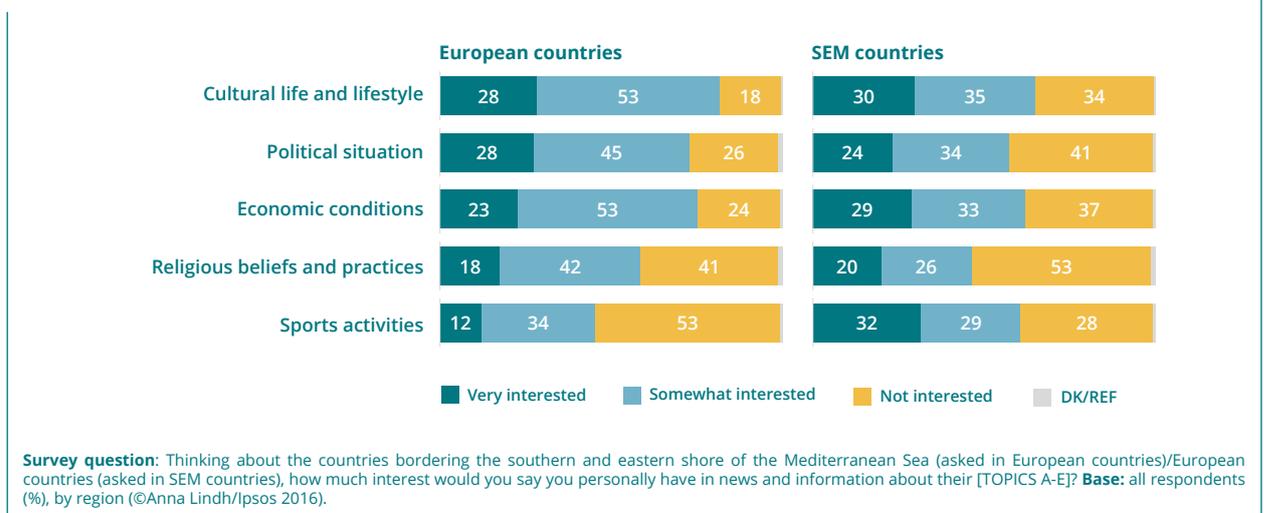
Discussing the findings of the ALF/Ipsos Survey concerning the role of media in shaping perceptions in the region, Rima Marrouch identifies the importance of cultural and lifestyle stories. However, tracking the impact of the stories leads the author to argue that media might not always play that positive role, and hence, despite the survival of TV as a dominant source of information on both shores, social media is gaining a wider role in shaping perceptions – especially among the youth.

In Polish primary schools students are taught early on that the basis of European civilisation and their own Polish culture was laid in ancient Greece and Rome. Greek myths and Rome’s history constitute an important element in the primary school curriculum. Myths about Sisyphus, Persephone and Antigone were some of the first stories I was introduced to when I moved at the age of 11 from Syria to Poland.

In Syrian primary schools, students do not learn about the whimsicality of Greek gods or the heroism of Roman heroes. Greek mythology is not included in the curriculum. Most young Syrians experience the Hellenistic and Roman culture first-hand on school trips to ancient sites like Apamea to see the Great Colonnade, one of the longest colonnades in the Roman Empire and its theatre, one of the largest surviving Roman theatres with an estimated seating capacity of 20,000 people.

Maybe because of the Polish curriculum and the Syrian school trips from my past, but mostly because of my current work as a journalist, the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey was interesting for me for several reasons: firstly, to better understand what type of news stories about SEM countries are of interest to people in the European countries included in the Survey (Austria, Croatia, Finland, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal and the Netherlands) and, vice versa, what stories about European countries are of interest to people in the SEM countries covered by the Survey (Algeria, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Tunisia). Secondly, the Survey also looks into the media’s role in shaping public perception about people from the other shores of the Mediterranean and finds that it is not always a positive role. Finally, the Survey produces interesting findings with respect to which media are perceived by people in European and SEM countries as the most trustworthy for cross-cultural reporting.

Chart 10.1 Interest in news and information about SEM/European countries



Human curiosity about people's lives on the other shores of the Mediterranean

I tried to look into some of the produced video content on the BBC Arabic Facebook page and analyse it through the results of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey. I looked at what type of video stories were mostly shared and viewed on BBC Arabic social media platforms and tried to see if the stories follow a similar trend as observed in the Survey. Why video? Cisco, a networking company, predicts that over 78% of the world's mobile traffic will be video by 2021.

One of the most viewed videos on the BBC Arabic Facebook page in May 2017 was about a young man producing small cars in Egypt. By 15 May 2017 the video was viewed 9,530 times (not a very large number but it was nonetheless one of the 'top' videos). According to the Survey, this type of cultural and lifestyle stories generates a large amount of interest in both European and SEM countries. In European countries, 28% of respondents answered that they were very interested in cultural and lifestyle stories from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean and an additional 53% reported being somewhat interested. In SEM countries, 30% of respondents were very interested, and 35% somewhat interested, in cultural and lifestyle stories from Europe. For me, this proves an endemic and human curiosity about other people's lives on the other shores of the Mediterranean.

In SEM countries, sports stories generate an equally high level of interest as cultural and lifestyle stories:

32% of respondents in SEM countries were very interested in this type of stories from Europe; in European countries, on the other hand, only 12% were very interested in sport stories from SEM countries (Chart 10.1). Many Arabic-speakers follow western teams, especially when it comes to football. The Barcelona football team playing against Real Madrid generates an even more heated debate on social media than politics.

The political situation in SEM countries remains one of the strongest segments of interest in the European countries surveyed. 28% of all respondents in European countries wanted to know about the political situation in SEM countries, compared to 24% of respondents in SEM countries who wanted to be informed about the political situation in Europe. For respondents in SEM countries, news stories about economic conditions in Europe come before those about the political situation (29% 'very interested' responses, compared to 23% in European countries).

When the Anna Lindh Foundation decides to conduct its 4th wave of the Survey, it would be interesting to see how 'environmental stories' would perform as an option because this type of story was not included in the current Survey. There seems to be a general misconception in the media industry that the environment is not high on the agenda of the Arabic-language audience. Videos shared on social media, however, show the opposite. To prove this point, one of the top videos shared in May 2017 on the BBC Arabic Facebook group was a video about German scientists producing artificial sun.

Chart 10.2
Interest in news and information about SEM/European countries

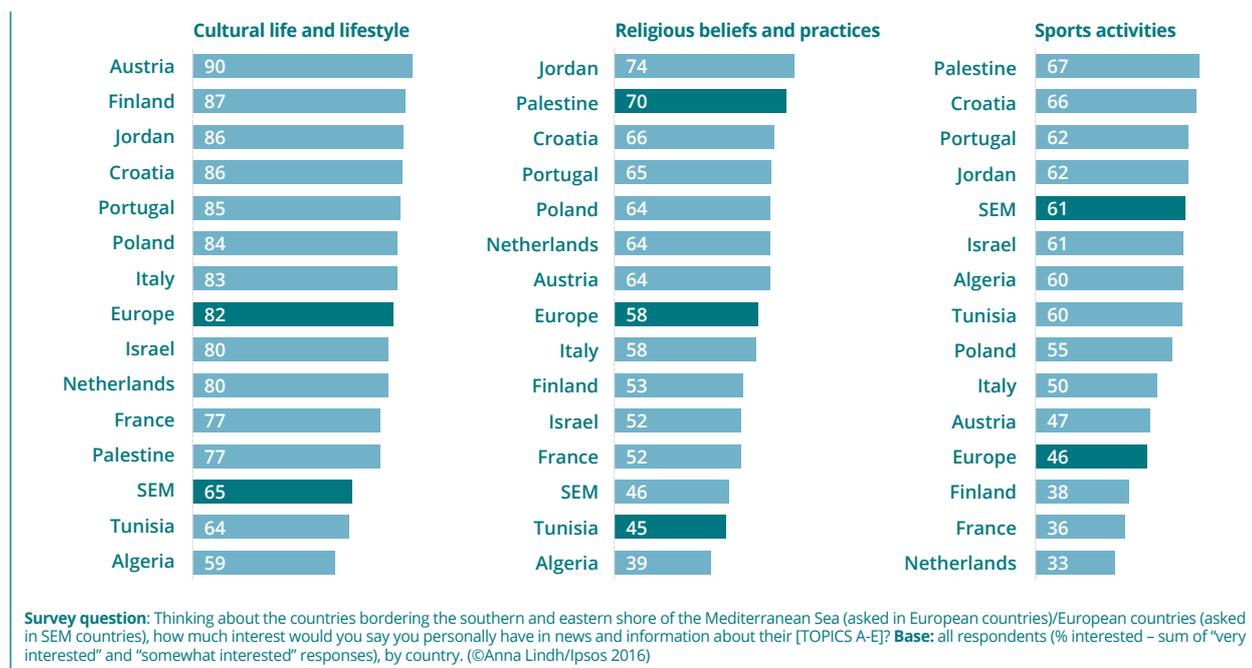
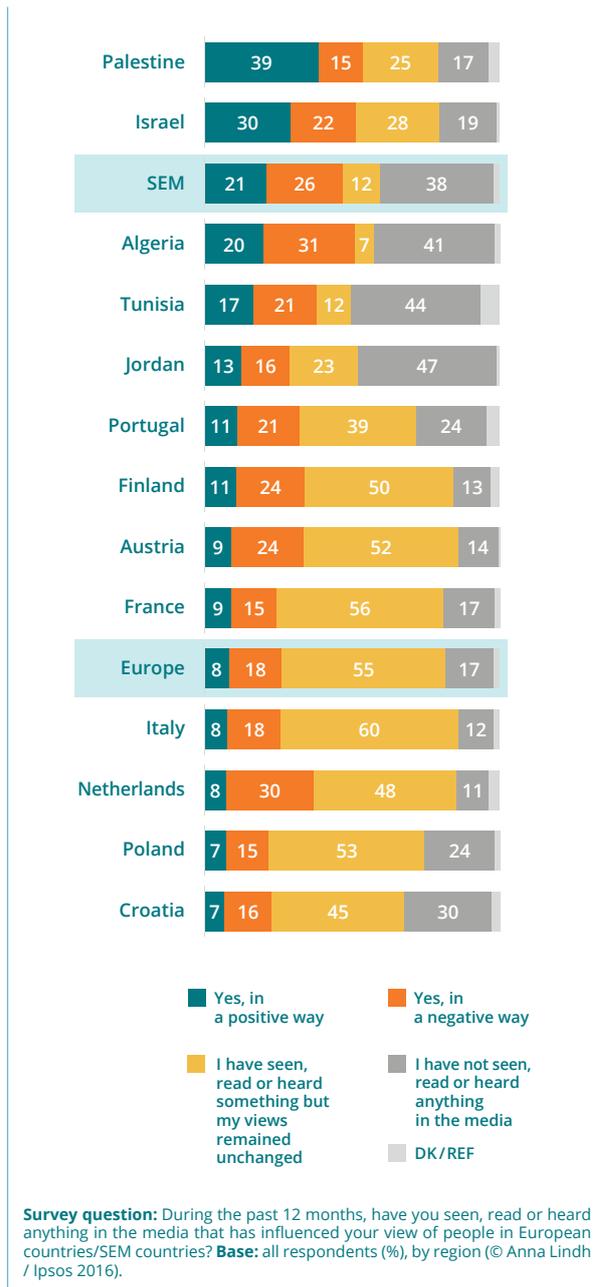


Chart 10.3
Media role in shaping perceptions about people in SEM/European countries, by country/crisis



The project is connected to research on the creation of climate-friendly fuel, according to news reports. By May 15th, the video was viewed 350,617 times and was shared 17,000 times, which shows that there is a high level of interest in environmental stories.

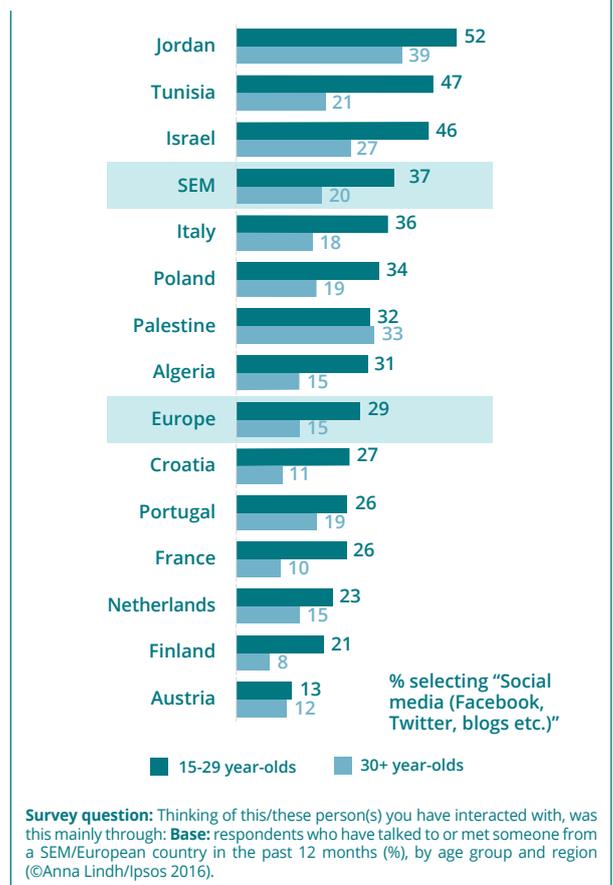
Media not always a positive role in shaping perceptions

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey shows that people are interested in news stories from the other shores of the Mediterranean, but the question remains what impact these stories, or more broadly, what impact

media outlets in general, have on people's views. One of the most troubling findings of the Survey, for me as a journalist, is connected to the role of media in shaping public perception in both European and SEM countries about people from the other shores of the Mediterranean. The Survey finds that the media does not always play a positive role in shaping perceptions.

When asked whether the media caused a change in views about people from SEM countries, 18% of respondents in European countries replied 'Yes, in negative way' (in comparison to only 8% saying 'Yes, in a positive way'). In SEM countries, when being asked about the media's role in changing their views about people from European countries, 26% answered 'Yes, in a negative way' (in comparison to 21% saying 'Yes, in a positive way') (Chart 10.2). It is, however, also worth adding that in SEM countries, many respondents reported not having seen, read or heard anything in the media about European countries; in Europe, on the other hand, most respondents had been exposed to media coverage on SEM countries, but the largest share of respondents noted that the media had not had an impact on their views. However, in both regions, if there has been an impact of the media on people's

Chart 10.4
Social media as one of the most trusted media sources for information about SEM/European countries, by country



perceptions, it was more likely to be a negative impact. In both regions, respondents reporting a negative impact outnumbered those reporting a positive impact. The countries with the highest negative impact of media on public perception were: Algeria (31%) in the SEM region and the Netherlands (30%) in Europe.

Young people turning to social media for news

If media causes a change in perceptions about people from the other shores of the Mediterranean, it is an indication that these people from both shores are sometimes framed in negative light in media stories. It would be very interesting to find out what media outlets respondents have followed and analyse the content viewed. Such an analysis is not possible in the context of the Survey, but we can have a look at the Survey results with respect to the most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting.

In terms of the audience's trust in media, it seems that TV still has hegemony as the most trusted media source for cross-cultural reporting. In European countries, when asked: 'Which of the following sources do you trust most for information about countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea', 45% of respondents selected TV, 40% mentioned print media, 32% films and documentaries, and 28% online media (such as news websites and online magazines).

In SEM countries the situation is different, although TV remains the dominant source. When asked which sources respondents trust most for information about European countries, 58% said TV, 32% online media (such as news websites and online magazines), 27% social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and various blogs) and only 15% selected print media.

But when we look at the results for young people, TV loses dominance. In European countries, news websites and online magazines are a top choice for trustworthy news stories for 42% of young people (15-29 year olds), and then comes TV (40%) and print media (35%). The TV's hegemony is also slowly fading in SEM countries and although it remains at the top rank with 48% of young people trusting it as a source for news stories, social media is quickly gaining importance. Social media was one of the most trusted media sources for 37% of young people in SEM countries; this proportion was as high as the proportion trusting online media (37%). In European countries, on the other hand, even among young people, online media were clearly still trusted more than social media (Chart 10.3).

In the era of 'fake news', this choice of social media as a trusted media source for cross-cultural reporting for many young people both in SEM and European countries might come as a surprise. For me, as a Syrian,

this choice absolutely makes sense, not only for cross-cultural reporting, but also for various news updates. Social media is an important platform for many Syrians, not only to distribute news, but also to verify information since the main Syrian media outlets have failed to gain the audience's trust to report on events in the country in an independent and reliable way. Many Syrians and, as the Survey shows, also many Jordanians, Israeli, Palestinians and Tunisians turn to social media for news. The Survey finds that roughly one in two 15-29 year-olds in Jordan, Tunisia and Israel selected social media as one of their most trusted sources for news stories about European countries. In Palestine and Algeria social media were trusted by roughly one on three young people.

Social media is not only used to distribute news and content but is often used to verify it. In my work, I often follow a Facebook group called Instant Reporting Team (now called neoIRT). The group consists of journalists, activists, filmmakers and people interested in developments in Syria (but there are also updates on international news). The way the group works is that a member posts information as a status (for example, updates on fighting in Tabqa, near Raqqa) and other members who have additional information on the topic post more information as comments. If there is someone close to the location or someone with contacts at the location, s/he is often tagged in the post to verify it or provide more information.

neoIRT is just one example of a Syrian Facebook group where people share and try to verify information. It is an organic effort to provide reliable information when there are no mainstream outlets doing the job. There are more groups like neoIRT across the Arab world as there is a hunger for reliable information. These groups make me hopeful, as do the findings of the Anna Lindh Foundation's 2016 Intercultural Trends Survey. People's interest in various news stories, especially about lifestyle and culture, from all shores of the Mediterranean, gives me hope that the endemic curiosity of the human kind in the life of others is safe and sound. But the negative role of media in shaping people's perception observed in the Survey is troubling. As journalists, we need to ask ourselves what are the stories we choose to report on, how we report on them, and what impact they may have on people's perceptions.

Rima MARROUCH is a Freelance producer based in London, mainly worked for BBC Arabic, Reuters Video News, CBS, and Al Jazeera.