

We are the newcomers

Interview with Ramy Al-Asheq, Abwab¹

Germany has long been a primary destination for asylum seekers. According to the Pew Research Center, over the past 30 years Germany has received at least 3.6 million asylum applications or nearly one-third (32 per cent) of all asylum applications in Europe. The overall increase of asylum seekers between 2013 and 2015 is a reflection of the trajectory of migrants arriving from each of the three leading countries of origin: Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. *Abwab* ('Doors') is the first Arabic newspaper in Germany. An independent monthly newspaper that addresses the needs and concerns of Syrian, Iraqi and other Arabic-speaking refugees in Germany. Over 60,000 copies of *Abwab* are printed and freely distributed every month in public libraries, NGO centres and refugee shelters across Germany. Ramy Al-Asheq is its editor-in-chief.

Abwab is the name of the first and so far only Arabic-language newspaper for refugees in Germany. It aims to provide information and serve as a platform for discussing integration-related issues. Who is your target audience? Who are 'the newcomers' and why do you refuse to use the word refugee? In using the term 'newcomer', how do you hope to change people's perceptions of migrants?

Well, let us say, it was a newspaper for 'refugees', but after just one month we realised that we cannot talk about understanding, integration and living together without also talking to the locals. So from the second issue onwards, we started to address a German audience too, with two pages

1 | This interview took place in January 2017.

written in German. Not only that, we also wanted to 'integrate' German authors, journalists and writers into the *Abwab* family. *Abwab* has now become a newspaper *by* refugees and locals, *for* refugees and locals.

I think there has been a huge misunderstanding regarding my critical stance on the topic of integration. This is especially true when you look at the response to my article 'This integration is a big lie'. I did not at all refuse to use the word 'refugee'. I am a refugee. I was born a refugee in Syria, because my grandfather was kicked out of his house in the city of Akka, when Israel occupied Palestine in 1948. My father was also born a refugee in Syria. I do not have a passport and I do not have a nationality on paper. I have always been a refugee. I was never anything else, except that here in Germany I became a 'stateless' refugee. I brought my personal story to tell you: I have no problem with this term at all. Being a refugee means you are seeking refuge, safety, dignity and freedom. In this context, the term 'newcomer' is meaningless. 'Newcomer' does not give any information about what the other person needs. However, I do have a problem with the German version of refugee, which is '*Flüchtling*', because it means 'runaway'. It is negative and does not carry the meaning of asking for refuge, safety, dignity and freedom. In addition to that, it only has a masculine form.

But the question is not always the meaning of the term 'refugee'. At the moment, we see the entire media machine trying to demonise refugees. We see how the police, media and society at large care more about the nationality of the criminal, than about the crime itself, and definitely more than about the victim. If the criminal is a refugee, all international and local media will talk about the crime. But if it is the same crime, the same victim, but committed by a criminal who is not a refugee, nobody will care. To be a refugee now is to have a 'sexy' identity. Some people will help you, take a selfie and post it on Facebook with the caption "with my refugee". Some people will say, you should look poor and ugly, "you do not look like a refugee!" Some people will ignore your experience, education and thoughts and will deal with you as if you were nothing. The point is; you are *only* a refugee. In this way, you will find many events called 'refugee in concert', 'refugee reading', 'refugee carnival'. But when I want to attend a music concert, I am not going to watch refugees, I am going to watch and listen to musicians. Refugees are not monkeys in a zoo or a circus.

When we see how the word 'refugee' is being used to discriminate against people and create barriers between humans, when we see how it is used to put a large number of people of many different backgrounds, nationalities, religions, ideologies, levels of education and generations in one box called 'refugees', then I do not believe it makes sense to use it. It does not make sense to me to create a team of 'refugees' to participate in the 2016 Olympics. In fact, it is shameful! We are living in a world that, in 2015, had created 65.3 million refugees. This fact is really shameful and not a reason to celebrate. To be a refugee is not shameful, but to live in a world that has created 65.3 million refugees is extremely shameful.

So when you see this discrimination, labelling and stereotyping, you will refuse to be labelled. Even if that means that you will lose the meaning of refuge, safety dignity and freedom. This is why a lot of people decided to use the term 'newcomer', which carries a different meaning; newcomers are also human beings, they are equal to the locals. The only difference is that they arrived in this country later, and now they just need to feel welcome and part of the whole, not to be seen or treated as guests.

Abwab addresses issues such as foreign policy, integration and social issues for migrants. Who writes for Abwab and from what perspectives? Do you also aim to reach other sectors of society and have an impact tackling racism and xenophobia, for example? What have been the results so far?

Abwab is the Arabic word for 'doors'. That is why our newspaper has a number of doors: international news, local news, Arabic-speaking community news, a guide to Germany for newcomers, feminism pages, success and survival stories, art and literature pages, and German pages. The authors of *Abwab* are from Syria, Palestine, Germany, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Eritrea, and Jordan. All of us have different perspectives, which are reflected in our writing, and there is a lot of communication going on between the different editors and contributors. Our aim is to be a bridge and facilitate communication between people on the same level. We are trying to communicate with activists from both societies. For example, in Dresden we met a group of German anti-racist activists and now we are planning to do a project together. We are equally in contact and engaged with different initiatives run by newcomers.

With *Abwab*, we were very successful in reaching locals and refugees alike and we had a lot of interesting input. We print more than 60,000 copies every month and have 50,000 unique user sessions per month on our website, which also has a German and English version. We are focusing on both societies, opening critical perspectives to allow both “criticism and self-criticism”, because both societies have their own stereotypes and ready-made images. I have received many emails from Germans who I do not know, telling me that they appreciate our newspaper. I am not exaggerating when I say that there are dozens of messages that make me feel proud and hopeful. All the Germans that I have met have been positive and friendly. Maybe I am lucky in this, as my German friends tell me, but I think that everywhere in the world the percentage of good people is always greater than the percentage of bad people.

For many European citizens, Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram are becoming important sources of information on topics such as Brexit, the US elections, but also on the migration crisis and the war in Syria. How do you evaluate the information people are getting from social media? How does Abwab contribute to clarifying doubts, fake-news and misconceptions around such a complex crisis, whilst also fighting against stereotypes about migrants?

One of the reasons that *Abwab* was created was to give refugees access to quality news and journalistic stories in their own language. Facebook is full of fake news and hate speech. We are trying to fight that as much as we can. *Abwab* now has around 93,500 followers on Facebook. As great as that is, it has also meant that we have faced a lot of hate speech, but this was expected from the beginning, and it definitely happens less now than before.

If you want to create a deeper understanding, you need to talk to people in their language and from their cultural point of view. Our German editor Lilian Pithan has made a lot of tasks easier with her comments and editing, especially when she manages to make the stories closer to German understanding and culture. And this is also why we manage to be closer to our Arabic-speaking audience, because we are from the same culture and we know it very well and we know how to use the right language to critique and inform, etc. So we’re not making the ‘teaching refugees how to use the toilet’, or ‘teaching refugees how to have sex’, mistakes.

As the migration crisis in Europe continues, one particular fact gets cited over and over: that this is the biggest migration movement since World War II. Do you think the model of Abwab can and should be reproduced in other European countries? Can you imagine establishing a partnership, or alliances, with other European countries to develop such a project? What would you need in order to develop such collaboration?

First of all, I do not believe in the term ‘migrant / refugee crisis in Europe’. The real crisis is in Lebanon and Jordan, which have taken in the biggest number of refugees, being the poor, small countries that they are. More than 40 per cent of the current population of Lebanon are refugees. This is where the crisis is. Furthermore, I think that there is no migration crisis in Europe as a whole, but only in some European countries. For example, there is no huge migration movement in the direction of France, Switzerland, Portugal, the UK, or the Eastern European countries. The crisis is in Greece and in other countries, which are closer to Asia and Africa. The EU definitely did not assume its responsibilities as a union in this context of events. Even in the case of Germany, I do not see what is happening as a crisis. If you look at the total population number and compare it with the number of refugees, can 1 per cent really unleash a crisis?

However, for refugees the ‘refugee crisis’ really is a crisis. For those who have been kicked out of their homes and cities, who have lost their families, hope and lives. It is not only a crisis, it is a catastrophe. Since we started *Abwab*, we have had many requests to launch similar newspapers in countries like France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden and the UK. Unfortunately, our capabilities are limited. Our network of writers and journalists is ready, the audience exists, but it is very hard to find financial support. We are an independent newspaper, which also means that there are many funding sources we would never accept, for example funding from government, political parties, companies or any other source which would seek to influence our content.

How do you finance Abwab? Have you faced political obstacles or pressures thus far?

We finance *Abwab* through advertising. Our publisher New German Media Ltd has a marketing department which is responsible for that. We

started with two sponsors, MoneyGram and Ortel, and now have some more advertisers like the German Ministry of Education and the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. Until now, we have not faced any political obstacles or pressure.

Germany has filled a particular position in the migration debate, as Merkel is often celebrated for her 'open door policy', while also having contributed to the tightening of asylum laws, having signed the deal with Turkey to curb migration to the EU. In this debate the term 'Lügenpresse' has gained renewed popularity with the far right, often being used to discredit the media. How have you witnessed these developments? What responsibility do you see, on the side of the media, in shaping this discourse, and what room for change can you see?

In general, people like to hear what they believe in or accept. This is not only true for Germans, but also for Syrians and all other nationalities. The mission of a journalist is to show the truth. The question we are facing now is, which media outlets are showing us the truth? How much propaganda is out there? We cannot deny that there are media outlets out there who do not show the truth. People have the right to say that something is a lie, but then the media has to *prove* what they say is true, nevertheless. This said, it does not make sense to me, when the right wing groups attack the media, because they know that a lot of media indeed support their extreme ideas. In addition to that, the media does not talk enough about crimes committed by members of the extreme right, like burning refugee shelters, or attacking people. In my opinion, if you tell half the truth, you are a liar. We do not need to present people as angels, but neither do we need to present them as demons. This is the biggest mistake the media is making at the moment, and you could say the same for politicians.

How do you foresee the next steps for Abwab?

Abwab is bigger now and our responsibilities have grown accordingly. Our plan is to make *Abwab* into a bilingual newspaper as soon as possible, and to create a platform to discuss all essential issues for German and European societies. We are already actively pursuing our goal of addressing a larger German audience.