Major events, the media, and refugees:

Examining Canadian print media framing of Syrian refugees

Word Count: 3,978

Abstract

Between the years of 2015 and 2017, the Canadian government reported that 40,081 Syrians arrived in Canada as refugees. News media can be very powerful and since the discourses that it presents can greatly impact the process of integration, it is important to understand how Syrian refugees have been depicted.

Given the interrelatedness of major events in the world and public perception, I sought to examine the relationship between major events involving Syrians, the prominent media frames in Canada and the subsequent impact on Syrians arriving in Canada, asking the question: How do major events perpetuate the way that Canadian media frames the arrival of Syrians to Canada and how in turn, does this affect the Syrian newcomers? Through analysis of various studies examining the portrayal of refugees, I determined that the three major frames in Canadian print media include refugees as threats, refugees as victims, and Canadians as saviors. Following Edward Said's theory of orientalism which emphasizes the "othering" of people from the East by people of the West, I conclude that such frames contribute to this division.

The frame of refugees as threats is furthered by events such as terrorist attacks, hindering integration as they face discrimination from the members Canadian public who in turn view them with fear. The victim representation of Syrian refugees simplifies complex narratives and people, removing their agency and distancing them from host communities who have specific expectations of refugees—expectations with which the refugees may not actually identify. The Alan Kurdi photo particularly garnered support for this emblematic narrative of suffering. Finally, the media's focus on the Canadian public as altruistic takes away from the voice of the refugees and creates a savior complex for Canadians, in turn, forcing Syrian refugees into the role of the receiver of aid.

Major events, the media, and refugees:

Examining Canadian print media framing of Syrian refugees

Introduction and Research Question

Between the years of 2015 and 2017, the Canadian government reported that 40,081 Syrians arrived in Canada as refugees (Citizenship Canada, 2017). Given the power and prominence of print news media, it is important to understand how such a large influx of refugees has been depicted in the media. Scholars such as Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) emphasize that news coverage plays a "role in framing public policy and discourse about immigrants and refugees" (p. 520). The way that news media frames its coverage is not only impactful, but it is everchanging and "can respond to shifts in the social and political context" (Wallace, 2020, p. 208). In the context of immigration specifically, Lawlor (2015) points out that Canadian print media frames refugees "in an event-driven manner" (p. 341). Understanding how major events influence this coverage and how that in turn gives way to an increase in particular discourses is thus extremely important.

Canada has a reputation for welcoming refugees and valuing diversity. Jean Nicolas Beuze, a representative for the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR), notes that the organization "counts on Canada and Canadians to continue standing with refugees as they have done for decades" (UNHCR, 2019). Comments such as the one by Beuze enforce the expectation that Canada has been and will continue to be welcoming to refugees, not just in government policy but in the attitudes of Canadians themselves. The country's Immigration and Citizenship Agency (2020) reinforces this sentiment on its website, pointing to Canada's history and involvement in immigration flows in a timeline dating back to the arrival of Black Loyalists.

Yet this generalization does not necessarily encompass the views of all Canadians, nor does it reflect the major frames of Syrian refugees in Canadian news media.

Existing literature on media framing of the Syrian conflict suggests that the most prominent frames in Canadian news media include refugees as threats (Esses et al., 2013; Lawlor, 2015; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017; Wallace, 2018), refugees as victims (Kyriakides, Bajjali, McLuhan, & Anderson, 2018; Wallace, 2018), and Canadians as generous (Tyyskä, Blower, Deboer, Kawai & Walcott, 2018; Winter, Patzelt, & Beauregard; 2018).

Following Said's theory of orientalism, which encompasses "making statements about [the Orient], authorizing views of it [and] describing it...in a Western style for dominating" (Said, 2010, p. 113), I will consider how these frames perpetuate an "othering" of Syrian refugees. My research question connects this "othering" with the major events informing media by asking: **How do major events perpetuate the way that Canadian media frames the arrival of Syrians to Canada and how in turn, does this affect the Syrian newcomers?** I will argue that major events contribute to the development of prominent media frames that "other" the Syrian refugees.

Structure of Paper

In examining the relationship between major events, media framing, and Syrian refugees, I will first analyze how terrorist attacks relate to the representation of refugees as threats, isolating them from host communities who may regard them with fear. I will use the events of 9/11 and the 2015 Paris attacks to support this theory. Following my analysis of the *threat* frame, I will examine the release of an image of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who washed up on the shore of Turkey, demonstrating how from this event, media presented Syrian as victims in need. This

victimization limits the understanding of Syrians as active agents who have complex identities involving more than just conflict. Finally, I will look to the portrayal of Canadians as altruistic in their acceptance of refugees into Canada and how Justin Trudeau's promise to admit 25,000 Syrians furthered this narrative, dividing refugees and their host communities as the savior complex forces a rescued and rescuer relationship.

Throughout my arguments, I plan to compare refugees to both immigrants and international students who are often framed as having economic value. I will also use evidence from a case study of privately sponsored refugees and their sponsors to exhibit the potential for Canadians to overcome the assumptions they develop from the media so that refugees themselves can forge an identity separate from that molded for them in the news.

Refugees as a threat

Canada has a reputation for valuing diversity linguistically and culturally, embracing immigration, and extending kindness to those seeking asylum. Although this reputation may have merit in some respects, it is not deeply rooted in society. Esses et al. (2013) explains that "positive attitudes toward immigration in Canada are based on a weak foundation, and negative portrayals by the media can rapidly degrade these attitudes" (p. 521). Winter et al. (2018) confirms that the relationship with minorities and the media is thorny despite the country's multicultural policy. As a result of this weak foundational support for refugees, the increased negative portrayals of them are costly. Lawlor (2015) goes so far as claiming that "Canadian print media's refugee framing is, on balance, negative" (p. 351) and cautions politicians and citizens from too broadly proclaiming Canada's tolerance.

One portrayal which is particularly harmful to positive attitudes is the framing of refugees as threats. For example, in a video by Western University (2015), Victoria Esses describes common headlines of news media that speak of crime at the hands of refugees despite its rarity. In fact, when compared to other immigrants coming to Canada, refugees are more often framed negatively, affirming a depiction of refugees as "as less deserving and less beneficial to Canada and more threatening than immigrants" (Lawlor & Taylor, 2017, p. 969).

Despite the fact that Syria has religious diversity, Syrians are often assumed to be Muslim. Muslim men, in particular, are likely to be "identified as security risks" (Tyyska et al., 2018, p. 150). This narrative has been and continues to be largely driven by terrorist attacks and their portrayal in the news media.

The Influence of Major Events: 9/11 and the 2015 Paris Attacks

The negative portrayal of Syrian refugees, despite Canada's reputation for acceptance, brings attention to how a "negatively portrayed immigration event" can act as a catalyst for negativity where there was once "soft support" (Esses et al., 2013, p. 521). 9/11 and the 2015 Paris attacks are two major events which have played a role in the representation of Syrian refugees as threats.

9/11. On November 11th, 2001, the attacks in New York by the Islamic terrorist group Al Qaeda fueled an association between Islam, the Middle East and terrorism. People all around the world, including Canada became very fearful, with the media capturing a sentiment of mistrust (Smith & Ziegler, 2017). Since then, scholars have noted the "negative significations of 'the Arab' and 'the Muslim' as 'threat' mobilized through media representations of migrants, refugees and minority ethnic citizens" (Kyriakides et al., 2018, p. 62). These associations between what many Canadians considered characteristics of the perpetrators and destruction during 9/11, regardless

of accuracy, defined how the media viewed those from the Middle East. Lawlor (2015), for example, points out that print media in Toronto and Vancouver increased in negative representations of immigration in the post-9/11 context. Specifically, there was "increased rhetoric around potential security threats brought by new Canadians" (p. 342).

2015 Paris Attacks. Another terrorist attack that had a major impact was perpetrated by the Islamic terrorist group ISIS who set off bombs at six locations in Paris. Tyyska et al. (2018) notes that, although Canada seemed to be less affected than other countries, the amount of "security concerns increased" (pp. 159-160) in articles in the *Globe and Mail* following the attack, particularly in the context of the government pledge to bring 25,000 Syrians refugees. Wallace (2020) echoed this observation in her analysis of eight major Canadian newspapers, noting a "surge in the religion and conflict frames in the week of the terrorist attacks in Paris" (p. 222).

Refuting the impact in Canada

It must be noted that some scholars might refute the impact that the threat frame has within Canada. Lawlor (2015), in discussing the frame of 9/11, asserts that Canada's overall coverage of immigration was more positive than countries like Britain (p. 347). Likewise, there is some skepticism that the Paris attacks affect Canadian views when the event is far removed. Winter et al. (2018), for example, explains that Canada remains much more accepting of refugees than other countries because there haven't been terrorist attacks or sexual assaults associated with Syrian refugees like there has been in Europe. However, even if the threat in Canada is minimal, the media can still create a perceived threat. Tyyska et al. (2018) reminds Canadians that the "manipulative powers of the media are undeniable" in the othering of "non-western people" (p. 149). Although this frame may be more prominent in other countries,

Canada's reputation of positivity towards foreigners does not make its refugees immune to the effects of the media's *threat* frame.

Contribution to Otherness

The notion in the media that Syrians refugees are threats does have an impact on Syrians settling in Canada. It can lead to the dehumanization and exclusion of refugees attempting to integrate into society. Esses et al. (2013) notes that dehumanization "serv[es] to justify the status quo, strengthening ingroup–outgroup boundaries, and defending against threats to the ingroup's position in society" (p. 519). In other words, some Canadians who are comfortable with their privilege might be more likely to buy into the media portrayals of refugees as threats, thus garnering feelings of "contempt, lack of admiration toward the group…and support for exclusion of refugees from one's country" (Esses at al., 2013, p. 524). These anti-immigration sentiments can be detrimental at a policy level as Garcea and Kikulwe (2019) confirm that in Canada, "[terrorist activities] created a backlash against the resettlement of Syrian refugees as some people began linking them with criminal and terrorist threats" (p. 97). The backlash that Garcea and Kikulwe observe proves the impact of this association between refugees and threats.

The dehumanization of refugees not only garners anti-immigration sentiment, it also prevents Syrians who are settling in Canada from receiving the supports that they need. If the refugees are not considered part of the "ingroup," Esses et al. (2013) predicts that Canadians believe that they "do not need to shift to accommodate the inclusion [of refugees]" (p. 531). Thus, the support from the host community which is needed for integration can be stifled by the effects of othering. In his PhD dissertation, Allwright (2018) demonstrates the progression of the *threat* frame as it eventually comes to affect the identities of the refugees. He comments that "negative media frames shape the native ingroup behavior toward refugees, which in turn affects

the refugee integration process and the identity that a refugee develops in the country of resettlement" (p. 8). The *threat* representation thus has implications which penetrate the integration process deeply.

Refugees as victims

Another common association made with refugees is victimhood. Winter et al. (2018) observes that often the Canadian media reinforces this connection, portraying the refugees as vulnerable, desperate and passive. Kyriakides et al. (2018) also observes that a refugee is often presented to the Western public as "a passive object" through the lens of the "spectacle of war and attendant 'refugee crisis'" (p. 66). The victimization of refugees is thus very apparent as it manifests in an understanding of refugees as passive.

Unlike the frame of threat, which was more directed at men, Tyyska et al. (2018) highlights that women are seen as "oppressed, silent, and needy" (p. 150), adding a gendered element to this framing.

The influence of Major Events: The Alan Kurdi photograph

Although the release of a photograph may seem insignificant, the image that circulated of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, washed up on the shore of Turkey, was seen in news media across the world. Kurdi and his family were trying to escape from Syria when their boat capsized in September 2015. Mortenson, Allen and Peters (2017), in analyzing the circulation of this image, note that "the rapid shift and swell in public sentiment accompanying the spread of the photographs [of Kurdi] worldwide was undeniable" (p. 78). The popularity of this image had a major impact on how refugees were portrayed, specifically on their framing through a lens of pity, as the "tragedy fostered a substantial degree of empathy, sympathy, sadness, and anger both

in Canada and in other countries" (Garcea & Kikulwe, 2019, p. 90). The Kurdi image helped to create a shift from negative representations to more humanizing depictions (Wallace, 2018) and even garnered a sentiment in media and political spheres "pressing the moral imperative for greater intervention in the Syrian crisis" (Kyriakides et al., 2018, p. 67). This sentiment was particularly strong in Canada because, as pointed out by Winter et al. (2018), Alan Kurdi and his family has attempted to come to Canada but there was a perceived lack of action from Harper's conservative government in admitting Syrian refugees at the time.

Contribution to Otherness

Although this image garnered support for refugees, it also was a single narrative which, for Canadians reading print news media, became an all-encompassing representation of Syrian refugees. A generalized understanding of who a refugee is does not take into account the multi-faceted and nuanced experiences of each individual. In a 2016 TEDx Talk, Tima Kurdi, the aunt of Alan Kurdi, touches on the diversity of experiences by refugees, reminding the audience that refugees face challenges that might not replicate that of her nephew. These other stories, however, are not always heard. Tyyska et al. (2018) notes that "the tragic images of the dead Syrian boy sidelined many other refugees' stories" (p. 155), confirming the way that sympathy and pity forced refugees into a very one-dimensional box of victimhood.

In fact, refugees can even be expected to conform to the stereotypes of being a victim. The media may have good intentions to show the plight and hardships faced by refugees but these "articles in essence remove the agency and resilience of Syrian refugees by always portraying them as desperate and vulnerable" (Tyyska et al., 2018, p. 154). Such expectations can be especially frustrating for refugees when they identify more with an idea of self-rescue, having managed to relocate and bring themselves and their families to safety with their own

strength and resiliency. The concept of orientalism informs the assumption that refugees are in need of rescue rather than capable of rescue (Kyriakides et al., 2018).

There are certain expectations that are set out when refugees are framed as victims. When Canadians are exposed to pictures or articles that emphasize the plight of refugees, they may conclude that refugees "must fit the 'victim' role in order to gain entry and act so as to retain host acceptance" (Kyriakides et al., 2018, p. 60). Someone who has not endured the hardships of a journey by boat from Syria may not been seen as fit for receiving asylum.

The article by Kyriakides et al. (2018) examines this dynamic specifically in the context of the relationship between refugees who are sponsored and their sponsors. The authors tell the story of a refugee named Rasha who was unhappy with the bedding provided by her sponsors and took it upon herself to change the sheets. This action offended sponsors who expected her to be very thankful, complacent, and easily satisfied. In describing the concept of "gifting," X (2018) identifies a power dynamic that can be applied to this relationship between sponsors and refugees. The supposedly altruistic gift of "bedding" in reality comes with expectations of thankfulness. These expectations further prove the underlying expectations that portray refugees as the "suffering other," people desperate for any sheets they can get, rather than an individual who has certain expectations about her sleeping conditions.

Attempting to dictate to refugees how they should act as well as placing their entire identity into the suffering they have endured ignores the fact that their lives reach beyond their status as refugees. They are mothers, brother, daughters, farmers, doctors, bus drivers and so much more. This focus on conflict can easily cover up the biographical trajectory of one's life—details which have the potential to "mobilize against the media and policy scripts that currently underpin reception in Western states" (Kyriakides et al., 2018, p. 61). In other words, culture,

experience, and pre-conflict histories, that are lived out by the Syrians who arrive in Canada, can challenge the expectations that the media projects to Canadians. However, in order for Syrians to express their diverse stories, they must have a platform as well as an audience who is willing to read print news media that goes beyond the sensationalist presentation of young boy killed in Turkey.

Canadians as Saviors

Another framing that is very common when referencing the conflict in Syria focuses more on Canada and Canadians than it does on Syria and Syrians. The print news media in Canada often frames Canadians as generous in the process of resettling Syrian refugees. For example, Tyyska et al. (2018) notes that "out of the 90 Toronto Star articles [collected from September 2015 to April 2017], 55 reflect on what represents Canadian values, in particular, generosity by Canadians" (p. 153). Anderson (2020) echoes this sentiment in observing that news articles which centre on immigration and refugee policy often portray "Canada as a benevolent, humanitarian, and compassionate country" (p. 60).

Anderson's (2020) article offers a comparison of the media portrayal of international students versus refugees who attend Canadians post-secondary institutions. The author explains that stories about international students are often focused on the ability for the students to fulfill enrollment shortages whereas "at no point in any of the news articles covering refugee students were these students represented as solutions" (Anderson, 2020, p. 75). Instead, the author explains how the articles mostly focused on portraying Canada's benevolence and described "how Canada and Canadian [post-secondary institutions] were impacting these students (Anderson, 2020, p. 74) as opposed to noting the value brought by refugees to Canadian

students. Refugees, just like other international students, bring value to the institutions and the limited portrayal of them as needy recipients undermines this value.

This notion of Canadian benevolence has also manifested as an attribute that defines Canadians. Winter et al. (2018), for example, identify a discourse that represents the "real" Canada as a generous nation committed to supporting refugees (p. 26), implying that generosity and acceptance of refugees characterizes the country. Although these associations may be beneficial in convincing Canadians to support refugees, they may also contribute to a denial and ignorance of the discriminatory and xenophobic challenges that face Syrian refugees when they settle in Canada. Whether or not a story about Syrian refugees is positive or negative may affect if it is framed as typically Canadian or not. For example, Tyyska et al. (2018) mentions that "acts that were benevolent were attributed to Canadian values, and acts that were hostile could be characterized as un-Canadian" (p. 152). Later the authors specifically cite an incident where refugees were pepper-sprayed and how the event was dismissed by the media as "uncharacteristic of Canadians" (p. 154). Similar to the narrow representation of refugees as vulnerable, the altruistic Canadian also captures only one type of citizen.

The influence of major events

2015 Election and Arrival of 25,000 Refugees. Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, as part of his 2015 campaign, committed to settling 25,000 Syrian refugees (Wallace, 2020). This decision had a huge impact on the interest of the media as it became more focused on the Canadian government and Canadians as they welcomed the refugees. Wallace (2020) describes the arrival of these refugees as a "source of pride" (p. 225) for many Canadians, so understandably news media harnessed this pride in showcasing and framing the arrival of refugees as an altruistic act by Canadians. Winter et al. (2018) notes a specific focus in some cases on volunteer and

organizations who provide services to refugees. Garcea and Kikulwe (2019), on the other hand, describe a narrative that justifies the actions of the government by framing Canadians as having altruistic desires to welcome others into their country. They explain: "the narrative articulated by the mainstream mass media before and after the 2015 election focused on Canada's national obligations to contribute to the resettlement of any refugees, including Syrian refugees" (p. 92), exemplifying a common and positive framing of the government's plan to resettle refugees.

The focus on the arrival of these refugees also carried negative connotations, with many people doubting the ability for the government to meet its promise. The political implications of this campaign promise drove media to focus on the government's work, taking away a voice from the refugees themselves. Tyyska et al. (2018) explains that "the focus [of the media] was shifted towards the government's deadline, rather than the actual plight of the refugees" (p. 152). So even though the story at hand might be about Syrian refugees, the politicized event left the focus on Canadians instead of Syrians.

Contribution to Otherness

One of the issues with the media focusing on Canadian generosity is that it stifles the voices and experiences of refugees. Tyyska et al. (2018) describe a focus on Canadian generosity to be a form of "speak[ing] on behalf of refugees and exemplify[ing] a 'saviour complex' that marginalizes Syrian refugees" (p. 154). If the story being told in the media is just about the good that Canadians are doing, they become the "rescuers" and the Syrian refugees are thus doomed to be viewed as the "rescued." Kyriakides et al. (2018) speak of a Syrian refugee family that specifically rejects being framed as a helpless victim to be saved by the West" (p. 65). This framing thus ties into the problems of "othering" faced by framing refugees as victims,

furthering the power dynamic and separation between the refugees and hosts which are portrayed as having a "position of dominance" (Kyriakides et al., 2018, p. 60).

Conclusion

Major events in the world have a huge impact on the way that Canadian print media represents refugees in the news. I sought to examine the impact that the prominent frames have on Syrians arriving in Canada by asking the question: How do major events perpetuate the way that Canadian media frames the arrival of Syrians to Canada and how in turn, does this affect the Syrian newcomers? Through analysis of various studies examining the portrayal of refugees, I determined that the three major frames in Canadian print media include refugees as threats, refugees as victims, and Canadians as saviors. Following Edward Said's (2010) theory of orientalism which emphasizes the "othering" of people from the East by people of the West, I conclude that such frames contribute to this division.

The frame of refugees as threats is furthered by events such as terrorist attacks, hindering integration as they face discrimination from the members Canadian public who in turn view them with fear. The victim representation of Syrian refugees simplifies complex narratives and people, removing their agency and distancing them from host communities who have specific expectations of refugees—expectations with which the refugees may not actually identify. The Alan Kurdi photo particularly garnered support for this emblematic narrative of suffering. Finally, the media's focus on the Canadian public as altruistic takes away from the voice of the refugees and creates a savior complex for Canadians, in turn, forcing Syrian refugees into a role of receiver of aid.

Further Research

This article brought together three different frames of refugees in the media, finding a commonality in their effects on integration and adding to the literature surrounding refugee settlement in Canada. Further research could analyze the effects that more recent events have had on news media in Canada, as well as compare it with the coverage during moments without major events. Of specific interest would be the evolution of stories surrounding Syrian refugees several decades following their integration, involving a comparison for subgroups of refugees differentiated by the particular media climate in Canada.

Works Cited

Allwright, J. J. (2018). Media framing of refugees in the United States and Canada (Doctoral

     dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. (2041015673)

Anderson, T. (2020). News media representations of international and refugee

     postsecondary students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 91(1), 58–83.

Citizenship Canada. (2017, February 27). #WelcomeRefugees: Key figures. Retrieved from

     https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-

     citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/key-figures.html

Esses, V. M., Medianu, S., & Lawson, A. S. (2013). Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the

     media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees. *Journal of Social

     Issues, 69*(3), 518-536.

Garcea, J., & Kikulwe, D. (2019). The liberal plan for resettling Syrian refugees in Canada: The

     justificatory narrative and counter-narrative. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 51*(2), 87-106.

Kyriakides, C., Bajjali, L., McLuhan, A., & Anderson, K. (2018). Beyond refuge: Contested

     orientalism and persons of self-rescue. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 50*(2), 59-78.

Lawlor, A. (2015). Framing immigration in the Canadian and British news media. *Canadian

     Journal of Political Science, 48*(2), 329-355.

Lawlor, A., & Tolley, E. (2017). Deciding who's legitimate: News media framing of

     immigrants and refugees. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 25.

Mortensen, M., Allan, S., & Peters, C. (2017). The iconic image in a digital age. *Nordicom

     Review, 38*, 71-86.

Said, E. (2010). Introduction to Orientalism. In S. Thornham, C. Bassett & P. Morris (Eds.),

     Media Studies: A reader (pp. 111-123). New York University Press: New York, NY

This citation has been redacted for anonymity.

Smith, M., & Zeigler, S. M. (2017). Terrorism before and after 9/11 – a more dangerous world?

    Research & Politics. doi:10.1177/2053168017739757

TEDx Talks. (2016). Personalizing the refugee crisis: Tima Kurdi [Video]. Youtube.

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6YQn_fhxiU.

Tyyskä, V., Blower, J., Deboer, S., Kawai, S., & Walcott, A. (2018). Canadian Media Coverage

    of the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Representation, Response, And Resettlement. *Geopolitics,*

    History and International Relations, 10(1), 148-166.

UNHCR (2019, October 7). UNHCR welcomes generosity amid record high displacement.

    Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.ca/news/amid-record-high-global-

    displacement-unhcr-welcomes-canadian-generosity-towards-refugees/

Wallace, R. (2018). Contextualizing the crisis: The framing of Syrian refugees in Canadian print

    media. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 51(2), 207-231.

Western University. (2015). Media's role in the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees

    [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyCFYOH75zk.

Winter, E., Patzelt, A., & Beauregard, M. (2018). L'imaginaire national, l'asile et les refugies

    syriens en Allemagne et au Canada : Une analyse discursive. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*

    Journal, 50(2), 15-34