

The Power of The Press: Examining the Construction of Refugee Issues in Canadian Media
SOCI 310 102
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Abstract

Refugee migration has been a prominent global and Canadian issue within modern society. Canadian refugees face unique challenges and experiences in their journeys to Canada. Academic literature notes various flaws in Canadian policy that limits refugee migration and creates challenges for resettlement. Canadian refugee experiences and challenges can be further understood as being influenced by depictions in the media. Through qualitative research the following themes on refugees can be identified in media discourse: a Canada vs. U.S. comparison, Canada as a UN leader on refugees, and acceptance, welcoming, and opportunity in Canadian society. This research paper seeks to understand the construction of refugee topics in Canadian media and how this influences societal attitudes and policy formulation in Canada.

Introduction

Imagine escaping the horrors of war, violence, persecution, and even death. These are just examples of the unbelievable threats faced by individuals seeking refugee status in Canada. According to recent statistics, 44,747 refugees were admitted to Canada in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2018). To situate Canada in a global context, there are a total of 25.9 million refugees worldwide with Turkey being the top refugee-hosting country, taking in 3.7 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). The topic of refugees has been both a major global concern and controversial Canadian political debate. Public attitudes and policy formulation are central to the discussion on refugees and are largely influenced by portrayals in Canadian media (Lacroix, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand the construction of refugees in Canadian media in order to better understand refugee issues in a societal and political context. This research seeks to answer the following question: how are topics on refugees constructed in Canadian media?

Literature Review

Academics have consistently criticized Canada's refugee policies for its conservative approach to a greater international humanitarian crisis. In critique of Canadian refugee policies, the slow and lengthy process for reviewing refugee claims complicates the already difficult task of escaping peril in refugee home countries (Lacroix, 2004). On a global scale, Canada's "modest" refugee acceptance targets fail to provide adequate global support for a massive international refugee crisis (Creal, 2009). Additionally, Canada's notable points system is commonly criticized as a conservative approach to refugees. Despite the success of Canada's non-discriminatory points system, refugee class migrants are largely disadvantaged in favour of economic class migrants who increase Canadian wealth and prosperity (Anwar, 2014). Moreover, Canada's modesty and reluctance to accept refugees is burdening countries with fewer resources who are accepting more refugee claims without necessarily having the capacity to do so (Creal, 2009).

Furthermore, successful refugee claimants often face barriers to resettlement and integration into Canadian society. Canada defines itself as accepting and welcoming towards individuals of all cultural identities, including recent immigrants and refugee newcomers (Uberoi, 2016). However, these central notions of welcoming are not always apparent in practice. In particular, refugees often face unique economic challenges when resettling in Canada. Their high human capital, defined by former employment, educational attainment, and English proficiency in their origin country, has little or no value in the Canadian job market (Lamba, 2003). Many refugee immigrants have high-levels of occupational and educational

credentials within their origin country, such as medical degrees, which are not recognized by Canadian institutions (Vineberg, 2012). This lack of recognition for foreign credentials forces Canadian refugees to often accept precarious employment for which they are overqualified for (Vineberg, 2012). In addition, negative attitudes and othering create feelings of rejection for refugee newcomers. The cultural threat hypothesis views the perception of foreign values, identity, and culture with restrictionist attitudes towards refugee newcomers (Gravelle, 2018).

In contrast, global criticism of Canadian refugee policy is perhaps overshadowed by the controversial attitudes towards refugees under U.S. President Trump. Widely publicized changes to U.S. immigration policy under President Trump involves a massive decrease and tightening of regulations for immigration from all classes (Parsons, 2018). The election of President Trump saw an increase in radical right wing anti-immigration sentiments that captured the attention of media sources worldwide (Kardas, 2017). For Example, President Trump's executive order that prohibited travelers from Muslim majority countries and refugees from entering the United States gained massive news coverage globally (Cambridge University Press, 2017). To a more extreme extent, the U.S. approach to refugee immigration can also be seen as increasingly conservative (Gubernskaya & Dreby, 2017). However, conservative decisions on U.S. refugee policies gain massive international media attention while changes to Canadian policies do not.

While current academic discourse widely covers criticisms of Canadian refugee policies and societal integration, a lot is unknown about how popular media portrays refugee issues to the Canadian public. In contrast, extensive global media coverage is dedicated to controversial immigration and refugee topics in the United States, while coverage of controversial Canadian approaches are not given the same international attention. Without international criticism, domestic Canadian media is the only common source for depictions of refugee topics in Canada. Analyzing the portrayal of refugees in Canadian media will provide evidence of how popular media discourse can affect both the intertwined construction of societal outcomes and government policy on refugees. Therefore, this research will answer the question: how are topics on refugees constructed in Canadian media?

Data and Methods

News Source:	Headline	Story Highlight	Dominant Theme(s)
The Globe and Mail	"Ottawa's tougher line on asylum seekers no cause for alarm: head of UN refugee agency in Canada"	Change to Canadian refugee policy makes it harder for refugees. Still compliant with UN laws	-Restriction of refugee migration -Canada as a UN leader on refugee policy
CTV News	"Canada resettled more refugees than any other country in 2018, UN says"	UN declares that Canada resettled most refugees & is very welcoming. More than the United States under Trump.	-Canada vs. U.S. -UN leader on refugee policy -Canada as Welcoming
Huffington Post	"UN Wants Canada To Take More Migrants from Central America"	UN calls on Canada as best suited to support Central American asylum seekers, as compared to the US under Trump	-UN leader on refugee policy -Canada vs. U.S.
Maclean's Magazine	"These Syrian refugees became Canadians. Just in time to vote"	Canada provides exceptional opportunities for refugees, including democratic rights.	-Canadian Dream
Global News	"After 9-hour walk, mostly barefoot, asylum seeker finds 'welcome' in Winnipeg"	Canada is welcoming of new refugee immigrants who go to great lengths to migrate to Canada, as opposed to US under Trump.	-Canada vs. U.S. -Canadian Dream -Canada as Welcoming
National Post	"The U.S. might be about to send us these two immigration and refugee problems"	Problematic US refugee policy forces Canada to resettle even more refugees as a global leader.	-UN leader on refugee policy -Canada vs. US
CBC News	"We will be their family: Refugees arrive in time for 1 st Thanksgiving dinner"	Private sponsors welcome refugee family with their first Canadian Thanksgiving dinner.	-Canada as Welcoming

Figure 1. Analysis of Canadian media articles on refugees. This figure illustrates how each article was compared and evaluated to form an understanding of common themes.

In order to analyze refugee discourse in Canadian media, this research will take a qualitative approach of examining coverage of refugees and refugee policy on popular online Canadian news platforms. A total of seven online news articles will be analyzed from seven individual news sources to identify common themes among refugee media discourse. The Canadian news articles will be sourced from the following online sources: *The Globe and Mail*, *CTV News*, *Huffington Post Canada*, *Maclean's Magazine*, *Global News*, *The National Post*, and *CBC News*. Articles will be discovered by searching the term “refugees” on each news website and selected based on the following criteria: published in 2019, national news headline, Canadian focused, and concerning refugee policy, resettlement, or experiences. This analysis will specifically compare the article headlines, dominant themes, and the overall story highlight. Specific analysis will be looking for common uses of language, similarity in arguments, and routine narratives. The organization of the article content is demonstrated in Figure 1. Each of the articles headlines and content will then be compared and analyzed to reveal common themes surrounding the portrayal of refugees in Canadian media.

Findings

Research and analysis revealed three dominant themes pertaining to the portrayal of refugee issues in Canadian media. The first theme can be articulated as a Canada vs. U.S. comparison, in which the media uses controversial U.S. refugee policies and attitudes to bolster Canada's approach as uniquely progressive. Secondly, the theme of United Nations approval is commonly identified to disregard negative changes to refugee policy and promote Canada's position as a global refugee leader. Finally, the theme of Canadian acceptance, welcoming and opportunity is commonly reported to highlight a ‘Canadian dream’ narrative.

Canada vs. U.S. Comparison

A common theme in Canadian media involves comparing the Canadian refugee approach to recent controversial U.S. policies. However, this comparison negatively misleads public opinion to suggest that Canada's approach to refugees is far superior in its humanitarianism than it actually is. By comparing refugee policies in Canada to the United States under President Trump, Canadian media seeks to differentiate and redefine the country's global reputation as individualistic and superior in its humanitarianism. It has long been understood that Canada as a sovereign nation has often been viewed in the shadow of its powerful neighbour, The United States. In the international sphere, this reputation as “Americas little brother” has caused Canada to seek opportunities to differentiate itself as independent. Therefore, it is understandable why a Canada vs. U.S. comparison is a common theme in discussing the topic of refugees in Canadian media.

Several news articles utilize comparisons with the U.S. under President Trump in order to position Canadian refugee policy as superior. *The Globe and Mail* boasts how “more than 40,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Canada... since U.S. President Donald Trump launched his crackdown on illegal immigration” (Zilio, 2019). *The Huffington Post* notes how the United Nations entrusts Canada to accept asylum seekers from Central America “as the United States... with President Donald Trump [is] branding... migrants as... violent criminals bent on destabilizing his country” (Canadian Press, 2019). Notably *The National Post's* headline stating that “The U.S. might be about to send us these two immigration and refugee problems” further demonstrates how Canada seeks to differentiate itself as superior to the United States (Robert, 2019).

Canada as a United Nations Leader on Refugees

A dominant theme in media discourse is the use of statements from the UN to gain approval for Canadian refugee policy and establish Canada as a global leader for refugees. The referencing of The UN to legitimize Canada's portrayal as a global leader for refugees is problematic because it inadvertently suggests that there are no improvements to be made to Canada's expert refugee policies. The United Nations as an international government institution plays an important role in facilitating the heavy flow of refugee migration globally. Despite academic literature clearly criticizing Canada for its lack of refugee acceptance, Canadian media uses statements from the United Nations as a way to position itself as a global leader on refugees. Approval from the United Nations is an effective way that Canadian media is able to incorrectly portray Canadian refugee policy as well-beyond global standards. The UN sets guidelines for refugee policy and evaluates the efforts of each refugee-receiving country in adhering to these guidelines. *CTV News* notably cites the UN in the headline: "Canada resettled more refugees than any other country in 2018, UN says" (Wright, 2019). Furthermore, *The Globe and Mail* references the United Nations to justify a change that further limits refugee migration by stating: "the United Nations refugee agency in Canada says the federal government's tougher line on asylum seekers is no cause for alarm" (Zilio, 2019).

Acceptance, Welcoming, and Opportunity in Canadian Society

Articles showcasing refugee resettlement, largely depict Canada as a welcoming and culturally accepting society that provides exceptional opportunities for refugee newcomers. Media discourse praises Canadian society through its depiction of a warm and supportive economic promised land for refugee resettlement. However, despite these positive portrayals of refugee resettlement, academic literature suggests that refugees also face economic challenges and labeling as cultural threats to national identity. Therefore, Canadian media only portrays an idealized experience of refugee newcomers and fails to depict the ill-favoured side of resettlement. *Global News* notes how asylum seekers make sacrifices to enjoy the embrace of Canadian society in the headline: "After 9-hour walk, mostly barefoot, asylum seeker finds 'welcome' in Winnipeg" (McGuckin, 2019). *Maclean's Magazine* captures a former Syrian refugee who expressed excitement being given the opportunity to vote in the 2019 federal election by stating that he is "really happy to be able to express [his] opinion now, to have the freedom to do that" (Friscolanti, 2019). *CBC News* showcased refugee newcomers being welcomed into Canadian society with the headline: "We will be their family: Refugees arrive in time for 1st Thanksgiving dinner" (Knope, 2019).

Conclusion

By identifying common themes in the media's construction of refugee issues, it is clear that media discourse praises Canada's approach to refugees by highlighting themes of superiority to the U.S., being a United Nations leader on refugees, and having a welcoming, accepting and opportunistic society. This portrayal of Canada's approach to refugees overlooks much of the hardships that are simultaneously experienced by Canadian refugees. While Canada does represent exceptional opportunities for individuals, refugees often face economic adversity when it comes to occupational attainment and credential recognition (Lamba, 2003; Vineberg, 2012). In practice, these economic challenges make it difficult for refugees to actually take advantage of any potential opportunities that Canada offers. Furthermore, academic literature clearly

criticizes Canada for having an overly “modest” refugee acceptance quota (Creal, 2009). However, Canadian media consistently emphasizes Canada’s role as a UN leader for refugees without considering that Canada is not among the top refugee receiving countries globally (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Lastly, it is true that Canadian society has been constructed on the basis of welcoming and acceptance through the Multiculturalism Act, but as academic theorists note, not every refugee resettlement experience is accompanied by welcoming and accepting attitudes in every community (Gravelle, 2018; Uberoi, 2016).

This research reveals that the construction of refugees in Canadian media, often exaggerates the true humanitarianism of Canada’s approach to refugees. The effects of this portrayal results in a large number of Canadians mistakenly believing that Canada fosters a perfectly inclusive environment for refugees as a global humanitarian leader. It is both harmful to society and future policy formulation to promote this dominant view because it prevents open dialogue on ways to grow and improve upon Canada’s current approach. Therefore, media portrayals of refugees in Canada have a huge impact on Canadian attitudes, policy formulation, and the very foundational principles of Canada as a diverse country.

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