



Study: The Media Dehumanize Immigrants

Canadian researchers have shown how negative portrayals of migrant workers lead to their being viewed as not fully human.

By Magda Fahsi | October 15, 2013

In August 2010, a ship was intercepted off the west coast of British Columbia, Canada, containing 492 Tamil passengers claiming refugee status. The asylum seekers were immediately detained by the Canadian government; the media depictions included claims that they were 'bogus refugees' trying to take advantage of Canada's lax system and that they included members of the Tamil Tigers, labeled as a terrorist organization in Canada. The result was that the sense of crisis and threat promoted by the media seemed to overshadow the seriousness of the incident.

This story illustrates the fact that in recent years, portrayals of immigrants and refugees in many Western countries have become increasingly negative, with the media focusing on the supposed threats they pose to host societies. They depict certain groups of migrants in ways that lead to dehumanization, supporting the view that these individuals do not deserve assistance, or worse, that inhumane treatment is justified.

It is also the conclusion drawn by a paper published in the Journal of Social Issues by Victoria Esses, Stelian Medianu and Andrea Lawson, a team of social psychologists in Canada. The article gives an overview of past research describing the media's implicit role in crafting national perceptions of immigrants. In addition to disseminating policy messages, the media also construct and promote certain positions on these issues, thereby playing a large role in framing public policy about migrants and refugees.

According to the study, recurring themes that are especially prevalent in the media in Canada but also in a number of other Western countries, are (1) that 'bogus refugees,' particularly those who arrive by boat, are flooding into Canada and trying to take advantage of the 'lax refugee policy'; (2) that the lax refugee policy allows many 'terrorists' to enter Canada and obtain refugee status; and (3) that immigrants do not receive appropriate screening at the borders and thus are bringing in diseases that threaten the health of Canadians.

One-sided negative portrayals of migrants

The study depicts a damning picture of a system that both reflects and exacerbates a level of uncertainty that exists in public opinion – both economic uncertainty and uncertainty about national identity – and that leads individuals to look to the groups to which they belong for uncertainty reduction. The group-centrism that results leads to intolerance of ‘otherness.’

The media may then reinforce these perceptions, providing one-sided negative portrayals of immigrants and refugees that serve to further reduce uncertainty. “Crises sell news,” the authors write, “whereas positive stories are less newsworthy, so that negative media portrayals of immigrants and refugees both reduce uncertainty and take advantage of the public’s preference for negative news content to sell stories.”

A recurring theme of newspapers, for example, is the sense that the nation is not in control of its fate, its economy and its borders. Giving the public an ‘enemy’ allows the focus to shift and to reduce the uncertainty. In times of crisis, what is happening is often too complex, too vague for the average citizen to grasp; the media provides for another kind of ‘crisis,’ more tangible and seemingly more controllable: put up those borders, tighten policy and we will have a solution to all our problem.

What may result though is extreme negative reactions toward immigrants and refugees, including their dehumanization. Dehumanization may be considered the ultimate form of intolerance of ‘otherness,’ in which immigrants and refugees are not even permitted entry into the human in-group.

An example of this skewed response is what occurred in the Canadian media shortly after four boatloads of asylum seekers from China landed off the west coast of British Columbia in 1999 and after a similar event in 2010, this time with Tamil passengers. These events could be interpreted in a variety of ways and give rise to different emotions. The media may then decide to cover the stories from different angles.

It could highlight the plight of these individuals, explain that they probably have spent a significant amount of time in very difficult conditions before leaving their home countries; that given these very difficult conditions, they were forced to leave. In other words, by underlining what these people have gone through, they could induce empathy for them.

But this is not what happened, however. Instead, in both instances, the media painted the groups in a negative light. The 1999 incident was portrayed as a crisis despite the relatively small numbers involved, with terms such as “invasion” used. The 2010 Tamil passengers on the boats were branded as being ‘bogus refugees’ or even ‘terrorists’ wanting to take advantage of Canada’s immigration system, creating a sense of crisis even if the number of individuals involved only constituted approximately 2 percent of the total number of asylum claims registered in Canada that year.

Effects of the negative coverage

The Canadian team of social psychologists then set out to discover the real effects of this negative coverage by the media, asking: what impact do these claims have on the perceptions of refugees and

migrants? How do people react to what they read? To find out, two groups of volunteers were asked to read newspapers editorials – one real and one doctored.

The real one described Canada's costly refugee program and depicted refugee claimants as immoral cheaters, including the following:

"Refugees are not people who have been displaced and are brought into Canada for humanitarian reasons. Only a few are in that category. Most are smuggled in or are queue-jumpers who lie their way into the country by pretending they cannot go home and get all the entitlements they need immediately . . . These people come here by plane, have passports when they board then flush them down the toilet and declare refugee status, even when they are from rich countries."

In the control condition, the editorial was adapted by the researchers so that it described Canada's costly refugee program but did not describe refugee claimants as immoral cheaters:

"These people come here by plane, but have nowhere further to go once they arrive. They sign up for social assistance until they can get themselves settled and look for work."

Participants were then asked to answer some questions about immigrants: those who read the real article depicting refugees as bogus queue-jumpers led to significantly less favorable attitudes toward migrants and toward Canada's refugee policy. They were also far more likely to dehumanize refugees and express contempt for them.

In other words, the study suggests that uncertainty surrounding migration and the media's proclivity to focus on negative rather than positive news stories can lead to extreme negative reactions toward migrants and refugees – including their removal from the human race through dehumanization. In turn, through the removal of the constraints imposed by humanity and kindness considerations, extreme behaviors toward members of these groups may be unleashed.

The findings have important implications at the level of public policy. Nations, as signatories to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocolm have an obligation to protect refugees. Additionally, many Western nations need immigrants to fill labor needs and to support their population base. But negative representation and dehumanization produce a lack of support for government policies that guide the admittance of immigrants and refugees, calling instead for a reduction of the number of migrants and refugees admitted each year.

How, then, can we present a more impartial, fact-based view of immigrants and refugees and counteract the negative messages that tend to be disseminated? According to the authors of the study, "governments need to do a better job of communicating with the media about immigration, providing information that reduces uncertainty and countering the potential perceptions of threat that are currently prevalent in public discourse." This, they conclude, should also "include communication on positive immigrant outcomes and contributions."

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