



New Western study shows media play role in dehumanizing immigrants and refugees

By Communications Staff

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A new study from Western University suggests that the news media may take advantage of an existing uncertainty and unease around immigration policies and the treatment of immigrants and refugees to create a crisis mentality in which these groups are portrayed as “enemies at the gate” attempting to invade western nations.

In “Uncertainty, Threat, and the Role of the Media in Promoting the Dehumanization of Immigrants and Refugees,” published in this month’s *Journal of Social Issues*, Victoria Esses from Western’s Department of Psychology and Centre for Research on Migration and Ethnic Relations, and her team, including Stelian Medianu and Andrea Lawson, examine the effects of common media portrayals of immigrants and refugees on dehumanization and its consequences. These portrayals include suggestions that immigrants spread infectious diseases, that refugee claimants are often bogus, and that terrorists may gain entry to western nations disguised as refugees.

"In the current global climate, immigration and refugee policies are a hot topic of debate and there is little direct information available to the public to answer their questions," says Esses. "This creates an opportunity for the media and political elites to grab the public's attention, alerting them to supposed physical, economic, and cultural threats from immigrants and refugees as they transform relatively mundane episodes into newsworthy events that can be sold to the public and serve as support for relatively extreme political platforms."

Esses and her team conducted a number of experiments to examine the potential consequences of media depictions focusing on threats immigrants and refugees pose to members of host societies that are particularly prevalent in the media in Canada and other Western countries: immigrants are sources and spreaders of infectious diseases, refugee claimants are bogus queue-jumpers who are trying to take advantage of lax refugee policies to gain entry to western nations, and terrorists are trying to gain entry to western nations as refugee claimants.

These studies suggest that the media may not only promote dehumanization of immigrants and refugees through depictions that highlight potential threats to the host society, but provide ready justifications for the dehumanization and consequent outcomes.

Esses says that the resultant dehumanization of immigrants and refugees may appeal to members of the public, serving to justify the status quo, strengthening boundaries between newcomers and established residents, and defending against threats to the established residents' position in society.

For example, studies of the portrayal of Tamil asylum-seekers arriving in British Columbia in 2010 show that negative media portrayals served to fan the flames of distrust and anxiety, causing a significant majority of Canadians to view the refugees as bogus and potential criminals, leading to the introduction of a Bill to reform Canada's refugee system.

"These findings have important implications at the both the level of public policy and the behaviour of those who produce media for public consumption," says Esses. "Immigrants play a significant role in successful nation building and it is essential that media portrayals of immigrants and refugees not serve the function of transforming uncertainty into crisis."

The study is available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12027/abstract>

MEDIA CONTACT: Stephen Ledgley, Senior Media Relations Officer, Western University, 519-661-2111 ext. 85283, sledgley@uwo.ca

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