

WIRED.CO.UK**Study: Media Dehumanises Immigrants, Creates False Crises**

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Negative portrayals of immigrants in the press are dehumanising and can engender the sense that that a social crisis is looming, if not already taking hold. This is the conclusion drawn in a paper published in the *Journal of Social Issues*, penned by a team of social psychologists in Canada, a place the authors say is generally "more positive than many other Western nations" when it comes to immigration. The conclusion comes just a month after a report by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford found that the portrayal of immigration in UK news is largely negative, with the term "illegal" most commonly used to describe immigrants in national papers, broadsheets and tabloids alike.

The Canadian study -- by professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario Victoria Esses, PhD student Stelian Medianu and Andrea Lawson of Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto -- gives an overview of past research describing the media's implicit role in crafting national perceptions of immigrants, before highlighting three experiments carried out by the team designed to uncover the real effects of these negative portrayals. It paints a damning picture of a system that both "exacerbates" and "reflects" a level of uncertainty that exists in public opinion around the issue of immigration, taking advantage of that uncertainty by artificially elevating the topic to crisis-like levels to sell newspapers.

"Uncertainty can be used to the media's advantage, allowing the transformation of relatively mundane episodes into newsworthy events that can be sold to the public," Esses told Wired.co.uk. "Thus, the media take advantage of unease to create a state of crisis that will attract attention and help sell media products." Excellent examples of that skewed response occurred in 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 onboard).

"These events could be interpreted in a variety of ways and elicit a variety of emotions," Esses explains to Wired.co.uk. "For example, one might feel empathy for the refugee claimants, considering that they have often spent a significant amount of time in very difficult conditions both before leaving their home countries and in transit to Canada. Thus, the media could highlight the plight of these individuals and induce empathy for them." That was, however, not the case.

In both instances the groups were painted in a negative light. In 1999, the incident was portrayed as a crisis despite the relatively small numbers involved, with terms such as "invasion" used to describe an influx of unwanted immigrants that may carry diseases or be potential terrorists. In 2010, the 492 Tamil passengers onboard the boats made up two percent of the total asylum claims that year, yet were branded as being bogus refugees wanting to take advantage of Canada's immigration system.

"Depictions of these refugee claimants have focused on the possibility that they are bringing communicable diseases into Canada, that they are queue-jumpers trying to take advantage of our 'lax refugee system,' and that they may be harbouring criminals and terrorists," says Esses.

In light of this history of negative coverage, Esses and her team set out to discover what the real effects of it might be. Do people believe everything they read? Or are there more complex implications to a few carefully placed insinuations?

In the first of the three experiments the team focused on the most obviously imminent threat of danger that might serve to dehumanise: infectious diseases. "We reasoned that such an association might be especially likely to lead to the dehumanisation of immigrants because vermin are typically associated with the spreading of disease," write the authors.

Two groups of volunteers were asked to read an article reviewing a biography of actor Steve Martin online. On the bottom corner after the article an editorial cartoon was included depicting an immigrant entering Canada carrying a suitcase. In one group the suitcase had labels saying things like Aids and Sars, while on the other there were no labels. Participants were asked a series of questions about the article before being asked details about the cartoon. Many did not remember seeing the cartoon at all (it was purposefully made to look like part of the page, but not part of the article or the study). Nevertheless, those who viewed the picture with the labels answered negatively when asked a series of questions about immigrants -- they saw them as the source and spreader of disease and were more likely to dehumanise them. When overall attitudes were assessed, they were again overwhelmingly negative, particularly toward public policy.

In a second experiment two groups were asked to read newspaper editorials, one real and one doctored. The real one related to Canada's refugee program and claimed that few had authentic humanitarian reasons to claim refugee status, but were instead "queue-jumpers" that purposefully manipulate the system to get benefits. The doctored article left out these negative insinuations, describing them as people with nowhere to go who seek work once settled. Again, participants were asked about the article before being addressed about their views on immigration. Those who read the real article were far more likely to dehumanise refugees and express contempt for them, as well as public policy related to them.

"Dehumanisation resulted from this presumed threat to the integrity of the refugee system, with a media claim that refugee claimants are often fake leading to the dehumanisation of refugees in general," conclude the authors.

Although it is a logical conclusion to draw, it's impossible to conclude whether the threat to the refugee system was the direct cause of the dehumanisation of refugees. Any subtle shift in a person's attitudes is necessarily an unconscious one and answers in a survey are without doubt open to interpretation. However, time and again the authors came up with evidence that media content does indeed sway opinion. The third and final experiment revealed troubling associations members of the public might have with immigrants. They were shown an article that painted an imaginary immigrant group as either bogus claimants, possible terrorists, or neutral. Then they were shown the word Canadian, refugee or no



Victoria Esses Speaking at the 2012 Local Immigration Partnerships Conference, Toronto

word at all, before being presented with an image of a human or an animal. Those who had been shown the negative newspaper articles were more likely to dehumanise immigrants than Canadians by associating them with the images of animals.

Looking at Esses' CV, the results shouldn't shock. She has been working in the field for 20 years and there has been a problem with perception and prejudice surrounding immigrants many decades and even centuries prior to then. "I have seen the dehumanisation of refugees in particular become more common," Esses says. "In recent years the media has been

more actively depicting certain groups of refugees in ways that lead to dehumanisation, supporting the view that these individuals do not deserve our assistance. The public may be particularly receptive to these depictions in times of economic and cultural uncertainty, which certainly characterises many Western nations in recent years."

The body of work referenced in Esses' paper shows there is a recurrent theme of newspapers taking advantage of national uncertainty -- the sense that the nation is not in control of its fate, its economy and its borders. Giving the public what is frankly an enemy, allows the focus to shift and gives a sense of purpose that begins to replace, or at least reduce, that uncertainty. In times of crisis, when the intangible notion of an unstable financial market feels too unwieldy and complex for the average citizen to fully comprehend, giving a reason for instability reduces uncertainty about how things got so bad and delivers a crisis that is tangible, and seemingly more controllable: put up those borders, tighten policy, and we will have a solution to all our problems.

It's a familiar trope, repeated throughout history and responsible for more than a few cases of genocide. "A crisis mentality can arise quickly based on perceptions of threat and arousal of fear," warns Esses. "Thus, the media can build on uncertainty about immigrants and refugees to quickly ignite a sense of crisis in response to particular events."

Dehumanising an individual gives way to a moral judgement that states we do not have to allow that person the normal rights and privileges we would expect for a "normal" citizen. "We" might have a right to healthcare, benefits, votes, for instance; "they" have no rights whatsoever and should not be taking advantage of a system that belongs to "us". It gives those that class themselves as "we" the moral high ground.

Dehumanising an individual -- using terms that describe them as having not elevated from animal-like status, being subhuman or being immoral disease-carriers with ill-intentions -- obviously go far beyond a distancing mechanism reserved for immigrants. They are the arguments of racists that enable acts of immoral abuse. It is an argument phrenologists used in the 19th century to describe Irish immigrants (of which there was an influx over the period) and members of the working classes. The suggested those groups exhibited a prognathous (protruding) jaw reminiscent of primitive man, and were therefore less developed than the rest of society. In Nazi Germany scientific racism was among the many justifications for the party's atrocities.

Surprisingly, scientifically founded racism that defines one race as genetically inferior still exists today in a form we are familiar with from these instances in history -- justification for the attack of immigrant groups. In 2009 Jason Richwine, then a PhD candidate at Harvard University, wrote a paper entitled *IQ and Immigration Policy* in which he argued that Hispanic immigrants in the US have a lower IQ than white US citizens, a fact he said is founded in genetics: "the totality of the evidence suggests a genetic component to group differences in IQ" he states, before drawing attention specifically to a "real cognitive deficit" in Hispanic immigrant populations.

He goes so far as to suggest there is a "strong case" for immigration decisions to be based on an individual's IQ, but says authorities might consider using the term "skill-based" for the test to "blunt the negative reaction". "The tests would still be ordinary intelligence tests, but the emotional baggage that the term IQ sometimes carries with it would be much reduced." It's a start to finish lesson on how to best implement institutional racism, then.

In a casual tone, Richwine repeatedly implies that the situation is not one in-flux, determined by economics or other social factors, but a permanent one: "No one knows whether Hispanics will ever reach IQ parity with whites, but the prediction that new Hispanic immigrants will have low-IQ children and grandchildren is difficult to argue against." It seems not a great deal has changed from the times when phrenologists measured skulls to back up their prejudices; we've just updated the tropes to include a Harvard education.

There's more than a few reasons we should be concerned by Esses' report, not least because there are more people living outside their country today than ever before, and that is set to increase. In Canada, the authors point to that dehumanisation indirectly affecting public policy. After the representation of the Tamil refugees in 2010 reforms were made to the refugee system which included giving the Minister of Public Safety the right to detain "irregular arrivals" for up to a year with limited review.

When put in the context of UK public opinion, the need to curtail media's negative portrayals seems desperately important. According to the survey *Transatlantic Trends 2010*, people in Britain are more likely than those in other nations (including in North America and Europe) to see immigration as a problem rather than an opportunity. Over and again the poll found that British respondents would refer to its immigration numbers as "too many", more often than in nations that have bigger immigrant populations.

According to a poll cited by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 75 percent of British people favour reducing immigration. At the same time the Observatory published another paper, "*Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010-2012*", revealing that negative terminology makes up the most commonly used words in news stories. The team used computer-aided analysis ("to remove human bias") to assess 58,000 news stories and found that the word "illegal" was most often associated with the term immigrant. "Aside from the political controversies around this very phrase, it is worth noting that immigrants with legal status far outnumber those without it, according to the best estimates of the size of both types of migrant populations," says the paper. So, purposefully or not, the media appears to put an emphasis and focus on the negative side of immigration. Responding to the news, Judith Dennis of

the Refugee Council said: "I think some of it is genuine misunderstanding. People do not realise when they are using the term, they might not have thought what the impact of that might be on someone who is described as illegal. It simplifies people's stories."

The disparity between the facts and public opinion and perception also appears to be widening.

A monthly poll conducted by Ipsos-MORI in the UK asks respondents to state what they think is the most important issue of the moment. They can suggest anything they like and are not prompted; their answers are then placed into a set of around 50 categories. According to an overview by the Migration Observatory, before 2000 the category "immigration and race relations" was rarely mentioned. Since then instances have steadily risen and the topic is now -- and has been for years -- classed as one of the top most important issues.

In light of that, you'd think something pretty horrendous was going on in the UK's cities and suburbs. But if another Ipsos-MORI poll (2007) is to be believed, that's not the case. It reveals that although the majority of the population sees migration as harmful, very few cite it as causing problems in their own neighbourhood. While 76 percent said immigration should be much tougher, 69 percent believed migrants have not had a strong local impact, good or bad, on their neighbourhood. On top of that, the Citizenship Survey 2008-2009 revealed 85 percent believe that in their area people of diverse backgrounds get along well.

It is not a stretch to conclude that media has a role in fanning the flames of a problem that many are suspicious of but, according to the Ipsos-MORI stats, few are actually experiencing. If immigration has taken on a myth-like status, Esses might argue that is the result of a "crisis mentality" perpetuated by the papers. The problem is undoubtedly everywhere. But the fact polls reveal British citizens are more likely to view immigration as problematic is not comforting.

Nevertheless, Esses is hopeful. "I believe that this is a problem that can be reversed. A major goal of this research is to determine how we can present a more impartial, fact-based view of immigrants and refugees, and counteract the negative messages that tend to be disseminated."

Government needs to play a role, she suggests, and monitor what the media is seeing. Not to control it, but to ensure the right messages, "more even-handed depictions" are being produced by its own press departments. "This is especially important in terms of promoting welcoming communities that can attract and retain immigrants. Many Western nations are now involved in a race for talent, competing for skilled immigrants who can contribute to national economies by filling labour and skills shortages. If these nations are to be successful, they must promote positive public attitudes toward newcomers so that they feel welcome and can use their skills to full advantage." A huge problem, she says, is that the public does not have easy access to government data and information on immigration.

This lack of transparency just gives others the chance to fill in the gaps. And in the absence of data, rhetoric is a powerful tool for selling papers, drama and a crisis -- authentic or otherwise.

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