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Media perpetuates refugee stigma

By Hamza Tariq

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Refugees and immigrants are being dehumanized by the media, according to a new study from Western.

The study, titled “Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees” was published in this month’s Journal of Social Issues.

The news media take people’s uncertainties and then uses them to portray refugees in a negative light, according to Victoria Esses, professor of psychology and director at the Centre for Research on Migration and Ethnic Relations.

Esses led the study along with her team, which included Stelian Medianu and Andrea Lawson from the department of psychology.

The study included experiments that examined potential consequences of negative media portrayals of immigrants and refugees in Canada and other Western countries.

“These portrayals are negative so they include the idea that refugees spread disease,” Esses said. “That they are not real refugees and those claiming refugee status are actually bogus — what they call ‘queue jumpers’ — and they are trying to get in illegally.”

According to Esses, she and her team were surprised by the results of the study and the extreme effect that news pictures and articles have on the minds of the public. The portrayals also led to beliefs that there were terrorists among the refugees and immigrants, which led to further dehumanization.

According to the study, dehumanization included the belief the other person or persons lacked characteristics such as “refinement, civility, morality, self-control and cognitive sophistication.”

Quoting the Tamil asylum seekers saga in 2010, in which 492 refugees were intercepted in a boat off the coast of British Columbia, Esses commented, “The response to the negative attention led to over 60 per cent of Canadians thinking we should be sending those boats back.”

“If you look objectively to the pictures we were presented, the pictures are of people we might feel pity for — instead we see them as outsiders who are trying to take advantage of us in some way.”

According to Esses, negative news and headlines garner more attention and are more profitable for the media.

The government should play a more active role by communicating with the media about immigration and provide information that counters negative perceptions, according to the study.

“I think that the community should become more involved in what goes into the media, and that the media should be paying attention not only to these negative stories but positive stories of the thousands and thousands of refugees and immigrants who are contributing to Canada,” she said.

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