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Syrian Crisis Representation in The Media: The CNN Effect, Framing, and Tone

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Abstract

Over the past seven years of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian refugees have been painted in a negative light by news media outlets around the world. History of media coverage regarding global humanitarian crises shows that with various tools and processes, media can shape public opinion and policy in whichever direction it desires, and oftentimes policymakers and the public are quick, as well as emotional, to react. In this paper, my objectives are to analyze specific examples of this CNN Effect phenomena within news coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as generally explain the negatively correlating relationship between media and humanitarian crises like the Syrian refugee crisis.

Introduction

In March of 2011, the Arab Spring began. As part of this large uprising to dethrone oppressive leaders across the Middle East, and in efforts to take down the authoritarian government of President Bashar al-Assad, Syrian rebels went to war against their own state. Syrians saw “that it was possible to challenge what had long been thought to be beyond alteration,” (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). Because of this war, over six million Syrians are currently displaced, five million fled as refugees, and 13 million within the country still need aid (Mercy Corps, 2018). This is now known as the worst humanitarian crisis in the modern age.

Defining a global situation as a crisis involves “the humanitarian consequences of war, the threat of terrorism, and anxieties associated with rising unemployment,” (Moore, Gross, & Threadgold, 2012). When reflecting on a crisis in history, one may ask where it all begins. Media plays a pivotal role in defining crises.

Media documents and defines history. Without this form of communication displayed in newspapers, broadcasts, and now the Internet, citizens would not be educated interconnectedly on what happens around the world. When news media often reports on humanitarian crises such as civil wars and forced migrations, it either humanizes its audience or dehumanizes it, in order to bring awareness to the situation. Humanitarian content such as this is prioritized by the media, and in turn, this news coverage becomes a frame to push opinion and shape policy.

Media around the world has participated in infiltrating the news with charged content regarding the Syrian refugee crisis, which results in propagandized stories, framing, and the CNN effect. This polariz-

ing relationship between media coverage and refugee crises will impact policy for centuries to come.

A General Reflection of The Syrian Crisis in The Media

A crisis such as this civil war in Syria is the perfect recipe for a successful news story due to “deep seated news values such as drama, conflict, violence, human interest and, in the case of visual news media, arresting images and spectacle” which plays a role in “prioritizing and shaping the images and events of war and occluding others,” (Cottle, 2009).

What’s even more enticing editorially is not just the war, but the human interest of a person’s livelihood at risk, the refugees. Journalists tend to emphasize and exaggerate the “exalting stories of immigrant success and the infuriating stories of immigrant victimization at the hands of incompetent bureaucrats,” (Suarez-Orozco, Louie, & Suro, 2011). Media representation of refugees “frequently objectifies them, dismissing their historical, cultural, and political circumstances,” (Wright, 2010). The Syrian refugee crisis is no exception to this phenomena.

Especially with refugee crises, it is difficult for news organizations to maintain their unbiased virtues when reporting as an outsider to such a perplexing cultural conflict. “Reporters, commentators, and editors, being human, are bound to be influenced in the information they present, and in the manner in which they present it, by the prevailing attitudes and opinions of the public,” (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). But it is the job of a journalist to decompose, simplify, and disseminate these complex stories to an average consumer, in an unbiased way, in order to fully compre-

hend the situation at stake.

It is important to remember a journalist's purpose, and their integrity. A journalist's job in this respect is not to "advocate for immigrants or what we conceive to be their interests," instead, their duty is to "educate our readers about a very complex, multifaceted immigration system," (Suarez-Orozco, Louie, & Suro, 2011). This is because in order to properly educate viewers of the news and information going on around the world, a journalist must not be biased. Objectivity is a fundamental tenet and value of journalism, whereas advocacy is inherently biased (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Especially in tense, opinionated situations like the refugee crisis, the news must be objective.

Regarding management of humanitarian crises, the United Nations' International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) was created in reaction to the genocide in Rwanda in 2001. The ICISS claims that the purpose of international involvement is "the responsibility to prevent, react, and rebuild," ultimately culminating to create "the responsibility to protect," (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). Although this commission was rarely covered by the media, its ideas are similar to a journalist's reason to report on humanitarian crises: to protect humanity and prevent future injustices.'

The CNN Effect Displayed in The Syrian Crisis

The Syrian crisis has received and still receives specific and ample air time. Editorially, it seems like an attractive decision to report on vulnerable people and oppressive governments. These stories gain lots of viewers. But sometimes the effect of covering this situation too much, or covering it the wrong

way, result in both slanted decision-making and public opinion.

For example, over just a matter of six days in August of 2013 when United States leaders were debating an attack after Syria's confirmed status of possessing chemical weapons, six cable networks in the U.S. offered 321 stories with a total of 21 hours of coverage (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). This coverage ultimately generated 61 percent of Americans being in opposition of strikes and led President Barack Obama, who had previously been supportive of military reaction in this situation, to decide to not strike Syria that year. This is a prime example of the CNN effect.

The CNN effect is a term coined in the 1990s due to technology's new ability at the time to constantly cover the Gulf War. It represents the pressing relationship between media coverage and policy action, and the effect has been shown to work. Some say media's "greatest impact on policy is when they can help determine a policy which is not determined," (Doucet, 2018). This is a direct illustration of the CNN effect, especially when it comes to war. As such, within a sole year of heartbreaking images scouring national broadcasts of the Gulf War and special reports on starving Somalis, President George Bush had decided to send American troops overseas (Doucet, 2018). As one of the very first instances of the CNN effect, it is shown that journalists prioritize and manipulate certain stories as a call-to-action. More coverage makes for more attention, and more attention makes for policy creation.

How Media Frames Syrian Refugees

Even more general than actually

calling policymakers to action, the media is one of the top framing and agenda-setting bodies of society. Citizens form opinions based on what information is available to them. In a journalist's defense, "[framing] is nothing more than placing events for target audiences in a context they might more easily understand or relate to," (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). The media provides consumers their information, and generally in democracies such as the U.S., this information is trusted and valued. However, governments "cannot often, or for very long, pursue policies that are strongly opposed by significant segments of their citizenry," (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). This is where the media takes advantage of its powerful process of setting agendas and event-driven tool of framing opinions for the general public.

Framing came early in the Syrian crisis. While still in the beginning of the Arab Spring, media begged for recognizable terminology. Key search words are important to the media, as they get more clicks and consumers, and stories become even more newsworthy. For example, in the event of Arabs fleeing the region, the media called them "boat people" at first instead of refugees. Terminology such as this "frames [Syrian refugees] as potentially opportunistic migrant workers rather than genuinely fleeing conflict [...] heightening the news value of migration stories," (Moore, Gross, & Threadgold, 2012).

In order to heighten news value of the Syrian refugee crisis, those fleeing were portrayed as dangerous, creating a sense of urgency for action. Media outlets around the world "depict refugees along an inaccurate and misleading continuum between being needy and lacking agency, and as a possible threat," (Tyyska et al., 2017). Reports in Canada found that "many stories

suggested that Syrian refugees, through possible connections with terrorist networks, represented a threat," (Wallace, 2018).

But the media sets the agenda, and it can do so through various outlets. The story of the Syrian refugee crisis took a turn in September of 2015. A photo of a three-year-old Syrian refugee boy flooded the front pages of major media outlets, seeing his lifeless body washed ashore in Turkey which "changed, temporarily at least, the media debate on asylum" (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015). Part of this continuous, contentious debate led to the policy decision of the EU shutting its borders in March 2016. Hysterical media coverage such as this "can be thus easily used by political figures to exacerbate the already very emotional debate on immigration," (Szczepanik, 2016). On the other hand, in an interview with The New Yorker, President Barack Obama seemed especially aware of media's framing of the Syrian civil war. He said, "If you were president fifty years ago, the tragedy in Syria might not even penetrate what the American people were thinking about on a day-to-day basis. Today, they're seeing vivid images of a child in the aftermath of a bombing," (Doucet, 2018). This demonstrates decision makers' acknowledgement of the CNN effect. However, Secretary of State John Kerry said Obama was "not influenced by the media on Syria because the mainstream media has been almost uniformly critical of him," (Doucet, 2018). When biased coverage and opinions come into the mix, all communication and understanding becomes clouded.

Framing is especially emphasized in social media, and public opinion displayed on these platforms can misconstrue traditional media's efforts to streamline the perspective of a news story. In a Facebook study linking media cues to cognitive processes, researchers found that even subtle

manipulation of terminology and tone can change news consumers' perspectives, especially "highlighting the risks of intervening" versus "emphasizing the humanitarian aspects of the crisis," (Najem, Soderlund, & Briggs, 2017). Subjects receiving pro-intervention content were more likely to favor US intervention.

Journalists around the globe also use humanitarian stories like these to shape their politics, while maintaining a distant role and optimistic outlook. In Canada, analysts in 2015 noticed in news articles that "the outlook (of the Syrian refugee crisis) is increasingly more positive and optimistic following the election," (Wallace, 2018). There's a reason news consumers are overwhelmed during election time. News is cherry picked to become political and to influence voters' ballots.

Framing is a primary tool of journalism's efforts to cover news stories such as general humanitarian crises, and specifically the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. Through qualitative and quantitative examples over the past seven years of this ongoing altercation ensuing around the globe, it is shown that charged reporting on the issue develops what is known as 'the CNN effect,' calling lawmakers into quick action. This in turn results in emotional responses and chaotic public opinion.

Specific Negative Tone In Media Coverage of Syria

Tone is significant when recognizing media coverage overstepping its boundaries. For example, in evaluating coverage in Turkey regarding the Syrian civil war, media outlets were found to use key terminology for different ideological reasons. In using the term "refugee," this painted Syrians

as an out-group, whereas using the word "people" promoted empathy (Dogankaya & Yücel, 2018). According to this study, the most common verbiage used in these Turkish articles all had a negative tone correlation, including "multeci" (meaning 'refugee'), "kacak" ('fugitive'), "misafir" ('guest'), "gocmen" ('immigrant') and even "gecici koruma" (meaning 'temporary protection') (Dogankaya & Yücel, 2018). Readers of these articles are manipulated with biased connotations from instigative language like this, definitely warranting an ideological slant toward exclusionary policy.

It's easy for media outlets to write off refugees with negative connotations, as "few stories discuss the economic or cultural benefits that migration brings to host countries," (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015). For example, Syrian women are often depicted in the media as stereotypically vulnerable, the men as terrorists, and all as a threat to the country's security (Tyyska et al., 2017). In Italy, one of the main entry points to the EU from the Middle East, 10 percent of hundreds of thousands of news articles consider refugees a security threat, along with 9 percent of published stories in Britain and Spain (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015).

Along with using negative tone, the media can frame people to be a certain way in order for a story to consistently entertain others, even sometimes prioritized over accuracy. Oftentimes refugee media coverage falls into two characterizations: massification and passivation, both efforts of the critique of victimhood (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Massification is when refugees are simplified into masses of unidentifiable, helpless humans, and passivation is when refugees are solely seen as hungry, tired 'bodies-in-need.' These two strategies deprive the refugees of their livelihood, identity, and legitimacy. Massification and

passivation are intentional efforts to make individuals numb the needs of society and make refugees seemingly invisible.

Media outlets also tend to misrepresent refugee populations. It has been shown that media will exploit the "sick women and children" idea to make a situation seem more dire or vulnerable, and male refugees are often highlighted when trying to portray an aggressive narrative (Szczepanik, 2016). The repercussions of these gendered characterizations destroy accuracy, and can infiltrate public perceptions. For example, 74 percent of refugees crossing the Mediterranean in June 2015 were men. However, this statistic has been used to inflate hysterical rhetoric, making the crisis seem more 'dangerous' than it is, because men actually only accounted for 47 percent of total refugees that year (Szczepanik, 2016).

Additionally, in Canada, media outlets assigned the characteristic of neediness to refugees by rarely ever interviewing them and instead, choosing experts or government officials (Tyyska et al., 2017). In the United Kingdom, 68 percent of those interviewed and quoted in refugee news stories are government officials, 78 percent in Spain, and 63 percent in Italy (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015). This is part of a constant effort of what some called "othering" Syrians, making them outsiders, and perpetuating a culture of "us versus them" or "West versus rest." In a sense, the refugees are simply 'extras' in their own stories. This creates a barrier between "us and them" and silences voices that need to be heard. This line drawn between the two sides signifies the difference among what actually affects the viewer versus what affects someone else yet entertains them, in that "the media division between "Home News" and "Foreign News" may cause part

of this," (Wright, 2010).

Conclusion

With millions of Syrians in peril for years now, and even more people screen-watching their every move, news coverage around the world presses this war to action. Journalists often set agendas, affect policies, and shift conversations with their coverage of this humanitarian crisis. Though a journalist's ideals are seemingly unbiased, charged diction and revealing tones regarding refugees inappropriately characterizes the situation and heightens hysteria.

Overall, humanitarian crises beg the question, "who's responsible?" and immigration is always going to be a contentious issue, due to the questions that arise from allowing foreign outsiders into one's homeland. But poor or slanted media coverage throws even more fuel to the fire. Demeaning portrayal of refugees in the media misconstrues their situation, character, and leads to emotional policy and public responses. News organizations around the globe have continued to prioritize such content since Arab Spring erupted in 2011, and without any change, future generations of refugees, immigrants, and those fleeing war will continued to be framed by public opinion and policy.

Recommendation: Media Literacy

Media literacy could be utilized across the globe order to alleviate this detrimental relationship between media coverage and humanitarian crises, which often results in public opinion and policymaking. Education is key

here.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines media literacy as, “equip[ing] people to be more discerning and probing of the world around, thereby becoming more self-aware and better able to appropriate the offerings of media and information for intercultural exchange, dialogue and self-identity,” (Leurs, Omerović, Bruinenberg, & Sprenger, 2018). It’s important for citizens to understand holistic approaches to reading and watching various media outlets, such as fact-checking and cross-referencing. These processes engage citizens in actively gaining responsibility, agency, and awareness of the information they consume. The current digital age creates a space in which media literacy is vital to being able to be properly educated and informed of the world around us. Otherwise, we would be drowning in constant information without knowing how to navigate its potential significance.

Oftentimes with media covering humanitarian crises, audiences’ media literacy operates visually through vulnerable images and video, but “before being heard, immigrants must be seen: not as dangerous ‘visible minorities’, but as potential ‘active citizens,’” (Leurs et al., 2018). Refugees should be presented as fellow human beings, not dangerous outsiders. This would prevent the “us versus them” dynamic commonly understood by stereotypical news stories.

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