

A Discourse Analysis of Syrian Refugee Representations in Canadian News Media

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Abstract : This study aims to examine the representation of Syrian refugees resettled in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland in local community and major newspapers. While there is strong support for immigration in Canada, public opinion towards refugees and asylum seekers is a bit more varied. Concerns about the legitimacy of refugee claims are among the common concerns of Canadians, and hateful or negative narratives are still present in Canadian media discourse which affects how people view refugees. To counter the narratives, these Syrian refugees must publicly declare how grateful they are because they are resettled in Canada. The dominant media discourse is that these refugees should be grateful as they have been graciously accepted by Canada and Canadians, once again upholding the image of Canada being a generous and humanitarian nation. The study examined the representation of Syrian refugees and the Syrian refugee resettlement in Canadian newspapers from September 2015 to October 2017 – around the time Prime Minister Trudeau came into power up until the present. Using a combination of content and discourse analysis, it aimed to uncover how local community and major newspapers in Vancouver covered the Syrian refugee ‘crisis’ – more particularly, the arrival and resettlement of the refugees in the country. Using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 12, the newspapers were analyzed and sorted into themes. Based on the initial findings, the discourse of Canada being a humanitarian country and Canadians being generous, as well as the idea of Syrian refugees having to publicly announce how grateful they are, is still present in the local community newspapers. This seems to be done to counter the hateful narratives of citizens who might view them as people who are abusing help provided by the community or the services provided by the government. However, compared to the major and national newspapers in Canada, many these local community newspapers are very inclusive of Syrian refugee voices. Most of the News and Community articles interview Syrian refugees and ask them their personal stories of plight, survival, resettlement and starting a ‘new life’ in Canada. They are not seen as potential threats nor are they dismissed – the refugees were named and were allowed to share their personal experiences in these news articles. These community newspapers, even though their representations are far from perfect, actually address some aspects of the refugee resettlement issue and respond to their community’s needs. There are quite a number of news articles that announce community meetings and orientations about the Syrian refugee crisis, ways to help in the resettlement process, as well as community fundraising activities to help sponsor refugees or resettle newly arrived refugees. This study aims to promote awareness of how these individuals are socially constructed so we can, in turn, be aware of the certain biases and stereotypes present, and its implications on refugee laws and public response to the issue.

Keywords : forced migration and conflict, media representations, race and multiculturalism, refugee studies

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