



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS  
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

# **Impact of Media Narratives on the Inclusion of Refugees in Canada**

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August 2017

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The key findings outlined in this report, by means of analytical research and a series of interviews, aim to assess the positive impacts and outcomes of Western media narratives on the inclusion of refugees, with the example of Canada as a host society.

The report explores the ways in which media platforms can shape public attitudes toward the inclusion of refugees in receiving societies. It also evaluates the impact of Western media in that regard, covering traditional journalism and new/social media. While the Canadian government and media have placed much emphasis on the Syrian refugee crisis, little attention has been paid to refugees' inclusion in society in general. Since November 2015, Canada has welcomed approximately 40,081 Syrian refugees;<sup>1</sup> however, reporting on their experiences can be complex and challenging. Several factors must be taken into account such as misinformation, the lack of or inadequate sources, the mandates of private media companies, and cultural differences. This report therefore aims to address the different impacts and positive outcomes generated by the media in regards to refugees' integration in society, acknowledging the traditional impartiality of journalism and free speech rights.

The study was based on in-depth analytical research and outreach, including interviews with four journalists, one columnist, one photojournalist, and two representatives from non-governmental organizations based in Montréal. Findings underscore the importance of media reporting in regards to refugees' inclusion in Canada. Likewise, promoting dialogue between media actors, civil society groups, and government actors is paramount. The concluding section of the report reflects on how several programs and policy recommendations targeting the Canadian government, the general public, and media actors, can result in an increased sense of belonging among refugees in society.

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<sup>1</sup> “#WelcomeRefugees: Key figures,” Government of Canada, Accessed July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## INTRODUCTION

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has reported that “by the end of the year 2016, 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.”<sup>2</sup> UNHCR defines a refugee as any “person forced to flee their home country to escape persecution, war, or violence.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, behind this number and definition lie the very real experiences of men, women, and children who are forced to leave behind their homes, communities, and lives. Further, they are often met, during exile, with intolerance, discrimination, and a lack of inclusion. Indeed, social isolation often manifests within the refugee experience.

Different forms of media can shape the public’s attitude towards the integration of refugees in society, including journalism, blogging, and social media. Each can also positively or negatively impact refugees’ sense of belonging in their host communities. It has been widely acknowledged that the media’s responsibility in that regard is to cover recent happenings in the most accurate way possible, in addition to informing and enlightening the public’s understanding of relevant issues. Indeed, multiple research studies have advanced evidence for a positive correlation between media reporting and attitudes towards migrants in society.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the need to promote awareness of refugee crises and inclusion of refugees in society has been recognized internationally. For example, on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in Brussels, the European Union and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations’ (UNACO) organized a symposium on ‘Hate Speech Against Migrants and Refugees in the Media’

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<sup>2</sup> “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016,” UNHCR, Accessed August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Refugee Resettlement Facts,” UNHCR, Accessed August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Danilova, “Media and Their Role in Shaping Public Attitudes Towards Migrants,” *Our World Brought to you by United Nations University* (2014), Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

(#SpreadNoHateInitiative).<sup>5</sup> This conference sought to frame recommendations for journalists, media, and government actors to counter hate speech.

In Canada, public focus on refugees has increased in recent years, largely as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis. According to the UN Refugee Agency, “Canada has an exceptional history of welcoming refugees and is the second largest resettlement country in the world. Since 1959, Canada has resettled almost 700,000 refugees. After less than one year, 90% of Syrian refugees resettled in 2015-2016 reported having strong sense of belonging to Canada.”<sup>6</sup> There are three refugee resettlement programs in Canada: first, the government-assisted program where refugees are referred by UNHCR and receive financial assistance through the government for a one-year period; second, privately sponsored refugees are also referred by UNHCR and financial assistance is provided by the financial sponsor for a year; and third, the blended visa program where refugees are referred by UNHCR and are eligible for financial assistance, the first six months through the sponsors and then the federal government.<sup>7</sup>

Informing receiving societies about refugees’ inclusion is significant, as different media outlets can promote positive dialogue across both civil society and traditional and social media. This research study was conducted by means of professionals and practitioners’ participation, based in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver, and Washington, DC. Research and information on this issue and existing initiatives were also gathered from sources, including reports published by international organizations, academic articles, news reports, and documentaries.

The ways in which the refugee experience is being reported in the media have been addressed at the international level. For example, UNESCO’s International Programme for the

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Butler, “Tips for media outlets looking to counter hate speech against migrants, refugees.” *International journalists’ network* (2017), Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Refugee Resettlement Facts,” UNHCR, Accessed August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Development of Communication (IPDC) organized a conference in Paris in March 2016 on ‘Media and Migration’.<sup>8</sup> The findings from this gathering echo the thoughts of interviewees and stakeholders I spoke with across different cities in Canada — that social media and visual narratives are powerful tools to establish a connection between newcomers and citizens. These initiatives and additional policy recommendations will further be discussed in this report.

## ISSUE, EVIDENCE AND KEY FINDINGS

Although, the media’s responsibility is not to influence public attitudes towards refugees in any particular way, certain stories and narratives can facilitate the deepening of social connectedness across segments of society. This study highlighted several issues related to reporting and working on refugees’ inclusion in society, as well as a number of initiatives being undertaken by various actors to address them.

The main issue surrounding reporting on refugees’ inclusion in Canada is the tendency to stereotype, and thus the need to constantly verify that assumptions are not influencing our analysis. In particular, there exists a preconceived idea or image of what individuals think a ‘refugee’ might be; yet, as noted by Bal Brach, reporter for *CBC News British Columbia*, asylum seekers often do not reflect such stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> Kevin Sullivan, a journalist with *The Washington Post*, said that the biggest challenge tends to be journalistic; as in, when writing about refugee issues, it is crucial to remember that you are more useful to those suffering and those helping when you are not in fact advocating.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Media and migration, covering the refugee crisis,” UNESCO, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Brach, B. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, K. (2017, June). Personal interview.

Another issue surrounds bridging language and cultural differences. Nicholas Keung, immigration reporter for *The Toronto Star*, pointed out that newcomers are not necessarily familiar with the ways in which Canadian media operates. For example, they may not be comfortable or used to being asked how they feel and to express their emotions.<sup>11</sup> All journalists and media professionals I interviewed agreed that it is crucial to always adopt a balanced approach when covering refugee crises and newcomers' integration in Canadian communities. As stated by Mr. Keung, "When we write our stories we make sure we have a balanced approach, be even more self-conscious, and about the use of language. We do not use any opinion [and do not] editorialize. [We are] neutral when interviewing our subjects. We play the devil's advocate, get both side's views, make sure that the story is complete in that way."<sup>12</sup>

Media stories can also have a marked impact on the programming of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example, Action Réfugiés Montréal noted how much things changed on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, particularly in terms of media attention, following the publication of the heartbreaking image of Aylan Kurdi around the world. Aylan Kurdi was a Syrian boy, three years old, who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he and his family were trying to escape to Europe.<sup>13</sup> One of the major results of this publication was increased donations to refugee-related causes, as reported by Paul Clarke, director of Action Réfugiés Montréal.<sup>14</sup> The organization received donations from a variety of sources, including individuals, churches, and foundations. Another major effect of media narratives is to inform and enlighten people who may not necessarily know much about refugee crises around the world and asylum-seeking processes. As

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<sup>11</sup> Keung, N. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Olivier Laurent, "What the Image of Aylan Kurdi Says About the Power of Photography," *TIME Magazine*, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, P. (2017, June). Personal interview.

a result, those who may be indifferent to the inclusion of refugees may be more willing to learn about and understand the complexity of their circumstances.

However, as mentioned by Jasmine Van Deventer, director of SINGA Québec, media narratives about refugees tend not to emphasize the talents and richness that each human being has and can bring to society.<sup>15</sup> Established in Montreal, SINGA Québec is part of an international network of organizations in Germany, Belgium, France, and Canada, which aims to connect locals and newcomers through a wide range of activities. SINGA Québec's mission is to work with refugees and civil society to create spaces where people can exchange, share their interests and knowledge, and advance projects together.<sup>16</sup>

Another challenge often encountered with mainstream media narratives is the tendency to extensively focus on one particular issue. For example, while the Syrian refugee crisis received significant media focus, other humanitarian crises received much less attention. According to Mr. Clarke, this results in very limited pressure for resolution, advocacy, and activism related to neglected crises. While public mobilization for assistance and aid to Syrian refugees is crucial, asylum seekers from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Burundi, Yemen, or the Democratic Republic of Congo also require support. As Mr. Clarke stated, "Nobody is calling me to say I want to give to Burundian refugees, and why is that? Because they do not know where Burundi is, they have never heard of it."<sup>17</sup> However, through dialogue and participation, it is possible to inform and discuss the different issues regarding displacement crises and refugees' integration in society. For instance, during World Refugee Day 2016, a journalist from Montreal approached Mr. Clarke to address the question of children in detention. He took this opportunity to inform the reporter about the newly released United Nations report on Eritrean refugees. Likewise,

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<sup>15</sup> Van Deventer, J. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>16</sup> "SINGA?" <https://www.singa.quebec/singa>. Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, P. (2017, June). Personal interview.

following discussions and exchanges of information with Action Réfugiés Montreal, several civil society groups, such as churches, decided not only to advocate for and help Syrian refugees, but also newcomers from Eritrea and Afghanistan.

In January 2017, the Norwegian Refugee Council published “The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crises,” which highlights humanitarian crises that the international community does not sufficiently address. These displacement crises “do not receive the necessary media attention, not the necessary political attention for there to be any real hope of imminent change in the situation.”<sup>18</sup> Ten humanitarian crises in 2016 were identified as not receiving enough attention or support: The Sahel, “the world’s largest interconnecting crisis area”; Yemen, “the worst humanitarian crisis”; Libya, “chaos prevents aid work”; The Rovingya (Myanmar and Bangladesh), “one of the most persecuted people on Earth”; Iraq, “The most deadly country for civilians”; The Central African Republic; Western Sahara; North Korea; Sudan; and Indonesia (West Papua).<sup>19</sup>

Recent upheaval in the media industry makes it even more difficult for issues to receive equal coverage. Bryan Dickie, a freelance photojournalist who published an article on the inclusion of Burmese refugees in Toronto, mentioned how, as a result of private journalistic corporations’ mandates, the media industry does not necessarily work the way we assume it would. Due to the growing number of new media outlets and the wide variety of social media tools available nowadays, information on a given topic can be easily accessed and transmitted — which has made the news industry far more competitive. At the same time, a number of media outlets have very limited resources and have to prioritize certain topics over others. Thus, while information, for example, on the Burmese refugee crisis is widely available and easily accessible,

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<sup>18</sup> “The world’s most neglected displacement crises.” Norwegian Refugee Council, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



it is not reported on TV, in newspapers, or on the Internet as frequently perhaps as other conflicts and social issues.

Significantly, new/social media is an important tool that can help raise awareness about the inclusion of refugees in society. Indeed, many civil society groups and NGOs use social media (eg. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) extensively to advocate and promote their programs and campaigns. For instance, The Depanneur, a restaurant based in Toronto, launched the Newcomer Kitchen program, “a non-profit enterprise that invites Syrian refugee women to prepare and sell meals.”<sup>20</sup> The Newcomer Kitchen has been promoted both through mainstream and social media and has gained much more visibility as a result. Social media can also be an efficient way, as stated by Mr. Sullivan, to get a first view or a start on research information.<sup>21</sup> However, social media of course cannot be considered a fully reliable source and can muddy the water in terms of issues and perceptions. While it is easy for certain stories to spread quickly, it is also becoming harder to tackle misinformation. As most professionals interviewed agreed, there is an important need for recognized media, with a history and record of being objective, to report the truth to the full extent of their ability.

The media thus plays an important role in a democratic society, as it can hold government accountable for its policies, operations, and programs, including those related to the resettlement of newcomers in Canada. For example, Ms. Brach worked on ‘Finding Refuge’ for *CBC News British Columbia*, a three-month project between December 2015 and March 2016, covering stories about Syrian refugees arriving in British Columbia. With her colleagues, they reported on the arrival and resettlement of approximately 3,000 refugees, and the story was reported on TV, radio, and online. As Ms. Brach stated, “I think that journalism has a huge role to play in the

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<sup>20</sup> “What is Newcomer Kitchen?”, Depanneur, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Sullivan, K. (2017, June). Personal interview.

functioning of a democracy because you hold the government accountable, it comes back to accountability, and it creates an environment where they have to act.”<sup>22</sup> Mr. Dickie agreed, stating that an open and free press “is the basis of a democracy,” and keeps “the players of power, whether government or corporates, in check.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Mr. Keung argued that stories on refugee experiences are likely to have an impact on government decision-making; hence, political actors pay close attention to international and national media reports.<sup>24</sup>

As argued by Ms. Brach, by building a reader’s understanding, you enlighten and inform him or her about newcomers’ experiences. Since one of the barriers to inclusion is a lack of understanding and empathy, an image, a picture, or a portrait can help build connectedness by focusing on the human aspect, allowing the reader to better relate to the refugee experience.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to have a positive impact on the public’s perception of refugee integration in host societies, media coverage must be fair, accurate, and balanced. There also needs to be a recognition of existing initiatives and guidelines established by international organizations aimed at improving media coverage of humanitarian crises worldwide. The following is a summary of recommendations that point in the right direction.

*The Ethical Journalism Network* published a report titled “Moving Stories: International Review of How Media Cover Migration,” which advances recommendations and addresses the various problems of media coverage of humanitarian crises. The Ethical Journalism Network is a non-profit institution that “aims to strengthen the craft of journalism and to promote for the

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<sup>22</sup> Brach, B. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>23</sup> Dickie, B. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>24</sup> Keung, N. (2017, June). Personal interview.

public benefit high ethical standards in journalism, based on principles of truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and impartiality, humanity and accountability by the provision of education and training of journalists and the publication of useful research.”<sup>27</sup> Among the suggestions put forward in the report were: firstly, for journalists, to provide a better understanding of the complex situation in which migrants and refugees find themselves; secondly, for news organizations to get diversified sources, provide accurate information, and hire expert reporters on specific subjects; thirdly, to create connections between the media, migrants, refugees, and NGOs; and finally, to challenge hate speech as well as to gain better access to information.<sup>28</sup>

Aidan White, founder of The Ethical Journalism Network, argued in his article, “Towards a Programme for Journalism and Media Literacy,” that journalism constitutes a powerful and unique tool of practical experiences and resources for actions and policies to be taken.<sup>29</sup> While, there certainly needs to be a recognition of the traditional impartiality of journalism as well as free speech rights, as argued by Mr. White, there are limits to what extent journalistic values can be applied. For example, not all bloggers and freelance reporters on the Internet are, or need to be, impartial. With that being said, it would be a positive step for writers and reporters on new/social media to borrow three journalism values: first, accuracy and fact-based communications; second, humanity and respect for others; and three, transparency and accountability.”<sup>30</sup> Were these values applied broadly, there would be fewer concerns about issues such as hate speech and misinformation on the Internet. Doing so would also help to tackle the

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<sup>27</sup> “Ethical Journalism Network,” EJN, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Aidan White, “Moving Stories: International Review of How Media Cover Migration.” *Ethical Journalism Network*, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Aidan White, “Towards a Programme for Journalism and Media Literacy.” *Ethical Journalism Network*, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

problem of fake news, or at least to raise awareness about the role the media can play in promoting solutions and informing about various social issues. The issue of fake news has been addressed by the Ethical Journalism Network and several recommendations were issued.

Thus, media literacy — defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” — is crucial.<sup>31</sup> First, it is important to distinguish between formal media, such as *The New York Times*, and informal media, such as a blog or a tweet. Moreover, it is crucial to disengage and think about sources from an objective manner. As argued by Thomas Mackey and Trudi Jacobson in their article, “How can we learn to reject fake news in the digital world?”, “...we are more inclined to fact check or examine the sources of the news when we don’t agree with it. Thinking about our own thinking reminds us that we need to move beyond how we feel, and engage our cognitive faculties in doing a critical assessment.”<sup>32</sup> Media literacy could thus be made a foundational subject in education systems, starting in primary school through to post-secondary education. Indeed, the first recommendation established following the EU-UNAOC Symposium on Hate Speech Against Migrants and Refugees in the Media was “Media literacy should be embedded in education systems, from early childhood to the professional level.”<sup>33</sup> Among the programs and initiatives suggested were for teachers to access open online courses to better comprehend media literacy techniques. For instance, in primary school, students can be taught how to assess the difference between traditional media and non-traditional media outlets. Then, in secondary school, students can be taught how to develop a critical approach to media sources.

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Turow, *Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi Jacobson, “How can we learn to reject fake news in the digital world?” *Ethical Journalism Network*, Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Butler, “Tips for media outlets looking to counter hate speech against migrants, refugees.” *International journalists’ network* (2017), Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

In order for media narratives to generate positive attitudes towards the inclusion of refugees generally, it is important to consider the public discourse. Journalists and other communicators have the ability to raise awareness about refugees' experiences by reporting on various stories from different angles; for example, by highlighting the stories of refugees from different countries and cultures. These personal stories can establish a connection between the reader and the subject. The issue of schooling and skills equivalency is also important despite not always being mentioned in the media in relation to the inclusion of refugees. Indeed, instead of prioritizing socio-economic factors, such as unemployment or language barriers, articles chronicling refugee experiences at work or school may generate positive responses. As stated by Jasmine Van Deventer, director of SINGA Québec, it is important to emphasize the talent and richness that individuals have and can bring to society and their community.<sup>34</sup>

It is also important for media outlets to prioritize visuals and to be careful with the language they use. First, visual narratives really make an impact; using images and photos can help contextualizing the stories. Through visuals, such as photojournalistic work or videos, media narratives help audiences see an issue in a different light. Being careful with the language used in articles or blogs can also have a big impact on the inclusion of refugees. For instance, as mentioned by Mr. Clarke, when addressing the situation of people crossing the Canadian border on foot, instead of employing the phrase 'crossing illegally', the phrase 'crossing in an unconventional way' can generate a different attitude towards these individuals coming to Canada.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the choice of words when writing about refugees' inclusion in society has a significant impact on their sense of belonging. For example, the words refugee and migrant have often been used interchangeably by the media, confusing the distinction between individuals

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<sup>34</sup> Van Deventer, J. (2017, June). Personal interview.

<sup>37</sup> Clarke, P. (2017, June). Personal interview.

escaping from a critical situation in their country and those seeking better opportunities. Indeed, when asylum seekers are misrepresented, it decreases their chances of being accepted by society.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, newcomers should be encouraged to tell their own stories through the media. For example, Migrant Voice, based in the UK, is monitored by migrants themselves, thus delivering their opinions to the general public about newcomers' experiences and aspirations in an active and authentic fashion.<sup>39</sup> In another example, SINGA Québec launched a video campaign titled #IAMHUMAN on World Refugee Day, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This initiative is established around videos of different individual portraits aimed at broadcasting stories of resilience, personal experiences, and messages to promote tolerance.

Lastly, promoting dialogue between decision makers, civil society, and refugees is crucial. There has been an acknowledged and recognized need to incorporate migration as a core theme within the international development discourse.<sup>41</sup> Through dialogue, issues regarding the inclusion of refugees are more likely to be tackled as attention is paid to all parties involved.

## CONCLUSION

Journalism, blogging, and social media constitute important platforms that can shape attitudes towards refugees in society. Although the media's responsibility is to remain impartial and objective, the stories and narratives it shares can help build social connectedness. Indeed, various media outlets providing fair and accurate information may positively impact the inclusion of newcomers in society. Moreover, by focusing on the human aspect, namely through

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<sup>38</sup> Daniela Frendo, "A Sense Of Belonging: The Media's Impact On Refugees" *Epicure and Culture*, Accessed August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Victoria Danilova, "Media and Their Role in Shaping Public Attitudes Towards Migrants," *Our World Brought to you by United Nations University* (2014), Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

visuals, such as photojournalistic work or videos, stories can have even more impact and help audiences see issues in a new light. It is also important to capture all points of view in relation to refugees' stories, whether it is during exile or resettlement in host societies. Further, it is important to bring together and connect people of different backgrounds in order to build strong and unified communities. While acknowledging the impartiality of traditional journalism as well as free speech rights, different media platforms can positively impact attitudes towards refugees simply through the power of individual stories.

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