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Biased neutrality: the symbolic construction of the Syrian refugee in the New York Times

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ABSTRACT

Although the Syrian refugee crisis has received global media attention, studies exploring the representation of Syrian refugees in American media have been lacking. Using both content and critical discourse analysis methods, this paper examines the discursive constructions of Syrian refugees in the New York Times during the 2016 presidential election. The findings reveal that despite the overall “neutral” tone of media coverage, this did not negate the existence of implicit bias toward refugees. The linguistic strategies employed, though at times engaging in narratives of victimhood, result in the demarcation of Syrian refugees as “universal refugee subjects” rooted in past historical and geographical contexts. Together with an emphasis on vulnerability over agency, pernicious depictions of Syrian refugees as terrorists or political bargaining tools, and an assumption of popular resentment by the public, these seemingly disconnected discursive strategies collectively contribute to the dehumanization of Syrian refugees, with damaging implications for the case of their acceptance into American society.

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Questions of truth, partisanship and bias have been raised since the first steps of communication in the public sphere. However, in recent years, the perception of the media as abandoning their mission of disseminating unbiased news has become commonplace (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, & Silver, 2018). Some have blamed this heightened mistrust to mounting awareness of the ownership of media outlets, increasingly powerful international corporations who enjoy “speaking rights” and decide what is percolated through the media (Bagdikian, 1983). As a result, the ideologies of influential agents in society may be inadvertently promoted, while marginalized groups are prejudiced against in attempts to serve the interest of elites and regulate public opinion. Indeed, evidence indicates that minority groups are more likely to be oppressed, discredited, and stigmatized given that they have little to no access to public discourses (van Dijk, 1991).

One of these marginalized groups is Syrian refugees, who have fled their country in droves ever since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and sought asylum elsewhere. While some escape indiscriminate violence and persecution, others abandon their homes due to a shortage of necessities such as running water, electricity, food and medicine. For a time, internal displacement within Syria was common, but with the escalation of the

conflict so-called “safe havens” became ever more challenging to find. At the height of the crisis in 2013, over 6,000 refugees departed Syria on a daily basis, and refugee centers soon filled to capacity (Butler, 2014). That same year, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres stated that “the Syria crisis has become the biggest humanitarian emergency of our era, yet the world is failing to meet the needs of refugees and the countries hosting them” (Middle East Star, 2014). Since that time, the United Nations has identified 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, of which over 5 million are refugees outside of Syria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). The vast majority of these refugees were in the neighboring first-asylum countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, although by 2017, around 900,000 had fled to Europe and filed asylum claims there (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

The international community’s response to the conflict has been dismal. For instance, the United States’ (U.S.) initial response toward Syrian refugees was woefully underwhelming, accepting only 36 Syrian refugees in 2013 (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Under pressure from the United Nations and Europe, the U.S.A. started accepting a greater number of refugees in 2016, with the Obama administration resolving to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees via the Refugee Resettlement Program (Zong & Batalova, 2017). As of 2017, the U.S.A. has accepted around 15,000 Syrian refugees, a meager figure in comparison to its response to other conflicts (Bergen, 2017).

On the 27th of January, one week after taking office, the embrace of Syrian refugees taken during the last leg of the Obama presidency came to a screeching halt when President Donald Trump signed an executive order suspending the entry of Syrian refugees into the U.S. indefinitely. During the signing ceremony, he stated his purpose was “to keep radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States” (Bergen, 2017). The decision came after a divisive election, in which immigration had become a notably hot topic. Donald Trump has been criticized by some for his rhetoric against Syrian refugees, such as statements claiming that Syrian refugees are the “great Trojan horse of all time” (Peters & Woolley, 2016). Since that time, there have been reports of rising racial nationalism (Yeselson, 2015), a cause of concern for those in favor of refugee resettlement in the U.S.A.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the state of scholarship on media coverage of Syrian refugees, the data sample, the method, and the data analysis. The findings suggest that despite empirical impartiality, the coverage of Syrian refugees in the New York Times during the 2016 presidential election oftentimes engaged in implicit bias, presenting opposing viewpoints in a more even-handed manner than warranted by the evidence or through various presuppositions of entailments in the text. Six argumentative strategies (*topoi*) are identified which contribute to these underlying discourses demarcating Syrian refugees as marginalized “Others.” I conclude with recommendations for achieving a “stronger” objectivity through the development of counter discourses of Syrian refugees, in which this marginalized group is allowed to occupy a privileged epistemological position hitherto not afforded to them.

Media coverage of immigrants and refugees, impacts and public perceptions

The equivocal status of Syrian refugees in the U.S.A. is not a unique phenomenon. As a “nation of immigrants,” the U.S.A. has never been able to escape questions surrounding

immigration. Despite immigration being crucial to the national memory and a subject of epideictic lore, more often than not the immigrant is portrayed as a threat to national unity and the cultural integrity of the nation (Beasley, 2006).

The mass media in particular have a crucial role in shaping the public agenda (McCombs, 2004) and cognitive responses toward refugees (Patel & Mahtani, 2007). In fact, media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers corresponds to an increasingly unfavorable perception of refugees among the public (McKay, Thomas, & Blood, 2011). For instance, media coverage dampens the willingness of host communities to welcome immigrants into their communities (e.g. Lopez-Rodriguez & Zagefka, 2015; McKay-Semmler, Semmler, & Kim, 2014). Aside from discouraging well-informed debate in the public arena on the socio-economic benefits (and costs) of immigration, media coverage has impaired the successful integration of immigrants by augmenting levels of prejudice, xenophobia and violence (Stewart, Pitts, & Osborne, 2011). The media's authoritative position as the dominant social group's preferred method of learning about immigrants can counteract even the effects of direct one-on-one inter-group interactions (Pagotto & Voci, 2013). Therefore, the media's prestigious position as a socially embedded influencer which decides what constitutes news and how news is determined cannot be undermined (Caldas-Coulthard, 2003).

The deep ambivalence about the role of immigrants in American society is due in large part to the media's negative coverage of racial and ethnic minorities (McKay-Semmler et al., 2014). Immigrants have become both "necessary and unwelcome ... both visible and invisible, both acknowledged and ignored" within an increasingly homogenous national narrative (DeChaine, 2009, p. 50). The nature of this coverage could be due, at least in part, to the fact that few minority groups own or control mass media outlets (Harwood & Roy, 2005). Consequently, news content tends to privilege dominant discourses, while simultaneously excluding or mischaracterizing the narratives of disadvantaged groups (Mastro, 2010). The impact of this kind of coverage on recipients is likely amplified by news media discourse habitually being constructed as factual and accurate, rather than opinion-based (van Dijk, 1998).

One of the primary topoi surrounding immigrants in the U.S.A. is that of criminality or immoral behavior (Flores, 2003; Hasian & Delgado, 1998; Ono & Sloop, 2002). Immigrants are painted as likely to engage in criminal activities, as threats to national and border security, and as the source of social problems and conflict (Dixon & Linz, 2000). The rhetorical slippage from immigrant to criminal has become so commonplace as to become almost natural (Santa Ana, 1999). Not only are undocumented immigrants "illegal" for having broken laws to enter the country, but they are also immoral for having "cut in front of others to do so" and are therefore "naturally prone to delinquency" (Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 33). Despite their "legal" status, refugees are typically cast within the same wide net in media discourse (Schuster, 2011).

Another predominant theme in media discourse has been the economic rationale for and against the entry of immigrants into the country (Hasian & Delgado, 1998). For example, Benson and Saguy's (2005) comparative study of American and French media outlets found that while the French media discussed immigrants' lack of ability to "fit in," the American media highlighted the fiscal burden of immigrants. O'Brien (2003) provides one of the more fascinating accounts of the construction of immigration as a social problem. He identifies popular conceptual metaphors of immigrants as waste material

from Europe, objects of hard labor, as food for ingestion, or as sources of infectious disease. Though some of these analogies have become customary, their impact is amplified through the media's weaving of complicated narratives to accompany them (Smith & Waugh, 2008). As a result, the array of discourse positioning immigrants in this manner casts them as abject and inassimilable to the American community (DeChaine, 2009). Another prominent strategy for ideological legitimation by the mass media (particularly the far-right media) are claims to represent the "man on the street" and reversals of racism accusations by appearing to be "strong" on immigration (Murray, 1986).

Although discrimination by the media in relation to refugees is common knowledge (Wodak & van Leeuwen, 1999), scholars of migrants and minorities have rarely used systematic media analysis in their scholarship (Bleich, Bloemraad, & Graauw, 2015). Furthermore, with regards to Syrian refugees, the literature has focused primarily on media coverage in European nations (e.g. Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Holmes & Castaneda, 2016; van Schaik, 2015) or on social media (e.g. Alhayek, 2014; Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016; Salhab, 2015), with a corresponding dearth of literature specifically addressing coverage of Syrian refugees in American media. Instead, the preponderance of communication studies in the American context have revolved around immigrants from the Latina/o community, albeit there has been interest in discourses surrounding the Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern subject as a homogenized and racialized Other (e.g. Alsultany, 2012, 2016; Kumar, 2012; Kundnani, 2014; Semati, 2010, 2011; Semati & Brookey, 2014).

However, I argue that there is a palpable need for more scholarly attention to the media discourses surrounding Syrian refugees in the U.S.A. in the current political environment. Considering the distinct cultural, racial, and historical legacy of Syrian immigrants and refugees in the United States (Bawardi, 2014), a study centering the Syrian refugee as a nodal point is a timely research topic. By shoe-horning Syrian refugees into the category of other immigrants, one may fall into a replication of the existing discourse(s) without precise attention to the notions of difference existing between various communities. Keeping in mind the New York Times' position as the national newspaper of record and as a determinant of international news coverage (Chang, Shoemaker, & Brendlinger, 1987), this paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How were Syrian refugees represented in the New York Times during the 2016 presidential election?; and (2) What are the possible implications of these discursive representations on the reader?

Objectives, data and method

The present research analyzes the manner in which Syrian refugees were portrayed by the New York Times during the 2016 presidential election. Wider political dimensions cannot be overlooked when addressing media coverage of refugees (Papadopoulos & Hildebrand, 2002). Furthermore, the prevalence of highly contentious ideological discussions on Syrian refugees during this period made this a noteworthy site of discourse. Indeed, the 2016 presidential election was notable for directly appealing to voters' racial and ethnic prejudices against Syrian refugees (Chua, 2018). As such, a stretch of time starting from June 16 2015, the date of Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy for presidency, to November 8 2016, the date on which he was elected 45th President of the United States was selected to

examine how Syrian refugees were covered during this period. This allows the data set to cover a timespan relevant to the context and socio-political environment being analyzed.

The New York Times was selected not only for having the largest circulation among metropolitan newspapers in the U.S.A., but for its reputation as one of the most influential news publications in the country. As the national newspaper of record, it has long been viewed as responsible for setting the country's media agenda and setting the standard for other newspapers (El Zein & Cooper, 1992; Mnookin, 2004). As such, the New York Times is instructive in so much as it signifies institutionally sanctioned cultural constructs with various social and political consequences.

The advanced search function on the New York Times website was used so that only articles meant for American readership were included. The search terms used were "Syrian refugee," "Syrian refugees," and "refugees from Syria." Articles about climate refugees, non-Syrian refugees (such as Central American or Iraqi refugees), presidential debate transcripts, op-eds, or video material with no corresponding transcripts were not included in the corpus. Although images in the articles were not included in the analysis, captions were part of the text analyzed. In total, 117 news articles were obtained from the online archives of the New York Times. Though some of these articles were not primarily about Syrian refugees, they were still included within the sample considering their relevance to understanding how Syrian refugees are discussed within a variety of contexts.

The study was a double-angled investigation into the representation of Syrian refugees in the corpus in question. As such, I engaged in both quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA). With regards to the former, a systematic cataloging of the articles in the corpus was performed, providing a macro-level analysis of the content of the articles (rather than a micro-linguistic interpretation of the discourse). Articles were deductively coded for positivity, negativity, or neutrality using Mollard's (2001) evaluation criteria (see Mollard, 2001). Dominantly "positive" articles included sympathetic personal stories and were generally supportive of Syrian refugees and critical of excessively negative attitudes toward them. Dominantly "negative" articles referred to refugees in a derogatory manner (e.g. as a burden or drain on public resources), while "neutral" articles were neither overtly supportive nor overtly critical of refugees and provided little to no journalistic interpretation or comment on the issues. At times, "neutral" articles would provide both positive and negative discourses regarding refugees but in relatively equal measure. Moreover, the corpus was analyzed according to the presence of a personal Syrian refugee story and type of political frame (i.e. the politician being quoted and their party affiliation).

CDA was then used to critically examine the micro-structures of the text, with the understanding that discourse is both "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Within the CDA tradition, I drew on the Viennese School of CDA, the discourse-historical approach (DHA), to analyze the list of topoi (argumentation strategies) and lexico-grammatical choices utilized within the corpus (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016), keeping in mind that this approach allows consideration of the ideology, distribution of power and social problems in society (Fairclough, 2010).

As put by Khosravini (2010, p. 55), "CDA ... requires a set of linguistic analytical tools as well as a theory (or theories) which can help to contextualize and relate the findings to the society." As CDA holds that the relationship between ideology and

discourse is “dialectic” (Fairclough, 2010), this method complemented the aforementioned content analysis by linking the linguistic analyses (i.e. vocabulary and collocations) with the social, political, and historical contexts affecting the production, distribution and interpretation of discourse. Articles were analyzed line by line, according to article headlines, descriptions/stories of refugees, quotes, and intertextual references. This dual-level analysis allows for one to work with larger data sets, reduces researcher bias due to a more comprehensive empirical base, and allows for both qualitative and quantitative perspectives on the textual data (Mautner, 2009).

Results

The analysis revealed that newspaper coverage of refugees was generally neutral in tone, with more than half of the corpus falling underneath this categorization (58%). This is in contrast to previous research describing refugee discourse in major metropolitan newspapers as primarily negative (McKay et al., 2011). Most of these articles were a neutral recanting of opinions regarding the acceptance of Syrian refugees into the U.S.A. without outside commentary.

However, though ostensibly neutral and not engaging in subjective language, the coverage engaged in implicit (or epistemological) bias, automatic negative attitudes associated with out-group members (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Howe, 2002), as opposed to overt framing bias (where the author would take an explicit stance against Syrian refugees). This implicit bias was introduced through the subtle pre-supposition and hedging of false propositions into the sub-text. For instance, in several cases, quotes made by individuals calling for a halt to refugee settlement were quoted, based on the purported terrorism committed by Syrian refugees. In one article, when describing the individuals responsible for the November 2015 Paris attacks, it was implied that the attackers included a man who entered Europe with a Syrian passport and was a Syrian refugee (see “Topos of the Terrorist” for an in-depth discussion on this argumentative strategy). Though the evidence indicates that the extremists involved in the attacks were not Syrian refugees, but European citizens (who would have been able to travel to the U.S.A. without a lengthy visa application process or significant security screening), in several instances, this fact was not clarified or corrected post-publication. Therefore, despite some articles appearing “neutral,” this did not prevent them from presenting underlying negative discourses toward refugees.

Furthermore, the opinion of individuals or groups opposing refugee acceptance consistently received significant space allocation playing an important role in constructing and reproducing particular viewpoints. This led to the portrayal of the acceptance of Syrian refugees as a matter of contention, highlighting the coexistence of oppositional discourses, as well as the complex nature of the debate regarding refugees. Allowing for the visibility of these logics disrupts frames emphasizing the non-negotiability of refugee acceptance and allows for the existence of competing frames of identification. This “strategic” discourse attentive to the debatability of refugee acceptance deserves further attention. The findings illustrate the need to not only address ostensibly critical textual features of a text, but also to examine the less apparent ideological elements of such discursive moves.

As such, the coverage of Syrian refugees in the corpus is an appropriate example of how social actors can be foregrounded or backgrounded through linguistic processes of

manipulation and perspectivization. Manipulation of a news story through micro-linguistic practices such as selective use of sources and quotations can play a substantial role in relaying particular ideologies (van Dijk, 1991). The discursive strategy of “perspectivization” allows for the writer to conceal his or her involvement in the discourse by quoting and narrating only events or utterances which express various viewpoints (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). By rarely interjecting the voice of the journalist himself, this strategy allows for the introduction of an “authority bias” (Bennett, 2012) where explanations from “experts” (i.e. law-makers, politicians or candidates for the presidency) provide legitimacy to the views being voiced.

While the majority of news articles were “neutral,” almost 25% of the corpus (29 articles) was categorized as “positive” (19) or “highly positive” (10). The smaller sample of positive representations of Syrian refugees is not entirely surprising, considering this is common in the broader research on immigration and discourse (Santa Ana, 1999). These articles were sympathetic of refugees and their flight from persecution, employing frames of victimization and humanization. On a handful of occasions, the long-term benefits to society of admitting Syrian refugees once short-term costs have been settled were cited (see Bidgood & Seelye, 2016; Bosmannov, 2015; Harris & Goodstein, 2015).

Seventeen percent (17%) of the corpus (20 articles) could be classified as “negative”. These were coded as such for their “openly hostile views” on refugees, either providing rationale for not accepting refugees into the country (e.g. the dangers or obstacles to acceptance of Syrian refugees) or presenting one-sided quotations from various individuals regarding their anti-refugee rationale (e.g. how support of Syrian refugees might be politically harmful to presidential candidates). The discursive strategy of negativization of Syrian refugees is in line with prevalent constructions of immigrants in newspapers (Teo, 2000).

In what follows, the various implications of the neutral, positive, and negative coverage in the sample are expanded upon, through an examination of the most prominent topoi in the corpus, namely: Topos of the Universal Refugee; Topos of the Terrorist; Topos of “This Time is Different”; Topos of Victimization; Topos of Popular Resentment; and Topos of the Political Tool.

Topos of the universal refugee

Although the Syrian refugee was often spoken for, defended, or derailed, only a handful of articles (five articles or 4% of the corpus) directly quoted or shared the personal narrative of a Syrian refugee. This meant that the testimony of Syrian refugees was largely absent in the corpus and only sporadically present. Linguistic strategies of individualization, such as singling out, use of proper names, character building or the extensive use of direct quotes from the refugees themselves were not the primary forms of representation. Indeed, with the exception of a few articles, the professions, education, income-level, and lifestyles of Syrian refugees were not commented on.

Moreover, the referential (naming) and predicational (description) strategies of representing refugees engaged in normal activities, which has at times been found in media coverage of refugees (see Wodak, 2001), were not significantly present in the sample. Although it is rare to find representations of immigrants as they would construct themselves (in their own voices), a growing body of scholarship has explicated the

emancipatory potential of vernacular discourses through which immigrants mobilize their own political reactions (e.g. Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Cisneros, 2011; Kaufer & Al-Malki, 2009). Such discourses are necessary as an outlet for the disenfranchised who are typically silenced in other communication frameworks, so as to reclaim their agency and redefine national belonging in their own terms (Hasian & Delgado, 1998).

Instead, Syrian refugees were routinely objectified as a group of unspecified and anonymous individuals through the substantial employment of the linguistic strategy of collectivization. On numerous occasions, the first-hand testimonies of the emotional, financial and legal struggles of refugees from other countries, such as Iraq (see Fernandez, 2016), Rwanda (see Bidgood & Seelye, 2016), Azerbaijan (see Johnson, 2015), and Palestine (see Fernandez, 2016) were taken to stand in for the Syrian refugee's experience. The pervasive de-personalization of Syrian refugees in this manner suggests a lack of agency for refugees to frame their own depictions and conflates their experiences with that of others.

Additionally, relatively little attention was given to the historical, social, and political determinants behind Syrian refugeeism. Assumptions were made about the conditions behind Syrian refugees' flight from their country, centering around the premise that refugees dramatically fled out of fear of oppression. There was little to no exploration of the root causes of Syrian refugeeism, aside from cursory comments about refugees being "persecuted" (Rappeport, 2015a), needing "safe passage" (Haberman, 2015), and being "slaughtered" (with regards to Christian Syrian refugees, Haberman, 2015), as well as an emphasis on the moral responsibility to alleviate their suffering (Johnson, 2015). As such, refugees are presented as the archetypal refugee: powerless and emotionally traumatized victims of their situation. The emphasis on vulnerability may ironically support the case for more stringent government policies against refugees (Poteet & Nourpanah, 2016).

In this respect, the *New York Times* was unable to extend beyond the sensationalist element and present a nuanced understanding of the Syrian refugee's experience. With a few exceptions, the dearth of Syrian refugee stories in the corpus allowed for a symbolic construction of an "imagined immigrant," always spoken for, yet rarely heard from. It creates a speechless "Other" that has lost its "power to signify, to negate ... to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse" (Bhabha, 1988, p. 16). Refugees' own narratives therefore may provide a critical path to counteract the one-dimensional portrayal of refugee vulnerability.

The aggregation of Syrian refugees was also evident from a preoccupation with excessive quantity attributions (such as "numbers", "thousands"), percentages, and statistics of Syrian refugees to imply teeming masses of people. Numerous articles began with an overview of various statistics connected to the Syrian civil war and displaced refugees. For instance, the article "U.S. Reaches Goal of Admitting 10,000 Syrian Refugees. Here's Where They Went" (Park & Omri, 2016) overflows with an amalgam of statistics regarding Syrian refugees, such as the number admitted in the fiscal year, the number accepted since the civil war, the percentage of total refugees accepted to the U.S.A., and a quantitative comparison of refugees taken in by the U.S.A. from Vietnam and Cuba, and the total number of Syrians in the U.S.A. Another typical example is the following excerpt: "The war in Syria has killed over 400,000 people and has uprooted nearly five million. Last month, the United States said it had met its goal for the year, welcoming its 10,000th Syrian refugee" (Hauser, 2016, my emphasis).

The systematic referral to refugees in the plural and homogenous form (and without individualized coverage) contributes to a de-historicizing generality, implying Syrian refugees share similar characteristics, circumstances, and motivations as other refugees. This reinforces the construction of the Syrian refugee within the lens of the refugee archetype, a “universal refugee subject” rooted in past historical and geographical contexts.

Topos of the terrorist

Although the representation of immigrants as highly involved in crime has often been seen in other contexts of displacement (e.g. Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013), Syrian refugees were at times constructed as potential terrorists intent on carrying out indiscriminate acts of extreme violence to achieve religious, political, or ideological aims. For example, some of the headlines within the corpus were “Arrest of refugee fuels U.S. debate on immigration policy” (Nixon, 2016), “Paris attacks could bolster Congressional efforts to block U.S. refugee plan” (Crowley, 2015), and “U.S. tightens visa-waiver program in bid to deter militants” (Harris & Schmidt, 2015).

A careful examination of the discourse indicates the existence of a “non sequitur” rhetorical device, a type of fallacy in logic or deductive argument where conclusions that do not follow the principles of logic are used, confounding the reader. As can be seen from the excerpts below, Syrian refugees are attributed responsibility for various terrorist attacks through a semantic contagion between the categories of “terrorist” and “Syrian refugee,” or are depicted as suspiciously carrying terrorists within their midst through adjacent textual positioning:

House members lined up on the floor to demand an **immediate halt to a plan to resettle Syrian refugees in the United States** ... For all of its chronic inertia, Congress can be quickly **stirred by a crisis like the Paris attacks**. (Hulse, 2015a, my emphasis)

After the terrorist attacks in Paris last month, a furor arose over **whether the United States should accept Syrian refugees**. (Apuzzo, Schmidt, & Preston, 2015, my emphasis)

Since the **terrorist attacks in Paris**, a tide of **anti-refugee ... sentiment** has swept, angrily and inexorably, across the United States. (Bosmannov, 2015, my emphasis)

By topicalizing the connection between Syrian refugees and terrorism at length in this manner, Syrian refugees are characterized as inferentially linked to fundamentalist activities. However, in the case of the Syrian refugee, this is not only a case of collective categorization, but a misattribution of behavior, given the lack of evidence that Syrian refugees have committed acts of terrorism in the United States or otherwise (Bergen, 2017; Friedman, 2017). For instance, despite the fact that Syrian refugees were not the culprits of either the 2015 Paris attacks, the San Bernardino shootings, or the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, the blame was often indirectly ascribed to Syrian refugees by systematically melding these two groups together or by representing terrorists as a sub-category of Syrian refugees.

Moreover, the argument that Syrian refugees are terrorists allows for the construction of a “them” versus “us” narrative, where an individual at the center of the news narrative stands in for a whole group as evidence of a negative group stereotype. Such reasoning, in line with the dominant metaphorical discourse of Western media, has been frequently

associated with racist prejudice (Billig, 1991). Additionally, the presentation of these views as “reasonable, rational and thoughtfully arrived at ... appeal(ing) to observable and thus purported ‘factual’ claims” (Augoustinos & Every, 2007, p. 127), supports the claim that Syrian refugees are depicted in a racially prejudicial manner.

Topos of “this time is different”

The analysis of the lexico-grammatical choices indicates a proclivity to depict an in-group and out-group narrative, where the in-group (or host nation) is the victim of a situation for which it is unprepared, while the out-group are intruders of a sort which have never been encountered before. This strategy of perspectivization suggests that the traditional rules of engagement do not apply because the current situation is out of the norm. The Syrian refugee is not only a deviant from American society, but also from other refugees, implying a baseline social condition which would tolerate the entry of “conventional” refugees, but not the Syrian refugee. This allows for engagement in a value-laden social hierarchy of immigrants, arbitrating who justifiably constitutes an American immigrant and who might not.

“Look, refugees come to this country for all sorts of reasons — **they don’t normally come with embedded terrorists** in their midst,” Mr. Bush said. “And that’s the challenge. The challenge is, **this is a new form of influx.**” (Parker, 2015, my emphasis)

In another instance, one article presents the overtly hostile views of Idahoans toward refugees without any further commentary on the problematic aspects of their position. Here we find an interesting case of perspectivization, when the article quotes Jason Lee, a Southern Baptist preacher who ominously ponders how Kentucky, a state which had opened its arms to Somali refugees in the mid 2000s, is unable to do the same for Syrian refugees, stating this time “seems really different” (Fausset, 2015). The author then quotes an expert Anne C. Richard, the assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, who states that concerns about bringing in “bad actors” from the Middle East were not without merit (Fausset, 2015). Another article expresses similar sentiments of Idahoans toward Syrian refugees:

They came from Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War, Eastern Europe after the Soviet Union’s implosion, Bosnia as ethnic cleansing wracked the Balkans, and Africa to escape genocide and civil war. But Idahoans say that **those refugees, different as they were** in culture and language, also shared something powerful with the sturdy agricultural families that have anchored this corner of the West since the first Mormon pioneers in the 1800s: **They were on America’s side ... This time, people here said, feels different.** (Johnson, 2015, my emphasis)

In the excerpt above, populist references to the “sturdy” families which have “anchored” this “corner of the West” since the “pioneers” settled, is contrasted with Syrian refugees, who are “different.” This semantic strategy functions as a disclaimer, emoting empathy toward Syrian refugees and projecting civilizing overtones of fairness, while justifying the consequent outcomes. Such discourse contributes to the perception of Idahoan’s positive attributes, revealing them as being in a vulnerable state. The positive self-representation of the in-group is part of a strategy of “face-keeping,” establishing the superiority of one culture and the avoidance of negative evaluations about a particular action to

justify exclusionary actions against an out-group (Brewer, 1988). This quasi-argumentative discursive strategy of perspectivization allows for the presentation of disparaging views of Syrian refugees as entirely reasonable through an emphasis on their incompatibility and risk to community relations. The “in-group” of Idahoan families is then widened to include other non-white non-European migrants (such as those from Southeast Asia and Africa), who are yet characterized as being preferable over Syrian refugees. The perspectivization in the use of third person terms of “them” and “those” firmly positions Syrian refugees as a marginalized “Other,” inferior even to other conventionally marginalized groups. Most importantly, in this instance of perspectivization, the author aligns himself with Idahoans and provides rationale for their anti-refugee sentiment, portraying their stance as understandable, if not admirable. The author explains how other cities are “grappling” with the dilemma of whether acceptance of the “next generation of refugees from the Middle East is wise and safe” (Johnson, 2015).

The re-contextualizing of older forms of racism to apply to newly minoritized groups is one of the preferred “subtle” rhetorical strategies in modern times (van Dijk, 1992). The lack of blanket denial of entry to all refugees, but only to *Syrian* refugees, forms a mitigation strategy which permits judgment against the minority group in order to maintain harmony in society. This socio-political dichotomy is powerful in reinforcing discriminatory views and practices, while simultaneously protecting itself from charges of racism through an emphasis on parochial concerns of self-preservation.

Topos of victimization

As stated prior, around 25% of the corpus (29 articles) were categorized as “positive” (19) or “highly positive” (10). The majority of these employed topos of victimization and were sympathetic to refugees, drawing on discourses of massacre and persecution by illustrating that refugees came from situations rife with “killings, kidnappings and sectarian strife” (i.e. Bosmannov, 2015). These articles were at times openly critical of rhetoric against refugee acceptance, provided stories of refugees in the local community framed in humanizing ways (e.g. stories illustrating refugees’ successful integration into society through training and employment, albeit these were seldom Syrian refugee stories), mentioned community advocacy for Syrian refugees (e.g. volunteer organizations established by Syrian-Americans to support the resettlement process), or brought attention to the suffering of Syrian children. A sample of these discourses is included below:

Heart-wrenching photographs of **dead children** this week focused the American conscience on **the Syrian crisis** as never before and prompted **renewed calls for more aid**. (Herszenhorn, 2015, my emphasis)

This week, as images flooded the news media of the Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi, **dead** on a beach in Turkey after drowning along with his mother and brother in an **attempt to escape the chaos of his own country**, the end-of-summer rituals that have been occupying my mind have never seemed more wonderful. Those pictures, that family’s story and the larger story of the **desperate crossings** from Africa and the Middle East. (Dell’Antonia, 2015, my emphasis)

In particular, the widely circulated images of two suffering Syrian children, Aylan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh, were often highlighted, attesting to the rhetorical power of these now iconic images. Discussion of the images was often as inchoate fragments and signifiers

of distress without much contextualization. For instance, Hauser (2016) only mentions the figure of Omran Daqneesh as being a “symbol of the suffering” of the Syrian people, while Herszenhorn (2015) glosses over the “heart-wrenching photographs of dead children this week.” The trope of the dead or dying child has become customary in media coverage of refugees (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2007; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Baker, 2008). Though intended to evoke empathy and establish legitimacy (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015), some have criticized these representational practices for glossing over passive suffering rather than inciting support for active struggle (Moeller, 1999) or low-intensity agency (Chouliaraki, 2010). Indeed, these discourses of children’s suffering, abstracted from their historical, political and cultural locations, may affirm colonial paternalistic attitudes and are problematic in a myriad of respects.

On a broader level, the scarcity of references to refugees’ previous (or future) place in society, their life history, trajectory, or aspirations, makes it less likely that “moral proximity” will be established between “the audience and the distant sufferers” (Orgad, 2012, p. 161) or be able to identify with their cause (van Leeuwen, 2008). Coupled with a lack of information about the social, cultural or economic contributions of refugees, I argue that these supposedly benign “humanizing” depictions obfuscate the individual histories of Syrian refugees. Without a more wholesome “symbolic rehabilitation” of the refugee (Cottle, 2006, p. 168), the “subject effect” is not meritoriously catalyzed, failing to reconstitute Syrian refugees as fully agentic subjects with their own ontological history.

Topos of popular resentment

The close analysis revealed the central argument presented in the corpus that most Americans oppose immigration and are skeptical of Syrian refugees. Headlines such as “Americans View Paris Attacks With Empathy, Fear and Resolve” (Healy & Fausset, 2015), “An America Conflicted About Outsiders” (Giridharadas, 2016), “Anxiety Grows in Texas With Syrians Due to Arrive Soon” (Fernandez & Preston, 2015), and “As Obama Checks Off List of Goals, a Nervous Nation Dwells on Terror” (Shear & Davis, 2015), are exemplary of this category of rhetoric. Another article states that the “the national mood has turned against admitting refugees from Syria” (Haberman, 2015) and that “the anger and anxiety here [*in the US*] show just how hard this might be in some parts of the country” (Fausset, 2015). The authors also engage in strategic activation with aggregate references to “people” (taken to represent the in-group and active subjects at “home,” “across America,” or “across the country”) and relaying their anxieties:

It all felt so familiar, **people said in more than three dozen interviews across America ... Across the country, people** attended solidarity marches for France ... **People** said they were paying attention now because the Islamic State’s rampage in Paris felt scarier, somehow **closer to home, than the years long slaughter of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis ... People** had other questions ... Could any **American cities** be targeted? (Healy & Fausset, 2015, my emphasis)

Although historically newcomers to the U.S.A. have been judged harshly by majority groups of American citizens, aside from anecdotal quotes, there were only a few cases in the corpus where evidence was offered to support the claim of a hostile national mood toward Syrian refugees. In some situations, Pew Research Center statistics regarding

the public's anxiousness regarding terrorism were interpreted to be indicative of opinions of Syrian refugees (e.g. Shear & Davis, 2015). According to van Dijk (1998), assumptions of unfavorable attitudes toward immigrants are typical of the argumentative strategies for the legitimization of increasingly harsh immigration restrictions against refugees. Furthermore, by appearing to be "democratic and respectable," the framing of these discourses as publicly accepted increases the chance of their being tolerated by society (van Dijk, 2000). The sustaining, circulating, and embellishment of unsubstantiated myths regarding American sentiment toward Syrian refugees could fuel the level of antagonism toward refugees, as well as perceptions of their undesirability in society.

Topos of the political tool

Considering that immigration constitutes a core topic in American politics, the majority of the coverage of Syrian refugees was backgrounded in the context of the presidential election. Approximately 80 articles (68% of the corpus) fell under this category. This is perhaps not entirely remarkable. In recent years, refugee resettlement has been politicized in a manner not observed since the Salvadoran refugee crisis in the 1980s (Nagel, 2016). The data set indicated frequent citations of the debates taking place between presidential hopefuls and politicians from the Senate and House of Representatives as concerned Syrian refugees, as well as references to policies being enacted at various levels of government regarding Syrian refugees (i.e. federal, state, and local level governments). Donald Trump monopolized the discussion on Syrian refugees, with almost 25% of the corpus being dedicated to his remarks on the topic. The second largest category was Barack Obama, where articles centered around his administration's refugee plan and public opinion regarding his announcement (during the election cycle) that he planned to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees (8.5% of the corpus).

Though the tendency of politicians to incite irrational fears during election campaigns has been previously noted (Nagel, 2016), this manner of representation is arguably unique in that it dehumanizes Syrian refugees through their transformation into political bargaining tools. For instance, several articles employ terminologies such as "the refugee *issue*, attached to a large spending bill" (i.e. Steinhauer, 2016), while another suggests that Syrian refugees may be utilized as pawns to win over undecided voters (i.e. Healy & Martin, 2016) or decried political correctness as it concerns Syrian refugees (i.e. Rappoport, 2015a). Other articles indicate problematic coverage of refugees as a political predicament, hinting at their positionality from a majority-Muslim country and the heated anti-Muslim racism which that incited. For example, one article mentions "the potential political dangers of getting into crossways with public opinion on the Syrian refugee question" (i.e. Hulse, 2015b) or framed Syrian refugees as being part of a "highly charged political issue" (i.e. Lichtblau, 2015). Another article interprets the crisis through the partisan debates on the matter, explaining how "lawmakers and candidates have been wrestling with how to address ... an influx of refugees fleeing Syria. In recent days, the debate has turned increasingly partisan and, in some cases, heated" (i.e. Rappoport, 2015b).

Such discursive strategies are in line with the Gramscian perspective of refugees as a tool for hegemony deployed by political and cultural leaders to win public consent and shape the agenda of certain communities (Orgad, 2012) and may lead to cognitive forms of marginalization (van Dijk, 2000). Furthermore, the confluence between anti-

refugee, anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant sentiment in these discourses makes it ever more challenging to contest the objectification of refugees in this manner. As these discourses coagulate, they construct an apologetic narrative within what is already a highly polarized discourse surrounding refugees. There are strong ontological ramifications to the instrumentalization of refugees, where their identity is arguably replaced by “the mobility, the flexibility, and perpetual differentiation of the multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 344).

Conclusion

In this paper, I explore the New York Times’s portrayal of the Syrian refugee through an examination of the media discourses which characterize the interpretation of the Syrian refugee during the 2016 presidential election in the U.S.A. The findings suggest that despite apparent dominant neutral framing of Syrian refugees in the New York Times, the coverage oftentimes engaged in implicit bias, presenting opposing viewpoints in a more even-handed manner than warranted by the evidence or through various presuppositions of entailments in the text. Therefore, despite the employments of linguistic strategies incorporating victimizing rhetoric, six argumentative strategies (topoi) are identified which contribute to these underlying negative discourses demarcating Syrian refugees as marginalized “Others.”

Closer inspection reveals this spurious “neutrality” is facilitated through the representation of Syrian refugees as archetypal refugee subjects. Despite empirical impartiality, the New York Times routinely engaged in homogenizing representations of Syrian refugees as equivalent to those of other nations, bolstered by an assumptive attitude toward the historical, social, and political determinants behind Syrian refugeeism. Furthermore, the exclusionary undertones of metaphors of Syrian refugees as terrorists and political tools contribute to the creation of a discriminatory discourse stressing the threat Syrian refugees form to the host society. Coupled with the construction of an “us” versus “them” narrative and assumptions of hostile attitudes toward refugees, these discursive strategies assist in the de-personalization and de-humanization of Syrian refugees. Such depictions not only augment levels of prejudice and xenophobia, but potentially impair the case for their successful integration into society.

Though our nonprobability sample was exhaustive, the findings were not designed to be generalizable to other media propositions. However, the findings are expected to be “transferable” (Guba, 1981) to other centrist news media outlets, particularly considering the New York Times’ position as a “gate-keeper” in setting the nations’ media agenda (Golan, 2006). As such, the findings are significant in speaking to institutionally sanctioned cultural constructs with various social and political consequences at both the national and international level.

Moving forward, an exploration of mechanisms by which to develop counter discourses of Syrian refugees will be critical to creating a climate of tolerance among the public. Moreover, enhanced understanding of the mechanisms by which epistemological bias is achieved is needed, considering the lack of scholarly attention to this aspect of journalistic texts (Recasens, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Jurafsky, 2013). Eliminating implicit bias requires more than a stricter adherence to positivistic journalistic norms. Moving from a “weak” to “strong” objectivity demands that “the subjects of knowledge be placed in

the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge” (Harding, 1993, p. 69), namely by allowing marginalized groups to occupy a privileged epistemological position hitherto not afforded to them. Further systematic quantitative and qualitative analyses comparing the New York Times’s coverage to other media discourses, such as that of right-wing or left-wing media outlets, would be beneficial. Additionally, a temporal comparative analysis of the coverage of refugees over time, including the period pre and post-election in which the Syrian refugee crisis was on-going would be valuable in analyzing patterns over time.

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