

## **Diversity in the Media: Models, Institutions, Practices Critical Analysis: Media Coverage of Refugee Crisis in the Uk**

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**Keywords:** Refugees, Asylum seekers, British media coverage, Media power

**Abstract:** The issue of refugees is a hotly debated social topic at the moment, the way in which refugees are reported in the British media coverage has an impact on how they are perceived by the public. Even if the media cannot completely shape the public attitudes, the choice of the using words and the way they are reported can still stimulate public opinion. For example, when reporting on child refugees, it is difficult to find the words “illegal” or “risky behaviour”. The tendency of major media coverage to construct an image of refugees as mainly asylum seekers also makes it more difficult for refugees to be accepted, and this negative coverage can be seen as a reaction to an insecure sense of citizenship identity.

### **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary political world, migration is counted among the significant and divisive topics. The last few decades have seen discussion around the refugee crisis, asylum seekers, migrants and immigrants becoming progressively charged and vigorously politicised. Refugees are often assaulted and defamed by the political elites as a way to assemble their popularity and advance their political plan (The Migration Observatory, 2020). As per the examination of the Labor Force Survey carried out by the Migration Observatory (2020), in 2019, around 388,000 individuals born abroad were estimated as living in the UK who had originally come to the country as asylum seekers. This number is equal to 0.6% of the UK’s overall population amounting to 67 million as of 2019. From the 0.6% of refugees, 56% had resided in the UK for over sixteen years (The Migration Observatory, 2020).

However, in comparison to other countries situated in Europe, the UK had the lowest applicants for asylum. The country received a little more than 39,000 applications for asylum in 2015. In the same year, Germany had received 441,800 applicants for asylum (Garrett, 2019). Italy at 83,245 and France at 70,570 (Garrett, 2019). Even Hungary received 174,435 asylum applications. To put this in perspective, for every 100,00 people, the UK only had 60 asylum application (Garrett, 2019). The average of the EU was 260 people per 100,000 people. Despite this, Britain was vocal about opposing the acceptance of refugees. Polls also showed that the number of people from the UK who supported the closing of the border to the refugees went up four times from October 2015 to December in a span of two months (Garrett, 2019). A 2016 Pew Survey also showed that 70 per cent of British citizens disapproved of the manner in which the EU was handling the refugee crisis (Garrett, 2019). In the light of such findings, it becomes important to understand, why there is a larger negative reaction from the people about the refugee crisis. People get information about the refugee situation from the media. Media coverage to a certain extent sets the tone for how the larger society views the issues at hand.

Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020) produced their findings on the UK’s refugee crisis. The report sought to comprehend how the press in the UK presented the refugees as well as in the websites from 2017. The findings show that after two years, when the numbers of refugees have gone down in a significant manner, the topic of asylums remains an area where boundaries still get meditated and mediated. The findings show that news media regularly represent the people seeking asylum as a threat to the country’s economy and security. The news media in the UK, frequently

frame the refugees and asylum seekers as dangerous criminals with news article talking about how Britain is under migrant attacks. A video report by BBC London titled “The youngsters going through the UK's asylum system” (2018) shows the challenges undergone by young people in UK's asylum system. The government's hostile immigration policies have been blamed for the youngster's death. This is something that is rarely shown in the mainstream news.

This essay will build upon the findings of Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020) article and Al Jazeera's 2020 news segment called “Is the European Union facing a new refugee crisis?” in order to study how the news media have an important role to play in presenting the refugee crisis to the world. By using the findings from the article and the Al Jazeera news segment, this essay will discuss that the news media do not always present the accurate ground realities of the refugees.

## **2. Representations of the Refugees**

In the opening section of the BBC London video, a migrant says, “From Afghanistan to here, we just got sold from one person to the other and we ended up here in the UK after being put in a fridge for 48 hours” (BBC London, 2018). Through this sentence, the news report sets the tone for what it will discuss. The narrator of the news report fills in the viewer about the dissonance between the efforts of the government and how successful it is with regards to the refugee issue. This is different from the invader image that is promoted in the news media in the United Kingdom. As per Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020), one of the main findings was that refugees belonging to the MENA region or the Middle East and North Africa region were higher chances of being linked to terrorist activities and security risk. Moreover, refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers in Europe have greater chances of being associated with violence and terrorism as compared to asylum seekers from other areas. One reason for this could be due to the terror attacks that shocked Europe from 2015 to 2017, even though those executing these terror attacks were not migrants every time. Moreover, Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020) identified the common themes in the articles studied for their research findings. There were dominant narration provided by the political elites in the news and the refugees, migrants, asylum seekers and immigrants were seldom quoted in news reports, no matter their country of origin. In the BBC London report, instead of a subtitle that translates what the refugee children are saying, a voice speaks over the refugee's voice translating the words. What this highlight is the importance of media representations. Journalists and media have an important role to play in mediating the public conversation about refugees and asylum seekers. This can either result in support or hostility from the members of the host society towards the refugees (Cooper, Blumell, & Bunce, 2020).

Melissa Fleming, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, opines that the choice of words matter. According to Jacco van Sterkenburg, a Dutch academic, the inability and lack of preparedness on the part of journalists regarding issues surrounding refugees have resulted in them being a threat and a cause of concern to security. A similar narrative of “us vs them” is being applied in both cases. This grows differences between the immigrants and those residing in the country, causing a conflict and escalation of human issues that the two communities share (UNESCO, 2019). The elite in the media and the political leaders have been exerting their influence to manipulate the coverage of refugees to forward their own interests by promoting negative coverage which often ends up shaping public opinion.

Even though media does not fully sculpt the public's opinions and attitudes, especially at a time when globalization has spread rapidly, it still does act as a fundamental means of galvanizing popular social opinion. Depending on the intent of the media outlet, it has the power of fortifying criminalised portrayal of the newcomer and highlight the anti-immigrant rhetoric (Danilova, 2016). In contrast, it can act as a medium to consolidate the migrants and put in the spotlight authentic struggles and stories for them, quelling any unease or misapprehension in the process. This makes it paramount for the media company to gather a global community by highlighting this issue and initiating a public conversation around the topic of immigration. According to Danilova (2016), it is when the mainstream media starts to highlight stories of migrants, it uses language wherein the migrants are grouped into the narrative of “other” community or represented as one. The press in

the UK has often descriptively depicted the anti-immigration sentiment. According to the Migration Observation's study conducted between 2010 and 2012 across 20 of the most read newspapers in the United Kingdom, where it closely scrutinized 43 million words of content based on migrant related coverage, it was observed that the most common word used to describe the migrant was the word "illegal". Common headlines like "illegal migrants entering Europe" were widely used across print media coverage. Those seeking asylum were described using words like "failed" (Greensdale, 2020). Words like "sham" and "terrorist" were frequently used to describe issues of security and legalities associated with migrants. The usage of such words provoked criminalizing the migrants who had left behind their homeland in search of a better life abroad.

However, the media report from BBC London does not refer to the child refugee as a sham or a terrorist. Rather, it focuses on the integration of the refugees in the host societies and the post-traumatic stress that they face. This is something that gets overlooked in the dominant discourse of the mainstream news report.

The primary themes varied vastly across countries in their coverage of issues surrounding immigration. The German and the Spanish media emphasized the human side of the migrant issues, (37.3% and 37.1% respectively, bringing to the forefront the pain and struggles that the migrants faced on their way. Almost a third of the Italian newspapers (31.3%) based their coverage on the humanitarian aspect of the immigrants as the central theme instead of showing it just as an element (Berry et al, 2015). There was a vivid distinction in the way various countries covered the issues. There were only a few other than the Italian papers who cared to talk about the plight and misery of the migrants. This was partly due to the fact that the Italian press tends to emphasize more on the stories and events from the Mediterranean and often publishes stories based on the experiences of the migrants and their journey. The report also noted that in general, the Swedish press covered the positive aspects in their stories of the refugees and the migrant, which was in sharp contrast from the chiefly dismissive and polarized coverage in the UK.

By showing the refugees in a negative light, the ethnic difference is being constructed in a process that is interactive as well as multilateral (Bennett, 2001). According to Bennett (2001, p 18), this process is "a matter of negotiation and contestation no less within and between minoritised groups than between the 'ethnicised' minority and the 'national' majority."

### **3. "Good Refugees/Bad Refugees" Discourse**

One of the interviewed refugees in the BBC London's news segment is 22-years old Nas who had to be smuggled out of Afghanistan when he was 13. He was fleeing from the Taliban who was training him to be a suicide bomber. He reached the UK at the age of 14, and the report refers to this as being "dumped in the UK." The report mentions how he "settled down and did his best in school." However, once he reached the age of 18, he was at the risk of being deported to Afghanistan as his stay was over. This portrayal of a refugee is different from the negative ones. It shows Nas in a sympathetic light by focusing on the hardships that he had to endure after coming to Britain. The type of representation that refugees are shown in the new reports, matter because according to Siapera (2010), representation lies at the core of mediation as without representation there is no production of meaning or its consumption. From one perspective, representation is the result of the process of media creation, and as such it must be perceived inside its production context. However, from a second perspective representation cannot exist outside the production context.

Siapera (2010) mentions that Walter Lippmann tried to clarify in 1922 the manner in which democracy should function, and the reason why it frequently does not function. In doing so, he alluded to the "pictures in our heads," which refers to the mental pictures based on which we understand and follow up on the world. Furthermore, these photos to us have summed up reflections, simple adaptations that are passed to us through our way of life. Furthermore, in light of the fact that the images get repeated over time since they are unavoidable, stereotypes have obtained an unbending structure with resistance to change (Siapera, 2010). The representation of Nas and other refugees in the BBC London video avoids the stereotype of "sham" and "terrorists" (bad

refugees) and the negative representation that was studied by Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020). At the same time, it gives rise to a new picture in our head which is of what a good refugee should look like by showcasing the effects of the UK's immigration policy on the child refugees and what they did out of their desperation to not be deported. BBC London (2018) narrates, "In order to avoid being deported back to countries where their lives might be at risk, many resorts to going off radar, scraping by on poorly paid black market jobs ending up as rough sleepers." This action is opposite to the threatening actions that refugees are often painted in.

Before discussing the good refugee/ bad refugee discourse, it is important to consider the good Muslims and bad Muslim discourse. Mavelli and Wilson (2016) write that following 9/11, the prevailing discussion that has arisen in regard to Islam does not simply accentuate the association between Islam and terrorism, but also additionally asks other people to recognise the "good Muslims" from "bad Muslims." Good Muslims, as mentioned by Mavelli and Wilson (2016) are law-abiding and peace-loving individuals who detest violent acts that compromise the secular Western state's authority. On the other hand, bad Muslims submit to demonstrations of brutality and as indicated by the head of states like George W. Bush from the US and Tony Blair from the UK, commit blasphemy in the name of Allah and do not follow the correct lessons taught in the Koran (Mavelli and Wilson, 2016). While these types of assertions could be seen as endeavours to de-essentialise Islam by underscoring that brutality is certainly not a prevalent element, yet simply the result of certain 'bad Muslims', this widely held narrative of the 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslims' story has led to the creation of mental images of 'good Muslims' as someone without any agency, and possible victims of a developing perspective on Islam that is radicalised and politicised (Mavelli and Wilson, 2016). The only hope for 'good Muslims' comes from Western society's eternal salvation. Within the narration of good (sympathetic) refugees in BBC London's video, lies the good Muslim narration for refugees like Nas and Imtiaz who came to the UK when they were a child.

Such narrative employed by BBC London is based on an Orientalist custom that is recreated in how the West approach the topic of refugees. One such example is the decision to take 20,000 Syrian refugees within five years, which was implemented by the UK in September 2015. The refugees would be taken directly from refugee camps in the neighbouring countries of Syria. According to then Prime Minister of the UK, the refugees would be chosen on the basis of their needs with priority provided to "...the most vulnerable, we will take disabled children, we will take women who have been raped, we will take men who have suffered torture" (BBC News, 2015). In this migrant settlement discourse, the good Muslims, as well as the good refugees, are women, children, and male survivors of brutality staying in the refugee camps waiting patiently to be saved by the saviours from the West. On the other hand, bad refugees and bad Muslims are those individuals who exert their agency by participating in proactive survival strategies and putting their livelihood at risk like crossing the Mediterranean by boat or Sub-Saharan Africa to reach Europe in order to seek asylum (Mavelli and Wilson, 2016). In doing so bad refugee challenge the narration of 'refugee=victim' subsequently turning into a multitude of individuals crossing the Mediterranean in swarms and becoming "queue jumpers" and "counterfeit asylum-seekers" who endangering the security claims sought and made by 'genuine' (good) refugees.

It is interesting to note that the BBC London mentions the good refugees taking matters into their own hands such as going underground in order to escape deportation to Afghanistan or Sudan. These nations are painted as a terrible place to live and in comparison, the UK is shown as a safe haven for these refugees. The Western saviour narrative is employed in the news report by showing the UK as a safe place for the refugees as well as having white elite sources who explain the plight of the refugees. Sentences such as, "They'll take the risk of going underground which is horrible, terrible for them, but bad for all of us. We don't want a country where people are forced to live underground" from white elite sources provides an element of legitimacy to the action of the refugees and thus pushes them in the "good refugee" discourse.

Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020) mention that researchers have been paying significant attention to how asylum seekers and refugees are shown in a negative light in the mainstream media

discourse. Parker's article (2015) found that a repetitive topic in the forty articles that he studied was the "undesirable invader" narrative. In such representation, the asylum seeker or the refugee is situated as effectively undesirable; as somebody that should be feared by the country's majority. In both the Australian and UK articles, that was analysed by Parker (2015) the regularly employed metaphor was the criminal metaphor that was utilised as rhetoric. Through this, an image was constructed among the general population of the asylum seekers and refugees as someone who was a danger to security. The newspaper also utilised the water analogies in mentioning asylum seekers and refugees as deviants in the Australian media (Pickering, 2001 cited in Parker, 2015, p.2). However, this is devoid of the representation of refugees in BBC London's news segment. This refugee construction is important as "On the screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining, has been accomplished for you" (Lippmann, 1922 cited in Siaperia, 2010, p.113). What this means is that even though there is still the presence of traditional methods of disseminating stereotypes, images that are mass-mediated images wield more influence in spreading stereotypes. This is due to the fact that they offer images that can be stored in the memories of the viewers and they can be brought up whenever necessary. BBC London's video mass mediates the good refugee and good Muslim stereotypes. The process of Othering begins from the moment the refugees are shown as the outsider.

#### **4. Otherness and Refugees**

Hier and Greenberg (2002 cited in Esses, Median and Lawson, 2013, p.521) suggest that negative portrayals and the problematisation of the refugee crisis by the media can, for the most part, be viewed as reactions to aggregate insecurity and anxieties with regards to the citizenship and public personality that originates from globalisation and realignments of ideologies in relation with the growing neoliberalism. The construction of refugees as the Other arises from the assembling of a crisis around policy related to immigration and refugee issues. The refugee issue is thus distinguished as something that can be definitively addressed and simultaneously lessening uneasiness (Esses, Medianu and Lawson, 2013). In spite of the fact that this may give some individuals from the host populace with certain benefit, the consequences of this problematisation can be extreme for the individuals who are focused on the Othering process, including dehumanisation that tends to justify the insensitive treatment received by the refugees (Esses, Medianu and Lawson, 2013). In the case of BBC London's video, the refugees are shown as the Other but under the good refugee construct which makes it easy for the video to criticise the UK's policy about refugee resettlement.

It can be said that the media mirror the inclination for the problematisation of migration to happen as a reaction to uncertainty and fuel this propensity. Uncertainty can be about the national identity that has been examined by Hier and Greenberg (2002) or it can be uncertainty from hosting unknown refugees. These are the probable causes that drive people to look to the community or the groups that they belong to in order to reduce uncertainty. As a result, this attitude of group-centrism prompts prejudice towards elements of "otherness" and criticism of the outsider group (Esses, Medianu and Lawson, 2013). The BBC London's video constructs the element of otherness by showing refugees in the minority and as someone with no agency. Reports about refugee children dying by suicide in the wake of deportation to their home countries highlight their lack of agency as well as voice.

#### **5. Conclusion**

According to the research conducted by Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2020), the media in the UK carried negative reports regarding the refugee issue. The news report by BBC London released on their YouTube channel has avoided the negative coverage of the refugee. At the same time, it has employed different representations of the refugee children. The news report frames the refugees from Afghanistan and Sudan in the "good refugee" and "good Muslim" narrative who are reliant on being saved by the West. Through their helpless situation at the UK's refugee resettlement policy,

their lack of agency has been highlighted. The elite in the media and the political leaders have been exerting their influence to manipulate the coverage of refugees to forward their own interests by promoting negative coverage which often ends up shaping public opinion. In the case of BBC London, the media elites play an influential role in showing the refugees in a favourable light.

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