The role of political ideology in the international mainstream news media framing of refugees and LGBT refugees

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This research examines mainstream press coverage of refugees in general and the coverage of lesbian, gay and transsexual refugees in the international refugee crisis. This study is an attempt to further understand how various newspapers around the world actively, and perhaps ideologically, construct media frames. Articles about refugees and lesbian, gay and transsexual refugees were randomly sampled between 2011 and 2016 and analysed in accordance with their publication in 18 different mainstream news publications from The United States, Australia, and The United Kingdom. An effort was made to sample articles from opposing ends of the ideological political spectrum in mainstream news content. Two coders analysed articles to ascertain the presence of five news frames in coverage of the refugee crisis: attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality or economic frames. In addition to the presence of these five frames, this research also explored whether the level of responsibility for the refugee crisis was conceptualized at either the individual or governmental level. The results of this content analysis were then contrasted against the politically ideological categorization of each media outlet.

Examining content at the ideological level of influence (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) could reveal active media framing that may have very real, lived, consequences for lesbian, gay and transsexual refugees as well as refugees in general. Media representation also could influence how the rest of the world understands their plight and who is responsible for refugees as well as homosexual and transsexual refugees. This research explores the consequences of these findings for refugees and for the lesbian, gay and transsexual international community. Finally, the implications of these findings for objective newspaper reporting around the world are considered.

The Power of Media Frames

There has been a wealth of compelling findings suggesting news messages have a profound influence on how one thinks about those portrayed. For example, research has found that coverage of political candidates in newspapers can affect how citizens evaluate a candidate and their voting intentions (Barrett & Barrington, 2005). Positive representations in televised media have been found to influence how individuals feel toward marginalized groups (Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2006). If marginalized groups are portrayed negatively then individuals feel much more negatively about that group. Over time, mediated portrayals can cultivate the salience, perception, and memory of individuals, groups, institutions and events (Gustafson & Kenix, 2015). In single moments as well as over the course of time, media representations can define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. This process occurs through media frames, "which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments." (Entman, 1993, p. 52) News, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings, which are transmitted through media frames. These frames can activate certain constructs at the expense of others, thereby directly influencing how a reader thinks about the issue at hand and the mediated messenger (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992).

Media frame issues and, over time, work to construct much of what is perceived as reality. This social construction of reality is understood of as a largely invisible process involving media-generated images that coalesce to form meaning about political and social issues (Gamson et al., 1992). Gitlin (1980) long ago defined frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse” (p. 7). How an issue is framed determines what and why something happened, but also confirms whether something happened at all. As such, media coverage can be easily conscripted as ‘proof’ of an event occurring. As Dansky (2009) has argued, “in order for social change to occur, there has to be evidence of the event” – and that evidence comes from media representation.

Frames implicitly hold evidentiary information that determines what is “relevant” (Hertog & McLeod, 1995, p. 4) and “suggests what the issue is” (Tankard Jr., Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991). Frames are “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, Gandy Jr., & Grant, 2001, p. 11). Framing can be harmful, especially when presentations of social problems distort an issue or fail to provide solutions to those affected (Kensicki, 2004).That distortion of an issue comes from a misconstruction of either the cause, effect or responsibility of an issue—three facets that have come to define media framing in its relation to power (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). Those who create media content “select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing theory, while commonly applied in communication research to written texts, has been unevenly implemented in the field (Entman, 2004). Carragee and Roefs (2004) argued that framing studies must begin to examine their results within the ‘contexts of the distribution of political and social power’ (p. 214). It is important to acknowledge the mutually inter-supported nexus that simultaneously reflects social contexts and mediates those same social contexts through specific narrative constructions (Barnard, 2005; Julier, 2000). This nexus of meaning is inherently ideological as it comes to define the meaning of power – those who possess it and those who do not. Thus, framing is linked broadly, yet directly, to both power and ideology (Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). Indeed, news content is framed largely through an ideological lens (McQuail, 2005). Meaning that, over time, media frames coalesce to expose the ideological constituency (Manovich, 2001; Reeves & Campbell, 1994) of those who created the media message.

The Role of Ideology in News Coverage

Media are not one monolithic voice. Rather, media are ubiquitous, dynamic and multi-directional in approach. However, the elite, powerful, news media predominately shape how the public interprets issues and events (Sotirovic, 2000). Consequently, the public’s main understanding of social issues is largely derived from a framed construction provided by the elite news media, which is intrinsically from a distinct perspective (i.e. Altheide, 1976; Gamson, 1992; Gitlin, 1980; C. Ryan, Carragee, & Schwerner, 1998; Tuchman, 1978). Although from a distinctly elite ideology, news media create purposefully framed images after a complex negotiation of contributing forces that can also be seen to be politically motivated (Street, 2001). This is not a structurally deterministic process whereby media simply disseminate elite, dominant messages. Rather, “there is an interaction within the media, who operate as both structures and agents, not passively disseminating dominant ideologies (as suggested by structural accounts) but playing an active role in their creation, construction articulation and communication” (Allen & Savigny, 2012, p. 280).

Actively constructed and co-created messaging coalesces to form a broader ideological perspective, which then provides researchers with a framework to better understand similarities across large groupings (Thompson, 1990). Some have argued that the mainstream news media have displayed a professional ideology (Deuze, 2005). Others have found an omnipresent, capitalistic, corporate focused ideology across news media (Kenix, 2011, 2013; Reese, 1990; Zollmann, 2009). This contrast between ideologies is perhaps most evident in content that is aimed at the business community whereby commercial interests can contradict journalistic interests (Allen & Savigny, 2012). When confronted with such a contradiction between competing ideologies, the ideology of consumerism and commercial interests generally supersedes any individual or business-level ideology (Christensen, 2007; Kenix, 2013; Reese, 1990). This supports, at least in part, the Propaganda Model, which argues that news media manufacture content that supports “government and dominant private interests” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2).

The omnipresent ideology of commercialism across the news media spectrum problematizes the role of specific owners, or business-level ideologies, directing content. However, a commercial ideology also argues that audience preferences, advertisers’ financial interests, market technological capabilities, and institutional profitability have a much stronger influence on content than any other factor (Hamilton, 2004). A commercial ideology would further argue that businesses standardize and find more efficient modes of telling stories, thereby homogenizing their content over time (Underwood, 1993). Whereas the media industry as a whole has moved to more formulaic and standardized forms of content because of economic pressures, the commercial ideology only partially explains homogeneity in content, but does not fully address all of the individual and business-level distinctions. As others have observed, ideology helps to explain the coherence of a specific grouping but it does not explain the “coherence of society as a whole” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1980, p. 3).

Thus, the balance between a macro-level omnipresent corporate ideology and the relatively micro-level political ideology of a news outlet remains problematic. If consumer preferences play an inordinately large role in dictating content (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010), as is argued in a commercial ideology, then a news outlet’s readers may demand newspaper content that engages with their own personal political ideology, particularly in instances where those stories do not contradict or challenge a broader commercial ideology. Drawing from the work of Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) compared circulation rates with zip codes and voting patterns and found that readers demanded newspaper content which engaged with their own personal political ideology – and that those political preferences became the largest predictor of newspaper slant or bias, not commercial imperatives.

There is indeed a strong demand for biased information across society, which is being met by revenue-seeking media within a competitive capitalistic environment. Exposure to like-minded biased information confirms one’s own personal ideologies. Thus, individuals support newspapers that confirm to their own beliefs. Newspapers slant their reporting to align with readers’ previously-held beliefs “in order to build a reputation for quality” (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006, p. 280) and then therefore boost circulation numbers. This cycle of confirming ideologies through biased and selective information is perpetually circuitous. One article titled ‘The Self-Perpetuation of Biased Beliefs,’ states this plainly: “bias begets bias” (Suen, 2004, p. 379). Therefore, every media outlet might have a particular perspective that some see as biased or ideologically-driven, but it is important to make clear that these perspectives derive from a truncated range of options on offer within a broader commercial ideology, that are then selected by like-minded readers. This research aims to explore whether newspapers around the globe, that are largely perceived as differing in their individual, politically-driven, ideological approach to news reporting, do in fact differ when it comes to content that does not directly challenge a consumer ideology. In the case of this research, coverage of refugees and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender refugees will be examined.

Given such complexity in examining ideology and media, previous research has argued that scholarship must assess several media types and genres, as well as geographic distinctions to assess media pluralism (Valcke, 2009). This research examines eighteen newspapers, all owned by different parent companies, from three countries around the world – the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, to assess their framing of the refugee crisis, particularly as it relates to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender refugees. The political ideological spectrum can be divided in a multitude of ways and across many indexes. However, the political spectrum is predominately conceptualized as a continuum between conservative and liberal ideologies. Academic scholarship has largely ignored comparisons of conservative and liberal ideologies in multi-national contexts. This research attempts to address this gap in the literature.

Political Ideology in the News

The issue of assessing objectivity in news media is clearly a complicated one, with a long history of examinations that have conflicting results (i.e. Fedler, Smith, & Meeske, 1983; Merrill, 1965). These contradictions exist because objectivity itself is a contested term complicated by assumptions embedded in high-level abstractions like “justice, democracy, freedom, mankind, Communism, peace with honour, and law and order” (Severin & Tankard, 1997, p. 97). Despite this complexity, the news media have largely maintained their adherence to the norm of objectivity (Donsbach, 1995).even though there has been widespread public opinion that a particular newspaper holds a particular political ideology.

Political ideologies are most often prescribed to political parties. In Australia, the Australian Labour Party is viewed as left wing or liberal, whereas the National Coalition and the Liberal party are viewed as right wing or conservative. In England, the Conservative and Unionist Party are right wing or conservative whereas the labour Party is viewed as left wing or liberal. In America, the Democratic Party is viewed as left wing or liberal and the Republican Party is viewed as right wing or conservative. These generalised abstractions of political behaviour are also ascribed to social events and societal actions, individual actions and thought, institutional histories, and media content.

While there are certainly variances within and varieties of any political ideology, liberalism is generally considered to include concepts of equal liberty for all individuals (Nussbaum, 2015), universal human rights and open access to public services (Michelsen, 2013). This political theory holds that each individual is unique and valued. The individual is fundamental to liberal political theory (A. Ryan, 1993). In economic terms, liberalism supports at least some state funding for rectifying social imbalances to discriminated individuals (Mahon, 2008). Liberalism as an ideology is reserved when it comes to intervention in foreign affairs, emphasizing international institutions and international law and relying upon economic interdependence to achieve peace (Greener-Barcham, 2007). Conservatism, on the other hand, generally holds restrictive beliefs on social policy that deals with homosexuality, abortion, extramarital sex, and traditional gender roles (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010). Conservatism also ascribes to economic policy that dedicates limited governmental involvement to address social inequality (Greeley & Hout, 2006) and foreign policy that emphasises military strength to achieve peace (Smidt, 2013).

These political ideologies are transmuted through mediated content in the same way that they are communicated through verbal communication – through words, phrases, emphases on particular aspects of a shared narrative and the specific framing of current events. The larger public associates meaning to these political identifiers symbolically (Conover & Feldman, 1981) and feels the “relative” esteem of ideological conventions communicated by elite media (Schiffer, 2000). This is because those who may only be fairly sophisticated in terms of their political knowledge are still adequately exposed to elite conceptions of political ideology but lack the abundance of prior considerations necessary to deter elite persuasion (Zaller, 1992). Thus, it is possible that “given the high salience of ideological labels in elite discourse …that the middle-dwellers have been exposed to enough of the one-sided information flow to be persuaded by it” (Schiffer, 2000, p. 299). Indeed, individuals can “take cues” from elite messaging and then cast dispersions on political ideologies that they feel counter those positions (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Given this previous research suggesting transference of the “relative” esteem of ideological conventions from political elites to the broader public, the ideologically embedded coverage of any particular sustained event in mass media could have profound implications on policy, political identification and the range of ideological debate available in democracies. Given the research examining framing, political ideology and news coverage, this study asks the following research question: Does the use of frames in content about lesbian, gay, bisexual refugees and refugees in general vary significantly by the categorized political ideology of newspapers sampled?

Methodology

Newspapers were selected using two main criteria: 1) all of the six selected newspapers within each country had to have, relative to their country, high circulations and 2) out of the six newspapers, three needed to be classified as ‘liberal’ and three needed to be classified as ‘conservative.’ The determination of those political labels came from an examination of several online sources, which corroborated assumptions in popular culture and also the researchers, which could then be tested against a dataset of media content. The criteria for including each newspaper within a political ideology required verification from two different online sources that were not individual opinions but amalgamations of collective perspectives or research.

The ten highest circulation newspapers in the United States in 2014 were *USA Today* – 3,255,157, *The Wall Street Journal* – 2,294,093, *The New York Times* – 2,149,012, *The Orange County Register* – 681,512, *The Los Angeles Times* – 673,171, *San Jose Mercury News* – 581,532, *The New York Post* – 477,314, *The Daily News* – 456,360, *Newsday* – 443,362, and *The Washington Post* – 436,601 (Cision, 2014). A compilation of websites (Table 1) was then used for identifying the perceived political bias of the American newspapers selected. *The Washington Times,* with a circulation of 200,000 (Statista, 2016), was added as it was not possible to locate information regarding the conservative political ideology of a third conservative newspaper from the ten highest circulating newspapers in America.

Table 1: Support for American Newspaper Political Bias

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conservative** | **Liberal**  |
| **Wall Street Journal** 1. Freakonomics: How Biased is Your Media? (2012)
2. Wikipedia: The Wall Street Journal Political Stance (2016e)
 | **Los Angeles Times**Wikipedia: Media Bias in the United States (2016b)Freakonomics: How Biased is Your Media? (2012) |
| **Washington Times**1. Conservativapedia: Conservative Media (2016)
2. Rational Wiki: The Washington Times (2016b)
 | **Washington Post**1. [Lakeland Library: Point of View](http://library.lakelandcc.edu/PDFs/research/bias.pdf) (2016)
2. The Washington Post: Ranking the media from liberal to conservative, based on their audiences (2014)
 |
| **New York Post** 1. Wikipedia: The New York Post (2016c)
2. Rational Wiki: The New York Post (2016a)
 | **New York Times**Freakonomics: How Biased is Your Media? (2012)Wikipedia: The New York Times Political Stance (2016d) |

Similarly, the following online information (Table 2) was used to support the political ideology categorisation of the following newspapers in the United Kingdom, which were also amongst the most popular (Boyle, 2013) in the country.

Table 2: Support for British Newspaper Political Bias

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conservative** | **Liberal**  |
| **Daily Star**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. EduSitesMedia: Newspapers & Political Bias (2011)
 | **Daily Mirror**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. Andrew Whitby: Follow that tank! Political orientation of UK think tanks (and newspapers), via Twitter (2013)
 |
| **The Sun**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. Andrew Whitby: Follow that tank! Political orientation of UK think tanks (and newspapers), via Twitter (2013)
 | **The Guardian**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. EduSitesMedia: Newspapers & Political Bias (2011)
 |
| **Daily Mail**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. EduSitesMedia: Newspapers & Political Bias (2011)
 | **I (Independent)**1. Wikipedia: List of Newspapers in the United Kingdom (2016a)
2. Andrew Whitby: Follow that tank! Political orientation of UK think tanks (and newspapers), via Twitter (2013)
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Finally, the following online information (Table 3) was used to support the political ideology of the following newspapers in Australia (Crikey, 2007), which were also amongst the most popular (Worldpress, 2014) in the region.

Table 3: Support for Australian Newspaper Political Bias

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conservative** | **Liberal**  |
| **The Australian**1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 | Sydney Morning Herald1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 |
| **The Mercury**1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 | **The Age**1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 |
| **The Courier Mail**1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 | **The Canberra Times**1. WorldPress: World Newspapers and Magazines Australia (2016)
2. Crikey: Crikey bias-o-meter: The newspapers (2007)
 |

A search was then conducted in the Factiva database for news articles from these 18 publications with the keywords “gay” and “refugee” and then, separately, “refugee” alone in the body of the news article (Table 4) from the beginning of 2011 until the middle of 2016. That search resulted in 479 articles with “gay” and “refugee” in the body of the article in the liberal news media (79.7 percent) and 122 articles in conservative media (20.2 percent). However, upon closer inspection, the reported articles with “gay” and “refugee” in the body of the news article were overwhelmingly not related to LGBT refugees. This research then attempted searches using “lesbian,” and/or “bisexual,” and/or “transsexual” in the search terms but had the same result when the parameters were the body of the news article. The search for LGBT refugees was then confined to the headline and leading paragraph. When searching for “gay” and refugee” in the headline and leading paragraph of the news article, only 18 news stories were found (Table 4). The number of articles about “gay refugees “and “refugees” in general was considerably higher in liberal media as opposed to conservative media. In total, there were 19,451 articles noted in the Factiva database that had “refugee” in the headline and lead paragraph of liberal news media (74.1 percent of total refugee content) and 12 articles (66.6 percent of gay refugee content) focused on gay refuges in the liberal news media. In contrast, there were 6,789 articles about refugees in the database for conservative newspapers (25.9 percent) and 6 articles about gay refugees in those same papers (33.3 percent). Gay refugee articles comprised only 0.952 percent of overall refugee articles available for analysis.

Table 4: Gay refugee and refugee news articles in the headline and leading paragraph of news articles (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Political Ideology | Newspaper | Gay refugee | Refugee |
| U.S.A | Conservative | Wall Street Journal | 0 | 813 |
| Washington Times | 0 | 0 |
| New York Post  | 1 | 194 |
| Liberal | Los Angeles Times  | 0 | 0 |
| Washington Post | 2 | 1435 |
| New York Times | 1 | 2614 |
| U.K | Conservative | Daily Star  | 0 | 266 |
| The Sun | 2 | 1136 |
| Daily Mail | 0 | 514 |
| Liberal | Daily Mirror | 3 | 878 |
| The Guardian  | 2 | 5024 |
| I (Independent)  | 1 | 2298 |
| Australia | Conservative | The Australian | 2 | 3785 |
| The Daily Mercury | 0 | 171 |
| The Courier Mail | 0 | 0 |
| Liberal | Sydney Morning Herald | 2 | 2433 |
| The Age  | 1 | 2737 |
| Canberra Times | 1 | 2032 |

Both coders coded all 18 gay refugee articles. Each newspaper’s total N for refugee articles was entered into a random number generator that took the total N and then randomly ordered the numbers from 1 to N. One coder then selected the first ten numbers from each newspaper to code and both coders began their analysis. At this stage, the researchers learned that the Factiva database did not hold articles for *The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Times* or the *Courier Mail*. Therefore, these three news outlets were not included in the final analysis. Once the 10 articles were coded across all fifteen outlets, the coders began again with the first newspaper and selected the next 10 articles. This continued until 297 articles were coded and the study. In total, 279 articles (93.9 percent) were focused on refugees and 18 (6.1 percent) were focused on gay refugees. Future research will continue coding through the total N to build a larger sample for analysis. Editorials and news articles were both included in the random sampling (Table 5) to give a broader perspective on the potential impact of ideology across the newspaper as a whole.

Table 5: Cross tabulation of newspaper’s perceived political bias and story type

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Story Type | Total |
| News | Editorial |
| Perceived political bias of media | Conservative | 114 | 18 | 132 |
| Liberal | 123 | 42 | 165 |
| Total | 237 | 60 | 297 |

The random sampling of articles across publication outlets resulted in the number of articles between 2011-2014 from Australia being slightly higher than the other two countries (Table 6) because in those years Australia had several high-profile refugee arrivals by boat on their shores and many more articles about refugees in Australia were subsequently published. In 2015, the focus on refugees shifted to the United States and the United Kingdom with the advent of the Syrian war, where both the UK and the US were sending weapons and monetary support, and Syrian refugees were flooding into Europe. This resulted in a much higher random sample of articles in 2015 due to the sampling method across news outlets.

Table 6: Cross tabulation of newspaper’s country of origin and publication year

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year | Total |
| 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| Country | United States | 2 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 52 | 9 | 78 |
| United Kingdom | 15 | 6 | 10 | 12 | 58 | 14 | 115 |
| Australia | 20 | 15 | 8 | 15 | 39 | 7 | 104 |
| Total | 37 | 25 | 21 | 35 | 149 | 30 | 297 |

The specific questions asked of coders were developed directly from Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) work, which created a set of questions around each of the five common overall frames in news that have been found repeatedly in academic scholarship: responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality and economics (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Kenix, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Kensicki, 2004; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991; Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) tested whether 20 specific questions clustered around the five frames. The authors chose stories focused on European integration, drugs, crime, or immigration. Two of these story types (European integration and immigration) are related to refugees so it was surmised that the methodological framework developed by Semetko and Valkenburg had applicability to this study and could be appropriated for this work. Semetko and Valkenburg conducted a varimax rotation and a hierarchical cluster analysis of the 20 framing questions and found that the 20 questions did indeed cluster around the 5 frames.

The only changes to Semetko and Valkenburg’s 20 questions were made to make the study directly applicable to in-group/out-group issues surrounding refugees. For example, rather than asking “does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem?,” which was asked in such a way to allow for the variance of social issues that they were examining, this research asked, “does the story suggest that some level of external/other government has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis?,” and then a further question asking, “does the story suggest that some level of internal/home gov’t has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis?” This type of alteration to Semetko and Valkenburg’s work led to a total of 31 questions being asked (Table 7), rather than the original 20 questions. For this study, twenty-six straightforward yes or no questions were asked of two coders to ascertain if specific frames were present in content about refugees (yes = 1, no = 0). Five more questions, with a range of possible coding options, were added to tease out further additional information. All of the 31 questions were developed and grouped according to the five news frames, determined by the varimax rotation and hierarchical cluster analysis of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), to measure human interest, conflict, morality, attribution of responsibility, and economic consequences.

Table 7: Coding Questions

|  |
| --- |
| Responsibility Frame Questions |
| Does the story suggest that some level of external/other government has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest that some level of internal/home government has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest that some level of external/other government is responsible for the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest that some level of internal/home government is responsible for the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest solution(s) to the refugee crisis? |
| If yes, is the solution to curb the flow of refugees, to expand the flow of refugees, or neither? |
| Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest that individual refugees are responsible for the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest that individuals within the internal/home country are responsible for the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story suggest the refugee crisis requires urgent action? |
| If yes, is the action to to curb the flow of refugees, to expand the flow of refugees, neither, or not stated? |
|  |
| Human Interest Frame Questions |
| Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion toward external/other refugees? |
| Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion toward those in the internal/home country? |
| Does the story emphasize how refugees are affected by the refugee crisis? |
| If so, is the emphasis on refugees positive or negative or neither? |
| Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups in internal/home regions are affected by the refugee crisis? |
| If so, is the emphasis on these individuals and groups positive or negative or neither? |
| Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors? |
| If yes, is the emphasis on these individuals and groups positive or negative or neither? |
|  |
| Conflict Frame Questions |
| Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries? |
| Does one party-individual-group-country reproach another? |
| Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the refugee crisis? |
| Does the story refer to winners and losers? |
|  |
| Morality Frame Questions |
| Does the story contain any moral message? |
| Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets? |
| Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave? |
|  |
| Economic Frame Questions |
| Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future? |
| Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved? |
| Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action? |

Chi-square correlations (χ2), expected values, adjusted residual scores, degrees of freedom (df), mean differences (MD), simple percentages, and frequencies were used to answer the stated research question. The Cohen’s Kappa inter-observer reliability coefficient was utilized to provide an indication of coding scheme’s reliability.

Results

Intercoder reliability, as measured through Cohen’s Kappa, ranged from 85.14% to 96.06% for all of the coded variables. The overall intercoder Cohen’s Kappa was 89.97%, suggesting a highly robust coding scheme. The variables measuring responsibility averaged 85.14% agreement, 91.15% for human interest, 91.65% for conflict, 96.06% for morality and 85.2% for economic frames.

There was no meaningful difference between the perceived political bias of media outlet and whether a story framed the external/other government as having the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=1.90, p=.0.275) or being responsible for the crisis (χ2(1)=1.011, p=0.315). However, there were statistically significant relationships between the perceived political bias of media outlets and whether a story suggested that the internal/home government had the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=11.667, p=.001) and who was responsible for the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=11.424, p=.001) (Table 8). Only 34.1 percent of conservative newspapers framed the refugee crisis as one that the internal/home government could alleviate. However, 53.9 percent of liberal papers framed the story in a similar manner. Similarly, 24.2 percent of conservative papers framed the internal/home government as responsible for the refugee crisis, whereas 43.0percent of liberal newspapers did the same.

Table 8: Chi-Square Relationships between the Political Bias of Newspapers and Coding Questions for the Responsibility Frame (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RESPONSIBILITY QUESTIONS** | P value | Chi Square |
| Does the story suggest that some level of external/other government has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis? | 0.275 | 1.190 |
| Does the story suggest that some level of internal/home government has the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis? | 0.001\* | 11.667 |
| Does the story suggest that some level of external/other government is responsible for the refugee crisis? | 0.315 | 1.011 |
| Does the story suggest that some level of internal/home government is responsible for the refugee crisis? | 0.001\* | 11.424 |
| Does the story suggest solution(s) to the refugee crisis? | 0.975 |  0.001 |
| If yes, is the solution to curb the flow of refugees, to expand the flow of refugees, or neither? | 0.058 | 7.481 |
| Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the refugee crisis? | 0.106 | 2.616 |
| Does the story suggest that individual refugees are responsible for the refugee crisis? | 0.001\* | 11.546 |
| Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) within the internal/home country are responsible for the refugee crisis? | 0.434 | 0.0611 |
| Does the story suggest that the refugee crisis requires urgent action? | 0.685 | 0.065 |

\* = p<.05

There was also no significant relationship between political bias of media and framed solutions (χ2(1)=. 0.001, p=.975). Although, if a solution was suggested in content, then 10.9 percent of liberal newspapers argued for expansion and only 3.00 percent of conservative newspapers did the same (χ2(1)= 7.481, p=.058). The numbers were nearly inverse for stories arguing for the curb of refugees to solve the crisis (6.8 percent conservative versus 4.2 percent liberal). Almost none of the newspapers, whether conservative or liberal, thought that the refugee crisis required urgent action (χ2(1)= 0.165, p= 0.685). Although, if urgency was recommended then 3.6 percent of liberal newspapers framed an expansion of refugees as an immediate solution whereas no conservative newspapers came to the same conclusion (adj. residual = 4.3).

There was a significant difference between the perceived political bias of media outlets and if a story suggested that an individual (or group of people in society) in an external/other location (χ2(1)=6.375, p=.012) was responsible for the refugee crisis. However, there was no relationship between the ideology of news media and the responsibility of the internal/home country (χ2(1)=6.375, p=.672). There was also a significant relationship between the political ideology of a newspaper and the framing of refugees themselves as responsible for the refugee crisis (x2(1)=11.456, p=0.001). Liberal newspapers framed refugees as responsible for the crisis in 3.0 percent of their content, whereas conservative newspapers did so in 13.6 percent of content (adj. residual = 3.4).

In regards to the human-interest frame (Table 9), conservative newspapers and liberal papers were both unlikely to provide a human example (χ2(1)= 3.969, p= 0.137). However, liberal newspapers were more likely to employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generated empathetic emotions toward external/other refugees (χ2(1)=4.481, p=0.034). Yet, almost no newspapers – conservative or liberal – demonstrated empathy toward those in the internal/home country (χ2(1)=1.487, p=0.223), nor detailed how refugees were affected by the crisis (χ2(1)=0.275, p=0.600). When there was an impact of the crisis noted, however, conservative newspapers were more likely to see that impact as negative (adj. res. = 2.5) and liberal newspapers were more likely to see that impact as positive (χ2(1)=15.614, p=0.001).

Conservative newspapers were more likely (adj. res. = 3.1) to emphasize how individuals and groups in the internal/home regions were affected by the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=8.979, p=0.003) in what was framed as a negative influence (χ2(1)=10382, p= 0.016). Conservative and liberal papers were both unlikely to go into the private or personal lives of the actors (χ2(1)=2.878, p=0.090). Although, the emphasis on these individuals, when it did occur, was much more likely to be negative (adj. res. = 2.3) when found in conservative newspapers (χ2(1)=10407, p=0.015).

Table 9: Chi-Square Relationships between the Political Bias of Newspapers and Coding Questions for the Human Interest Frame (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **HUMAN INTEREST QUESTIONS** | P value | Chi Square |
| Does the story provide a human example or 'human face' to the refugee crisis? | 0.137 | 3.969 |
| Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion toward external/other refugees? | 0.034\* | 4.481 |
| Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion toward ethose in the internal/home country? | 0.223 | 1.487 |
| Does the story emphasize how refugees are affected by the refugee crisis? | 0.600 | 0.275 |
| If so, is the emphasis on refugees positive, or negative, or neither? | 0.001\* | 15.614 |
| Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups in internal/home regions are affected by the refugee crisis? | 0.003\* | 8.979 |
| If so, is the emphasis on these individuals and groups positive, or negative, or neither? | 0.016\* | 10.382 |
| Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors? | 0.090 | 2.878 |
| If so, is the emphasis on these individuals and groups positive, or negative, or neither? | 0.015\* | 10.4.7 |

\* = p<.05

In general, the strong majority of newspapers did not represent any disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries when it came to the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=0.383 p=0.536). Nor was one party, individual, group, or country shown to reproach another in either liberal or conservative newspapers (χ2(1)=0.991, p=.0.320). However, there was a significant relationship (Table 10) between the political ideology of a newspaper and reference to two sides or more than two sides to the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=5.648, p=0.017). In those cases, conservative newspapers were more likely (adj. res. = 2.4) to highlight the crises’ many sides. Although neither conservative nor liberal papers framed the refugee crisis as one that had ‘winners and losers’ (χ2(1)=1.014, p=0.314).

Table 10: Chi-Square Relationships between the Political Bias of Newspapers and Coding Questions for the Conflict Frame (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **CONFLICT QUESTIONS** | **P value** | **Chi Square** |
| Does the story reflect disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries? | 0.536 | 0.383 |
| Does one party, individual, group or country, reproach another? | 0.320 | 0.991 |
| Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the refugee crisis? | 0.017\* | 5.648 |
| Does the story refer to winners and losers? | 0.314 | 1.014 |

\* = p<.05

Neither conservative or liberal newspapers made meaningful references to morality, God, and other religious tenets (χ2(1)=0.606, p=0.436), or to specific social prescriptions on how to behave (χ2(1)=1.030, p=0.310) or to any particular moral message (χ2(1)=2.722, p=0.099) (Table 11).

Table 11: Chi-Square Relationships between the Political Bias of Newspapers and Coding Questions for the Morality Frame (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **MORALITY QUESTIONS** | **P value** | **Chi Square** |
| Does the story contain any moral message? | 0.099 | 2.722 |
| Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets? | 0.436 | 0.606 |
| Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave? | 0.310 | 1.030 |

\* = p<.05

There was no significant relationship between mention of financial losses and the political ideology of a newspaper (χ2(1)=1.225, p=0.268). Conservative newspapers were slightly more likely (adj. res. = 1.1) to highlight these prospective financial losses, but that emphasis was still only a very modest 4.0% of content. The specific costs (χ2(1)=2.274, p=0.132) and the economic consequences in general (χ2(1)=0.007, p=0.932), were not mentioned with any particular emphasis (Table 12) dependent on the newspaper’s political ideology.

Table 12: Chi-Square Relationships between the Political Bias of Newspapers and Coding Questions for the Economic Frame (2011-2016)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ECONOMIC QUESTIONS** | **Political Bias and…** | **Chi square** |
| Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future? | 1.030 | 1.225 |
| Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved? | 0.132 | 2.274 |
| Is there a reference to economic consequencies of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action? | 0.932 | 0.007 |

\* = p<.05

The proportion of articles that included gay and lesbian refugees was so small that for most relationships the cells with expected counts of less than five was far too great for statistical analysis. Only three questions out of the 31 were able to be examined statistically for any relationship between LGBT refugee content and refugee content. The relationship between the story focus (refugee vs. gay refugee) and if the article suggested that some level of internal/home government had the ability to alleviate the refugee crisis was found to be significant (χ2(1)=12.112, p=0.001). In this case, articles focused on gay refugees were far more likely (adj. res. = 3.5) to frame internal governments as not being able to alleviate the crisis. Indeed, 94.4 percent of gay refugee articles had no faith in the internal government assisting the refugee crisis, whereas articles focused on refugees in general framed internal governments as far more efficacious. Similarly, there was a statistically significant relationship between the focus on articles (between refugees in general and gay refugees) and if internal/home governments were seen t hold any responsibility for the refugee crisis (χ2(1)=7.175, p=0.007). Only 5.6 percent of gay refugee stories framed the internal/home government as holding responsibility for the crisis whereas the overwhelming majority of gay refugee articles did not see the internal/home government as responsible. There was a significant relationship between the use of adjectives or personal vignettes to generate empathy and if the article was focused on gay refugees or simply refugees (χ2(1)=4.125, p=0.042). Gay refugee articles were more likely to rely on those empathetic techniques (add. res. = 2.0) than refugee articles.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest a complicated mix of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality and economic frames surrounding coverage of the refugee crisis. However, this complexity emerged in relation to the political ideology of the newspaper and not in relation to analysing gay refugee content. The overall goal of this research was initially to examine how the political ideology of newspapers may have covered refugee stories differently than gay refugee stories. However, due to the lack of content focused on gay refugees, the emphasis shifted to examine how the political ideology of newspapers influenced the coverage of the refugee crisis in general. If “a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives,” (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 391) then the results from this study have importance not only in regards to the resulting information learned from the media but also for the lack of resulting information learned from media. For some, the refugee crisis in general and the gay refugee crisis in particular might not affect their everyday life, but for others the effect is ongoing and direct. The results of this study bring into question the ability that readers have to gain a coherent sense of understanding from an apparently ideologically-driven media of the struggle LGBT refugees face. Further, the nexus of political ideology and media content obfuscates the broader social forces that surround the refugee crisis.

The most obvious finding from this research suggested that there was an almost omission of LGBT refugees in this sample – less than 1% of coverage. There is clearly limited news space as well as audience attention and newspapers can’t cover every issue, but this near blackout of LGBT refuges does suggest a striking oversight in focus. As a whole, liberal and conservative papers chose to overlooks LGBT issues. However, when LGBT refugees were actually addressed, it was far more likely to be in liberal newspapers – a finding that correlates with the overall liberal mission of ‘equal liberty for all individuals.’ Conservative newspapers were far less likely to address LGBT refugees, which aligns with a politically conservative reluctance to celebrate or condone what could be seen as a permissive social policy that included LGBT recognition. This politically driven emphasis on global events is concerning not only for those immediately involved – the LGBT community in this instance – but also for democracy, where citizens are charged to make voting decisions based on what would be incomplete information learned from politically aligned media.

The overwhelming majority of both conservative and liberal newspapers around the world didn’t place any responsibility on other governments – those same governments that the refugees had fled from before arriving in their present home country. These external governments were not seen to be responsible, nor as having the ability to alleviate the crisis. If one accepts that somebody somewhere must hold responsibility for the refugee crisis, then removing that responsibility from external governments, would presumably shift the responsibility inward toward the home country. This is what these findings concluded – but only for the liberal newspapers. The conservative papers did not frame internal or external governments as responsible for the crisis or capable of assistance. This, again, coincides with a conservative focus on corporate capitalistic engagement outside of governmental influence. In large part, conservative papers did not place the responsibility anywhere except, in some instances, on the individual refugee. While individuals were largely abdicated from responsibility across all newspapers, conservative newspapers were much more likely to place responsibility upon a specific refugee when individual responsibility was located in the newspaper frame. The emphasis from liberal newspapers on governmental responsibility and the emphasis from conservative newspapers on individual responsibility aligns with the political platforms of these ideologies in all three countries sampled.

Solutions as a conceptual frame were also not frequently found in this sample – but when they were, it was the liberal newspapers arguing for an expansion of refugees and conservative newspapers arguing for a contraction. However, no newspapers – liberal or conservative - thought immediate action was needed. This lack of attributable responsibility or suggested solutions creates a disconnect between the crisis at hand and actual possible ramifications (Kensicki, 2004). This disconnect could lead to a sharply decreased sense of personal efficacy in the refugee crisis – and again, has concerning potentialities within a democracy.

Such a lack of personal efficacy is even more troubling when contrasted against the lack of empathy found in news content as well as the lack of detail regarding how refugees are affected by the crisis. Copious research has concluded that when individuals are unaware of the ‘other’ in any given society then stereotyping and misinformation follows (Ahmed, 2002; Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2010; Desmarais & Bruce, 2010; Said, 1978). Interestingly, conservative papers were more likely to provide a human-interest frame and to highlight how individuals in the internal/home regions were affected by the refugee crisis. Although, it is important to note that the emphasis was more likely to be negative than positive. From an ideological perspective, this negative perspective of refugees is reflected in conservative political thought, which emphasises limited governmental involvement to address social inequality. Thus, conservatives would be more likely to view refugees, who inherently demand increased governmental assistance at least immediately upon arrival, with disdain whereas liberals view the expansion of refugees as a overall benefit to the cultural fabric of any given society.

The refugee crisis was also largely not seen to be one of conflict. This finding correlates with the lack of responsibility placed on any particular individual, institution or government. Conservative papers were more likely to note there were two sides to the refugee crisis, but it was not in a position of disagreement or reproach nor was it in reference to ‘winners or losers.’ This lack of directed engagement with oppositional forces is intriguing given the rather cataclysmic outflow of refugees from Syria, a country that has been in the midst of a devastating war for several years at the time of this writing. This finding does not appear to correlate with conservative ideology that has historically supported military strength, which inherently emphasises conflict.

The specific financial costs of the refugee crisis were also not noted to any meaningful degree across all the newspapers sampled. However, if they were addressed then conservative papers were more likely to highlight the financial losses. Such a restrictive economic perspective from conservative newspapers is also correlated to conservative ideology.

This research suggests an interconnected representation that generally reflected the political ideology of the newspaper’s political ideology. Such a finding brings into question how media outlet’s actively frame media content – and how that framing might have very real, lived, consequences for lesbian, gay and transsexual refugees as well as refugees in general. Liberal papers represented refugees from a decidedly different ideological perspective than conservative papers. This distinction therefore then influences how readers understand the plight of refugees and who is responsible for them. Such conclusions have profound implications for governmental policy and individual interactions with refugees in general society –as well as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual international community.

Much more research is needed in this area to tease out lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender representation in the mainstream media. The sample here of LGBT content was far too small (6.1 percent) to make any generalizable conclusions. The lack of LGBT refugee content certainly suggests a lack of emphasis on LGBT issues in relation to the refugee crisis. It isn’t known if such a lack of emphasis is because of a simple lack of stated LGBT issues as it relates to refugees or if mainstream media are ignoring a major issue within the refugee community. Further, interviews with reporters and editors about the rationale for selecting a particular slant or approach is necessary to unpack how and why the LGBT community was treated so fundamentally different than the general refugee community – and why the refugee community was treated differently in different newspapers. There has been much argumentation about the ideological influence on stalwart political newspapers (e.g. Fox News). However, the interaction of ideology on less politically driven news outlets is less clear. Further research could tease out these ambiguities with content analyses on data that skirts the ideological edges of newspaper content.

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