

Maria Prymak

Professor Tamashasky

Writing 100-024

November 14, 2019

1500-1750

Amazing Race: Refugee Edition

President Donald Trump undoubtedly contributes to a new wave of political polarization that circulates the conversation on illegal migration, deportation, and border security because of his “zero tolerance” policies. Many Americans assume that refugees, especially, are problematic and therefore should not be granted legal status to cross the border. Many refugee advocates are attempting to break down barriers of exclusion in order to provide asylum for those struggling in ways most American citizens cannot fathom. Through the use of digital media, such as documentaries, American audiences are able to view the struggles and experiences of refugees fleeing from persecution, detainment, camps. Americans also enjoy the popular tv show, *The Amazing Race*, in which contestants travel the world and compete in various challenges in hopes of winning the ultimate prize; the chance to win one million dollars in cash, fancy trips, and flashy cars. But what happens at the end of refugee documentaries, are they given the chance for freedom, peace, and security? Or do we just move on with our lives, unaffected, undeterred, and ready to watch something much happier?

In the spirit of *The Amazing Race*, refugees should receive a similar television show in order to properly depict the hardships individuals experience during their journeys for asylum. In a nation so polarized by our leader’s anti-refugee language and policies, there should be a show

that humanizes refugees and shifts the public discourse around the perceptions of migrants seeking refuge.

Television shows significantly impact public discourse by their use of framing techniques. American reality television, in particular, is incredibly powerful because of its incorporation of “real” people, not actors. *The Amazing Race* documents unknown individuals rather than celebrities, vying for the grand prize of one million dollars without the overuse of scripts. Reality television viewers are driven by a certain level of desire to intrude on others’ lives by seeing people in their most vulnerable and natural habitats. On the other hand, *The British Psychological Society*, a representative body for psychology in the United Kingdom, says that people enjoy viewing a reality show because it has an “appeal that constitutes an extension of fictional drama, and is thus driven by positive feelings like empathy and compassion” (Witkowski). A show such as *The Amazing Race* portrays Americans involved in somewhat embarrassing competitions that test their strengths and weaknesses. The show provides the audience with a “chance to watch others travel the world and interact with diverse cultures as they race across continents, while also educating them about the cultures encountered” (Matthews 252). The show portrays global travel as an exotic, exciting, and luxurious adventure that is both educational and entertaining for contestants and audiences alike. Each destination offers a unique and unfamiliar cultural perspective.

Before one begins to look into the possible solutions that inspire more inclusive dialogue around the refugee crisis, it is worth investigating the root cause of numerous issues perpetrated by the Trump administration. From a scholarly perspective, experts have raised concerns regarding Trump’s problematic rhetoric and policies. Joshua Woods, the author of *Debating*

Immigration in the Age of Terrorism, Polarization, and Trump, provides an overview of how the president's words resemble negative discourse. Woods makes it clear that President Donald Trump engages in elitist dialogue that often involves negative rhetoric that is harmful to the positive growth of the country. Woods reports that Trump's immigration speeches are full of "contradictions with warm acceptance of immigrants as well as nativism and xenophobia," and images that perceptualize immigrants as "innovators and strivers, as well as criminals and terrorists" (Woods 73). Trump's contradictions incite division among Americans. Generally, Americans either view refugees as certain types of criminals seeking economic stability in illegal ways or as the victims who deserve attention and assistance. No matter what people tend to believe, they possess certain opinions without having the proper knowledge. People rarely understand the complexities of refugee issues.

Another root cause of the negative dialogue and misconceptions of refugees stem from the media's portrayal of outsiders entering the country. Author of *Divided Politics, Divided Nation* and director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C, Darrell West, presents many key elements that represent the current polarization of the American people. He believes the Trump administration contributes to the mutual intolerance between political parties. He states, "Simmering tensions over politics, economics, and culture have metastasized into an overarching us-versus-them environment" (West 3). Our nation's identity is heavily focused on the melting pot metaphor, "People of different backgrounds and viewpoints fuse into peaceful coexistence" (West 3). Unfortunately, this comparison appears to be a relic of the past because the media influences the public opinion of the American people, hence furthering the modern divisions within our country. Media outlets often isolate refugees by not

reporting the struggles they undergo. Instead, they are framed in a way that do not coincide with our values of accepting people from different backgrounds.

The best way to go about shifting the public discourse around the negative perceptions of migrants seeking refuge is to develop a television show similar to *The Amazing Race*. This show would pull inspiration from reality television shows and documentaries in order to educate the public about the realities of refugees' struggles. *The Amazing Race: Refugee Edition* would document the lives of refugees from all over the world and their personal journeys to the United States. The show would characterize refugees as who they are, not a facade or role producers design for them to portray. Cameras would follow refugees, both children and adults, in whatever path they take. By capturing the struggles and triumphs these people experience, viewers would feel more empathetic towards their situations. Similar to how *The Amazing Race* puts people in difficult challenges all around the world, this tv show would also record the real life hardships people are facing everyday. The show will capture all dimensions of refugees' stories, such as their time in exile, resettlement, detainment. Finally, the show would not glorify refugees or expose their struggles for profit, instead it would accurately show audiences what sort of internal and external battles refugees are facing that we normally do not comprehend.

As a country who generally prides itself for caring about human rights, we often fail to consider major setbacks individuals endure over the course of their lifetime. As author Christian Long expresses in the article, *How Television Handles Stories of Refugees and the Undocumented*, television has the "inherent ability to create empathy for its characters, regardless of their background" (Long). This will and should apply to *The Amazing Race: Refugee Edition* because it will significantly affect public perception by humanizing refugees

through the raw depiction of their journeys to the United States. Challenges like trying exotic foods from various countries will seem miniscule in comparison to the struggles of entering the United States without citizenship or legal status. This television show would be beneficial for audiences and refugees alike because it will break down the negative stereotypes and common misconceptions they experience when fleeing from discrimination and then enter even more of it. A show like this would break down walls of intolerance and exclusion enforced by the public. It would also raise awareness and enlighten the public's understanding of relevant issues. Author of *Impact of Media Narratives on the Inclusion of Refugees in Canada*, Farah Msefer, explains that media narratives, such as a television show, "inform and enlighten people who may not necessarily know much about refugee crises around the world and asylum-seeking processes" (Msefer). By shifting the focus of refugees to their humanity through the use of visuals such as this television show, their stories will definitely impact audiences into seeing pressing issues in new dimensions. Since the show will also depict individuals attempting to assimilate into the United States, this show is necessary to connect people from different backgrounds in order to shift public opinion into appreciating a country that is accepting and unified.

Just like any popular television show like the original *The Amazing Race* faces backlash and scrutiny, some may argue that this proposal would be unethical and unappealing. Guest blogger for the *British Psychological Society*, Tomasz Witkowski, dives into the allegation that "tv shows rely on viewers' enjoyment of the humiliation and degradation of participants" (Witkowski). In this instance, the participants are displaced individuals in search of asylum and stability. People might view a television show depicting these certain hardships as a greedy and immoral way for corporations to obtain monetary gain off of less fortunate individuals. Some

might even say that refugees are victims, and media outlets do not have the justifiable right to showcase their lives for views. Another critique that may appear is the exploitation of refugees in contrast of the United States and its dominance on the rest of the world. This raises the concern of capitalism and its own negative effects on a society. For example, political writer Elizabeth Montroy from the *Inquiries Journal* writes, “In positioning the United States as safer, cleaner, and superior, these images of countries being dangerous, dirty, chaotic, and unpredictable are “unusual to our capitalistic society” and reinforce stereotypes of impoverished and foreign countries” (Montroy). By creating a show that portrays migrants desperately vying to enter the United States, it would put the country on a certain pedestal above other nations and even worse, refugees themselves.

Although constructive criticism raises important concerns, *The Amazing Race: Refugee Edition* is not a representation or derived from malicious intent and overarching supremacy. The intent of the show is not to infringe or expose those seeking asylum, but is rather a form of using digital media to educate the public about the refugee crisis. By calling attention to an issue in which people are not given a voice or sense of safety, the show would also humanize refugees and explain the complexity of their circumstances. Not only does the First Amendment allow Americans certain freedoms to express their opinions and ideas to others, the media is also responsible for covering issues that inform the public on important issues. Without a doubt, the displacement crisis and the nation’s polarizing climate must be challenged with a new solution. The show would not support certain sides over others, but would rather depict refugees in their natural, and most vulnerable moments. By providing refugees with a platform that strictly

encapsulates their experiences, feelings, and desires, audiences will consider empathizing with those they once thought of as criminals or invaders.

In a country so polarized by our leader's rhetoric and actions, the American public should be actively engaged and knowledgeable on current events. People often fall into believing common misconceptions and stereotypes that harmfully destroy our values and dehumanize us. In order to shift the discriminative opinions instilled by Trump, an unconventional television show like *The Amazing Race: Refugee Edition* would address an important situation that would generate a more inclusive impact. The overall attitudes towards refugees would be improved through the depiction of individual stories.

Works Cited

Msefer, Farah. "Impact of Media Narratives on the Inclusion of Refugees in Canada."

Socialconnectedness.org, Social Connectedness Fellowship Program , 2017.

Long, Christian. "How Television Handles Stories of Refugees and the Undocumented." *Variety*,

[variety.com/2019/tv/events/refugee-storytelling-game-of-thrones-one-day-at-a-time-terror-infamy-atx-television-festival-1203236840/](https://www.variety.com/2019/tv/events/refugee-storytelling-game-of-thrones-one-day-at-a-time-terror-infamy-atx-television-festival-1203236840/).

Montroy, Elizabeth. "International Travel, Nation-Branding, and Orientalism: Conflicting

Portrayals of Americanism in 'The Amazing Race.'" *Inquiries Journal*, 1 Mar. 2015.

www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1014/2/international-travel-nation-branding-and-orientalism-conflicting-portrayals-of-americanism-in-the-amazing-race.

West, Darrell M. *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era*. Brookings

Institution PR, 2020.

Witkowski, Tomasz. "Why Do We Enjoy Reality TV? Researchers Say It's More about Empathy

than Humiliation." *Research Digest*, The British Psychological Society, 24 Nov. 2016.

Woods, Joshua. *Debating Immigration in the Age of Terrorism, Polarization, and Trump*.

Lexington Books, 2017.

<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2016/11/24/why-do-we-enjoy-reality-tv-researchers-say-its-more-about-empathy-than-humiliation/>

<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1014/international-travel-nation-branding-and-orientalism-conflicting-portrayals-of-americanism-in-the-amazing-race>