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The Flawed Media Coverage of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

The average American probably could not accurately locate the country of Syria on a world map, let alone explain in detail the complex issues surrounding the state of anarchy taking place there and the resulting refugee crisis. It is against this backdrop of ignorance that the media must attempt to inform the public about current events and development in the conflict, all while battling its own internal bias and the criticisms of politicians and everyday citizens. While other issues can be more easily covered, the news media's coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis is insufficient because it tends to make a single story out of a complex issue, fall victim to journalistic biases, and inspire grossly misinformed political views in the general public.

One main problem with the media's coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis is the fact that it is a complicated issue that is difficult to understand. Because Syria is so far away from the United States, the media tends to present it as a single story of chaos, destruction, and what conservatives like to call "radical Islam" without any mention of the other sides of such a multifaceted issue. Many articles try to cover the issue of immigration and terrorism by showcasing the potential dangers, and they occasionally go so far as to "invoke the specter of Europe being flooded with 'half a million' Islamic State fighters" (Byman). Spreading the idea that the immigrants are just masked criminals is inherently unhelpful, because it makes viewers

assume that they understand the situation completely and propagates negative stereotypes about the refugees coming from Syria.

What's more, the need for a compelling narrative also weighs heavily on the news media and influences the way they present information. If a story doesn't follow the most interesting turn of events, the media often doesn't report on it, instead preferring to overemphasize cases that do. For example, religion is immediately brought up every time a Muslim commits a crime, even if it wasn't religiously motivated at all while the faiths of other criminals are never even mentioned. Terrorism is a constant part of every discussion about immigration, and the tendency to equate it with immigration is all too common and reflects badly on the innocent people caught up in the conflict. This narrative bias comes about because the media attempts to connect every incident and explain every rationale; in reality, not everything is so simple. It is almost journalistic malpractice to forcibly simplify such a complicated web of issues.

The media obviously can't teach a lecture on the topic in just a few minutes, but that doesn't mean its coverage has to be incomplete or sensationalist, as much of it commonly is. This goes hand-in-hand with bad news bias, where they overemphasize the dangers of Syrian refugees, for example, even though many of the refugees are just women and children trying to survive. In describing the flow of refugees to Europe, one Business Insider article laments, "Short of addressing the roots of the problem in Syria, the EU is largely helpless to stop this mass migration" (Balanche). The wording of this kind of sentence paints the refugees as a plague that must be stopped, similar to how one would describe a migration of insects. In doing so, it dehumanizes the victims of the situation and makes them seem more foreign and harmful than they really are. Because average Americans don't tend to follow the news about Syria very

closely, they tend to form opinions based on whatever small snippet the daily morning show mentions without taking time to understand all of the complexities first. This ignorance means that people forget that Syrian refugees are actually trying to escape the same terrorism, religious extremism, and cultural genocide that they are so falsely equated with. Unfortunately, the fear tactics work, because uninformed audiences absorb both the implicit and explicit biases and allow them to shape their political views without considering the entire context of the situation.

Meanwhile, the politics of the media are another aspect of the Syrian coverage to be considered. Author Brooke Gladstone criticizes the increasing partisanship of the media, saying, “Now entire cable news channels report the world through obvious political prisms. Now websites that serve as primary news sources for many Americans make no secret of their ideological leanings” (110). While this is true, the main problem is not just biased news outlets, but the fact that many of those biased outlets try to pass off their coverage as being neutral and unbiased, giving audiences a false representation of the issue. It’s natural for journalists to have personal opinions on a subject; problems arise when they allow it to influence their coverage in presenting something as fact without backing it up with evidence.

Indeed, the refugee crisis is a very controversial topic with possible substantive effects on the US, especially if the government decides to allow refugees into the country. This harkens back to Gladstone’s idea of the status quo bias, where people tend to dislike change that disrupts their way of living (63). Seeing an influx of new people and new cultural influences into the country has the potential to cause great change, and the stress of change inherently scares people who might normally be open to helping others, especially when “the fear is that admitting refugees from this part of the world will open the door to more terrorism and violence” (Byman).

When faced with the decision to bring in new people and new opportunities for terror, or keep things the same, it is a natural instinct to opt for the latter, and it is the very same impulse that must be overcome if the crisis is to be solved anytime soon.

At the end of her work of nonfiction, Gladstone ultimately concludes that “we get the media we deserve” (156). While she is correct in describing the strong influence that people have over the media, this statement fails to adequately address the fact that the media also has a strong impact on the people. Despite the large influence of money over the work that journalists do, the media’s most crucial duty is to accurately cover a story, and there must be repercussions from society when they blatantly fail at that responsibility. Ultimately, the relationship is circular, because the people must keep the media honest, while the media’s purpose is to educate the people enough that they can do so. The solution to this problem is two-fold: the media must try harder to maintain strict standards in educating the public on Syria, while the people must learn more about the subject in order to keep the media honest.

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