Breaking the Mould: Refugees, Stereotypes, and Canadian Media

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ABSTRACT
While Canada has become a safe-haven for refugees fleeing persecution, baseless stereotypes about why refugees leave their country, as well as their presence in Canada, continue to be part of a national narrative. This paper explores three of these stereotypes in depth – refugees as resource stealers, queue jumpers, and security threats – and uses existing literature from the United Nations Refugee Agency, the Canadian Council for Refugees and Amnesty International, as well as the work of leading scholars, to show all bare no resemblance to the real situations facing most refugees who enter Canada. These stereotypes inhibit Canadians from appreciating the significant social, political and economic contributions refugees make to the country. In order for Canadians to recognize these contributions, stereotypes like these need to be exposed as falsehoods.

KEYWORDS
Refugee, Stereotype, Canada
Introduction

Every day, in countries across the world, people of all ages are forced to make the difficult decision to leave their homes, friends, families, and lives behind. Last year the “number of people forcibly uprooted by conflict and persecution worldwide stood at 42 million.”¹ With almost 7 billion people in the world,² there are many reasons why any given person may feel they need to leave their country. Amongst these reasons are war, conflict, persecution, poverty, corrupt governments, and environmental disaster. What distinguishes a refugee from those feeling compelled to leave, is choice; refugees have no other choice but to leave. They are overwhelmed with fear for their own safety and for those they love. Whether the persecution is created by state or non-state actors, many situations lack a governing body capable of providing protection. In many cases refugees have faced grave human rights violations and leave to find sanctuary in a country that will be able to provide them security.

Many refugees have made their way to Canada in the past, and refugees continue to arrive at Canada’s borders today. Unfortunately, due to stereotypes, refugees are not always welcomed with open arms when they arrive. Given the presence of multicultural thought in Canada, one would think that newcomers to Canada would be accepted by citizens and the media. This, however, is not the case as the media creates a strong stereotype that refugees have to overcome. This paper will discuss three stereotypes that the media has given refugees, namely “resource stealing”, “queue jumping”, and refugees as a security threat, a fear created by the “war on terror”.

This paper will analyze where these stereotypes have arisen from, why they exist, and why it is fundamentally important that these stereotypes be broken and exposed for what they are: lies. While confronting and analyzing popular, negative responses and points of views regarding refugees, this paper will argue that the mass media has created and perpetuated stereotypes regarding refugees, furthermore deepening the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy in Canada and reversing the positive images which are widely believed regarding ‘our compassionate Canada’ globally. Furthermore, it will be argued that in order to see the profound impact refugees make in enhancing Canada’s cultural, social, economic and political life, these stereotypes need to be addressed and proved to be untrue.

In addressing the issue of the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes regarding refugees in Canada, various issues arose in the piecing together of this paper. While research and literature has been published formally on refugee

¹ (UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency 2009)
² (Worldometers 2010)
stereotypes, there is little work in the field concerning the importance of this issue to Canada specifically. This paper, therefore, is complimentary to existing Canadian refugee literature insofar as it sheds new light onto why the perpetuation of refugee stereotypes through Canadian mainstream media is important to Canada. While researching this topic, the question arose of whether or not to focus on one specific refugee group in Canada. A limitation to this paper therefore, may be that it does not focus on one specific refugee group within Canada. This is, however, because refugee stereotypes are inherent to all refugees as a whole within Canada. While this may make the focus a little bit vague, this paper more specifically bases itself on the dynamic complex surrounding the issue of refugee stereotyping present in Canada, given Canada’s self proclaimed multicultural stance globally.

What distinguishes Canada from other countries in the world is nor its geographic proximity to war, neither a lack of land or resources; it is that Canada has policies that promote the image of a welcoming, compassionate country accepting of differences, promoting multiculturalism, standing on the belief that Canada holds its commitments as important. It is therefore hard to understand the media’s rhetoric and attitude towards refugees since they are supposed to be promoting Canada beliefs and views in their writing. In reviewing and analyzing various Canadian media sources there are 3 persistent stereotypes which emerge (as confirmed internationally by Amnesty International).

The following quote by, Diane Francis, Editor-at-Large for the National Post, well known columnist, broadcaster, author of nine best-selling books, sought-after speaker, host of events and participant in conferences around the world,\(^3\) provides an alarming but truthful depiction of where the mass media in Canada is with regards to newcomers, especially refugees – providing a relevant and important starting point for this paper:

> The vast majority of Canada’s refugee claimants are fraudsters. Far from being ragtag displaced persons carrying all their possessions in the world in a sack, they arrive here from Frankfurt or New Delhi in suits, with fancy luggage and even phone numbers of oncologists or drug dealers or tennis clubs to join. They fly in economy, or first-class, often with a counterfeit visitor’s visa, and once they arrive at a Canadian airport they make a refugee claim. Then up to 10 years’ of legal dodges begin. If they eventually lose their right to remain, they simply disappear.  

Financial Post - National Post 2 March 2002 - Diane Francis

\(^3\) (Francis, About Diane 2011)
This quote presents refugees as fraudsters, placing refugees inside a set of false and negative stereotypes. To understand why these stereotypes are so damaging, one must first understand what a refugee is.

**Refugees through a Canadian Lens**

Refugees tend to be subsumed within the broader immigration category. When viewed like that Canadian public opinion see refugees as a class of people whose intake numbers can be regulated according to political and economical whims. In other words, there is no obligation for Canada to have an immigration program; however, Canada does have a legal obligation to protect refugees who come to its borders. Refugees are not a new phenomenon. “There have always been refugees, because there have always been those who could not accept the society or the state in which they lived and those whom society or states could not accept.”

While refugees are not new, the nature of the conflict has changed. In the 21st century refugees are defined as “people who are forced to leave their home countries because of serious human rights abuses.” The right to asylum from persecution is an international human right, articulated in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. According to this Convention:

> a refugee is a person: who is outside his or her home country and who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

This convention was drafted to entrench a global definition of what it is to be a refugee to ensure that all groups of refugees are treated equally by all signatories of its document. Canada is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Convention against Torture, and therefore, has legal obligations towards refugees under both conventions:

> The Supreme Court of Canada has also confirmed that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right of asylum seekers to fundamental justice. Not everyone who makes a claim in Canada will be found to be a refugee, but all need to be heard to ensure that no one is sent back to face persecution or torture.

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4 (Smyser 1987, 3)  
5 (Smyser 1987, 4)  
6 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008, 2)  
7 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008, 2)  
8 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008)
Refugees have frequently been successful in finding asylum in neighbouring countries. Having found asylum, the refugees are safe from the persecution that they feared in their own home countries, but they may face the difficulty of not being thoroughly integrated in their new country. There is no universal solution for decreasing the number of people around the world who face persecution, or for the number of people around the world seeking asylum from this persecution. Due to this, many refugees come to Canada seeking refuge:

> If we don’t make a conscious effort to be aware of our implicit bias, they may influence how we interact with others, affecting not only who we chose as our friends, but most importantly who we want as our employees, tenants, roommates, doctors, politicians...even who we want to welcome as immigrants and refugees.⁹

This quote introduces some of the reasons for why it is important to combat damaging stereotypes. Now that it is clear what constitutes a refugee, this paper will examine what a stereotype is and how they are created.

**Refugees Stereotypes**

**Defining Stereotypes and the Media’s Role**

“We all absorb implicit bias and stereotypes, and these have real impacts on how we perceive others: who we think we can trust, who we think belongs, who we think is normal...and who isn’t.”¹⁰ To better understand what a social stereotype is, one can look at the origin of the word in the context of printing. In printing, a stereotype is formed or cast when it becomes used enough to create a mould.¹¹ Stereotypes exist because of use. This mirrors the more commonly used term of social stereotype, similarly formed out of use. “A stereotype is an oversimplified, generalized attitude about a group of people.”¹²

Stereotype’s have become a metaphor for societal opinions, ideas or popular beliefs about a specific set of individuals, that are repeated enough to create a standardized mold or conception. “Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people—usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation.”¹³ Throughout history refugees have often been marginalized by host societies as a

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⁹ (Canadian Council for Refugees 2011)  
¹⁰ (Canadian Council for Refugees 2011)  
¹¹ (Encyclopædia Britannica 2011)  
¹² (UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency 2007)  
¹³ (Media Awareness Network 2010c)
result of prevailing stereotypes. As described briefly above, the stereotypes addressed in this paper are common to society, and collectively acknowledged by global organizations, such as Amnesty International Canada, one of the leading organizations campaigning for the rights of refugees both in Canada and abroad.

The media is supposed to be able to provide its audience with an objective and unbiased set of information, letting the events speak for themselves. Unfortunately, if misused the “media has the power to grant or deny legitimacy to whole groups of people.”14 With the ability to influence the minds of millions of listeners and viewers, the media has the ability to modify thoughts and attitudes, opinions and behaviours. While it is safe to say that not very many aspects of life are free from bias, especially perhaps news media sources, problems arise when news stories and media opinions become fixated in the minds of public discourse as fact. While classifying individuals into groups, or the othering of individuals may very well be a normal, reoccurring, and natural part of human nature:

Stereotypes become problematic when they reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations; transform assumptions about particular groups of people into "realities"; are used to justify the position of those in power; perpetuate social prejudice and inequality; and fuel feelings of otherness – "us" vs. "them." 15

When the media’s coverage is intellectual, truthful and unbiased, the media can often play an important role in informing public debate. The misinformation spread by the media through stereotyping, however, can seriously undermine this function. The media has constructed a negative identity for refugees by manufacturing stigmatization through the use of stereotyping. The mainstream and mass media has, therefore, have distorted the perception and portrayal of refugees by constructing and attaching a negative image to their social identity, such as that of stealing Canadian resources.

**Three Stereotypes**

**“Resource Stealers”**

The first stereotype this paper will address and defeat is that refugees are draining our economy by stealing our resources and financially burdening Canada; while

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14 (Media Awareness Network 2010a)
15 (Media Awareness Network 2010b)
coming to Canada in search of wealth, prosperity and more favourable economic conditions. This stereotype is founded on the idea that refugees and asylum seekers drain resources and are “burdens on the welfare system…” An example of this stereotype being perpetuated in mainstream media, can be seen again in the writings of Financial Post columnist Diane Francis. While discussing the World Economic Forum in Davos, specifically with regards to Middle East North Africa (MENA), she claims:

(...) the result is the world's most dysfunctional region, whose biggest export successes have been oil, terrorism and refugees which are financial burdens to the United States, Europe, Canada and much of the rest of the world.

This stereotype is invalid due to the fact that refugee claimants in Canada are only eligible for basic social assistance and emergency health care:

This is a matter of basic human dignity: no one wants to see people starving or bleeding to death on the streets. However, under current law, refugee claimants are entitled to only the bare minimum: they do not, for example, receive full health coverage or child tax benefits. Many claimants do not want to rely on social assistance and find work as soon as they can. They pay taxes, which go towards services for Canadians to which they themselves are not entitled.

Refugees arrive to Canada under dire and serious circumstances whereby they have reasonable fear of persecution. This stereotype also suggests that refugees come to Canada in search of wealth and prosperity. While it may seem difficult to separate refugees fleeing persecution from those fleeing economic instability in the countries from which they flee. An April 2003 study done by the U.K. based Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found that the majority of asylum seekers are driven by:

(...) conflict and repression rather than economic factors... In a detailed analysis of refugee trends, the study concluded the ten most common countries of origin of asylum-seekers in Western Europe are linked by their chronic instability, rather than their poverty.

This quote further invalidates claims that refugees are primarily driven by the desire to seek riches. In analyzing this first popular stereotype towards refugees it is easy
to see how difficult it would be to recognize the profound impact refugees make in enhancing Canadian life.

“Queue-Jumpers”

The second common stereotype attached to refugees is the idea that refugees “jump the line” to get into Canada. This stereotype of “queue jumping” is rooted in the idea that there is a formal line in many countries for refugees to get in from refugee camps abroad to come to places of sanctuary like Canada. This stereotype is furthermore founded on the premise that there are, in fact, protocols set up by agencies such as the UN to aid refugees in relocating to a more safe country such as Canada. The truth of the matter, however, is that refugees are not always in a position to line up for a visa at their local government office especially if it is their government who is persecuting them. With strict laws in some countries and innumerable barriers and challenges, it is very difficult for refugees to come to Canada.

Due to the fact that “refugees are people who have been forced from their homes by human rights abuses,” this makes the very concept of an individual being a queue jumper very problematic from the outset insofar as “all refugees have a right to protection, wherever they are. Saying that some refugees are more deserving than others is the same as saying that some human beings are of less value than others.” An example of this can be seen in the media’s representation of the 559 Chinese migrants who made their way to the shores of British Columbia in the summer of 1999. This events coverage in “Canada's major dailies - The Vancouver Sun, The Globe and Mail and the National Post - ran editorials condemning the Chinese migrants.”

Accused of jumping the line, anything that was left to say was expressed in “the headlines [which] said it all: "Ship's passengers must be sent home" (The Vancouver Sun, July 23), "Boat people who need a return ride" (The Globe and Mail, July 23),

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20 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008)
21 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008)
22 (Clarkson 2000)
23 (Clarkson 2000)
“Gatecrashers are not welcome” (National Post, July 22).” Diane Francis also played a role in the commentary following the arrival of these individuals in British Columbia. Francis depicted:

(…) refugees and immigrants in this country as 'undesirables' (January 9), people who’ve made Canada 'a nation of suckers' (February 27), 'trash' (April 3), 'criminals, warlords, and terrorists,' 'bogus and expensive' (April 6) and 'scum' (April 8).

It has become popular opinion that Canadians “are sick and tired of paying the freight for queue-jumpers, freeloaders, criminals, and all the other undesirables and destroyers of our country.” It is clear however that:

Asylum seekers are not breaking the rules. They are fleeing violence and terror and most do not have access to resettlement through the UN (the “queue”) due to the extreme difficulty in applying and the very limited number of places available.

This stereotype would have Canadians believing that refugees are not in fact “fleeing torture and death at the hands of their malevolent government… [however] obviously these people are coming to Canada not to flee persecution but to avoid having to meet normal immigration requirements.” This is not the case in most situations:

Given that only 1-2% of the world’s refugees will be resettled in any given year and that the average length of time a refugee spends in a refugee camp has increased from 9 to 17 years in the space of just one decade.

It is surprising that the term “queue jumper” is used. Additionally:

(…) given the lack of fair and effective asylum procedures, durable solutions, and physical protection in countries of first asylum, which is known to force refugees to make onward movements in search of protection, the notion of “queue-jumping” is particularly inappropriate.

Upon arriving in Canada afraid and filled with uncertainty, refugees are not seen as survivors but instead as violators and threats to Canadian security.

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24 (Clarkson 2000)  
25 (Clarkson 2000)  
26 (Goodall 2010)  
27 (Amnesty International Canada 2011)  
28 (Bisset 2002, 37-38)  
29 (UNHCR 2006, 2)  
30 (UNHCR 2006, 2)
“Security Threats”

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is under constant pressure from governments and its executive committee as “its position is being seriously weakened by the increasing perception of refugees as a threatening and destabilizing force.” In their 2005 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development described it perfectly when they referenced that “today’s security strategies suffer from an overdeveloped military response to collective security threats and an underdeveloped human security response.” For centuries Canada has been glorified as a ‘multicultural’ and inviting country, self-perceived as a place that welcomes people from near and far, where people are free to express themselves religiously, culturally, politically, and personally. Canada has flaunted their ability to be a country rich in equality and diversity. With this, Canada has also flaunted its tradition of refugee protection. However, you cannot embrace the image of being an accepting country while retaining the position that refugees and asylum seekers are a threat to Canadian security.

The last stereotype this paper will discuss is the view that refugees are a threat to Canadian security, arguably primarily founded and fueled by the “war on terror”. Following the events of September 11th, the world, as people saw it, seemed a much less secure and more uncertain place. In these times of high anxiety, the insecurity and uncertainty generated by the terrorist attacks brought many people in stable, rights-respecting countries closer to the insecurity that was present in the lives of many of the world’s refugees. Unfortunately with this, the new language and politics of security have worked to reinforce stereotypes especially for newcomers to Canada.

This fear and uncertainty was exacerbated by the construction of refugees as security threats. An example of this can be seen in the example of Martin Collacott, Senior Fellow at The Fraser Institute, where he studies immigration policy, the treatment of refugees, and related issues involving terrorism. Collacott is a distinguished member of the Department of External Affairs for Canada, Director General for Security Services and in coordinator of counter-terrorism policy at the international level. Some of Collacott’s articles include ‘Keeping an Eye on Who Gets In’, ‘A Refugee System In Need of Overhaul’, ‘Canada Becoming a Haven for Terrorists Due to Lax Immigration and Refugee Policies According to New Study’,

31 (Moorehead 2005, 37)
32 (KAIROS Canada 2011)
33 (Fraser Institute 2011)
‘Canada Becoming Haven for Would Be Terrorists While Politicians Look the Other Way in Search of Votes’ all of which detail that newcomers, namely refugees, arriving to Canada. This places Canada in the hands of terrorists and, consequently, threatens the safety and security of Canadians. In one of these articles Collacott quotes that “Canada’s flawed refugee system and a lack of political will to reform the program has been a major factor in making Canada a prime destination for terrorists” which he attests to a new study put out by The Fraser Institute on Canada’s Inadequate Response to Terrorism.

According to Thomas Hobbes, “all of our actions are performed for self interested reasons, primarily to obtain satisfaction and avoid harm.” Is it possible that the Canadian public legitimately believes that they are under attack or are living in a culture of fear because of the inclusion of refugees into Canadian life? Or is it more likely that this “social construction of social insecurity” has simply been created and perpetuated by the mainstream media? This unfair targeting and grouping has created and instilled fear, trauma, and suspicion about the refugee community among the remainder of the population.

If the mass media is able to construct the image of the refugee as a security threat, Canadians may become less accepting of refugees. The war on terror is not, however, considered to be a typical war. Most wars throughout history have been fought using common methods and weapons. These so called common wars and this new unusual form of war are both equally as destructive. The difference between the two forms of war is that this new war on terror did not involve the use of weapons where the masterminds who planned the event, the suicide “bombers” who carried out the actions, the victims who died in the event, the victims who lived and will be traumatized for the remainder of their lives, and, finally, the victims who lost a family member or friend, cannot be individually counted and identified.

In lieu of this “war on terror”, individuals that share a common ethnicity or religion with the terrorists involved in the September 11th attacks have been racially ostracized. Society has been taught to fear the entire group due to the actions of a small minority of people from the Islamic faith. Since “the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the Canadian Muslim community has been placed under a national security spotlight.” Alongside this:

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34 (Fraser Institute 2011)
35 (Collacott 2006)
36 (Hobbes 2001, 57)
37 (Suhrke 2003, 96)
38 (CAIR-CAN - Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations 2004, 3)
the whole notion of security, once seen as being about keeping refugees safe … has shifted. Now it is the refugees themselves who are seen to pose the danger, particularly in the wake of September 11 2001.\(^{39}\)

This however is not the case. In reality, refugees may come from dangerous places where their governments or military are unable to provide them with adequate security, but this does not in any way translate to refugees posing a threat to security in Canada. In contrast, refugees themselves are filled with fear. Already traumatized by what they have suffered, refugees find themselves in a new, unfamiliar country, surrounded by strangers who live in a “pervasive culture of disbelief.”\(^{40}\) They are vulnerable and virtually powerless and, even in a country like Canada; they are often met with skepticism and discrimination.

It is important to combat stereotypes because with the presence of these stereotypes in Canada, it can be difficult to see the large contributions that refugees have made, and continue to make towards Canadian life and Canadian society. As a brief example of how large the contributions have been from refugees to Canada this section will briefly discuss the life and actions of Adrienne Clarkson.

“Studies show that refugees and immigrants contribute positively to the Canadian economy.”\(^{41}\) Adrienne Clarkson is an example of this. Born in 1939 arriving in Canada as a toddler after her family fled the Japanese invasion of 1941,\(^{42}\) Clarkson went on to contribute to Canada culturally, socially, economically and politically. “A leading figure in Canada's cultural life, Clarkson has had a rich and distinguished career in broadcasting, journalism, the arts and public service,” \(^{43}\) becoming “…the first Agent-General for Ontario in Paris, promoting Ontario's business and cultural activities abroad.”\(^{44}\) While representing Canada’s culture socially both within Canada and around the world, Clarkson also went on to attain doctorates from four Canadian universities before going on to become Governor General of Canada in 1999 until 2005.\(^{45}\) With the presence of the stereotypes mentioned in this paper dominating mainstream media it can be difficult to see the profound impact refugees make in enhancing Canadian life.

\(^{39}\) (Moorehead 2005, 37)

\(^{40}\) (Pratt 2005, 24)

\(^{41}\) (Amnesty International Canada 2011)

\(^{42}\) (UNHCR Refugee Agency 2011)

\(^{43}\) (UNHCR Refugee Agency 2011)

\(^{44}\) (UNHCR Refugee Agency 2011)

\(^{45}\) (UNHCR Refugee Agency 2011)
Conclusion

Whether or not politicians or writers in the mass media influence the process of creating and perpetuating stereotypes within Canada towards refugees, as this paper has argued, it is impossible to say for sure. However, when the media’s coverage is intellectual, truthful and unbiased, the media can often play an important role in informing public debate. The misinformation spread by the media seriously undermines the function that the media plays as mediator of intelligent public debate. The heartbreaking reality is that the anti-refugee opinions expressed in the media’s coverage, is the real threat, not the refugees arriving to Canada – instead of speaking out in hateful and stereotypical ways, save your voice for the reason that made them refugees.\(^46\)

Carl Sandburg said that we have a choice in life; he asked, will it be “the single clenched fist lifted and ready, or the open hand held out and waiting?” A decision needs to be made immediately; will we be a country of clenched fists, waging war on each other during our times of difficulty and need, or will Canada stretch that hand out as far as it will go and help as many lives as we can along the way:

Refugees are like you and me. So what’s the difference? Really only one: fear. While our homes are safe and our rights protected, their homes have been destroyed, and any rights they once enjoyed have been swept away by violence and hatred – and they’ve been living in constant fear for their very lives. That’s why they are refugees. Of course they wish they were back home – wouldn’t you? But it’s still too dangerous, and for now we must continue to offer them our protection. So please, don’t get mad at refugees. Instead save your breath for the situation that’s made them refugees.\(^47\)

As it has been illustrated in this paper, what distinguishes a refugee from those feeling compelled to leave, is choice; refugees have no other choice but to leave for a country which will be able to provide them security. Unfortunately, due to stereotypes, refugees are not always welcomed when they arrive. Despite multicultural thought in Canada, newcomers must overcome stereotypes. This paper has argued that the mass media has created and perpetuated stereotypes regarding refugees, deepening the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy in Canada and reversing the positive images widely believed to be true to Canada.

\(^{46}\) (UNHCR 2011)

\(^{47}\) (UNHCR 2011)
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