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Abstract

The months preceding and following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States has incited furious debate about the authenticity of media discourse in the shaping of reality (cf. fake news), including in particular the reporting of refugees from predominantly Muslim regions and their resettlement into Western nations. Much of this debate is rooted in how opposing discourse clans, such as liberal and conservative ideologies, construct a narrative of nationhood around contested views of refugees. Examining mainstream and alternative media from a critical discourse analytic perspective, the paper uncovers how two key narratives about the Syrian refugee crisis emerge when the media attempts to orient their respective audiences to government policy through the discursive formation of the American Dream. Drawing on aspects of historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, and social impact, the analysis of the data reveals a discursive fracas between a humanistic perspective on the crisis that exploits a banal understanding of the American Dream, and a more dichotomous narrative that homogenises refugees as a threat to the American way of life. These observations add to the growing body of literature that questions the ways in which the media discursively shapes, and is shaped by, political ideologies.

Keywords: Media discourse, Ideology, American Dream, Syrian refugees, Immigration, Nationalism, Trump

Fabricating the American Dream in U.S. Media Portrayals of Syrian Refugees: A Discourse Analytical Study

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I ran for president because I believed the American Dream was at risk for millions of our fellow citizens.

-- President Bill Clinton's Radio Address April 8, 1995

1. Introduction

The American Dream is an ideology that has its roots in early U.S. history, perhaps most notably during the time of the Declaration of Independence when optimism for the future was high and hope for sovereignty became a reality. Although beliefs systems regarding individual liberty and economic prosperity are central to many important periods in U.S. history, the American Dream did not become formally known as such until 1931 when James Truslow Adams wrote extensively about "a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (214). This oft-cited observation of opportunity, which is part of a larger sensationalized interpretation of U.S. history, circulated the fabrication that the American Dream is unique to the United States (White & Hanson 2011), and thus provided the ideological foundation for future generations on which to create a sense of national identity. However, the American Dream is not merely a discursive tool for constructing a sense of national identity: the construct offers hope and inspiration.

These dreams do not materialize in a vacuum. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous public speech in 1963, the rags to riches narrative popularized in Hollywood films, the political rhetoric of elected officials, and of course U.S. history textbooks all use, and indeed exploit, the belief that the American Dream not only exists, but it must also be protected. In an insightful book on how class and race figure into the land-of-opportunity trope, Hochschild (1995: 15) writes that

> the American dream has been attached to everything from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury. Nevertheless, the phrase elicits...a new world where anything can happen and good things might.

More recently, Rank, Hirschl, and Foster (2014: 2) note that "the American Dream has been deeply rooted in the concept of a journey… to a new country… across generations, and… within one's life. It is about motion and progress, it is about optimism, and it is about finding success and fulfillment along the way." The notion of a journey is, of course, quintessentially American. The postcolonial

nation is founded on migration: the period between the arrival of White settlers to refugees currently leaving predominantly Muslim nations to escape civil unrest is about a journey to a new country.

The discourses that come from the reporting of refugee journeys has become the scrutiny of academics interested in the representation of human interest stories in changing political contexts. Gale (2004), in exploring the intersection between political and media discourse, reveals three representational themes in the depiction of the refugee and state: state as a humanitarian nation "with a shared humanity with the Other"; refugees as the "boat people" escaping from oppression; and the "border protection theme that places a greater emphasis on notions of the nation's sovereignty and rights" in contrast to the "'illegal', non-western, non-Christian Other" (334). Continuing the thread of research into conflicting representations of refugees, Park (2008), in her study of the construction of refugee in U.S. social work, reveals "the refugee ideal was valorized in social work discourse to both exhort and contest immigration restrictions" during WWII, causing many liberals against the imposed restrictions to resist the construction of "refugees as problematic" (771). Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) similarly found that there is a tendency in media discourse, particularly conservative and tabloid venues, to circulate "conflated and confused meanings" of refugees and asylum seekers creating "moral panic" (33) dictating dominant understanding about refugees. Steimel (2010), combining narrative and discourse analysis in the examination of the discursive construction of refugees, notes that typically in American media "refugees are presented (a) as prior victims; (b) as in search of the American Dream; and (c) as unable to achieve the American Dream… these discourses represent a narrative of escape, hope, and then harsh reality for refugees in America's current economic climate" (219).

While some work has been done on media portrayals of refugees within the context of the American Dream, the current political climate demands a new understanding of how the refugee construct is connected vis-a-vis to the political rhetoric of the Trump Administration, as well as the Syrian refugee crisis. The discursive construction of any category, issue, or event is about practice and social effect, audience and context, history and future. Add to this an ever-evolving socio-political landscape shaped by conflicting narratives of fear and acceptance, protectionism and globalisation, together with the expanding role of media in the shaping of allegedly objective and alternative facts, and the emergence of 'fake' news and 'real' narratives of struggle. Thus, the study of refugee discourses cannot be truly exhausted but only kept up with, as far as possible, in terms of social, political and cultural developments. The emigration of more than 11 million Syrians caught in the outbreak of the Syrian civil war since 2011, and the 2017 instatement of the Trump Administration, which suspended the American refugee intake program has resurrected a furious debate about the sensibility of State absorbing scores of asylum seekers from troubled regions. The discursive fracas emerging from various discourse clans (Bhatia, 2015) conveys two primary, competing narratives:

> the first voiced by liberal media about victimised refugees escaping from their tragic pasts to achieve the American Dream, positioning audiences against the Trump Administration by pushing a humanitarian perspective;
>
> the second deriving from conservative media that portrays refugees as a threat to national security and the American way of life, reconceptualising the American Dream as the pursuit to make the country great again, reorienting readers in favour of current U.S. foreign policy.

The aim of this study is to examine how these two narratives are discursively constructed and the ways in which the ideologies espoused in such discourse are dependent on a particular view of Syrian refugees.

2. Methodology

The discursive portrayal of Syrian refugees in the context of the American Dream is a complex issue steeped in political eventualities, and as such requires an appropriately multi-perspective methodology. Such an approach enables a close analysis of how such portrayals are formed in the media, including the intentions of the author/actor, power struggles within social domains, as well as the social, cultural, political and historical contexts which influence these versions of reality. A combined analysis incorporating dimensions of historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, linked to an account of some of the social effects of these actions will, it is argued, permit the exploration of the dynamic discursive processes that give rise to those social and political tensions which imbue portrayals of refugees (Bhatia, 2015). This paper will thus critically analyse the data from the perspective of three interrelated components:

1. Historicity- our construction of reality is often a result of the recontextualisation of past knowledge and experience into present day action; to analyse which the framework draws on the concept of *structured immediacy* (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011), focusing on "how participants enrich the here-and-now of action by connecting it to the past" (66), and which Bhatia (2015) defines as *the unconscious or conscious reconceptualization of historical antecedents in an attempt to situate and present specific instances of current reality, often in relation to the future* (Bhatia, 2015).
2. Linguistic and semiotic action- subjective conceptualisations of the world materialise in an individual/group's linguistic and semiotic actions, perceivably through metaphorical rhetoric; to analyse which the framework borrows elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA), in particular *critical metaphor analysis* (Charteris-Black, 2004), which investigates the intention in the creation and diffusion of discursive metaphorical constructions.
3. Social impact- the language and actions of individuals/groups engender many (often delineating and homogenising) categories, which can be analysed through Jayyusi's (1984) concept of *categorization* that explicates how people "organize their moral positions and commitments round certain category identities" (183).

To enrich the investigation of these three interrelated components, a range of lexico-syntactic and semantico-pragmatic tools, keeping the nature of the various discourse analytical models integrated in mind, will be employed, some of which may include: metaphor, allegory, temporal forms, category-sets, topoi, recontextualization, and parallelisms.

The primary data for this paper consists of a large range of opinion, editorial and news pieces taken from a variety of American 'mainstream' (sources part of large news conglomerates created through mergers post the 1996 Telecommunications Act [Cissel, 2012]) and alternative media (independent sources), in a variety of print and digital forms, conveying both liberal (e.g. New York Times, CNN, Washington Post) and conservative perspectives (e.g. Fox News, Breitbart, National Review). The data ranges from the end of 2016 to mid-2017 (covering media reaction to the Trump Administration's initial policies and executive orders). The criteria for data selection included articles that dealt primarily with either Syrian refugees or refugees in the context of the Syrian war. It is also important to indicate here that the individual nationalities of the authors of collected articles did not preclude

them drawing on the American Dream/Make America Great Again trope since these were American publications aimed at a local audience. The paper also draws on a secondary corpus of data comprising news and views expressed in a variety of academic sources in order to better inform our understanding of the construct of the American Dream and its impact on the representation of refugees.

3. Analysis

Over the last few decades, we have witnessed media discourse cast refugees typically in the role of victims escaping brutalities of their homeland, or a burden on national resources chasing the American Dream. While the circumstances responsible for producing refugees has not changed much over the course of time (war, genocide, persecution etc.), the American Dream has in recent years become a rhetorical centrepiece that informs our ways of knowing and seeing the world.

Many factors and phenomena contribute to why the American Dream is a focal point of contemporary political discussion (e.g. stagnant wage growth, unemployment, increased education costs); however, the heightened awareness of this ideology can be attributed most recently and prominently to the 2016 presidential elections in the United States when the then candidate Donald Trump ran (and won) on a platform suggesting that the country is not what it once was: 'Make America Great Again'. This campaign platform and now policy agenda are founded on isolationist beliefs and a general lack of openness to 'outsiders', which materialises in Trump's position on trade agreements, border security, immigration, and of course, a travel ban on Muslims. In other words, the current presidential platform argues that the American Dream can be restored by protecting the local workforce, securing the southern border, decreasing immigration, and prohibiting Muslims from entering the country.

The current study is thus timely in that it examines how news media use discursive portrayals of Syrian refugees to participate in the ideological struggle between isolationist policies and humanitarian activism. Media discourse, in promoting the view that Syrian refugees are either harmless or dangerous, thus offers opportunities to reflect on how the American Dream is not merely an ideological construct, but is additionally a rhetorical tool to inform how individuals should come to an understanding of policy decisions.

3.1 Syrian Refugees as Victims

Discursive portrayals of Syrian refugees in predominantly left-leaning media often rely on victim narratives, which offer opportunities for readers to become sympathetic consumers of political news reporting. This recontextualisation of Syrian refugees from potential threat (as espoused by the Trump Administration and close allies, including right-leaning media) to trauma victim makes use of several discursive strategies and rhetorical tools. Namely, the discursive portrayals of plight by and large rely on the narrative that migration is not only obligatory, but also the reasons for needing to resettle are based on trauma, death, turmoil, and shattered dreams.

(Extract 1) She walked through the war-torn streets of Syria with a baby in her arms… three more children following closely behind as civil war erupted around her. She was a young, widowed mother and the streets were filled with chaos and countless dangers, but in her mind, she had no other options. And so she walked. (Tomlinson, 11/12/16, The Hour)

(Extract 2) Ahmad dodged bullets in Syria. Bushra received death threats in Iraq. Awino walked a thousand miles to flee civil war in Sudan… Five years into Syria's bloody civil war, Ahmad's story sadly sounds familiar. The 38-year-old salesman for an electrical company abandoned his Damascus home when fighting erupted. He escaped sniper fire; witnessed executions. (Basu, 20/6/16, CNN)

(Extract 3) Beginning three years ago in the Syrian city of Aleppo, it has taken them through streets patrolled by snipers and across a militarized border where guards shoot to kill. It has taken them through three years eking out a living in Turkey as Syria's war killed hundreds of thousands and turned their old street into piles of shattered stone… Amid the largest refugee crisis since World War II, families like the Khojas represent just the tiniest fraction of a human exodus encompassing the rich and poor of every faith. (Loveluck, 7/2/17, The Washington Post)

(Extract 4) The Syrian refugees I have met are ordinary people whose lives have been upended by extraordinary suffering. Some were tortured for peacefully calling for freedom. Others spent months eating leaves when their communities were encircled and starved. Still others barely escaped bombs that flattened their neighborhoods. They have lost homes, limbs, loved ones, dreams. All say that they would prefer to live with safety and dignity in their own country if they could. But they cannot. (Pearlman, 30/1/17, The Washington Post)

(Extract 5) Ali's [director of Interfaith Ministries in Houston] definition of refugees is very simple. Refugees, he says, are normal people in abnormal circumstances… they flee because they have to, not because they want to leave their homeland. The subtext to both definition and corollary: any one of us can become refugees. That is, says Ali, just the nature of the world in which we live. (Meyer, 02/2017, Texas Monthly)

We see in the extracts above a sympathetic portrayal of refugees, whereby through a series of emotive parallelisms, they are cast as victims rather than potentially dangerous to Americans. The rhetorical function of the victim narrative is remarkable, as it humanises not only refugees, but also current immigration policy debates that treat communities from predominantly Muslim countries as a threat to the American way of life. In dramatic juxtapositions, for instance, the vulnerability of refugees ('a baby in her arms', 'three more children', 'young, widowed mother', 'communities were encircled and starved') against the harsh realities of war is exposed ('war-torn streets', 'civil war erupted', 'chaos and countless dangers', 'bloody civil war', 'streets patrolled by snipers', 'guards shoot to kill', 'bombs that flattened their neighbourhoods'). Words and actions depicting survival and determination are attributed to refugees ('dodged bullets', 'flee', 'escape', 'eking out a living'), who are represented as part of a 'human exodus'. This biblical reference recontextualises the tribulations of refugees in terms of the departure of the Chosen people from Egypt in the Old Testament, playing down their association with Islam, playing up their human-ness, and thus making them more relatable and palatable to those of Christian and Jewish faiths.

The victim narrative is fortified by additional discursive tools, such as death and upheaval. The extracts for example emphasize the mortality of refugees, their 'homes, limbs and loved ones, dreams', at threat from 'war', 'bullets', 'death threats', 'executions', 'sniper fire', 'bombs'. The

displacement of so many individuals is further recontextualised through the topos of illustrative example (Wodak et al., 2009), framed as the 'largest crisis since World War II'. The direct comparison here between both world events expressed through the superlative 'largest' and temporal reference 'since', connecting the past with the present, and in doing so transferring the connotations of one event onto the other so that "neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer" (Burke, 1989: 98), and both history and the present become socially conditioned, distorted by subjective conceptualisations of reality.

In these discursive portrayals, the media performs the role of "social educator" (Hall, 1975: 11), evaluating the current refugee crisis through the frame of past war experiences of the 1930s and 40s during which time "megalomaniacal tyrants who desired to conquer and enslave the world truly existed", and during which time U.S. policy "by its passivity, aided in the rise of these monsters" (Stoler, 2001: 386). This particular media narrative now reminding Americans of the dire consequence of "their 1919-20 rejection of collective security", urging them to reconsider international involvement in light of the blunders of their historical past (ibid). Americans, through the strategy of compensation (Wodak et al., 2009), are reminded of their past failures and the loss of millions of lives as a result, and in doing so, the media invokes in audiences not only a sense of guilt, but also the need for White saviourism.

Furthermore, use of temporal references in the extracts ('for 13 days', 'beginning three years ago', 'three years of eking out', 'since WWII', 'spent months') emphasises the length of refugees' struggle, their narratives of loss justifying the need for their acceptance in America. The use of past experience justifying a present course of action encourages individual memories of suffering to become collective experiences of war, so that ultimately, even if audiences "do not embrace memories of events that occurred in unfamiliar or historically distant cultural contexts" their understanding of these narratives become a "mediated phenomena", assuming "collective relevance when they are structured represented, and used in a social setting" (Kansteiner 2002: 190). There seems to be then, a visible attempt in these extracts to fight the more aggressive immigrant discourse purported by the Trump Administration within which we see colours of an "ugly strain of nativism, stoked by the prospect of a terrorist infiltrating the U.S. by posing as an asylee", this discourse coursing through the veins of "national politics, from the campaign trail to the U.S. Capitol. With fear spreading and solutions in short supply, the refugees have become a target" (Altman 2017).

This pivot away from the political rhetoric of the Trump Administration is further demonstrated in the portrayal of Syrian refugees as 'ordinary' and 'normal', which counter the depiction of the cultural Other as "evil-infiltrators" (Zahabi-Bekdash, 2017). In a positive presentation of the people more typically cast in the role of the dangerous Other, and through a series of juxtapositions, refugees are cast as determined and brave, but also peaceful, resonating many of the same values that America stands for ('peacefully calling for freedom', 'live with safety and dignity'). And, although refugees are depicted as resilient individuals with sympathetic experiences, they are discursively stripped from their agency through a series of uncontrollable events ('because of war and persecution', 'bombs flattened', 'were tortured', 'sniper fire', 'filled with chaos and dangers'), with war being personified as a ruthless being responsible for killing 'hundreds and thousands', turning streets into 'piles of shattered stone'.

Interestingly, this media version of events also gives a more personal, human face given to refugees, where instead of being "essentialized and imagined as homogeneous" (Gal and Irvine 1995: 975),

they are given individual narratives ('with a baby in her arms', 'a young, widowed mother', '38-year-old salesman for an electrical company', 'Ahmad's story'); names ('Ahmad', 'Bushra', 'Awino', 'Khojas'); and homes that they have left behind ('abandoned his Damascus home', 'living in Turkey', 'their old street', 'their communities', 'their neighborhoods', 'their own country', 'their homeland'). As Steimel (2010: 227) reiterates, such media discourse proliferating narratives of individual refugees, in which they are "are humanized and made sympathetic through their harrowing stories of victimization", both projects them as victims who need to be heard, and also empowers them by giving them an opportunity to share their version of reality. We see here also, the power and effect of media which works to position the audience to a story, to a group of people, or an issue through "repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency" (Fairclough, 1989: 54).

What is most noteworthy in the discursive construction of Syrian refugees, however, is the creation of the 'asymmetric category set' (Jayyusi, 1984) of War vs. War Victim: refugees are favoured with the opposite of everything war stands for ('chaos', 'danger', 'executions', 'killings', 'blood', 'torture', 'persecution', 'loss', 'bombs') and everything that contemporary popular discourses associate with terrorism ("We need to be smart, vigilant and tough. We need the courts to give us back our rights. We need the Travel Ban as an extra level of safety!" [@realDonaldTrump, 4/6/17]). In this scenario, our past understanding of war leads to a certain 'category-boundedness' (Sacks, 1992), within which any "projected action is a possibility embedded in the features of that categorization… provided for by the guarded prediction of a *consequence*… [and further] provided for, as having been generated by a knowledge of, and familiarity with" (Jayyusi 1984: 24) such types of people or contexts. Here, audiences are reminded of the expected repercussions of war, including mass 'human exodus', and State responsibility. Audiences are also reminded that refugees are not chasing the American Dream because they want to, but rather because 'they have to': the use of obligatory and prohibitive modals ('have to', 'cannot') again countering typical migratory discourses which claim

> We must reevaluate our policy regarding refugee resettlement to protect the safety, freedom, and liberty we value as American citizens. Our current program is a Trojan horse allowing ISIS and other terrorist groups an open invitation to immigrate into the U.S. and establish bases of operation legally and at taxpayer expense.
>
> (Babin, 18/8/16, National Review)

3.2 The American Dream

The discursive construction of Syrian refugees as victims can be understood in its own capacity as an attempt to portray a sad and sombre story. And while reporting on the plight of these individuals can, independent of other social issues, offer a way of uncovering the discourse of U.S. media, victim narratives are inherently ideological. That is, a more critical analysis of these texts reveal that victim narratives allow readers to engage in an ideological struggle with notions of nationhood and nationality, as the familiar narrative of overcoming hardships has become, through cultural influences and elite discourses (van Dijk 1993), both a necessary feature of the American Dream and marker of national identity. Put differently, the American Dream provides a lens through which to understand both Syrian refugees and the extent to which the country is obligated to assist with resettlement efforts.

For example, while the victim narrative allows readers to become sympathetic consumers of U.S. news media, the more culturally significant issue within the United States is not whether refugees

should be viewed as casualties of war, but rather the ideological debate that is responsible for much of this reporting is related to whether the country should provide a better life for Syrians. Much of the debate regarding whether the American Dream should be extended to Syrian refugees is related to safety and security, which are often discussed in terms of time and resources.

(Extract 6) After almost six years of war, Turkey is hosting at least 2.8 million refugees. In Lebanon, at least a million. Fewer than 17,000 reside in the United States. Families approved for resettlement in the United States have undergone up to two years of security vetting by multiple international and government agencies. (Loveluck, 2/7/2017, The Washington Post)

The juxtaposition between the resettlement efforts of the United States and other countries frames the refugee crisis in quantitative terms (‘2.8 million’ and ‘17,000’), providing a concrete way of measuring the extent to which the American Dream is extended to Syrian refugees. Each numerical measurement is qualified with an approximation (‘at least’ versus ‘fewer than’) that, by further contrasting the large disparity in resettlement efforts between these countries, presents the crisis as evidence that the United States is not assuming a fair share of the responsibility. The underlying discourse here is important in a political environment and country where immigration, especially by people from predominantly Muslim countries, is met with much criticism and scepticism (cf. Marlow 2015). In contextualizing the crisis in temporal terms (‘two years of security vetting’), the text moves the reader away from the discourse of fear that is frequently associated with refugees from Muslim countries (Baker & McEnery 2005) by repositioning Syrians as demonstrably safe ('security vetting by multiple international and government agencies').

Although safety and security are important issues in the larger discussion of to what group of people resettlement efforts should be extended, the American Dream is also constructed as a reality that is currently experienced by Syrian refugees. Here the ideological work is not whether refugees are safe, but rather that Syrians possess the characteristics needed to achieve the American Dream. In other words, by portraying refugees as resilient, hard-working individuals that escaped war but now face additional challenges of creating a better life in the United States, media discourse can situate Syrians within, and alongside other fellow Americans that aspire to achieve, the American Dream.

(Extract 7) Today Abdulsalam's family lives in a small, cream-colored house in Dearborn. They've got a small garden where they grow vegetables, a grey Honda minivan donated by local volunteers, and a sparsely decorated living room with a flat-screen TV, which Abdulsalam watched until 11 on election night – with minimal interest. "I would like to congratulate President-elect Trump," says Abdulsalam, who like others interviewed prefers to use his first name only out of fears for those back home. "I hope America will thrive during his presidency. (Haynie, 19/12/16, US News & World Report)

(Extract 8) Ahmad dodged bullets in Syria. Bushra received death threats in Iraq. Awino walked a thousand miles to flee civil war in Sudan. They each found a new home in the United States. Strangers in a strange land, they started new lives with elation, the dates of their arrival indelible in their minds… This country expects new arrivals to become self-sucient [sic] within a few months, says Alaa Naji, life skills coordinator at the Refugee Women's Network in Atlanta. The system is designed for healthy,

hard-working people, she says. But the reality is that many refugees arrive with physical and psychological traumas, problems that often are chronic and require the attention of specialists. (Basu, 20/6/2016, CNN)

(Extract 9) Since late 2016, more than 200 Syrian refugees originally settled elsewhere in the United States have made a fresh start in Fresno…–But behind the low rent is a city struggling with high poverty and unemployment, making it more difficult for the refugees to secure jobs. And Fresno has no federally funded agency to help them find work, learn basics like bus routes and understand United States culture and rules, like with the practice of animal slaughter. (Jordan, 20/7/2017, The New York Times)

(Extract 10) …a refugee student sells the treats to help support his parents and four brothers. … He will only be allowed to continue high school this year, Tayara said, before he becomes too old, but during any spare time he must work to provide money for the $1,000 rent his family pays on their house in Kalamazoo. "I want to go to college. I want to own a restaurant. I want to start a bakery. I want to do a lot of things," Tayara said. (Parker, 2/3/2017, Kalamazoo News)

We see in these extracts a contextual repositioning of Syrian refugees as participants of the American Dream (‘a small, cream-colored house’, ‘a grey Honda minivan’, ‘living room with a flat-screen TV’). The portrayal of Syrians presently living in the country, as opposed to fleeing one, feeds into the immigration debate by creating a familiar narrative of individual liberty (‘to secure jobs’, ‘provide money’, ‘own a restaurant’). In so doing, such narratives participate in a war of cultures, where arguments against the resettlement of Syrian refugees are based on the notion that they do not hold the same values as most Americans. By associating Syrian refugees with material and consumer objects, such texts exploit a sentimentality that is central to how individuals construct a sense of national identity (Billig 1995). Indeed, the category-bound discourses (Sack 1992) of the American Dream (‘hope’, ‘hard-working’, ‘new lives’) create a sense of oneness by folding the stories of Syrian refugees into the value systems of the nation.

However, as with most American Dream narratives circulated in popular culture and media (Gosh 2013), success and achievement are not certain life outcomes. This is especially true of portrayals of Syrian refugees. Cast as agents of the American Dream, Syrian refugees are given some agency in their quest to pursue a new life in ‘a strange land’. Yet they face a number of political (‘I hope America will thrive during his presidency’), social (‘learn basics like bus routes’), economic (‘during any spare time he must work to provide money’), and psychological (‘refugees arrive with physical and psychological traumas’) uncertainties and challenges. Syrians are not, in other words, portrayed as the cultural Other, but rather the stories depicted above suggest that refugees are like any other ordinary, hard-working individual attempting to achieve the American Dream.

This portrayal of Syrians as members of the unmarked norm, pursuing dreams like other members of society, helps confront the common ideological position that refugees are not only a burden on national resources, but that they are also a threat to the security of the nation.

3.3 Syrian Refugees as a Threat

In order for society to be receptive to the idea that the United States must engage in more resettlement efforts, refugees must not only be depicted as victims, but Syrians must also be discussed with categories and actions that are inextricable to the values, dreams, and cultural practices of Americans. This discursive fabrication is needed because the victim narrative orients society to the humanitarian crisis, while the American Dream trope helps decouple Syrian refugees from the discourse of fear and danger.

In the same vein, the ideological struggle that comes with excusing the United States from the refugee crisis is motivated by isolationists belief systems. Specifically, the discursive work needed to promote the ideology that the United States is not obligated to engage in resettlement efforts relies on a narrative of terrorism and threat, which moves the political debate away from a humanitarian crisis to an issue of security and war.

(Extract 11) The mainstream media, liberals and Hollywood are pitching a super-sized hissy fit over President Trump's decision to protect the fruited plain from blood-thirsty jihadists. They seem to think we are under some sort of moral obligation to allow refugees to flood into the country without vetting and pray that nobody gets blown up… spare us your righteous indignation. (Starnes, 30/1/17, Fox News)

(Extract 12) Make no mistake. What we are seeing in Europe is the hard lesson of what happens when you put out the "welcome mat" to hundreds of thousands of refugees from known terrorist hotspots… We are also seeing the hard lesson of what happens as a result of the Western world devoting fewer and fewer resources to national security and less emphasis on protecting its citizens. (Hipp, 21/12/16, Fox News)

(Extract 13) A seven-year-old Iraqi boy, plus 14-year-old and 10-year-old Sudanese boys, reportedly cornered the tiny victim in a laundry room at the Fawnbrook Apartments in Twin Falls… They stripped her naked, sexually assaulted her… federal programs that delivered the foreign boys to the girl's apartment building… After the attack, the Muslim refugee families of the boys collectively swarmed their victim's apartment and urged the parents not to call police after the attack, he said. (McHugh, 6/4/17, Brietbart)

(Extract 14) President Obama's own FBI director has warned that he cannot properly screen refugees coming from troubled terrorist hotspots such as Syria. But political correctness blinds far too many in Washington to this imminent peril... There are currently 800 ongoing FBI investigations of ISIS-inspired terrorist suspects in the U.S., 48 of which are serious enough to justify round-the-clock surveillance. Last year, 31 ISIS terrorists were arrested plotting terror attacks against Americans… future jihadists are radicalized to the point where they aim to kill the very people whose generosity and cultural liberalism welcomed them into their country in the first place. (Babin, 18/8/16, National Review)

Social reality as we know and live is not 'out there' to be collated in some way, but rather it is "constructed by individuals from the raw materials provided to them by the social context in which they live" (Tajfel, 1981: 158), and constituted through the social categories and classifications

generated by cultural groups. We see also, as a result, much contestation between various discourse clans, in their efforts to cast issues, people, and events in various categories according to their respective socio-political agendas. In contrast to the liberal representation of refugees as victims, conservative media propagates the threat to national security that refugees pose. This particular discourse proliferates a negative other-presentation of refugees in which they are depicted as terrorists ('bloodthirsty jihadists', 'suspects', 'radicalized'), with their actions a threat to the 'fruited plain' and American citizens ('flood into the country', 'blow up', ~~'attack'~~, 'sexually assault', 'aim to kill').

The threat of 'future jihadists' is justified through connection with their past ('from known terrorist hotspots', 'from troubled terrorist hotspots'), an image that conjures up fear of the present when Syrians are discussed as flooding 'into the country without vetting'. In this sense, "participants enrich the here-and-now of action by connecting it to the past" (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011: 67) in order to predict the future. Here historical details layer, or "thicken the descriptions of people and activities – providing them with meanings they would not have had otherwise" (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011: 80). The creation of future history through connection to contemporary activities also becomes the cause for subsequent actions, dissociating any possible past cause to current activities (denying the Others justification for their actions). Thus, historicising in socio-political and media discourse becomes "a Janus-like method: one element of it is to situate a current event relative to selected historical antecedents; another to constrain the historical particulars available to situate the future events" (81).

In place of individual narratives that tell their stories of struggle and pain, right-wing media discourse transforms refugees into fearful statistics ('800 ongoing FBI investigations', '48…are serious enough', '31 ISIS-inspired terrorist suspects', 'hundreds of thousands'), homogenised as a threat based on their origins ('Iraqi boy', 'Sudanese boys', 'foreign boys'). Through use of an attack vs. self-defence antonym, the threat to America and in fact the 'Western world' is intensified ('gets blown up', 'Europe is the hard lesson', 'imminent peril', 'attacks against Americans'), and audiences are reminded that policy decisions that devote 'fewer and fewer resources to national security' put the country, the American Dream and way of life, and its citizens at risk. Use of an insect metaphor to describe the actions of such threats ('collectively swarmed their victim's apartment') dehumanises refugees, and in doing so, denies them any sense of legitimacy.

Through the topos of comparison (Wodak et al., 2009), the relatively more barbaric actions of jihadi refugees are juxtaposed with positive self-presentation of Americans, whose 'generosity and cultural liberalism' sets them apart in this asymmetric category-set (Jayyusi, 1984). Americans are attributed a conscience ('moral obligation') and faith ('pray'), making them civilised and humane. Categorisation as such can be regarded as a multifunctional rhetorical device, which can be used to lay ground for future actions, amplify the scale of an event or issue, provides grounds for assessment, help retain or achieve moral superiority, and maintain legitimate power over others (Bhatia, 2015).

Through the topos of illustrative example (Wodak et al., 2009), audiences are further warned about the flaws of current U.S. policy ('federal programs that delivered the foreign boys to the girl's apartment building', 'when you put out the welcome mat', 'fewer resources to national security', 'into the country without vetting', 'cannot properly screen'): 'Trump's decision' to protect the American way of life, for example, constructs immigration policies as defective by using recent terror attacks in Europe as a teaching moment ('hard lesson', 'make no mistake'). In doing so, the connotations of fear, as well as threat to security, are transferred onto refugees from 'terrorist hotspots' seeking asylum, while the liberal perspective is delegitimised ('political correctness', 'dismissive', 'a supersized hissy fit') as ignorance of the actual situation at hand.

3.4 Make America Great Again

The American Dream is based on the belief that the country possesses the social and political conditions for individuals to prosper economically, pursue individual liberties, and live a life devoid of oppression. It is not simply a way of life, but this ideological commitment represents the lens through which many Americans view and understand the world, including Syrians and refugees. In reporting on the refugee crisis, for instance, political ideologues use Syrians to engage in a larger discussion of whether the United States has a moral obligation to provide support, and whether individuals from predominantly Muslim countries should be viewed as potential Americans.

Syrian refugees are also used in the media to explore the extent to which the American Dream is a being attacked, an issue that has recently entered mainstream political discourse because of the "Make American Great Again" (MAGA) platform championed by the Trump Administration. Specifically, Syrian refugees are used in the media as a discursive springboard for adopting and engaging in the more sentimental position and ideological struggle regarding the extent to which the hopes and dreams of Americans are threatened because of outside forces. In short, political texts against resettlement efforts use Syrian refugees to argue that the country is not great, and in order to protect the 'American' way of life (i.e. the Dream), Syrian refugees must be met with fear, disdain, and even anger.

(Extract 15) In order to stop terror and to "make America safe again," as Trump has vowed to do, access to the trough — wherever it is found — must be curtailed… In order to "make America safe again," we must swiftly hit the reset button. Instead of adopting policies designed to circumvent the truth about terrorism's relationship to political Islam, we must hit the institutional reservoirs and ideological purveyors… allowing for the past decade of gruesome Muslim-on-Muslim bloodshed to speak for itself… attributing responsibility for jihadism's relentless rash of barbarity to political Islam's history. (Lappin, 7/6/17, The American Spectator)

(Extract 16) Is a "nation of immigrants" our deepest American value? Are fairness, equality, openness, generosity, or courage, for that matter, immigrant values … Globalists claim immigrants provide added value and vitality, bringing new ideas into closed, fearful societies composed of aging citizens who want to protect their self-interests. But these claims are one-sided. For millions of established residents in the U.S. and Europe, uncontrolled immigration threatens safety, schools, livelihoods, and quality of life. Slums, crime, filth, and parasitism might be coming to a once tidy neighborhood near you. (Sewall, 10/5/17, The American Spectator)

(Extract 17) Times aren't as good now as they were then. Trump's objectives, like America's local and international enmeshments, are larger: vanishing industrial jobs, terrorism, energy, urban decline, immigration, police relations, health care, retirement policy, and so on… the repeated pledges to "make America great again"… a thriving, well-functioning, and most of all free community…. (Murchison, 24/1/17, The American Spectator)

(Extract 18) The Fort Hood shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, the San Bernardino shooting, and the Orlando nightclub massacre, to name a few, were Islamic terrorist attacks on innocent Americans. And yet in every instance, the Obama administration, with high praise from leftists, rushed to protect and defend Islam… why do leftists feel that American lives do not matter when the villains are Islamic… Incredibly, leftists deem Trump's desire to make America great "racist

> hate speech." What is wrong with these people? Why do they hate their and our country so much?... (Marcus, 10/4/17, The American Thinker)

Although the belief that resettlement efforts are not in the interest of the United States is constructed in different ways, the extracts all rely on the same allegorical representation of reality: the country is not great ('uncontrolled immigration threatens safety', 'vanishing industrial jobs', 'the Orlando nightclub massacre'). Allegories are needed for mainstream media consumption because they provide a simple (and simplistic) lens through which to understand complex issues (Ronen 1988). For instance, situating Syrians within the larger narrative that America must be great again suggests that the betterment of society (or lack thereof) is tied to a single cultural group. Further, in situating the discussion of the refugee crisis within the MAGA narrative, the media is able to flatten Syrian refugees into one-dimensional monsters ('gruesome Muslim-on-Muslim bloodshed', 'relentless rash of barbarity', 'Slums, crime, filth, and parasitism', 'terrorism', 'attacks on innocent Americans'), thereby creating a separate allegorical representation of a cultural group.

These one-dimensional representations of Syrian refugees are possible because the MAGA narrative is, in its own semantic capacity, a fabrication of reality based on binaries: great or not great, American or un-American, Obama or Trump, then and now. One such binary that is crucial to the MAGA narrative is the static view that Syrians are a threat to the American way of life ('uncontrolled immigration threatens safety, schools, livelihoods, and quality of life'). In these instances, the threat that is ascribed to Syrians is based on religion, and more specifically the image of fear that is widely circulated in popular culture is the juxtaposition of Islam and terrorism ('terrorism's relationship to political Islam', 'the villains are Islamic'), again a set of discursive constructions that are defined by, and according to the belief systems of, ideologues against resettlement efforts.

Static representations of Syrian refugees allow the media to create new understandings of the American Dream that are inextricable to the MAGA narrative. That is, by constructing Syrian refugees as dangerous individuals, the MAGA narrative suggests that the American Dream is not limited to the hopes and aspirations of immigrants ('Is a "nation of immigrants" our deepest American value?'), but is rather primarily about maintaining security ('make America safe again') for non-Muslim individuals that are currently residing in country ('fearful societies composed of aging citizens who want to protect their self-interests'). The immigration and refugee positions of the Trump Administration are thus constructed as solutions to the preservation of the American Dream, a set of policies that equates the inclusion of refugees from predominantly Muslim countries to hatred for the country ('Why do they hate their and our country so much?').

4. Discussion

Since November 2016, there has been much discussion in the media about the emergence of fake and alternative news, the objectivity of mainstream media, and the role they all play in (mis)informing, interpreting and evaluating people, issues, and events for their respective audiences. There has been an equal amount of debate about the exodus of refugees from troubled, unstable regions, their absorption into surrounding and Western nations, and the subsequent risk that a welcome-with-open-arms policy may pose to national security. It is in the context of this socio-political issue that this paper attempted to explore how American media orientates its readers to government policy through the discursive formation of ideological constructs.

Focusing on the fabrication of the American Dream in the portrayal of Syrian refugees, the analysis explored different versions of reality offered by two opposing discourse clans. The first perspective, deriving mostly from mainstream media, grounded in liberal ideology; the second perspective deriving from voices affiliated mostly from alternative media and some mainstream media, more typically grounded in conservative ideology. To explore the dynamic discursive processes of identity-construction, the analysis drew on aspects of historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, linked to an account of some of the subsequent social effects of these actions. Our analysis, thus, revealed the emergence of two narratives that draw on a common pool of rhetorical resources (i.e. topoi, temporal references, metaphor, category-pairs, allegories, positive/negative presentation), but achieving two very contrasting conceptualisations of reality. Drawing on a more humanistic perspective that resists homogenizing Syrian refugees as a dangerous Other, the liberal narrative offers a relatively more sympathetic portrayal, often revealed through the words of the refugees themselves. Depicting refugees as victims of a metaphorically personified War, but also as competent and hardworking, this narrative forces audiences to question the notion of nationhood, as conceived within popular culture's understanding of the American Dream, if it does not stand for the land of opportunities. In contrast to this version of reality, more conservative media negatively represents refugees as a dangerous Other in a fairly dichotomous narrative, which transforms these individuals into one-dimensional beings (e.g. monsters and statistics) that threaten the American way of life. Within this narrative, America is not in its ideal state but rather weakened by the Obama Administration's flawed resettlement policy.

Our findings also reiterated the arbitrary nature of news media in general, where the question of authenticity does not arise in a distinction between 'fake news' (which insinuates 'real' news) and 'mainstream media' (which insinuates objective media), but rather between any form of news discourse. The media may be the medium through which "we receive most of our information (and entertainment) about the world" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2000: 21), but ultimately it is still a disparate whole made up of competing discourse clans in a race to persuade their respective audiences that the conceptualisation that they are putting forward is the correct and objective truth, giving rise to discursive illusions (Bhatia, 2015) about various ideological constructs. Information dissemination in the *media* (the term used here to depict all forms and ideological leanings) then seems to be, more than anything else, an attempt by various clans to project their *story* about either issues, events, people or constructs, and with "the addition of every new element to the media ecosystem, 'the story'" becomes "increasingly complex, going from a simple account of a bison or deer hunt to multiple but still manageable competing narratives to perhaps thousands and even millions of disparate accounts of the world" (Ray, 2011: 190), to be aligned with but not necessarily trusted.

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