

Opinion Discourse and Canadian Newspapers: The Case of the Chinese “Boat People”

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Abstract: “Opinion” discourse—editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns—assumes an important communicative function by offering newsreaders a distinctive and authoritative voice that will speak to them directly, in the face of troubling or problematic circumstances. Opinion discourse addresses newsreaders embraced in a consensual relationship by taking a particular stance in relation to the persons and topics referred. Nevertheless, despite its communicative importance, opinion discourse has received less sustained theoretical and empirical attention from scholars than “hard” news. Where “hard” news purports to be balanced and fair, “opinion” discourse problematizes the world by taking up the normative dimension of issues and events as the justification and rationale for taking sides. Taking the arrivals to Canada of four boatloads of “illegal” Chinese migrants in 1999 as a case study, this article aims to contribute theoretical understanding about the import of opinion discourse to the critical study of news, whilst offering a contribution to scholarship on the social construction of the Other.

Résumé: Le discours d’« opinion »—éditoriaux, chroniques, et rubriques d’invités—remplit une fonction importante dans la communication en offrant aux lecteurs une voix distincte et fiable qui leur parle directement, lors de circonstances troublantes ou problématiques. Le discours d’opinion adresse les lecteurs en les accueillant dans une relation consensuelle où l’on prend une position spécifique par rapport aux personnes et aux sujets discutés. Néanmoins, malgré son importance dans la communication, les chercheurs ont porté une attention théorique et empirique moins soutenue sur le discours d’opinion que sur les actualités. Alors que les actualités prétendent être justes et équilibrées, le discours d’« opinion » discute du monde en adhérant à la dimension normative de questions et d’événements, adhésion qui justifie et explique une prise de position particulière. En se rapportant comme étude de cas à l’arrivée au Canada de quatre bateaux transportant des émigrés chinois « illégaux » en 1999, cet article vise à contribuer une compréhension théorique de l’importance du discours d’opinion dans l’étude critique des nouvelles, tout en offrant une contribution au savoir relatif à la construction sociale de l’Autre.

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Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 25 (2000) 517-537

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Introduction

On July 20, 1999, an unmarked ship transporting 123 passengers from Fujian province in China was tracked and intercepted by Canadian citizenship and immigration authorities off the coast of British Columbia. The conditions aboard the ship (“abysmal” and “horrendous”) and the physical state of its passengers (“filthy”) became the primary focus of coverage in much of Canada’s mainstream daily press. Amid speculation that several other such boats had illegally evaded federal border authorities, three more ships in similar condition arrived at numerous points along the B.C. coastline over the next couple of months (August 12, August 31, and September 9 respectively). In total, 599 migrants arrived without proper legal identification and many subsequently declared refugee status; this was a series of events which precipitated among political elites, media observers, and some Canadian citizens a general consensus that the immigration and refugee systems were in a “state of crisis” (see Clarkson, 2000; Greenberg & Hier, forthcoming).

Despite evidence that upwards of 30,000 refugees attempt entry to Canada each year (Beiser, 1999), the general feeling conveyed by news coverage of these events was that the immigration and refugee systems were being flooded by an influx of Asian “gatecrashers” (Francis, 1999a), whose presence posed numerous harms to the public. Almost immediately after the arrival of the first boat, the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, in a poll of its readership, reported that approximately 97% of respondents felt the migrants should be sent back to China immediately (July 30, 1999).¹ Although claiming to be “sympathetic” to the migrants’ life-situations overseas, respondents expressed concern that the new arrivals constituted a threat to law and order and an insult to the integrity of Canadian citizenship. Furthermore, respondents overwhelmingly articulated a shared concern that the migrants’ arrivals threatened the capacity of the Canadian and British Columbia welfare systems to respond to additional demands without putting the ability of the state to meet the needs of “legitimate” Canadians at risk (Greenberg & Hier, forthcoming).

News coverage assumed an increasingly critical and hyperbolic tone after the arrival of the second boat. With immigration and security officials warning that many more ships were on the way, groups of Canadian citizens began mobilizing at various B.C. ports, some in support of the migrants and many others shouting slurs and waving placards stating unequivocally that the migrants should “GO HOME.” The usual slowness of newsworthy events during the summer months, the spectacle-like coverage of each boat arrival, and the divisive public sentiments triggered by these events, gave rise to a veritable explosion of public records: numerous town-hall style debates, radio call-in shows, and an array of press reports. And the unanticipated, dramatic appeal of these events, a general rightward shift in the national political spectrum, and a highly competitive news media environment thus made the migrants’ arrivals especially attractive to news coverage. Indeed, as one reporter put it: “You’ve got hundreds of people standing on a ship out in the middle of nowhere—on a ship that looks like if you touch it too

hard, it's going to sink. For lack of a better way of putting it, it's eye candy" (quoted in Clarkson, 2000, p. 6).

In developing understanding of these events and the role of the mainstream news media in constructing an ideology of consensus in the face of seemingly unusual or problematic circumstances, this study examines the content and rhetorical expressions of "opinion" discourses, that is, editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns, in five mainstream Canadian daily newspapers. Opinion discourses assume an important communicative function by contributing to the media's role of formulating certain, "preferred" viewpoints about the world. The function of opinion discourse within the larger context of newspaper coverage is to offer newsreaders a distinctive and authoritative "voice" that will speak to them directly about matters of public importance. Opinion discourses "address newsreaders embraced in a consensual ('us') relationship, by taking a particular stance in relation to the persons ('them') and topics referred to" (Fowler, 1991, p. 221). Yet, despite this communicative importance, the study of "opinion" discourse has received less sustained theoretical and empirical attention by communications scholars and media sociologists than "hard" news, where conventional journalistic standards of balance, fairness, and objectivity can be scrutinized and challenged.² Therefore, this paper aims to contribute theoretical understanding of the import of "opinion" discourse to the critical study of news, in addition to offering a contribution to scholarship on the construction of the "Other" in press discourse.

Analytical framework

This paper commences with the notion that at any given moment, certain, perhaps unexpected, events may come to be seen as fundamentally problematic to the identity of the state and the stability of its relations with its citizens. In Gramsci's (1971) original formulation, these "conjunctural moments" are to be seen as crucial to the ongoing, developmental character of modernity, insofar as they appear as if by accident, and in a way that is perceived to be immediate and threatening to the status quo (p. 177). According to t'Hart (1993), the most important instrument in the management of such moments is language, that is, those who are able to define what the problem is about "also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for its resolution" (p. 41; see also Edelman, 1977, 1988). For Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts (1978), discourses of crisis management that arise during such conjunctural moments bring about the construction of an "Other" (or several "Others")—an outsider(s) whose presence is seen to threaten the norm of consensus and whose identity, moreover, may serve as the basis of their eventual expurgation (see Cohen, 1972).³ Such conjunctural moments, then, are not purely objective phenomena that define the contours for subsequent ideological contestation among elite and non-elite actors about institutional problems; rather, they are subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through and by discourse (Hay, 1996).

Opinion discourse: Some general theoretical remarks

Editorials are public, mass communicated types of opinion discourse that normally appear in the front section of a newspaper and are the “official” voice of a media outlet on matters of public importance. Op-ed articles are normally placed on the page opposite the conventional editorial and usually represent the expressed opinion of a single individual employed by the newspaper, or by an individual associated with an affiliate news outlet. While op-ed articles are subjective accounts, they are often perceived to carry an *objective-like* status; that is, they are generally, *though not necessarily*, associated with the opinions of the newspaper as an elite institution, since the author is normally a recognized and regular contributor.⁴ Guest columns, on the other hand, appear in close proximity to the editorial page and are normally the expressed opinion of an accredited expert or recognized stakeholder outside the media industry, but who nevertheless possesses specialized, “insider” status, for example, a lawyer, physician, NGO, labour leader, or leading academic researcher.

After primetime television talk shows, newspaper editorials are probably the widest circulating forms of opinion discourse (van Dijk, 1996). Their influence upon political opinion-formation is formidable, extending not just to the ordinary, everyday reader but also, crucially, to institutional and/or elite actors, for example, Members of Parliament (MPs), corporate executives, and police. Moreover, editorial opinions are generally institutional, not personal, insofar as they are rarely perceived by newsreaders to be representative of purely subjective viewpoints. Rather, these opinions are often *perceived* by readers to be consistent with the viewpoints of the newspaper as an organizational entity equipped with the facts and information required for informed opinion formation, which are generally unavailable to the average newsreader (van Dijk, 1996).

The viewpoints expressed in opinion discourses are an important feature of news because, unlike conventional “hard” news reporting, they often blend what van Dijk (1998) calls “evaluative propositions” (normative prescriptions) and “factual beliefs” (social facts) (p. 29). The distinction is important because opinion discourses obfuscate the fundamental or basic problems of cognition, such as the basis of knowledge and belief, and truth and falsity. The crucial factor in determining whether or not an editorial viewpoint is normative or factual is whether the grounds or criteria of judgment are based merely on cultural or group norms or are socially-shared criteria of “truth” or other knowledge, based on valid inference, scholarly research, or expert observation. When facts are blended with values, notions of truth and falsity, knowledge and ideas, and, by extension, the very concept of “public opinion” itself, become analytically problematic.

Whereas “hard” news coverage purports to be fair, balanced, and objectively grounded in such “uniform technical criteria” as the prevention of personal bias, fact-opinion separation, and the inclusion of opposing viewpoints (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, p. 105),⁵ critical news analysis has shown “hard” news to be structured ideologically and inflected with “preferred” readings that frequently, though not necessarily, serve dominant interests, whilst containing and displacing

contradiction (Fowler, 1991; Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991; Hall, 1977; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Knight, 1998, forthcoming). Opinion discourses, on the other hand, are *not* bound by such claims to objectivity and balance, that is, they are overtly biased viewpoints that are not intended to be objective, fair, or balanced. Opinion discourses not only take sides by evaluating events, but they also explain these events in ways that have to do first and foremost with the attribution of responsibility.⁶ They are primarily, but not exclusively, blame-oriented and, as such, they attempt to mobilize and enrol newsreaders around particular ideological positions by resonating in ways that will connect with their ethics and emotions.

While this blame-centredness is a crucial, indeed defining, feature of opinion discourse, it is also part of the critical nature of “hard” news texts. Both modes of news discourse are seen to problematize the world in terms of different issues and events.⁷ However, what opinion discourses do differently than conventional “hard” news coverage is to take up the socio-emotional, that is, normative, dimension of this problematization as the *justification* and *rationale* for being opinionated and taking one side versus an/other(s). The implication of this rhetorical distinction is that, like “hard” news texts, opinion discourses are subject to their own limit points or spatial boundaries insofar as they have their own normative standards to uphold, in the sense that there are certain, contextually grounded, limits to what can or cannot be said, even in the form of opinions and judgments. Secondarily, and consequently, editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns generally proffer solutions that (presumably) are not being followed by those with the authority and/or responsibility to act, and these discourses have the ability to *persuade* newsreaders to formulate (and act upon) their own opinions.

Framing and narrativization

Underpinning these largely socio-cognitive assumptions about opinion discourse is an understanding of the ways in which news media construct mental representations, or *frames*, of everyday life in order to comprehend and respond to social situations. As principles of partiality and selectivity—that is, codes of emphasis, interpretation, and presentation—media frames are routinely used by newsmakers to organize verbal and visual discourses into formats that will be accessible to the everyday reader, viewer, or listener. In rendering opinions, laying blame, and presenting solutions about problematic issues, actors, and events, opinion writers inevitably accentuate some points of view while downplaying others, thus limiting the range of interpretable meanings available to the public (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). It is in this sense that the concept of framing can be said to capture the numerous ways in which the media set the discursive context within which individuals may come to “locate, perceive, identify and label” the events and happenings going on around them (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Regarded this way, the role of news media is to organize the “field of social intelligibility” (Knight, forthcoming) within which news comes to “make sense,” not by telling people what to think, but telling them what to think about and how to think about it.

In addition to functioning paradigmatically, news discourse generally, and opinion discourse in particular, operates syntagmatically to account for the ongoing, shifting character of news. The temporal aspect of representation is best captured by the discursive technique of “narrativization” (*inter alia* Ricoeur, 1984). Narrative is a feature of news broadcasting and opinion-formation, where professional codes help to determine certain structures, orders, and components of a given story (*inter alia* Hartley, 1982). As Knight (forthcoming) argues, “narrative complements framing in that it deals with the movement of representation across time, and with the coordination of differentiated signs into a more or less coherent discourse” (n.p.) In the case of print news, narratives help to choreograph into a whole and complete story a series of complexly related events, and their articulations, in a way that will be meaningful to the reader(s). In the case of news that is “problematic,” real world actions and events are extracted from their actual manner of occurrence in order that their *effects* can then be “recruited” to the discourse as symptomatic of other, broader, problems and anxieties (Hay, 1996). Such “reality effects” (Knight, 1989) are then re-embedded into a more generic discourse where they may be subjected to a further process of narration. It is in such configurations and re-configurations that “notions of responsibility, causality and agency may be deleted and replaced by an abstracted reference to causes of a more simplified degree of generality” (Trew, 1979, p. 108).

Data and sampling procedures

Conventional techniques of content and discourse analysis have been used to examine the spatial and temporal features of all editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns (n=57) appearing in five mainstream, English-language only print media: *The National Post*, *The Vancouver Sun*, the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The Toronto Sun*. The frames identified in the coverage are represented in the data analysis below as frequency counts of the number of times each frame was referred to in a single paragraph.⁸ In instances when more than one frame was mentioned together (this was rare), each frame was counted separately. The period of analysis extends from July 21 to October 1, 1999.

The media sampled can be said to comprise four different genres of news reporting—the logic of the sample, then, is governed principally by idiomatic consideration, and secondarily by geographic location and circulation.⁹ *The National Post* is a right-wing, highbrow broadsheet that caters generally to the political and corporate elite, and at the time of the coverage was the flagship news outlet of Conrad Black’s Hollinger Inc. media empire (*The Vancouver Sun* and the *Victoria Times-Colonist* were also Hollinger papers).¹⁰ *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Toronto Star* are middlebrow newspapers insofar as they cater generally to a more socially and economically diverse readership. Despite this commonality, however, *The Toronto Star* is clearly more oriented to a social-liberal editorial stance than *The Vancouver Sun*. *The Toronto Sun* is a right-wing, tabloid daily. Its ethos represents what Fairclough (1998) has called “lifeworld discourse”: the narrative logic is binary and underlined by a rhetorical current of conflict and confrontation, with emphasis normally placed upon common-sense interpretations of

complex phenomenon. The *Times-Colonist*, finally, is a hybrid newspaper that is moderately populist in its idiomatic flavour. For analytic purposes it is therefore situated someplace in between the middlebrow and tabloid spectra.

Data analysis

Each of the sampled media perceived and reported the migrants' arrivals as problematic, a focus which, after all, is precisely what defines as "newsworthy" unusual or out-of-the-ordinary events. When abstracted into a single, generalized issue, the four boat arrivals were a classic example of "bad" news in that the events were principally framed around the generic themes of public *disorder* and *conflict*, the *transgression* of norms and values, and *confrontation* (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976).

This negative coverage began with the media's characterizing the migrants in ways that highlighted a general ambiguity about their identity. On the one hand, the migrants were portrayed as "illegal," that is, they were treated as "economic migrants" whose motivation was not asylum from political persecution but upward socioeconomic mobility. This kind of lexical selectivity is noteworthy because it takes for granted the implications of these different terms of representation, insofar as "persecution" generally implies a definitive, identifiable subjective agency, in ways that economic negatives such as poverty, deprivation, and mass unemployment do not. On the other hand, the migrants were portrayed as pitiful dupes of unscrupulous human smugglers (so-called "snakeheads"). The "snakeheads," of course, had no concrete presence in the real events insofar as they were not known to be aboard the ships and were never arrested, but they still acquired a central presence in the media's representation, as an invisible, but causally blame-worthy, agent. While the migrants' agency occupied the centre of attention in "hard" news reports (Greenberg & Hier, forthcoming)—a predictable observation, given the emphasis on concrete events, identifiable and personalizable actors, immediacy, and the presence of official social control authorities—it was displaced from the centre in the "opinion" formats because the migrants are not discursively and normatively sustainable as blameworthy actors. They are poor ideological targets for the attribution of responsibility and blame because representation of their identity depended upon other representation of identities for other actors (i.e., government and the "snakeheads"). This general ambiguity where the migrants' identity is concerned was a central feature of the coverage and, not surprisingly, has played and continues to play an integral role in the present state of refugee debates in Canada and elsewhere in the West.

The media's portrayal of the migrants' identity blended discursively with the themes of the opinion discourse. Table 1 identifies and provides frequency counts of the general frames that organized the narrative structure of the coverage in these five newspapers. These data show generally how the migrants' arrivals served for the construction of a series of editorial "master frames" (Carroll & Ratner, 1996, p. 411). In terms of news coverage, master frames operate as central interpretive frameworks from which public opinion may be said to derive about people, events, and/or issues which the media have deemed "newsworthy." In the

present case, five master frames are identified: (1) the problematization of government; (2) race relations; (3) moral health and national security; (4) identity and the integrity of national citizenship; and (5) migrants' welfare and safety. In regard to this final frame, when genuine concern for the migrants' welfare and safety was addressed as a primary frame, it was done so almost exclusively by guest columnists, whose opinions arguably carry less persuasive weight than the official opinion of the newspaper, as is featured in the main editorials.

Table 1: Themes of Editorial Concern (%)

Theme	NP*	VS	STAR	SUN	TC
Problematization of gov't	41.8	36.5	43.4	45.7	29.4
Race relations	11.5	16.2	24.7	12.0	30.4
Health & security	25.7	24.8	13.5	23.7	14.7
Citizenship	15.1	11.4	8.1	11.3	5.9
Migrants' well being	2.2	5.3	9.3	4.1	16.7
Mixed/Other	3.7	5.7	2.3	3.3	2.9
Total	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0

* NP = *The National Post*; VS = *The Vancouver Sun*; STAR = *The Toronto Star*; SUN = *The Toronto Sun*; TC = *Victoria Times-Colonist*

The principal conclusion to be drawn from these data is that in all but one of the newspapers "problematization of government" was the overall dominant frame of concern.¹¹ This master frame denotes a range of references to the federal Liberal government's inability to stem the influx of undocumented and uninvited human population groups to Canada. First, it refers to the notion that the immigration and refugee system is inherently flawed, by virtue of its being based on a socially liberal ideology, an ideology popularized by the policy decisions of numerous postwar federal Liberal governments. Take, for example, the following two passages from *The National Post*:

Liberals were not always this cavalier about foreign ships sailing into Canadian waters. In 1985, when the U.S. coast guard icebreaker Polar Sea dared to patrol the Northwest Passage without Ottawa's permission, the Liberals' fevered calls for territorial sovereignty, and even a naval build-up, were matched only by their anti-American bigotry. Unlike the current Chinese flotilla, however, the Polar Sea sailed to protect Canada from an invasion, not to facilitate one. (Levant, 1999, p. A18)

Those Chinese women who find themselves paying off their passage in the whorehouses of Vancouver and Toronto will, I'm sure, be gratified to know that the federal government regards them as the moral corrective to the dark stain of Canada's history. (Steyn, 1999, p. A18)

Second, this frame included references, although these were far less frequent, to the opinion that the immigration and refugee systems were actually working smoothly and in the manner in which they were supposed to. As *The Toronto Star*

argued, “Each time one of these smuggling dramas takes place, there are accusations that our immigration system is broken, our rules too lax and our authorities are too timid. In fact, the system worked quite well in the latest incident” (“Caplan Sends the Right Message,” 1999, p. A22).

Third, this frame comprised references to criticisms of centralized state federalism more generally, such as bureaucratic inefficiency, over-bureaucratization, the mismanagement of tax dollars, regional political pandering, and patronage appointments that result, firstly, in the immigration and refugee systems working poorly, and secondly, in the accentuation of regional cleavages across the country:

What angry British Columbians must now see is that where Ms. Caplan comes from, the system *is* working. It works to nurture a huge immigration industry of tax-paid lawyers, bureaucrats and social-service providers—all of whom have a keen sense of political loyalty. It also works as an easy sop to the immigration industry’s cousin, the multiculturalism industry, based similarly on taxpayers’ largesse. This is spoils-based politics: Ethnic vote-brokers in Ms. Caplan’s Toronto are pleased, immigration and legal-aid lawyers are pleased, and Reform-voting British Columbians can pay the bill. (Levant, 1999, p. A18)

The point to be made is that when problematic or challenging circumstances arise, news discourse not only identifies those who are involved, but it also forces us to question and interrogate what we expect and understand to be the proper role of government in our lives.

The exception to the trend of privileging “problematization of government” as the dominant theme was the *Times-Colonist*, where the theme received roughly the same frequency of attention as that of “race relations.” That the Victoria newspaper was as concerned about addressing the state of race relations as it was with the “problem of government” might be explained, first, by the legacy of racism toward ethnic minority groups, especially where people of Asian descent are concerned, in the province of British Columbia in particular (see Henry & Tator, 2000; Li, 1994, 1998; Li & Bolaria, 1988). Second, the political and ideological influence in British Columbia of the Reform Party, the official political opposition to the Liberals and the most outspoken critic of official multicultural and immigration policy, might also help to explain the frequency of this theme of concern in the Victoria newspaper, as compared with the other media. Nevertheless, given these more demographic considerations, one would have also expected *The Vancouver Sun* to address “race relations” more frequently than was actually the case.¹² In this newspaper, “race relations” figured only a distant third in terms of the total frequency of attention. Lastly, the *Times-Colonist* accentuated the more troublesome features of racism—conflict, anger, and a general disruption of the social order—more than *The Vancouver Sun*, an observation that might be attributed to the *Times-Colonist*’s idiomatic shift to the tabloid spectrum in recent years. For example, one article in the *Times-Colonist* included the following passage:

Groups like the Canada First Immigration Reform Committee are taking valid questions and concerns about immigration policy and dragging them across

the line, using them to legitimize weak-minded xenophobia, pandering to our basest emotions and fears “Immigration is changing Canada to what more resembles a Third World country,” it screams and splashes a picture of Asian drug dealers being taken down by police in Vancouver. At the foot of the site is a portion of Michelangelo’s hand of God touching that of a man, accompanied by the slogan: “Made with European Culture—Accept no Substitute.” It’s nauseating; after five minutes of this, we feel we need a shower. But that isn’t the real issue, is it? There are people exploiting our concerns about people-smuggling and twisting them into a campaign against non-white immigration. It’s repugnant, and presents a much greater threat to our country than any 11-year-old girl from China. (“Far-right Stokes Refugee Fears,” 1999, p. A14)

Since the *Times-Colonist* attended to the theme of “race relations,” and that it did so in a negative way, it is also important to question why it paid considerably more attention than the other newspapers to addressing the general “safety and welfare” of the migrants, and to interrogate the rhetorical expressions that this frame elicited. As Greenberg & Hier (forthcoming) have shown, “hard” news coverage in the *Times-Colonist* propagated, far more than other Canadian media, the idea that B.C. was experiencing a protracted “flood of illegal migrants” whose presence would pose serious political, social, and economic problems for the province. In part, this concern for the migrants’ safety and welfare might be seen as a discursive strategy for balancing these largely negative “hard” news representations, thereby suggesting how opinion formats are subject to their own kinds of normative limit points. Alternatively, or in addition, the ongoing public education and media relations work by NGOs working with new immigrants and refugees in Victoria might also account for this observation,¹³ and may explain the proportionately greater number of guest columns provided in the *Times-Colonist*, as compared to the other newspapers.¹⁴

The theme of “race relations” was the second most frequent master frame in *The Toronto Star*’s editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns. As the only nominally social-liberal newspaper in the sample, *The Toronto Star* often challenges the kinds of social conventions or standards that precipitate discriminatory practice among the general population (sexual, racial, socioeconomic, etc.). Whereas other newspapers took up this theme as well, *The Toronto Star* was unique in that it went beyond merely identifying the issue of institutional and systemic racism as just one factor in the migrants’ treatment by the public and government.¹⁵ It also used this social problem as a basis for political critique, ruminating sarcastically how

pundits proclaimed [Prime Minister] Chrétien guilty of caving in to ethnic voters and immigration lawyers. In the media hierarchy of rights and wrongs, it is all right for a prime minister to bow to big business, to Quebec and other regions, and to this or that lobby, but not to “the ethnics,” who remain undefined. (Siddiqui, 1999a, p. A11)

“There’s a flavour that all those coming in are all bad,” reports lawyer Howard Greenberg. NGOs say the officers’ starting assumption seems to be that everyone coming to them is a crook. The perception takes on racial overtones

considering that an overwhelming majority of officers are white and two-thirds of their clients are not. (Siddiqui, 1999b, p. A13)

What is interesting about *The Toronto Star's* coverage, moreover, is that while it expressed criticisms about the treatment of the migrants by federal authorities it also used these as a basis for re-problematizing the activities of government in a way that is generally consistent with the neo-liberal editorial tone of the more right wing news media. For example, *The Toronto Star* sees the problem of racism as linked to *bureaucratic inefficiency* within the immigration and refugee systems:

But the same department that can't get the illegals out can't get the legal immigrants in, in an orderly, timely fashion either. The department has thus managed to miff both anti-immigrant and pro-immigrant advocates. But it wears its inefficiency as a badge of honour, akin to the media's perverse posture that they must be doing something right if they have maligned people on both sides of an issue. Outside Ottawa, the prevailing view is that the immigration department has become anti-immigrant. (Siddiqui, 1999b, p. A13)

This is significant insofar as *The Toronto Star* could still operate from a nominally altruistic editorial position as public defender of the weak and downtrodden, while at the same time directing firm criticism at the ruling Liberal Party. Although the government also expressed "concern" for the well being of the migrants and dismissed much of the criticism levied against it as either racist or racially motivated, *The Toronto Star* still positioned itself against the ruling Liberals in a manner consistent with its normally critical editorial role.¹⁶

Cross articulation as narrative strategy in opinion discourse

Particularly noteworthy about these editorial master frames is the degree to which they were cross-articulated to one another. In instances when a variety of angles or themes are incorporated into the overall narrativization of a newsworthy event(s), a discursive blurring or hybridization among categories is not an uncommon occurrence. The themes identified in these opinion discourses were significant insofar as they were often expressed as partial units in an overarching meta-narrative of crisis regarding the federal Liberal government's immigration and refugee systems. Given that each of these frames becomes a mode of problematizing the situation at hand, each theme becomes, as it were, a vantage point from which to view, and pronounce upon, the others. In this sense, each theme becomes a point in a chain of articulation. In the case at hand, the problematic role of government clearly exercises a privileged role in the motivating and articulation of the other themes. It becomes, therefore, the driving force or hub of the chain, the nodal point that operates as a kind of "universal equivalent" which allows for the circulation and exchange of sign values between each of the themes. The problematization of government thus acts rhetorically as a discursive medium through which all the other themes can be transformed or translated into one another.

Immediately following the arrival of the first boat of 123 migrants, *The National Post* and *The Vancouver Sun* stressed that if the federal government

allowed the migrants to stay in Canada, the country's sovereignty would be placed at significant risk. The *Times-Colonist* questioned the "absurdity" of an immigration law that allows "illegal aliens" to "bypass the immigration queue" and claim legal entitlement to refugee status ("Tightening Our Refugee Process," 1999, p. A9). Each of these three print media outlets believes that a firm precedent must be set by the federal government to protect the integrity of "our" borders against those "others" who use smugglers to get into the country.¹⁷

That the events were localized along the British Columbia coast would attest to the reasons for why *The Toronto Sun* and *The Toronto Star* took longer to address these events in their editorials and other opinion pieces than the other newspapers. This delay may also help to explain, if at least only in part, the difference in the kinds of concerns about the migrants of the Ontario media. While *The Toronto Star* focused largely upon the broader issues of systemic racism, on the one hand, and bureaucratic mismanagement and low morale in the immigration and refugee departments, on the other, *The Toronto Sun* juxtaposed the federal government's stance to the more local concerns of the city's municipal councils over the costs of immigrant and refugee transition and the threat to the physical safety and well being of "true" Canadians by those in the refugee and immigrant communities.¹⁸

As the summer proceeded and more boats arrived, the opinions of the news media about the migrants' arrivals also changed. In particular, *The Toronto Sun's* coverage grew more vitriolic where the ability of the federal government to safeguard Canada's borders was concerned. The problem for *The Toronto Sun* was no longer that the federal Liberals were making decisions on refugee and immigration matters without consideration for how new arrivals will be dealt with financially by the nation's largest municipality, but rather that the government was to blame for making Canada "an easy mark for human smugglers" ("Save Our System," 1999, p. 14). Although in the main, the migrants were portrayed by *The Toronto Sun* as "desperate people" and "it is not the Canadian way to abandon them to their fates on the ocean" ("No Refuge," 1999, p. 14), a "real immigration system would deny refugee status to anyone who used blatantly illegal means to get to Canada" ("Save Our System," 1999, p. 14).

Following the arrival of the second boat (August 12), and amid speculation that many more "migrant ships" would soon be arriving to Canada, *The National Post* believes it is not only the integrity of the immigration and refugee systems that is at risk, but also, and more crucially, the health and welfare of Canadians that is being compromised by the migrants' arrivals, and the Liberal government's inadequate response:

Through sheer incompetence, Ottawa is ruining lives, exposing Canadians to grave risks and financing the creation of a criminal class that will hurt this country for years to come. If these boatloads are not deported . . . the government of Canada should be sued by the provinces, municipalities, taxpayer organizations and other victims of refugee crimes. (Francis, 1999b, p. A8)

The Vancouver Sun editor shares the same concern for the well being of “real” Canadians. This concern emerged much earlier than it did in *The National Post*; the emphasis, however, was similar in terms of overdramatizing the conditions of the boat and the physical state of the migrants: “slop buckets overflowed on to the deck of the hold where the cargo slept, on wooden slats, and ate. The passengers had lice, scabies and the sundry ills that blossom wherever people are crowded together in their own filth” (“Ship’s Passengers Must Be Sent Home,” 1999, p. A10). Moreover, “once absorbed, those beholden to criminals for their passage will work it off, slowly, either in criminal activities such as operating brothels or dealing drugs, or as virtual slave labour” (“Humanitarian Nation Faces Moral Questions,” 1999, p. A14). Thus, for *The National Post* and *The Vancouver Sun*, the issue of health and welfare was not just a matter of physical well being (both the migrants’ and Canadians’), but also, and more crucially, it was one of economic safety and “moral” security. As *The National Post*’s Tom Grimmer put it just after the third boat arrival (August 31, 1999), the response of the federal government to the arrivals of the migrants was neither simple nor efficient, but rather “characterized by a moral agony that is uniquely Canadian” (1999, p. A14).

The media’s opinions about the migrants’ arrivals and the weak responses of the federal government are suggestive of the subtle and overt basis of temporality within the context of power relations in advanced democratic, capitalist societies. In response to the decisions of governing authorities, media consistently seek to legitimize their interests and/or viewpoints by identifying the past performance of their subject(s) and object(s) of criticism—normally those individuals and groups who occupy positions of authority—and then use the appraisals of those performances to frame their present opinion. Claims of (symbolically reconstructed) past successes, such as references to days past when Canadian governments could act without being overshadowed by clouds of political correctness and special interest, are gambits that force authorities to respond to partisan viewpoints in preferable ways. Once news media outlets can symbolically establish a legitimate past, they are in a much stronger position of making claims concerning how future public policies will be defined. In occupying such a position, media effectively use this social structural past to define the parameters for present and future relations. The media’s ability to control the passage of time through narrative constructions of the present operates as the crux of its ability to define social-political reality and set the agenda upon which the public will base its own opinions.

Conclusion

Opinion discourses play an integral role in public opinion formation and assume a particularly critical role during periods when the social and political consensus gets called into question. Unlike “hard” news texts, opinion discourses (editorials, op-ed articles, or guest columns) possess a unique idiomatic character that “speaks” directly to the readership in a way that is familiar, habitual, and reliable. As Fowler (1991) argues, “the language employed will thus be the *newspaper’s own version of the language of the public to whom it is principally addressed: its*

version of the rhetoric, imagery and underlying common stock of knowledge which it assumes its audience shares and which thus forms the basis of the reciprocity of producer/reader" (p. 48, emphasis in original). Establishing a reliable style of discourse is fundamental to the building of consensus and is central to the ideological practice of news coverage (Chibnall, 1977; Hall, 1973; Hartley, 1982).

In general, each of these five media was critical of the federal government's handling of the four boat arrivals of Chinese migrants. Yet what became so problematic was the manner in which this "problem of government" was linked discursively to other issues of editorial concern. Opinion discourses in these mainstream media established a cause and effect relationship among a variety of themes: a poor government constructs weak or poor laws; these laws are believed to create the environment which makes possible the influx of several hundred unwanted and undocumented foreigners; a "weak" response in turn by the federal authorities is perceived to be an offer of admission to criminal elements in the future; the uncontrolled wave of migrants likely to precede such inaction is felt to place the integrity of the immigration and refugee systems at risk; such inaction is seen to put the lives of "real" Canadians at risk, as unscreened refugees will *ipso facto* bring with them disease, crime, and other unfavourable scourge. In this instance, anger and frustration were articulated against the government whilst also channeling resentment in the direction of the refugee-seekers. Unwaveringly, the "public" which consisted of these five newspapers was unified on this issue.

Upon closer analysis, differences could be identified among the opinions in each of the sampled news outlets. *The Toronto Star's* editorials were unquestioningly more sympathetic to the migrants' agency than the other newspapers; at the same time, however, its op-ed articles and guest columns were harshly critical of the government's handling of the situation. The effect of this was the presentation of an ideologically disjointed point of view. Criticism of the government would lead to calls for tightening the refugee determination process, a policy recommendation that falls far too short of critically addressing the reality of increasing poverty in the peripheral economies of the world system, the crucial factor motivating the migrants' exodus to Canada in the first place. The *Times-Colonist* was also sympathetic, although in a different way than *The Toronto Star*—guest columns provided a balance to the more critical conventional editorials. The *Times-Colonist* also published far more opinion pieces of NGOs in the Vancouver area, as well as the opinion of the B.C. director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), who raised the issue of questioning the impact of globalization and the gross income gaps between wealthy and impoverished nations on transnational population movements.¹⁹

Editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns in *The National Post* and *The Vancouver Sun* were unambiguously critical of the federal government's actions and official position. In comparison, like the Victoria newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun* provided greater discursive space for individuals working within the "immigration industry" to express their opinions, notably NGOs and immigration lawyers. *The National Post*, on the other hand, was consistently and overwhelmingly

insensitive to the lived realities motivating the migrants' exodus from China. As a result of this insensitivity, this newspaper went as far in its editorials, op-ed articles, and guest columns as the official opposition (Reform Party), in terms of negatively stereotyping the migrants as a disease-carrying embodiment of danger whose presence posed a significant threat to the moral, physical, and economic well being of "legitimate" Canadians. According to Leon Benoit, Reform MP and co-chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration: "The consequences [of the migrants' arrivals] are Canadians facing increased health risks through diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS, which are coming to our country increasingly through various types of immigration" (quoted in Danard, 1999, p. A3).

The Toronto Sun, finally, began its editorial coverage cautiously, though still in a manner consistent with its tabloid format: polarizing the actions and positions of the federal with the municipal governments and the needs and wants of the migrants with "real" Canadians. Like *The National Post*, it also accentuated negative stereotypes, so that the migrants would be seen not as possible contributors to the overall prosperity of the country, but rather as a hindrance to continuing economic, social, and political growth and development.

The ideological and hegemonic effects of these kinds of media coverage are significant and numerous. The pretext, of course, consists of newsmakers' choices of words or labels for making sense of the migrants' arrivals: terms such as "invasion," "flood," or "wave" were used as "designators" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 62) for interpreting the events as just another form of "catastrophe." Such factual disproportionality and journalistic hyperbole has the effect of substituting what is real with a variety of symptoms or "reality effects" (Knight, 1989). The specificity and complexity of events around the arrival of each boat was consequently denied and replaced by a more simplified narrative which could account for every symptom or outcome, whilst unambiguously attributing responsibility for the immigration and refugee crisis.

In addition, the migrants were objectified as greedy, selfish, and economically driven individuals whose disdain for the proper channels of entry to Canada was simplified by the media's use of such terms as "illegal migrant" or "economic migrant" (see Hier & Greenberg, 2000). As van Dijk (1988) notes, these types of lexical terms are common in countries where tolerance of diversity is a socially recognized norm. The effect, however, is that language such as this mitigates and disguises a speaker or writer's tendency to discriminate by appearing to be more temperate, less severe and cruel, than the opinions they may actually hold.²⁰ They were seen to take advantage of a generous, albeit flawed, refugee system; hence, their presence was represented as a threat not just to the image of those who have already arrived as immigrants to Canada and made a positive contribution to society but, more crucially, to those who might wish to come to Canada in the future. The state, on the other hand, was discursively constructed as a kind of "worthy victim" in its own right, a subject whose harm or loss was made ideologically sympathetic to the citizenry on terms that would establish a consensus about

the undesirability of illegal migration (as phenomenon) and the undesirability of illegal migrants (as people). An underlying discourse of state victimization was thus constructed in these media in such a way that displaced the migrants' political-economic hardship—that is, as losers of global neo-liberalism—onto the state, in a manner that mobilized Canadians to inhabit the state's narrativized subject position as its own (Greenberg & Hier, forthcoming).

The opinions expressed in these mainstream media, whether in the form of an editorial, op-ed article, or guest column, unambiguously represented the viewpoint that the immediate and future costs associated with allowing the Chinese migrants to remain in the country would have an indelibly harmful impact on an already overburdened and overextended state. While the impact of refugees on the state's social welfare and humanitarian-aid programs is a valid and realistic concern that is worthy of public debate, what demands punctuation, and this is precisely where this discourse was incomplete, is that the public must have access to *all* of the correct and proper information if it is to make informed decisions about who is entitled to belong and who is not. The opinion discourses propagated by the mainstream news media has the potential to go a long way in terms of constructing the kind of empathetic and humanitarian community Canada proclaims itself to be.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Graham Knight, Sean Hier, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. The poll was unscientific and its findings are clearly dubious, at best. What is so problematic, however, is that the results of the poll were subsequently reproduced in other mainstream news media in the form of a "hard" news item distributed by Canadian Press. See "B.C. Residents Tell Newspaper . . ." (1999) and "Send Chinese Illegals Packing . . ." (1999).
2. There are some exceptions to this general pattern of less sustained attention. See Fowler (1991) and van Dijk (1998) for useful discussions of the rhetorical and stylistic character of editorials. The Canadian literature consists primarily of Hackett (1991), the collection of papers in Grenier (1992), and, most recently, Bright, Coburn, Faye, Gafijczuk, Hollander, Jung, & Symbros (1999). Not all of these studies, however, have sufficiently developed a theoretical model for the analysis of opinion discourse.
3. Using a different theoretical tradition, the notion of the "Other" may be recast using Simmel's (1950) concept of "the stranger." Alternative interpretations of this study might fruitfully draw on such a concept by analyzing the position of the migrant (as abjectly poor Chinese newcomer; *contra* the wealthy or middle-class Chinese migrant Canada is used to and comfortable with) as "a person fixed within a particular group (e.g. Chinese race), but whose position in the group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he [*sic*] has not belonged to it from the beginning . . . he [*sic*] imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself" (p. 402). That many within the Chinese-Canadian community rejected the migrants, identifying and labelling them as criminals ("not like us"), that is, as the "Other" within, is instructive here. On the opinions of the Chinese-Canadian community, see Chong (1999). The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria was also "against" the migrants' arrivals. According to Thomas Ho of the Chinese-Canadian Friendship Association, the migrants' arrivals "makes me feel embarrassed" (see McCulloch, 1999).

4. Having suggested that not all columnist opinions will be consistent with the viewpoint of the newspaper, Rick Salutin, media critic for *The Globe and Mail*, is a good example of a columnist paid by the newspaper to provide commentary that generally deviates from the “official” view of the newspaper.
5. For Saint-Jean (1998), the question of media professionalism is also one which acknowledges such “journalistic ethics” as “notions of duty, of individual conscience, and of social morality . . . constrained by prevailing legal frameworks” (p. 37). The implication of a normatively grounded approach to newsmaking is the same.
6. Opinion discourses also play an important symbolic function. The various headings (“editorial,” “opinion,” “comment,” “we say,” etc.) partition off the “opinion” component of the paper, implicitly supporting the claim that the other sections are, by contrast, a purely “factual report” of reality (Fowler, 1991, p. 208).
7. In this sense, therefore, the ideological effect of opinion discourse and patterns of “hard” news should be seen as complementary. Where opinion discourses are felt to be of a more persuasive (and effective) character than “hard” news is in news coverage of local phenomenon, when people turn to the regional/local paper for orientation. Although the migrants’ arrivals were portrayed as events of “national importance” their impact—both symbolically and materially—was principally felt locally. The author acknowledges Reviewer A for supplying this observation.
8. Although an inter-coder reliability test was not formally conducted, the author wishes to acknowledge Sean Hier for reading and providing commentary on the data. Moreover, in order to ensure that the themes identified are not merely arbitrary or intuitive, I have used as a sensitizing framework the thematic findings in Greenberg & Hier’s (forthcoming) examination of patterns of “hard” news coverage of these events, where an inter-coder reliability test was done.
9. Average circulation figures, as provided by each newspaper’s advertising department in September 2000, are as follows: *The National Post*—360,000 (Mon.-Fri.) and 428,000 (Sat.); *The Vancouver Sun*—202,000 (Mon.-Sat.); *Times-Colonist*—84,000 (Daily); *The Toronto Star*—500,000 (Daily); *The Toronto Sun*—244,000 (Mon.-Fri.), 192,000 (Sat.) and 413,500 (Sun.). A more reliable measure of receptivity would be the audience-reach statistic; however, each newspaper uses a different methodology which makes cross-comparison problematic.
10. In the period since these events, Hollinger liquidated 200 of its newspapers, including its controlling shares in the Vancouver and Victoria newspapers, as well as half of its shares in *The National Post*, to the Can-West media conglomerate.
11. The term “problematization” derives from Foucault’s (1984) work on modern forms of government. It refers to the development of a domain of thoughts that seem to pose problems for politics. For example, it suggests that in regard to the phenomenon of “illegal” migration or the performance of government vis-à-vis illegal migration, there is not any “politics” that provides a definitive or just solution. Rather, in addressing social or political problems of any kind, there are reasons for questioning the politics behind it. Hence, “problematization of government” operates as a fluid category that accommodates numerous ways of posing questions about and interrogating the role of government (i.e., as institution, as practice).
12. When *The Vancouver Sun* did address the theme of race relations, it tended to frame the issue in terms of the kinds of negative effects that these events would have on the Asian community in British Columbia. This approach was also detected in the coverage of this theme in *The National Post*. The opinion discourses in both newspapers frequently referred to prominent members of Victoria and Vancouver’s Chinese community as criticizing the migrants for giving honest, hard-working Asian migrants a “bad name.”
13. This point is anecdotal only and stems from discussion with NGO members and anti-racist activists working in the Victoria area.
14. The following are figures for the numbers of guest columns published by individuals working or living in the refugee or new immigrant communities: *Times-Colonist* (n=4); *The Vancouver Sun* (n=2); *The National Post* (n=0); *The Toronto Star* (n=0); *The Toronto Sun* (n=0).

15. Whereas *The Toronto Star* used journalists and other individuals employed by the newspaper to articulate this concern about systemic racism, the *Times-Colonist's* expressions were articulated by NGOs and others with a stake in the country's immigration industry. The difference is that while the *Times-Colonist's* op-ed and guest columnists' opinions can be attributed to, and critiqued for, a level of self-interestedness, *The Toronto Star*, on the other hand, would likely be seen to be still more objective and distanced from the emotional aspects of the situation.
16. This suggests how opinion discourse within the same publication may vary significantly over time on the same theme depending, among other variables, on the author.
17. *Times-Colonist* (Victoria): "How we handle these people will determine how many others try to use smugglers to get into this country illegally. If we let them stay, others will surely come" ("Tightening Our Refugee Process," 1999, p. A9). *The National Post*: "To accept these arrivals without questions would send three powerful messages. First, it would condone and reward illegal people smuggling. Second, it would send a message to would-be immigrants that our rules and processes for immigration are meaningless. It would confirm that a quicker and more certain way to live in Canada is to deliberately avoid the legal process and attempt to sneak in. Finally, and, most importantly, it would admit that our borders are unguarded, and that the hospitality of our citizens can be commanded, not earned" (Francis, 1999a, p. A19). *The Vancouver Sun*: "If Canada gives safe haven to the 122 people aboard a decrepit ship, it will give the green light to the criminals who traffick in people. Bypassing immigration channels cannot be sanctioned. . . . These people should get food, medical treatment, clean clothing—and a safe passage home" ("Ship's Passengers Must be Sent Home," 1999, p. A10).
18. *The Toronto Star*: "Robillard's successor, Elinor Caplan, will soon see that she is presiding over a largely dysfunctional [*sic*] department choking on red tape, inefficiency, low morale and inconsistent application of law. Its reputation is bad, abroad and at home, among foreigners wanting to come to Canada—as visitors or as immigrants, and, more important, among Canadian citizens forced to deal with it" (Siddiqui, 1999a, p. A11). *The Toronto Sun*: "Ottawa has to start helping Toronto cope with the costs of treating immigrants and refugees for serious diseases. . . . Fact is, Ottawa always sets immigration and refugee policy with little regard for the ability of Toronto—where almost half of new arrivals end up—to cope, whether it's in health care, English as a second language programs or the ability to provide jobs" ("Healthy City," 1999, p. 14). *The Toronto Sun*: "Also very worrisome is the health of many of these people who have gone through no formal health examination before they left their homelands. Some have already been found to be carrying dangerous communicable diseases" (Crispo, 1999, p. 15).
19. The point of the CCPA's argument was that economic globalization—through which Canada has become one of the world's most prosperous nations—is a primary structural factor influencing patterns of transnational population flow; therefore, the negative side-effects of globalization (e.g., "illegal" migration) ought to be examined and questioned critically but only within a broader critical examination of the impact of globalization. This opinion, however, was not picked up by any of the other media in any kind of comprehensive way. And although the *Times-Colonist* did allow for the problem of globalization to be addressed, it was raised in a marginal sense and did not achieve any significant expression elsewhere in this newspaper's definition of the situation.
20. To conclude that news coverage in this case was racist or, worse yet, that the Canadian news media is a racist institution (see Henry & Tator, 2000) requires due attention be paid to the debate over the actual pervasiveness of "racism" in Canada (see, for example, Fleras & Elliott, 1992; Levitt, 1997; Guppy & Davies, 1998; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 2000; Hier, 2000; Reitz & Breton, 1994; Satzewich, 1991, 1998). This represents an important discussion in its own right and goes beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, the sociological meaning of the term "racism" is itself hotly contested between those who treat racism as a "social fact" (e.g., Banton, 1967; Rex, 1970) and those who treat it primarily as an ideological construct (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Miles 1989). My point is that it is reasonable to draw conclusions about the social construction of the "other" from this analysis. To draw conclusions about the propagation of racist ideology is an entirely different matter and *should* be the focus of another paper.

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