

Five Questions to ask when Crafting Messages about Refugees in the Current Climate

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A recent Media Matters study found that discussions of the “migrant caravan” took over the news cycle directly after Fox News covered it and the president Tweeted about it.

What started out as one of Fox News’ pet issues has become a major media narrative thanks to the feedback loop between the network and President Donald Trump. CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC spent a combined 15 hours covering the migrant caravan between Monday, October 15, and Sunday, October 21. Fox News led the charge, covering the story both first and the most -- for nearly eight hours. In the same week-long period, CNN covered the issue for four and a half hours, while MSNBC devoted two and a half hours to the migrant caravan.¹

It's moments like this when we can find ourselves caught up in playing defense – there are so many lies to contend with, and so much under attack, including vulnerable people. It can be overwhelming to think of where to start when crafting a communications response, and advocates often fall back on the obvious: refute the lies, throw out more facts, hope that the truth will prevail. But experience shows that this strategy isn’t sufficient for stories like these. We have to think more broadly about the long-term story we want to see, examine news coverage to see where we can fit pieces of that story in, and give audiences alternatives: new thinking and better solutions in how they are viewing the story.

Below are five questions to consider as we strategize how to respond to stories about the refugees while still moving forward the positive, long-term narrative that will build longer lasting support for common sense policies.

1. What kind of values would we rather see in headlines about people coming together to move toward safety and opportunity?

Compassion, hope, and opportunity are all important values that our audiences tend to share. We should consider how we shape messages to encourage audiences to embrace these values over the themes promoted by the opposition, namely fear and nativism.

“As a nation, we should respond to humanitarian situations with compassion and common sense.” -Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum.²

“Consistently, as Presbyterians gather at General Assemblies, they decide that we, as a church, must respond with compassion, taking great care to meet the humanitarian needs of groups on the move. In these moments, we are guided by scripture which says, ‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.’ (Hebrews 13:2, NRSV). These are our sisters and brothers with whom we share a loving God.

May we be courageous enough to reach out with open arms and support others in doing the same.”- Amanda Craft, manager of advocacy with the Presbyterian Office of Immigration Issues.

We recommend a Value, Problem, Solution, Action structure when crafting messages to ensure that values are front and center in any communication:

Value: We are a compassionate country that has a commitment to honoring our humanitarian responsibilities. We have long had an orderly system for considering asylum claims that has served us well.

Problem: Divisive fear mongering, unjustified threats, and using asylum seekers to further political arguments rooted in xenophobia do not serve our country or our values well.

Solution: We should process asylum claims according to current laws and rethink our immigration policies that make it impossible for those seeking opportunity to join our workforce and society.

Action: Tell your representatives that you care about how we treat migrant and refugee families and want to see humane solutions instead of threats and bullying.

2. How can we best inject the truth into coverage of this story?

This story, as designed by Fox News, has become a vehicle for the president and others to spread lies and fear and point toward inhumane, cruel “solutions.” There has been a lot of coverage from CNN, MSNBC, and others refuting the misinformation the administration is providing.

We should use any limited space we have to promote our own story and vision instead of repeating false information, even if to counter it, as doing so often just spreads the lies further. In fact, some of the well-intentioned coverage arguing with the administration’s characterization of the migrants has likely already dug the story, and mischaracterizations, further into audience’s minds than we would want. It’s important to not feed these aspects of the story, to not repeat them, and rather to focus on the ways forward that we want audiences to see.

3. What solutions should we pivot toward?

Giving audiences an alternate vision of the world, including alternate solutions, is just as – if not more – important than only taking a stance against what the administration proposes. Without solutions, we risk exhausting audiences with what appears to be politically-motivated rhetoric among pundits who are only interested in disagreeing with each other. Assuring audiences that we know a way forward, and have concrete examples of what that looks like, can also help to reduce the appearance of chaos that our opponents are trying to frighten persuadable audiences with.

WOLA, the Washington Office on Latin America, notes:

[T]his is a manageable humanitarian and logistical problem... It can and should be managed in an orderly way that treats migrants humanely, respects their rights, and follows our legal procedures, as well as the United States' international commitments on migration.³

They then provide a six-point, bulleted list of actions that the U.S. should take.

Welcoming America provides a more general call-to-action, with specific examples included on their website (see question #5):

Building a nation of neighbors starts right where you are: in your community, and there are ways you can make a difference, too. Together, let's build bridges and demonstrate that our differing identities are assets in making our communities and nation stronger.⁴

4. How are key audiences hearing this story? What's the right language to use to persuade them to support our solutions?

While we know that some audiences are hearing this story with a mixture of fear and anger, it's important to think of how more persuadable audiences might be taking it. One consideration in how they will understand the story is how we talk about migrants and refugees themselves. It's strategic to show the similarities these audiences have with the folks in the migrant group: a desire to work and care for their family, a pursuit of opportunity, a need for safety. Because we want to emphasize the asylum aspects of this story, it's tempting to focus on what people are fleeing: violence and poverty. But there are a lot of other outlets doing that work, so it likely serves advocates better to remind audiences, particularly persuadable audiences, of what they might see of themselves in people looking for a better life for themselves and their families.

It's also important to move away from repeating language designed by the other side to instill fear and anger. There is no need to repeat words like "invasion," or even "migrant caravan," even if to argue for better terms. Instead, we should describe the folks coming here as families, parents, workers, students, etc. who are seeking opportunity and safety.

"These individuals are largely asylum seekers, families of people who are seeking safety. How we react to them says a lot about how we value them as human beings."

-Teresa Waggener, immigration attorney for the Presbyterian Office of Immigration Issues.⁵

"They truly hope that by making this show of collectiveness, by joining this caravan, somebody's heart will be touched and a miracle will happen."⁶ -Oscar Chacón, executive director of Alianza Americas

“They are pilgrims, coming to a place that once welcomed the immigrant with the lines: ‘Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.’” -Rev. Katherine Rhodes Henderson, Auburn Seminary President

5. What story would we rather see in the headlines?

While it’s true that we don’t control the news cycle, keeping in mind what ideal, or at least better, coverage would look like can help to inform our responses when we find ourselves playing defense in moments like this. Welcoming America provides some good examples of positive narratives around refugees on their welcomingrefugees.org site.

HOW REFUGEES HELPED A STRUGGLING GA. GROCERY STORE SUCCEED

By embracing the needs of refugees in his community, a Georgia grocery store owner gained loyal customers, turned his business around, and created a sense of community. His story highlights the benefits of embracing the diversity and strengths of recently arrived refugees.

IMPACT OF REFUGEES IN CENTRAL OHIO

This engaging report is filled with facts, statistics, and stories that confirm the significant social and economic contributions that refugees make to their new communities.

FINDING COMMON GROUND: STAY-AT-HOME MOM AND SUDANESE REFUGEE SHARE CULTURE AND WELCOME

Stay-at-home mom Becca Clary found common ground with Sudanese refugee Fatima Bakhit through a cultural exchange program at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Not only has Becca helped Fatima feel welcome in her new home and learn English, she also has gained a friend.⁷

¹<https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2018/10/23/study-caravan-coverage-has-taken-over-news-cycle-s-exactly-what-fox-news-and-trump-wanted/221806>

² <https://immigrationforum.org/article/trumps-border-threats-a-myopic-reaction-to-a-complex-issue/>

³ <https://www.wola.org/analysis/9-questions-answers-central-american-migrant-caravan/>

⁴ <http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/promising-practices>

⁵ <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/10/presbyterian-leaders-prepare-for-migrant-caravan/>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/world/americas/migrant-caravan-mexico-trump.html>

⁷ <http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/promising-practices>