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The Arctic Institute, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE

Claude Beaupre
✉ claudbeaupre@uvic.ca

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Post-truth politics vs. newspaper coverage: the COVID-19 pandemic and transnational human migration in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom

Claude Beaupre^{1,2*}

¹Political Science Department, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada, ²École Doctorale des Sciences Juridiques, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France

Introduction: In the context of a presumed post-truth world where emotion and ideology increasingly shape public discourse, this study explores the media's role in constructing and disseminating narratives about transnational human migration. The COVID-19 pandemic added a new layer of complexity, biologically securitizing mobility at a time when migration was already framed by xenophobia and securitization in the Western world. This study investigates how major newspapers in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom covered migration during the first year of the pandemic, revealing how media constructions reflected and reinforced national attitudes.

Methods: A mixed-method discursive analysis was conducted on 225 articles (25 from each of nine major newspapers) from January 1 to December 31, 2020, selected for their topical relevance through the Factiva database. Articles were categorized quantitatively by topic and sentiment and qualitatively analyzed using constant comparison methods. The study focused on recurring topics, dominant narratives, and sentiment orientations (positive, neutral, neutral-negative, or negative) to identify country-specific media 'truths' about migration during the pandemic.

Results: Distinct national patterns emerged. Canadian newspapers exhibited largely positive or neutral portrayals of migrants, highlighting their economic and social contributions. U.S. coverage was polarized, reflecting both supportive and hostile attitudes, especially regarding Latin American migration and the Title 42 policy. U.K. articles were more frequently negative or securitized, especially concerning Channel crossings. Across all countries, themes of migrant precarity, humanitarian solidarity, and essential labor during COVID-19 were common, yet framed differently depending on national context and media sentiment.

Discussion: The findings illustrate how media in post-truth societies selectively constructed 'truths' about migration during a global crisis. While Canadian media maintained a largely humanitarian and pragmatic framing, U.S. and U.K. media leaned toward narratives of threat and economic burden. These constructions reflect deeper societal and political cleavages, where media act as both agents and arenas of discursive influence. The research underscores the importance of media literacy and critical discourse analysis in unpacking the role of journalism in shaping migration politics during times of uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

transnational human migration, post-truth politics, media discourse, COVID-19 pandemic, Canada, United States, United Kingdom

Introduction

More than ever in this globalized world, efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in limited human mobility and, at times, outrightly halted it between most states. By March 19th, 2020, 127 countries had some form of no-entry policy in place (Gadarian et al., 2022, 184). These efforts have been met with varying success, as COVID-19 has evolved into a global pandemic.

COVID-19 emerged at a time when transnational human flows in most Western countries were already permeated by various fear-based discourses, with politicized, “mediatized visions” of human migration being depicted negatively in most Western countries (Wallace, 2018; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). Media has become a platform for the spread of “anxious politics” toward human flows, with media reporting often angled toward fearmongering, misinformation, sensationalism, xenophobia and/or Islamophobia (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015). It follows that media coverage has a complex, multi-layered, and long-term influence on perception and discourse creation, particularly regarding politically charged issues. Media, as both a field and agent of discourse elaboration and propagation, is thought to infuse narratives surrounding human mobility with marked elements of securitization, especially when said mobility traverses state boundaries. These narratives, moreover, are furthered by racialized notions of ‘othering’ between ‘North and South’ and ‘East to West.’ The seemingly global discursive shift is perceived as the result of the tendency to link migration, security and terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks of September 2001, furthered by the 2015–2016 Refugee and Migrant Crisis (RMC) in Europe (Huot et al., 2016; Nail, 2016; Bose, 2022). Considering that the COVID-19 virus occurred seemingly everywhere and demonstrated no discrimination in who it targets, adding a layer of ‘biological’ securitization against ‘others’ leads one to wonder if mobility in general, and not merely targeted, “undesirable” mobility was further vilified in Western countries during the pandemic.

The emotionally charged discourses surrounding human migration can be traced back to the concept of post-truth politics or to what Newman (2019) characterized as a mutation in political culture, a loss of the “symbolic authority of truth” in the public sphere, a time during which emotions and beliefs are given priority over facts in discursive formulations. Therefore, understanding the key narratives that comprise emotionally charged discourses and the actors that influence their construction is an important endeavour in presumed post-truth societies. This research project aims to uncover the truths about transnational human migration in the media during the emotionally charged and informationally sparse first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, it delved into the 2020 media coverage of some of the most popular daily newspapers in the US (The Wallstreet Journal, The New York Times and USA Today), the UK (The Daily Mail, Metro and The Sun), and Canada (The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, and The National Post). The news outlets were deliberately selected not because of their political affiliation, which does show some variance, but chiefly because of their high readership. The fact that these newspaper outlets consistently rank among the top-read dailies in their respective countries is translated into a high potential for discursive influence within their respective societies.

Overall, the content of 25 articles from each source was categorized both quantitatively and qualitatively, resulting in a total of 225 articles. The article presents a discursive analysis of the three most

frequently covered topics in each country, along with their related narratives and perceived sentiments toward transnational human migration in 2020. The whole is compared to understand the key media-constructed ‘truths’ in each country surrounding transnational human migration in the early days of the pandemic.

Theoretical positioning: media and discourse in post-truth politics

In 2008, Stromback (2008, 239) argued that “mediated reality matters more than any kind of actual or objective reality.” A few years later, in 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year, defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” [as quoted in Lynch (2020, 50)]. In this instance, the concept does not refer to an era of ‘truth’ per se, implying a historical period in which facts reigned supreme over emotion and ideology in the larger social consciousness. Instead, ‘post’ refers to a state where the concept is no longer relevant, as in “post-war” or even “post-COVID-19.” According to Su (2023), ‘post-truth’ encompasses the processes and structures bringing forth fake news, misinformation, confirmation bias, and alternative facts, and includes the public’s reactions to them (Su, 2023, 4). It allows for widespread epistemological contentions and the socially constructed echo chambers that enable them. Considering the sheer scale of mis- and dis-information that surrounded the pandemic, not to mention the related conspiracy theories, Prasad (2022, 89) called COVID-19 the “new flashpoint in what has been called the post-truth era.” Indeed, numerous studies have documented the destructive influences of misinformation and misperception during public health crises, leading to an erosion of trust in authority and scientific institutions, intensifying discrimination and xenophobia, and even social unrest (see, for example, Malik et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2020).

To this effect, the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in its early days, can be considered a perfect example of a time of post-truth politics. States’ COVID-19 responses and the rationales on which these are/ were based remain emotionally charged and, at times, controversial. The polarizing debates echoed existing notions of Trumpian populist politics, social media algorithms, ‘fake news’ and widening social cleavages, hinting at the complex relationship between power and truth found in the interactions between politicians, the media, scholars, social networks, and so forth; the whole of which has been described as ‘post-truth politics’ (Hannan, 2018; McIntyre, 2018). Post-truth politics now refers to both a social reality in which individuals are inclined to rely on their emotions and ideologies rather than facts when engaging in political action (i.e., voting, debating, mobilizing, etc.) (Giusti and Piras, 2020) and the social practice characterized by audiences who seem indifferent to - or at least dubious of - the factual veracity of the information presented to (MacMullen, 2020).

In presumed post-truth societies, studying discourse becomes critical in understanding the pre-existing social structures and power relationships. Discourses and narratives have an intersectional and interdependent relationship. Discourses within a social unit may be acquired through articulating narratives, creating and fixing their identities contextually and relationally. If a discourse is a socially constructed reality, a narrative is a meaningful structure constructed

through the linkages of events and activities, which renders them intelligible, meaningful, and indeed coherent (Czarniawska, 2010). Upon telling or receiving a narrative, its contents are thus reinforced and maintained through people's lived experiences and socialization, both on a societal level and on a more immediate, personal level (Esin et al., 2013, 205).

As an influential medium of information dissemination, the media's discursive role becomes relevant insofar as its influence (i.e., its gatekeeping and editorial capacities) has a codifying effect on the convictions and actions of members of the said political system. It should be noted that when mentioning 'media,' one refers to the institutionalized practices of mustering and propagating information speedily and accurately.

The link between media coverage and discourse elaboration is contested. On the one hand, the notion that the media's principal role regarding public opinion is one of reinforcement for pre-existing attitudes – and is, as such, inconsequential politically – remains pervasive across many political and social science sub-disciplines and in non-academic commentary (Gavin, 2018). On the one end, such thinking can be traced to the minimalist influence thesis (MIT), premised on the assumption that people already have stern, formulated opinions and that people choose to expose themselves to media sources whose output they find congenial while actively reinterpreting political messages failing to match their predispositions (Klapper, 1968). It is also related to the idea that individuals choose which information to expose themselves to, while actively dismissing and/or reinterpreting political messages that contradict their beliefs and opinions (Kuhn, 2007). On the other hand, some argue for a direct relationship between media coverage and political (in)action. Often first to make something known to the public, the position argues that media maintains an important role in producing and reproducing prevalent discourses, which in turn influence national public and political attitudes, frame debates, and set agendas toward key issues and events in this instance asylum and migration (see for example Huot et al., 2016; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

This research positions itself somewhere between these two viewpoints, allowing preconceived opinions to shape media consumption, especially in increasingly polarized societies, while allowing the informational role of media coverage to influence attitudes and positions. It focuses more on the indirect influence of media coverage on discourse elaboration. As providers of information, the media enable civil society and policymakers alike to access knowledge on issues relevant to them, playing an appraising role of greater importance when the audience is physically distant from the events taking place or during rapidly evolving times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The media's informative powers and authority as an 'on the ground' source are mitigated by the sheer availability and accessibility of viewpoints vying for an audience's time and attention, and the changing culture surrounding news consumption. This paper follows that media coverage has a complex, multi-layered, and long-term influence on perception and discourse creation, not least about politically charged issues such as transnational human migration. For instance, by discussing human mobility in a negative light repetitively – linking it with terrorism or criminal activity, for example – media may trigger what is known as a "cultivation effect" and influence readers' perception of the subject matter through repetitive exposure (Arendt, 2010; Balabanova and Balch, 2010; Balch and Balabanova, 2016). Media act simultaneously as fields and agents

of discursive deliberations by choosing which narratives get told, through which lens, and with which frequency.

If 'Truths' (veracity and factuality), therefore, are perceived as less substantial than 'truths' (social constructions) in presumed post-truth societies, then this research project aimed to understand which 'truths' were given primacy on the emotionally filled subject of transnational human migration at a time in which the subject is perceived as increasingly contentious – not to say vilified. The project offered a discursive analysis of newspapers, an example of an influential information medium. It was premised upon two research questions. The first is, what 'truths' existed about transnational human migration in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic? Second, what do those 'truths' demonstrate about how the subject is constructed in each society being studied?

Methodology

This project focused exclusively on 2020, the first year of the pandemic. It is a research timeframe selected on two accounts. The first, is the novel and unforeseen nature of the virus. 2020 was a time when emotions ran high, while information on the virus's rapidly changing nature and spread was sparse and inconsistent, making the COVID-19 pandemic a perfect case study for a media-focused discursive analysis in a presumed post-truth world. The second reason is that the WHO was notified of COVID-19 by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission on December 31, 2019.

It should also be noted that this research analyzes only print and online media articles published by the selected newspapers. The decision to focus on newspapers for this project was deliberate. Once considered an "almost sanctified" medium in many nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies (Nerone and Barnhurst, 2001, 1), as the 'fourth branch' of democratic governments and the watchdogs against power abuses, newspapers maintained their role as credible sources of information despite widespread changes in media consumption and the media industry (Hyvönen, 2018). This led to what Bohman (2004) referred to as digitally expanded public spheres, or what Chadwick (2013) termed "hybrid media systems." In this digital age, mainstream news agencies were capable of revamping their business models to remain the dominant news providers around the world, not so much because they alone decide what captures the political agenda – that much they share with virtual influences – but because thanks to their editorial capacities that select and process information, they can script what *stays* on it (Boyd-Barrett, 2011). Editorial capacities, in this instance, highlight two key factors: the length of news articles, which allows for in-depth argumentation in comparison to social network conventions, and legitimacy derived from the long-standing practice of intellectuals and journalists from diverse backgrounds choosing to express themselves primarily through print media (Kaufmann, 2008). That being said, further research into the influence of social media and the power of its algorithms within the same framework as this project would be complementary.

This project focused on three newspapers in each country: Canada (The National Post, The Globe and Mail, and The Toronto Star); the UK (Daily Mail, Metro, and The Sun); and the USA (USA Today, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal). These newspaper outlets were chosen because they have the highest readership in each country (Agility PR Solutions, 2025a,b,c). According to the *Media*

Bias/Fact Check website, U. S. and Canadian newspapers are generally politically centrist. At the same time, the UK sources showed more of a variance, with two being politically right-leaning. While a broader spectrum of political views would have been interesting to study, especially in a project on post-truth politics—and indeed, there are some considerations to that effect surrounding the right-leaning UK sources—it was a conscious decision to focus on readership rather than ideology. In this sense, the high readership of each news outlet, and therefore the widespread exposure of their reporting, represents the potential discursive influence of these sources.

It should be noted that in Canada, while *Le Journal de Montréal*, a French-language publication, has a higher daily readership base than the *National Post*, it was not chosen for this study. As argued in a previous publication by [Beaupré and Fischer \(2020\)](#), language has real-life impacts on how an event or a group may be perceived, and discourses elaborated and/or maintained, not the least of which may be tied to terms and labels associated with human migration. As such, the *National Post*, the next most widely read daily newspaper in Canada, was selected because it is an Anglophone source. It was done to ensure linguistic consistency with the other two countries being studied and to mitigate potential linguistic nuances in the terminology found in the newspaper articles.

The selection of newspaper sources to be studied relied heavily on the Factiva research portal, which enables the compilation and comparison of various news outlets' outputs using pre-selected criteria. Through Factiva, it was possible to generate a list of all articles published by these nine outlets both in print and online from January 1st to December 31st, 2020, which included at least one of these terms (migrant, migrants, immigrant, immigrants, refugee or refugees) as well as one of these terms (COVID or pandemic). These search criteria are designed to generate a list of topically relevant articles that align with the research project's goal of understanding how the media covered migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, 225 articles were analyzed, with 25 articles selected for each of the nine newspapers, as determined by Factiva's "most relevant" selection. The selection parameters allowed for a wide range of newspaper articles, including opinion pieces, letters to the editor, editorials, and other types of content. Furthermore, it is worth noting that duplicate articles were removed from the top 25 and replaced by the following "most relevant" articles to allow a wider breadth of narrative analysis. Ultimately, it was found that 217 out of 225 articles (96%) met the project's topical requirements.

As narratives exist at the intersection of content and context, the methodology developed for this research project included a content analysis of the 217 articles, as well as a discursive analysis. From a quantitative perspective, all statistics presented in this dissertation concerning news articles were generated using Factiva's numerical outputs. Qualitatively, the content and the discursive analyses of the 320 articles were conducted manually and categorized into a database. They were performed according to the constant comparison method, in which each article is systematically compared to the others to ensure consistency in the definition and logic of each code.

The mixed-method analysis of the 217 articles was performed in 2 steps. Along each step, the collected texts were coded using a scheme to identify the content and contexts that comprise each country's perceived narratives. The first step involved multiple, careful read-throughs of each article, enabling the quantitative identification of recurring newsworthy discussion topics (i.e., their content). Examples

of such topics included focusing on specific types of migrants (i.e., temporary foreign workers in Canada and international humanitarian migrants) or the economic impact of immigration.

Each article was discursively analyzed in the second step to decipher the relevant sentiment associated with its content's depiction. Sentiment labels were broken down into five categories: positive, negative, neutral, and neutral-negative. The attribution of sentiment to each article ultimately depended on how it framed migration, how issues are framed matters because it determines how they are received, how they come to be problematized, and the range of solutions or responses to such problems. For example, if an article demonstrated that migration benefited the country by stating the social and/or economic contributions of some migrant groups or others, that article would be labelled as having positive sentiments toward migration and vice versa. An article was labelled a 'positive' if its subject matter, language use and broader contextualization of transnational human migration were overtly positive. Similarly, an article was labelled with a negative sentiment if its subject matter, language use, and associations with transnational human migration were overtly negative. An article was labelled 'neutral' if there were no perceivable distinctive pro- or con-identifiers regarding transnational human migration. Lastly, articles were labelled either 'neutral-negative' or 'neutral-positive' if they initially appeared neutral at first glance but were deemed negative or positive in their portrayal of one aspect, such as language use, article development, or broader associations.

The final step of the analysis involved the discursive analysis of the narratives related to the most recurring topics, as identified in the collected articles. Jointly and interactively, the recurring topics and related narratives portrayed in the coverage of these widely consumed media outlets exemplify the key discourses at play in each country during 2020. They were used to identify the media-constructed 'truths' (i.e., socially constructed discourses) surrounding transnational human migration in their respective countries in the early days of the pandemic.

Canada migration-related discourses during 2020

The Canadian migration-related media coverage during 2020 held comparatively high, favourable positions toward transnational human migration. Out of 75 articles randomly selected from *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The National Post* between January 1st and December 31st, 2020, 71 (95%) were relevant to this research project content-wise. Out of these, 34 (48%) held positive sentiments toward human mobility, 33 (46%) were neutral in sentiment, leaving only 4 (6%) as either outrightly negative or neutral-negative. Below is a breakdown of the top three recurring topics in these articles, followed by their most frequently mentioned narratives.

Topic 1- migrants faced greater precarity in 2020

Migrants facing greater precarity in 2020 was the most recurring topic in Canadian news coverage. It was mentioned in 46 out of 71 (65%) of articles. The news coverage on this topic was quite extensive, painting a holistic picture of migrant precarity during the pandemic through statistics and personal stories.

A sentiment breakdown of the 46 articles addressing the topic of migrant precarity in 2020 revealed two overarching narratives. The first was found in the 24 articles (50%), which treated the topic of migrant precarity with a neutral sentiment. They relayed general stories of migrant hardship and insecurity exacerbated by trying times due to their lower socioeconomic positioning, leaving them more likely to be impacted by changes brought about by the pandemic than the average citizen. Less likely to have financial and social resiliency, the narrative followed that migrants, both domestically and internationally, were hit particularly hard during the pandemic. On a local scale, the narrative was often supported by data contrasting migrant populations with everyday Canadians. For example, a Statistics Canada survey published in May 2020 found that 49% of immigrants reported being very or extremely concerned about their health compared with 33% of Canadian-born adults (Anderson et al., 2021).

The second narrative can best be found in 20 of the 46 articles (46%) on this topic, expressing positive sentiments toward migration. The narrative highlights the social and economic benefits of migrants and immigrants to the country, despite the dire reality faced by many newly arrived immigrants or temporary migrants. Regarding the country's pandemic efforts more specifically, these articles tended to highlight migrants as "essential" and "front-line" workers in the country's efforts to navigate these challenging times.

Combined, the articles on both narratives presented an in-depth, intersectional presentation of what migrants may have faced in 2020. For example, some articles provided information on the gendered reality of 2020 ("Pediatricians say kids should be in school despite coronavirus risk; Ontario's regional health units report 347 new COVID-19 cases; Migrants, refugees hard hit by coronavirus, UN says" 2020; Hagan, 2020); while others also provided for migrant racialization playing a part in their precarity. Overall, 10 of the 46 articles (22%) specifically mentioned racialization as a source of precarity for migrants, especially those of Southeast Asian descent. They provided statements like: "[c]ompared with Canadian-born adults, immigrants were more likely to say they were very or extremely concerned about domestic violence, family stress from being confined at home, and the preservation of social ties"; or "COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting the vulnerable - people living in racialized populations and in poverty, in multigenerational families living in cramped housing, and those with low-paying essential-service jobs and no paid sick leave".

Developments of these articles were, at times, group-specific, highlighting the plight of migrants by their legal status or type of employment. In one article, for example, migrant domestic workers are described as feeling imprisoned in their workplace by lockdowns. None of the migrant groups, however, received as much media attention as humanitarian migrants when discussing pandemic-related precarity. Of the 46 articles, 15 (33%) were about humanitarian migration specifically. Humanitarian migration in the context of this project includes both refugees and asylum seekers.¹ 8 of these 15 articles (53%), furthermore, were concerned about the precarity faced

by humanitarian migrants on an international scale, primarily concerned with either displaced individuals in general or zeroed in on specific groups like the Rohingya in Bangladesh and Venezuelans in Latin America. These internationally-focused articles followed two, sometimes mutually inclusive threads: the efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 in refugee camps being exponentially more difficult due to population density and/or poor sanitation facilities, and the means to help the situation were hindered by the economic downturn, resulting in fewer humanitarian donations. It is worth mentioning that all but one of these 8 articles were neutral in sentiment, taking on humanitarian, duty-bound notions in their retelling.

The outlier article was deemed neutral-negative in sentiment. While its content on refugees in Greece was similar to other abovementioned articles, it held stark securitization undertones. For example, the article mentions Athens's proximity to one of the many refugee camps in the country time and again. It highlights the country's efforts to "lockdown" these camps as it would be impossible to contain outbreaks, implying, therefore, that refugee camps put the remainder of the country at risk of infection.

Domestically, the remaining 7 out of the 15 (47%) articles focused on the precarity of humanitarian migrants already in Canada and/or those yet to come. These articles focused on various aspects of humanitarian immigration, such as integration. In Anderson et al. (2021), for example, it was argued that the lockdown made settling for newly arrived refugees harder than usual by precluding their access to necessary services.

Topic 2 – migration and economic development

The second most recurring topic, featured in 26 of the 71 articles (37%), centred around the economic impact migration has had and continues to have on the country. Since the mid-80s, Canada has taken around 250 thousand new permanent residents annually, roughly 0.8 percent of its population annually (Reitz, 2012; Hiebert, 2016). Canada is deliberate in who it allows within the country. Of the 250,000, fewer than 10% are refugees, preferring economic migration to fill labour shortages and boost economic competitiveness (Epp, 2017, 1). Considering that Canada allows, on average, three times more immigrants per year than the United States, it is worth noting that the country maintains comparably high levels of public support for immigration and tolerance for increasing diversity compared to other OECD countries (Hollifield et al., 2022).

Within this context, it was not surprising that 24 out of 26 (92%) of the selected articles held positive sentiments. The overarching narrative that emerged from these articles centred on the country's dependence on migrants of all types, including asylum seekers, temporary foreign workers (TFWs), and international students, in its current and future economic developments. One article, for example, claimed that "Canada's ability to attract newcomers to its shores has long been one of this country's greatest strengths and competitive advantages". Of these,

¹ "Refugees" here refer to those whose refugee claims have been both processed and recognized under the terms of the 1951 Convention or as people in need of protection based on humanitarian grounds not explicitly included in the 1951 Convention but included in a state's domestic legislation. An "asylum

seeker," on the other hand, refers to people who have sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined.

42% also mentioned the importance of migration in the country's social development, often citing the country's aging population and dwindling demographic. Overall, numerous articles lamented the dwindling numbers of migrants entering the country in 2020 due to travel restrictions, going so far as to claim the reduction in immigration influx risked "derailing Canada's strategy of growing the economy through high levels of immigration" and that "immigration must be a pillar of Canada's post-pandemic economic recovery plan". In fact, out of all 71 Canadian articles under study, 15% mentioned Canada's inability to meet its targeted immigration goals in 2020 due to lockdown-related administrative slowdowns and travel restrictions.

The remaining 2 articles (8%) furthered narratives of economic concern-or at least dubiousness-rather than outright benefit vis-à-vis the numbers of migrants allowed into the country. With a neutral sentiment, one article weighed the pros and cons of welcoming high numbers of international students for their potential future contributions versus their current influence on the real estate market with no apparent *parti pris* from the author. Lastly, a negative article focused on the potential influx of refugee claimants putting pressure on Canada's systems and resources following the Federal Court's decision calling the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) with its Southern neighbour unconstitutional due to the quality of reception in the USA (Keung October, 2020).

Topic 3 – temporary foreign workers (TFW)

Closely related to the first and second most frequently found topics, the third topic focused on Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), predominantly those working in the agricultural and food processing industries. It featured in 24 out of 71 (34%) analyzed Canadian articles. 21 out of 24 (88%) articles held positive sentiments, expressed predominantly via two distinct narrative threads.

The first narrative concerned Canada's agricultural system's dependence on the labour of TFWs. Of the 24 articles, 14 (58%) label either agricultural TFWs themselves, or at least their labour, as 'essential' to the country's efforts to keep things going during the pandemic by ensuring continuity in its food supplies. Canada's agriculture sector relies heavily on nearly 60,000 TFWs to journey north each year from southern countries (Falconer, 2020). A role of greater importance still in 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions combined with the economic recession resulted in higher food prices, dwindling supplies, and increased food insecurity throughout the country. To mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the food supply, the Federal government ensured TFWs' travel exemptions, provided over \$50 million to cover mandatory quarantine costs for new arrivals, and eased visa procedures (Government of Canada, 2021).

The second narrative found in 16 out of 24 (67%) trend in these articles ties in closely with the most recurring topic in 2020 Canadian news coverage, namely that their living and working conditions left them vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, exemplified by the numerous outbreaks in farms around the country (Government of Canada, 2023). The narrative was supported through statements such as "[t]hrough no fault of their own, hundreds have contracted the virus through community transmission after they arrived, and three have died. [...] For decades, Canada's migrant worker programs have been plagued with vulnerabilities to abuse, exploitation, workplace

injuries and deplorable living conditions". Wanting to recognize their contribution led advocacy groups to call for agricultural migrant workers to be considered for fast-tracked permanent residency by the Federal government and provincial immigration programs, such as Quebec's 'Guardian Angel' program, otherwise focused on asylum seekers working in hospitals and long-term care homes.

TFWs were also mentioned in one outlier negative article, claiming that the Federal Government's program for Pandemic Emergency benefits (CERB) had been defrauded by migrants, like TFWs and international students, who had asserted funds and left the country, to the detriment of Canadian taxpayers. There were also two articles by journalists Blaze Baum and Grant deemed neutral in sentiment that exposed in July the lack of legal recourse available to seasonal agricultural workers to complain about their living and working conditions exacerbated by the pandemic restrictions, followed by a follow-up in July 2020, about Federal efforts to rectify the situation (Blaze Baum and Grant July 2020; August 2020).

UK migration-related discourses during 2020

The UK's migration-related media coverage of transnational human migration during 2020 was polarized. All 75 articles randomly selected from the Daily Mail, Metro, and The Sun between January 1st and December 31st 2020, were relevant to this project content-wise. Contrasting heavily to Canada's 48% of all 71 relevant articles, only 12 (16%) of all 75 relevant UK articles held positive sentiments toward transnational human migration. Of the remaining articles, 37 (49%) were neutral, 21 (28%) were negative, and 5 (7%) were neutral-negative in sentiment. Below is a breakdown of these articles' top three recurring topics, followed by their most frequently mentioned narratives.

Topic 1 – migrants crossing the English Channel

Human migration across the English Channel was the most recurring topic in UK news coverage. It was mentioned in 26 out of 75 (35%) of articles.

Out of these, 21 out of 26 (81%) of the articles were either outrightly negative or found to be neutral-negative in sentiment. These articles present clear securitization narratives in which migrants are perceived as threats, be it economically or even physically, to the British host society. Of these articles, for example, 13 out of 21 (62%) emphasized the illegal and, indeed, outright criminal nature of their mobility. Indeed, corresponding news reporting premised heavily on the size of the influx, with articles frequently highlighting the size of the influx, such as "[s]ome 4,000 migrants have made the perilous crossing already this year - twice as many as in the whole of 2019" ("France Must Do More to End Migrant Crisis" 2020), "[b]etween sunrise and early evening it's believed at least 50 small boats carrying men, women, children, five babes in arms and even a double amputee, reached Dover and the surrounding shorelines", or again "AT LEAST 244 migrants managed to reach the UK over the bank holiday weekend" ("At Least 244 migrants managed" 2020).

Furthermore, 15 out of 21 (71%) of the negative and neutral-negative articles mention France, furthering notions of it being

inefficient in- or outrightly unwilling to curb the flow of migrants making their way to the UK. Some articles even accused France of helping smuggling operations or of profiting from UK funding to bankroll their militarised operations on the Channel. Along similar lines, more than half (57%) of the articles mentioning France focus on the administrative cost of maintaining the current migration system, from detention centers, militarised efforts in the Channel, processing asylum seekers' files, all the way to deporting failed applicants.

Regarding the pandemic, more specifically, 7 out of these 21 (33%) articles on irregular English Channel migrant crossings emphasize the narrative that migrants pose a biosecurity threat to UK society. They express the genuine possibility that migrants crossing the Channel brought COVID-19 with them during the first year of the pandemic.

The remaining 5 out of 26 (19%) articles discussing migration across the Channel were neutral in sentiment. While these articles followed similar lines to the more negative articles mentioned above, stressing the administrative cost of migration also allowed for a more humanitarian approach to Channel crossings. They provided, for example, that the Channel crossings were “much more complex than simply getting the Border Force to return them to France, or blaming the French, or taxing the rich to pay to accommodate them”, and sometimes called for a need to remember Britain's role in creating the conflicts from which migrants flee in the first place. Due to the nuanced and critical nature of the argument presented in these articles, they have all been deemed neutral in sentiment and offer a counterbalance to the securitized narrative mentioned above with a humanitarian narrative.

Topic 2 - migrants faced greater precarity in 2020

Migrants facing greater precarity during the pandemic was the second-most recurring topic in the 2020 UK news coverage on migration. It was mentioned in 25 out of 75 (33%) of articles. Out of these, 20 out of 25 (80%) of the articles were neutral in sentiment, and 3 out of 25 (12%) were positive. There were no discernible threads based solely on sentiments between these articles. What was telling, however, was their geographic focus.

Out of these 25 articles, 12 of them (48%) focused on international news stories, chiefly reporting on the precarity faced by humanitarian migrants around the world, be it Lebanon (“Refugee tests positive inside Lebanon camp” 2020), USA (“‘Body bags’ demo at Trump hotel for migrant victims” 2020), France, and Greece. These articles followed similar narratives to their Canadian counterparts, providing sympathetic reporting on the increasingly dire realities of refugees during the pandemic, citing crowded conditions in camps and/or detention centers, and the lack of access to sanitation facilities.

The remaining 13 (52%) articles focused on local news and carried two narrative trends. The first was that migrants faced additional challenges during 2020 than the average UK citizen, with the assumption that ‘average’ in this instance refers to ethnically white citizens of European descent. Canadian news coverage of racialized communities contrasts with that of the UK. Generally, Canadian articles that spoke of racialized marginalization about COVID-19 allowed ethnic minority groups to include pockets of migrants [see, for example, [Anderson et al. \(2021\)](#)], whereas UK articles tended to conflate the two. Doing so ignores the long-standing history of

diversity in the UK and the fact that over 14% of the population in the UK in 2019 belonged to racialized minority groups. From a narrative standpoint, the information conveyed was similar to Canadian reporting on migrant's existing precarity being exacerbated by the pandemic. These articles, for example, mentioned that migrants faced challenges during the pandemic due to socio-economic factors, including their living arrangements, the type of work they performed, whether in healthcare or low-skill industries, or inadequate safety precautions in their workplaces. It was also mentioned that cultural beliefs could deter both migrants and ethnic minorities from seeking medical assistance. Although the sample used for this comparison is admittedly small, the discursive implications hinted at by these articles remain noteworthy. Additional studies would be required to shed more light on this notion. Grouping racialized pockets of society with migrants, themselves presumed to be non-white, is a sign of citizenship variegation in which citizenship and immigration laws have worked to construct ‘whiteness’ as a core feature of belonging ([De Genova, 2005](#); [Dick, 2020](#); [Haney-López, 2006](#)). Reinforcing cultural differences, furthermore, may cast doubt on the incomers' abilities to integrate into host societies ([Alexander et al., 1999](#)).

The other narrative trend focused on the state's role in caring for migrants. On multiple instances, migrants were listed as- or alongside- marginalized groups like “women in poverty,” “sex workers,” “trans people,” and “drug users,” leaving them at greater risk of social exclusion, and of being affected by the 2020 economic downturn. Refugees, furthermore, were listed alongside current and former foster children, saying that they were “at risk of becoming homeless [had] been struggling to access the internet during lockdown, leaving them feeling isolated”. Concerning asylum seekers, more specifically, the bulk of these articles depict individuals passively awaiting a verdict on their asylum claim. Related news coverage on asylum focused on where asylum seekers resided, be it in local camps ([Keogh September 28, 2020](#)) or in COVID-19 isolation in hotels throughout the UK.

Topic 3 – the administrative cost of migration

Overlapping the previous two topics, the third most mentioned topic was the administrative cost of maintaining the current migration policies. It was mentioned in 21 out of 75 articles (28%). None of the articles treating this topic had an international focus. 12 out of 21 (57%) of these articles were either negative or neutral-negative in sentiment, and 8 out of 21 (38%) were neutral in sentiment.

Interestingly, articles addressing this topic from neutral, negative, and neutral-negative perspectives almost all present these two narratives. The first narrative is that the UK is paying a high price for the constant influx of migrants, and in most cases, it follows that UK taxpayers are being taken advantage of by criminals. Out of the 21 articles, 17 (80%) of them focus on migrants crossing the English Channel, lamenting both the cost of care for these migrants as well as the cost of securitizing the Channel itself; 12 (57%) directly mention the amounts being channelled to France to fund their Channel security efforts; and 62% and 12 (57%) of them, respectively, insisting on either/both the criminality and illegality of said crossings. Overall, only 4 (19%) articles link the cost of caring for migrants crossing the

English Channel with humanitarian migration, of which two of them make allowances for “genuine” asylum seekers. The other two articles either focus on the high cost of caring for asylum seekers, especially in light of the 2020 economic downturn, or call for a reminder of Britain’s role in creating the conditions that asylum seekers flee. To that effect, in all the articles treating the cost of administering for migrants to the UK, only 4 (19%) of them mention the 2020 recession.

The use of hotels for the social isolation of asylum seekers in the UK is a prime example of a narrative surrounding the cost of care for migrants. The practice began in March 2020 and aimed to provide them with a “safe environment” during the pandemic (Home Office, 2021). Hotels were used in conjunction with military facilities, or “camps”, to provide temporary accommodations during the pandemic. Mostly found to be unsuitable to the task at hand, the “UK government’s determination to press on with sourcing additional contingency forms of accommodation despite the criticism and overwhelming evidence regarding their unsuitability should be understood in a context of an increasingly hostile public debate around asylum in the UK” (Guma et al., 2023, 3). Hotels, especially, became a commonly covered narrative, with two incidents featuring in 9 out of 75 (12%) UK articles: a stabbing of six individuals in June 2020 in a Glasgow hotel by an asylum seeker in mental distress and the alleged sexual aggression at a hotel in London “where the man was living at taxpayers’ expense”. Following these events, some articles decried the living and mental conditions of asylum seekers, some calling it a “humanitarian crisis,” with “asylum seekers left malnourished in some temporary accommodation” (“Charity says refugees face ‘humanitarian crisis’”). Other articles focused on the social response, notably targeted attacks on hotels by xenophobic hate groups like Britain First Members. In all instances, the cost of care for asylum seekers as they wait to have their files treated was the overarching undertone of the UK news coverage on transnational human migration in 2020.

The only outlier article on this topic with positive sentiment toward migration followed the personal story of a Syrian refugee, Hassan Hakkad (sometimes spelled Akkad), employed as a hospital cleaner, who had his family granted the right to remain in the UK should he die on “the front line” of the country’s COVID efforts. Illustrative of welfare chauvinism in the UK, migrants had initially been excluded from the UK’s COVID-19 bereavement scheme, which granted them indefinite leave to remain in the UK but expected them to pay a £400 surcharge to use the National Health Service (NHS). Outraged by the situation, Hakkad filmed a video that gained enough popularity to incite the government to make a ‘U-turn’ by allowing selected workers to participate in the bereavement scheme in recognition of their service to the UK. Hakkad’s story highlights the 12 out of 75 UK articles (16%) that underscore the contribution of migrants to the country’s pandemic efforts as essential workers. Overall, 83% of these were positive, leaving only one article mentioning the role of migrant essential workers with a negative sentiment due to its focus on migrants being a source of insecurity by bringing COVID-19 into the country.

US migration-related discourses during 2020

Similarly to the UK’s news coverage, US migration-related media coverage on transnational human migration in 2020 was polarized.

Out of 75 articles randomly selected from The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and USA Today between January 1st and December 31st 2020, 71 were content-wise relevant to this research project. Of these, 25 (35%) held positive sentiments toward human mobility, 30 (42%) were neutral, 7 (10%) were negative, and 9 (13%) had neutral-negative sentiments. Below is a breakdown of the top three recurring topics in these articles, along with their most frequently associated narratives.

Topic 1- migrants faced greater precarity in 2020

38 out of 71 (54%) articles in USA news coverage mentioned migrant precarity. Articles on this topic mentioned the challenges migrants faced in 2020 in relation to COVID-19 developments. Of the 38 articles, 21 (55%) expressed neutral sentiments, 13 (34%) expressed positive sentiments, and the remaining 4 (11%) expressed either negative or neutral-negative sentiments toward migrants. Overall, there is no discernible overarching narrative trend based on sentiment between these articles.

Taking a geographic approach instead, 12 articles (32%) focused on news occurring outside of the USA. These chiefly maintained similar lines to Canadian and UK articles concerning humanitarian migration. Some, for example, focused on the challenges faced by humanitarian migrants during the pandemic, mentioning the EU’s harsher position toward asylum seekers attempting to cross the Mediterranean in attempts to curb the spread (Kingsley April, 2020; Kingsley March, 2020). Others focused on refugees in camps around the world, exploring how refugees were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the conditions.

On a more local level, 26 articles (68%) treated the topic of migrant precarity in the USA; half of which centered on the effects of the 2020 economic downturn on US immigrants, mentioning them being socio-economically marginalized communities [see, for example, “Highlight: Massachusetts” (2020) and Lustgarten (2020)], or among those most likely to lose their jobs to COVID-19 restrictions. While racialized marginalization was included in some articles, the USA articles sampled for this project presented no evidence of citizenship variegation in their elaboration. Other articles on this topic focused on how migrants are statistically more likely to live in poorer neighbourhoods and multigenerational or crowded apartments. This reality is exacerbated by the fact that they are disproportionately represented among essential ‘front-line’ services such as long-term care homes, factory floors, and the service industry, most of which cannot be performed remotely. Recognition for migrants working in essential roles in the country’s pandemic efforts was acknowledged in 9 articles, or 13% of all 71 USA articles, all of which unsurprisingly were found to hold positive sentiments toward migration.

10 articles (27%) on migrant precarity in the USA, moreover, mentioned the conditions in migrant detention centers throughout the country, with some calling them a “humanitarian disaster” (Kanno-Youngs April, 2020) due in large part to the general lack of oversight over their respecting COVID-19 restrictions (See for example “HIGHLIGHT: UTAH” 2020). Already dire before the pandemic, the inadequate facilities, substandard or inaccessibility of medical care, and the unsanitary and packed conditions in those centers played a significant part in the deaths of those in US

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody (Lee et al., 2023).

A novel aspect of transnational migration during the pandemic, untreated by either of the other countries, was that of undocumented migrants who wanted to return to their home country but were unable to do so due to travel restrictions (Semple August, 2020; Nechepurenko and Ponomarev, 2020). The two articles on the subject highlighted that the pandemic and related economic downturn exacerbated the already precarious position of irregular migrants. It mentioned, for example, that their lack of legal status precluded them from accessing healthcare, a reality made exponentially riskier during a global health crisis. From a financial standpoint, their lack of status left them with no access to emergency government support schemes or legal recourse if they were unjustly laid off. It meant that they were more likely to work in illicit industries, with little oversight as to the safety of their labour conditions, let alone their employer's compliance with COVID-19 safety precautions.

Common to both local and international narratives on migrant precarity in USA news coverage was the discussion of migrants potentially being sources of COVID-19 spread. Negative articles focused on the need to stop border crossings to stop migrants from bringing in - or at least spreading - the virus, especially since detention centers were known to be "hotbeds" for COVID-19 (Semple, 2020). Even articles that did not clearly express pro- or con-positions toward migration showed some reticence toward newcomers during the pandemic, hinting at migrants as potential sources of COVID-19 (Kanno-Youngs December, 2020; Semple May, 2020; Kanno-Youngs and Jordan, 2020).

Topic 2 – migrants crossing state Borders

The second most covered topic in USA articles was that of predominantly Latin American migrants crossing the USA's Southern border. It was mentioned in 35 out of 71 articles (49%), with 14 articles (40%) expressing a negative or neutral-negative sentiment, 11 (31%) conveying a positive sentiment, and the remaining 10 (29%) conveying a neutral sentiment.

There were no discernible narrative trends in the articles with neutral sentiments. They primarily presented various initiatives by the Trump administration regarding migration, without demonstrating either pro or con attitudes toward those targeted by the policies.

The articles expressing negative or neutral-negative sentiments, however, consistently included two elements: statistics on the number of Latin American migrants crossing the Southern US border, or at least some mention of it rising, and some mention of the system in place to control the influx. Jointly, the narrative created is one of controlled chaos, where large numbers of migrants risk their lives to cross into the USA illegally, only to be arrested and/or expelled (at least during the pandemic), time and again. The narratives on migrants follow both passive and active approaches. Migrants are, on the one hand, subject to their reality, being victims of smugglers or being ill-equipped for the journey, and in need of saving by well-meaning border agents who risk their lives to do so. On the other hand, they are also actively infringing laws and are viewed as security threats. The latter is similar to a frequently found securitization narrative in UK articles on Channel crossings. They present an urgent need to halt the flow of illegal migration and regain control of the

country's border management. Both goals are presented as matters of national security.

In a similar sense to the UK's articles linking illegal migration and criminal activity, 22 articles (64%) on border crossings mentioned migrants doing so illegally, stressing the often-repeated efforts to skirt legal channels of migration. A total of 7 articles (20%) on migrant crossings linked migrants with criminal activity, citing, for example, their false asylum claims and their criminal past, which prevented them from remaining in the country. The illegality - and sometimes criminality - of these migrants was a recurring narrative in articles of all sentiments. Dick (2020) argues that the securitization and racialization of immigration is an emotional appeal being mobilized by various actors to help justify and expand south-of-the-border immigrant illegality. Indeed, while data disproves the association of migrants and criminal activity, some argue that it has become 'common sense' in the US to link migrants with criminality (Warner, 2005; Menjivar et al., 2018). Others speak of the convergence of racialized, criminal and security discourses in the US as "crimmigration" (Inda and Dowling, 2013; Stumpf, 2006). The whole results in a social construction that is legitimated and reproduced by law, and utilized to expand the financial and institutional support for government agencies and private actors focusing on illegal immigration.

The 11 articles with positive sentiments presented an entirely different perspective on migration. Similarly to Canadian media coverage on economic development and migration, they highlighted the importance of the Latin American migrant contribution to the USA's economy. Some did so by stating it in a general manner, others by citing specific examples, such as: demographic decline, migrants providing essential labour during the pandemic, migrant labour's importance to post-COVID-19 economic recovery, and migrant's children being up a key university demographic, making them the future of country's workforce (Jordan October, 2020).

Topic 3 – migration policy during COVID

The third most covered topic in USA articles was COVID-19-related migration policies. It was mentioned in 31 out of 71 articles (44%).

5 of these articles (16%) detailed policy developments abroad, focusing chiefly on efforts to control irregular migration into Europe at a time of limited mobility and border closure. These articles all held neutral sentiments toward migration, except for one with a neutral-negative sentiment, which linked the unfortunate living conditions of illegal migrants with the international spread of COVID-19.

The remaining 26 articles focused on policy elaboration in the USA. 7 of these articles approached the topic with positive sentiments toward transnational human migration. Similarly to Canadian coverage on economic development, some focused on the significantly reduced numbers of immigrants allowed in the country in 2020, citing future challenges for the country in terms of: dwindling demographics, the agricultural industry's dependency on foreign labour, and a general economic need for migrant labour. Other articles argued that President Trump was using the pandemic to push his anti-immigration agenda, especially ahead of the 2020 Presidential election.

The other 19 articles, which featured neutral, negative, and neutral-negative sentiments, all referenced the Title 42 clause, which

allowed the government to prevent the introduction of individuals during public health emergencies. President Trump reintroduced this 1944 Public Health Services Law clause in March 2020 to prevent – or at least deter – migrants from entering the country and claiming asylum. Title 42 stayed in effect until May 2023, when the COVID-19 public health emergency was officially lifted. Overall, it is said that the policy authorized over 1.45 million expulsions ([Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023](#)). The narratives in articles on Title 42 clause primarily focused on migrants spreading and/or contracting COVID-19, with 12 articles emphasizing the need to empty disease-ridden detention centers. Another 10 articles highlighted what the clause meant for underage migrants. The USA faced difficulties expelling underage migrants because Mexico refused to accept them. As a result, they harboured them in hotels and detention centers until they could “place them on unsupervised flights back to their home countries”. The use of hotels to host asylum seekers during the pandemic, schools’ gymnasiums, and numerous non-conventional accommodations aimed to alleviate the pressure on the cramped detention centers. The initiative did not receive the same level of media attention in the sampled US articles as in the UK. In the UK, it was mentioned in 9 articles, with appearances in USA media coverage being limited to twice. Instead, detention centers featured more prominently in US coverage of COVID-19-related policy developments. They were mentioned in a total of 18 articles (26%).

What emerges from these articles on Title 42 is a narrative portraying migrants as posing a biosecurity risk to U. S. citizens and others. Overall, out of the 71 USA articles used in this project, 23 (32%) mentioned migrants as potential sources of infection. Of these, only 2 argue that there was no proof linking migrants to the spread of COVID-19, stressing instead migrants’ vulnerability to viral infection due to their living and working conditions. Furthermore, some articles focused on the USA itself posing a biosecurity threat to other countries as it was one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and related how individuals deported from the USA to Guatemala tested positive for the coronavirus after returning.

The COVID-19 pandemic and transnational human migration: ‘truths’ in UK, USA and Canadian media coverage

Below are the most recurring narratives surrounding the topics of transnational human migration that were most frequently covered in the media coverage of each of the studied countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these narratives could be found in more than one country and are organized into broader umbrellas by their underlying logic.

Narratives of humanitarian solidarity

Narratives on humanitarian solidarity are commonly associated with humanitarian migrants, be it refugees or asylum seekers, and are premised upon a moral obligation for host societies toward migrants anchored in shared humanity and, indeed, in a more contemporary sense in Human Rights. It also suggests that transnational

humanitarian migrants often find themselves in dire situations, evoking a range of emotions, including pity toward the migrant, resentment toward the perceived causes of their precarity, and/or a level of compassion toward the individuals in need of assistance. In turn, these emotions may lead to a desire to help migrants through various means, such as making physical and financial donations and extending a welcome to those in need.

The narrative of humanitarian solidarity toward humanitarian migrants was indeed present in all three media coverage analyses. In each of the countries, there was media attention given to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers around the world, considering the pandemic. These articles would highlight how rapidly a virus could spread among individuals dwelling in camps due to crowding and limited sanitation facilities. The whole situation created an unfortunate circumstance, made even more challenging to address due to the economic downturn, resulting in fewer humanitarian donations.

A pandemic-specific narrative that emanated from these analyses premised that all migrants – and not exclusively humanitarian migrants – faced higher than usual levels of precarity during the pandemic. Studies, such as those by [Panebianco \(2021\)](#), demonstrate sizable humanitarian appeals in recognizing migrant vulnerability to pandemic-related outcomes. My findings also indicate that the narrative of migrant precarity, angled as the subject of sympathy and compassion, was a popular one. It featured prominently in the number one topic in Canada and the US, found in 65 and 54% of articles, respectively. In the UK, it ranked second, appearing in 33% of articles. In this narrative, the plight of migrants as marginalized groups is described in a way that musters an emotional reaction. Related news coverage in all 3 countries was quite extensive, painting an intersectional narrative of precarity during the pandemic through statistics and personal stories. Articles on this topic provide related information on how lockdowns, the 2020 economic downturn, racial discrimination, and COVID-19 measures would have been particularly hard on migrants due to their living and working conditions and ultimately exacerbated social inequality. Indeed, structural changes in COVID-19-impacted societies resulted in the ‘1%’ facing lockdowns in safe and remote locations while those in lower socio-economic groups bore the brunt of COVID-19 responses. Migrants are disproportionately represented among key ‘front-line’ services such as long-term care homes, factory floors, and the service industry. The narrative focuses on a specific construction of migrants as a group, one in which they are statistically more likely to live in multigenerational, crowded apartments and are more likely not only to contract COVID-19 but also to be less resilient to the social and economic changes associated with the pandemic. The whole compounds inequality with systemic racism ([Sell, 2020](#)).

Narratives of pragmatism

Narratives that fall under the umbrella of the pragmatism premise present a transactional logic, depicting the numerous ways in which host societies may benefit from both regular and irregular migrant influxes. The focus of these narratives is not the migrants themselves as much as their contributions to host societies. They are, therefore, typically associated with a positive stance toward immigration.

A first narrative supports the need for immigrant arrival in societies facing a declining birth rate and/or an ageing population.

Immigration can help aging populations by increasing the size of the working-age population, thereby helping to maintain a senior-to-working-age ratio. Migration may thus reduce population decline, improve age dependency ratios, and keep the labour force from shrinking. A second narrative views migrant labour to host societies as an infusion of human capital, a stimulus for creativity, entrepreneurship, and investment. The narrative has been codified into policies encouraging the contribution of migrant labour. Both narratives were found in all three countries to varying degrees. They were found in US and Canadian media coverage, presenting the pandemic-related reduction of migrant flows into the country as a missed 'opportunity'. In Canada 15% of its articles expressed concerns surrounding Canada's inability to meet its targeted immigration goals in 2020, whereas it was found in 10% of US articles.

About the pandemic more particularly, the media coverage in all three countries, especially Canada and the USA, highlighted the importance of migrant labour in their country's pandemic efforts. Migrants working in 'essential' or 'front-line' positions during 2020 was mentioned in 13% of US articles, 16% of UK articles and 34% of Canadian articles. Studies show that the pandemic has resulted in a greater appreciation for migrant labour, discursively shifting it from 'low-skilled' to 'essential,' notably in health services, social care, and food supply chains. Indeed, the systemic challenges brought forward by the pandemic rendered countries conscious that low-skilled labour was equally crucial to their resilience in times of crisis as the usually preferred, high-skilled foreign labour (Triandafyllidou and Nalbandian, 2020). In the second quarter of 2020, low-skilled workers deemed 'essential' to 'front-line' efforts were subject to special exemptions and arrangements in various countries to ensure their supply despite travel restrictions. Efforts to curb the spread disproportionately affected migrants, lower socioeconomic classes, and BIPOC communities, as members of these groups were often associated with low-skilled industries that support daily social life (i.e., custodians and grocery workers) (Sell, 2020; Wu et al., 2021).

Narratives of economic insecurity

Concerns about the administrative costs of migration reflect the post-2008 trend of viewing migration and its management increasingly in terms of resource drains in a resource-scarce economy (Poole and Williamson, 2023). As a result, the future of the state and the question of immigration are key policy debates in Western democracies. By 2016, a wave of nativism and resentment focused on migrants could be observed in political debates across Europe and North America.

Two narratives fall under this umbrella: the migrant influx into the labour market increases competition to the detriment of citizens, and the cost of care for humanitarian migrants detracts from the capacity to care for citizens. Each of these narratives conveys the underlying logic of economic insecurity and resource scarcity, portraying migrants as resource drains. These negative portrayals inject anxiety into debates surrounding the future of the state and future immigration. The economic impacts of migrant influxes into host communities can be seen to some extent in Canadian media coverage, as reflected in a handful of articles concerned with the real estate implications of high levels of migration and the administrative costs of the immigration system. The narratives featured most prominently, however, in the US and UK articles, where the levels of

migrants entering the country and the administrative cost of maintaining the country's immigration system in general are among the most mentioned topics, predominantly treated with negative sentiments toward migrants.

These narratives can sometimes stand contrary to those related to humanitarian solidarity, viewing all migrant injections as problematic and burdensome. Alternatively, they can also be mitigated by them, as seen in these two UK articles, which make allowances for "genuine" asylum seekers while decrying the administrative costs of immigration. Based on the perception that there is a trade-off between the well-being of humanitarian migrants and the well-being of established members of potential host countries, there is a tendency to greet asylum seekers with intolerance, distrust and contempt. The resulting discourses focus on the administrative and economic demands of caring for and integrating individuals who need assistance within host societies, as well as suspicions about the genuineness of their claims. The pessimistic approach to an otherwise humanitarian subject matter stems from the rising number of refugees globally and their perception as burdens, threats, 'bogus asylum seekers,' 'illegals,' criminals or, worse, potential terrorists (Wallace, 2018).

Such nativist political rhetoric is motivated by what Andersen and Bjørklund (1990) called 'welfare chauvinism,' a term used to describe the perspective that state support should be restricted to national citizens and not provided to 'others.' While data demonstrates that migration is an economic boon for the host society, public opinion, in any case, usually takes little account of the intricacies of economic analysis. Welfare chauvinism implies a fiscally austere approach to government spending, one that Poole and Williamson (2023) say blurs the myths of 'national unity,' 'alien disruption' with the myth of 'overspending.' It necessitates excluding certain people from participating in the national economy, either through employment or welfare.

Examples of welfare chauvinism in relation to the pandemic, more specifically, were found in all three countries. In Canada, for instance, concerns were raised about migrants defrauding COVID-19-related welfare support funds. Media coverage in US and the UK, moreover, demonstrated that the cost of administering the flow of migrants during a pandemic, be it by putting them in hotels or school gymnasiums, was a significant concern, primarily, when migrants were pooled with other marginalized groups associated with government support like "women in poverty," "sex workers," "trans people," and "drug users," or again "foster children". What emanated from the association is a narrative in which poor, racialized migrants are further drains on national resources.

Narratives of threats to security

The last narrative trend identified in this media analysis is linked to the perception of losing control over migration, in the sense that a state's border controls are inadequate insofar as migrants pose a tangible threat to the rule of law and the government's management capabilities in host societies. These narratives are based on migrants being viewed as more likely to partake in harm-inducing activities, both abroad and within the host society, not the least of which is linked with criminal activity and even terrorism. In many such cases, the threat perception of migration is elevated to the level of an 'invasion' and migrants are perceived as existential threats.

The desire to control and securitize irregular migration flows in general, not merely during a global pandemic, featured most prominently in US and UK articles. The narratives presented in both coverages were a mix of vulnerability and threat, reflecting the constant influx of migrants. For irregular migrants (i.e., those who mobilize across state borders outside of administrative and regulatory norms), the securitization of migration discourses legitimized control measures to curb migration (Horsti et al., 2012; Léonard, 2011). For example, undocumented migrants, also frequently referred to as illegal migrants or “illegals,” are deemed to be breaking the law by virtue of their status (or lack thereof), associating them with crime (Demleitner, 2018). It is as if not going through the regular channels upon crossing a state border implies a penchant for criminal activity, ignoring the fact that a large part of undocumented migrants are asylum seekers, legally entitled to irregular mobility according to human rights. Yet, the assumption that undocumented migrants commit more crimes than citizens remains pervasive, an association deeply criticized in academic literature [see, for example Matos (2018)].

In a similar vein, asylum seekers and refugees are frequently presented as faking persecution and abusing the humanitarian regime designed to offer them protection (Demleitner, 2018). The issue of ‘genuine’ asylum requests was most clearly evident in UK articles. Watson (2009, 5) explains the negative shift in attitudes toward humanitarian migration as a result of changes in the source countries of refugee flows, indicating a fear-based, racially and culturally imbued securitization of surrounding discourses. Long (2013) argues that by creating this stand-alone channel, the resulting humanitarian discourses promote dependence on state-provided assistance and actively prevent them from finding long-term financial security in the workforce.

The vision of security vis-à-vis migration differed most visibly between the UK and the USA media coverage. While the USA's focus predominantly veers toward traditional perceptions of state security, it allows for elements of criminality. The UK's media portrayal dealt with an additional layer of financial insecurity, favouring discussions on the scale of migrants who have crossed the English Channel, about the administrative cost of caring for them. Over 8,000 migrants crossed the English Channel via small boats in 2020, nearly four times the number in 2019. Of these, around 92% would have claimed asylum, and approximately 86% would have been granted protection (Walsh and Cuibus, 2023). In 2020, over 10,000 individuals crossed the English Channel into the UK, most of whom are asylum seekers legally entitled to irregular mobility according to human rights. Researchers suggest that the line between empathy and fear when it comes to transnational humanitarian migration is increasingly blurred as refugees and refugee claimants are becoming discursively dehumanized behind numbers by political actors and media portrayals (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). Such narratives of faceless masses reproduce and reinforce notions of threatening ‘invasions’ and resource-drain discourses on humanitarian mobility (Xu, 2021).

Furthermore, while border closure featured to some extent in both studied UK and Canadian articles, it was the focus of the USA's third most mentioned topic, migration-related COVID-19 policies. The 2020 reintroduction of Title 42, which allows for the refusal and return of asylum seekers, was featured in 19 (27%) of U.S. articles, while the adoption of a similar policy in Canada was only mentioned in two Canadian articles. This author acknowledges that the stark difference in media attention between the two countries may be due in part to

how Factiva compiled its articles. However, they maintain that this finding is telling about each country's experience with irregular migration. The difference stems from the scale of the flow. For example, between 2020 and 2023, Title 42 resulted in 1.45 billion individuals being turned back at US borders, whereas Canada's policy turned away at least 544 would-be refugees between March and October 2020. The discrepancy is unlikely to stem from how the policies were implemented as much as the sheer scale of migrant flows. In 2023, while there were 189,000 encounters with migrants at the US-Canada border, there were over two million migrant encounters at the Southern US border, including people who arrive at legal points of entry to request asylum, as well as those who are captured illegally. Canada has a unique geographic advantage. As one of the northernmost states surrounded by oceans on three sides and an economically powerful Southern neighbour, the country's geographic position has mostly safeguarded it from large-scale unauthorized human flows and allowed it to have a selective immigration system (Hiebert, 2016, 1). As such, Canada gets to be very deliberate in who it lets in, focusing its humanitarian efforts toward already-vetted refugees rather than ‘riskier’ asylum seekers. As mentioned in a 2016 Economist issue on ‘Canada's example to the world,’ “[i]t is easier to be relaxed about immigration when your only land border is protected by a wall the size of the United States” (as cited in Hollifield et al., 2022, 124).

A COVID-19-specific narrative that emanated from this media analysis is that migrants were linked with the spread of COVID-19 and therefore posed a bio-security threat to host societies. This type of biologically informed securitization of migration -or ‘bio-security’- is a historically established form of xenophobia at times when health concerns are heightened (Shams, 2020). In the 1800s, Irish and Chinese immigrants to the USA were blamed for bringing smallpox and cholera to the US, resulting in exclusionary policies and practices (Clissold et al., 2020). Similarly, in the early 1920s, Italian newcomers were blamed for the polio epidemic in East Coast cities (Kraut, 2004; 2010). More recently, during the early 2000s SARS epidemic in Canada, various media outlets and political figures portrayed Chinese Canadians as “SARS suspects,” associating them directly with the potential for carrying and propagating the virus (Leung, 2008). While it is beyond the scope of this study to compare previous levels of biological securitization with those experienced by migrants in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the results reveal considerable concern about the link between migrant mobility and viral spread. In all three countries, some articles viewed migrants as potential sources of COVID-19 spread. It was mentioned in 32% of US articles, 20% of Canadian articles, and 21% of UK articles. It is worth noting that in all of these, there were 4 Canadian articles that mentioned the association and rejected it outright, as did 2 USA articles.

Conclusion

According to the WHO, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 officially killed more than 1.8 million individuals, with unofficial numbers being estimated to be at least 3 million (World Health Organisation, 2023). In addition to the loss of human lives, it also costs societies worldwide in multiple ways. From an economic standpoint, the pandemic led to the deepest global recession since World War II, leaving some businesses and individuals to choose between risking

exposure to the virus and their livelihoods (World Bank Group, 2020). By August 2020, 3.3 million businesses in the United States had shut down, with unemployment rates of 8.4 and 14.7% by April (Tierney, 2025; Davis, 2020). In Canada, the unemployment rate in August 2020 was 10.2%, down from a high of 13.7% in May. At least 14 percent of Canadian independent businesses considered bankruptcy or winding down their operations due to COVID-19 (Hagan, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020). Moreover, the UK economy fell into a recession due to the pandemic, falling by 2% between January and March 2020 and by over 20% between April and June 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Despite government-provided emergency benefits to individuals and businesses affected by the pandemic, concerns about individual finances and the national economy were evident in all 3 countries [see Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2021)].

Politically, 2020 was a year marked by protests and civil unrest. It was the year of mass mobilizations around the world led by the Black Lives Matter movement calling for an end to racial discrimination and police brutality, mixed with widespread anger over lockdowns, the economic downturn and government management of the general public health crisis (Press and Carothers December 2020). Canada, the UK, and the USA were among the countries experiencing anti-lockdown protests. Furthermore, the pandemic is seen as having fueled nationalist sentiments, involving ‘me-first’ attitudes, rendering societies more inward-looking (Nossem, 2020). Border closures and subsequent disruptions to the global supply chain led to scarcity and unmet demand across numerous industries. States hoarded what they had and were left “scramble[ing]” for vaccines and medical equipment, ultimately outbidding each other for advance deals with individual firms to secure their access in the wake of potential shortages and general competition (Sell, 2020; Daoudi, 2020, 2). The resulting tensions between states was called a form of “vaccine nationalism” by Weintraub et al. (2020). For example, Canada and the United States engaged in vaccine nationalism by entering pre-purchase agreements to secure priority access to vaccines when they became available (Fidler, 2020). General insecurity, accentuated by economic insecurity, left states more inward-looking than before. From a transnational human mobility standpoint, the desire to stop – or at least mitigate the viral spread – resulted in somewhat of a standstill. In most OECD countries, state borders were partially to completely closed to nonresidents, leading to a suspension of both immigration and the entry of asylum seekers. Human mobility between most states was significantly reduced in attempts to curb the spread of the virus. Doing so imbued mobility with marked discourses of urgency and anxiety (Esses et al., 2021). As such, the migration-related news coverage throughout the pandemic did not focus solely on mobility but also included discussions on its absence.

The media’s portrayal of transnational human migration during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a critical lens through which to examine societal attitudes and political discourses. Several key themes emerge from the analysis, each reflecting broader societal dynamics that merit further exploration.

In each of the countries, the media’s focus on humanitarian solidarity highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by migrants, particularly amid a global health crisis. This framing not only humanizes migrants but also highlights their contributions as essential workers, particularly in sectors such as healthcare and agriculture. It was most visible in Canadian media coverage. The narrative aligns

with Canada’s long-standing reputation for relatively welcoming immigration policies and a public discourse that values multiculturalism. The media’s positive sentiment toward migration may have been bolstered by a national ethos that prioritizes humanitarian values, particularly in response to crises.

In contrast, the UK and US media coverage often leaned toward narratives of securitization, where migrants were framed as potential threats to society. This perspective reflects a growing trend of nativism and xenophobia, where immigration is increasingly linked to issues of national security and public health. The portrayal of migrants crossing the English Channel or the US-Mexico border as criminals or vectors for disease exemplifies a broader societal anxiety around immigration, particularly during a pandemic that has heightened fears about contagion and resource allocation.

The discourse surrounding the economic impact of migration was particularly pronounced in both Canadian and US media. In Canada, narratives emphasized the essential role of migrants in sustaining economic growth and addressing labour shortages, especially in the face of demographic challenges. Conversely, UK coverage often framed migration as a burden on public resources, particularly during economic downturns exacerbated by the pandemic. This economic lens highlights the tension between recognizing the contributions of migrants and the narrative of economic insecurity that can fuel anti-immigrant sentiments.

The analysis also highlights the significance of intersectional factors, including race and class, in shaping media narratives. In Canada, articles often highlighted the compounded vulnerabilities faced by racialized migrants, linking their experiences to broader discussions of systemic inequality. In contrast, UK media hinted at the conflation of migrants with marginalized groups without adequately addressing the historical context of diversity in the UK. This lack of nuance can perpetuate stereotypes and hinder meaningful discussions about integration and belonging.

The concept of post-truth politics plays a crucial role in understanding how narratives surrounding migration are constructed and disseminated. In an age where misinformation is rampant, the media’s framing of migrants can either challenge or reinforce societal biases. The research suggests that while emotions and beliefs often overshadow factual accuracy in public discourse, media can also serve as a platform for counter-narratives that advocate for understanding and empathy. Indeed, the narratives constructed by media outlets have real-world implications for migration policy. As public perceptions are shaped by media coverage, policymakers may feel compelled to respond to the prevailing sentiments, whether they lean toward inclusion or exclusion. Understanding these narratives can inform more equitable and compassionate immigration policies that recognize the complexities of migration and the diverse contributions of migrants to society.

Overall, the interplay between media-constructed narratives and societal attitudes toward migration during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the importance of critical engagement with media discourse. Jointly and interactively, the recurring topics and related narratives portrayed in the coverage of these widely consumed media outlets exemplify the key discourses at play in each country during 2020. These discourses have real-life implications. The current project reveals a complex web of ‘truths’ and discourses surrounding transnational human migration in 2020. These ‘truths’ co-existed alongside one another at times, building on each other and even outrightly contradicting each other. Media portrayal as both object and subject of discursive deliberation influences how states position

themselves and react to ongoing concerns. This study yields a deeper understanding of key state-specific constructions in the media during turbulent times, when information was scarce and emotions ran high. Such efforts are crucial for understanding the emotionally charged discourses surrounding transnational human migration. Additional studies would be welcomed to further contextualize the findings, not least of which could focus entirely on newspaper ideology or different media mediums. Promoting a more nuanced understanding of migration can help counteract harmful stereotypes and foster a more inclusive environment for all individuals, regardless of their migratory status. As the world continues to grapple with the implications of globalization and human mobility, the role of media in shaping public discourse remains a vital area of study and exploration.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

CB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources,

Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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