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Climate Refugees and Critical Communication Between the Global North and the Global South

A Review of Elida Høeg and Chrisopher D. Tulloch's *Sinking Strangers: Media Representations of Climate Refugees on the BBC and Al Jazeera*

Kiribati, Tuvalu and many other Pacific island countries are currently undergoing the adverse effects of drastic, infrastructurally threatening, sea level rise. In terms of their media representation, climate refugees from the Polynesia and the Pacific islands are portrayed as two distinct roles: victims and security threats. Caught within echo chambers, and the discordant cacophony of communication from large news-media companies like BBC and Al Jazeera (AJE), the migrant lives of those who struggle to find a place to call home are stranded and remain unheard. Climate refugees are often categorized in "othering" terms including *victim, security threat,* and *abstraction* – all of which contrast the power relations between the global North and the global South. The issue of these frames is that they completely represent "third world others" affected by climate change as deagentialized actors that are left to fend for themselves in instances of climate disasters.

Furthermore, as if the destruction of the climate weren't enough, Elida Høeg and Chrisopher D. Tulloch, authors of *Sinking Strangers: Media Representations of Climate Refugees on the BBC and Al Jazeera,* present an unfortunate reality revealed through the means in which climate refugees are described as "deterritorialized speechless actors" (p. 244). Apart from the other pejorative descriptors mentioned previously, the frames that construct the contemporary climate refugees are beyond deplorable; no human being should be "aggregated, collectivized, and made generic" for the purposes of mass media consumption. In this way, Høeg and Tulloch research suggests that climate refugees are "deagentialized" and lose their agency through their representations as "third world others" and as sinking strangers. Philo, Briant and Donald (2013) suggest that western countries are "directly attributable to the actions of Western powers," and Farbotko, Ransan-Cooper, McNamara, Thorton, and Chevalier (2015) add:

> Within the contemporary policy debate unhelpful dichotomies still linger – between the North as developed and the expert and South as victims and deficient – reducing the scope and reach of communication and advocacy… this, in part, relates to strong cultural resonance that the victim framing perpetuates (Farbotko, et al., 2015; p. 114).

Theory, Media and the Climate Refugee

As it turns out, the use of "climate refugees" are embodied in communication studies in agenda setting and framing theories. Thus, Høeg and Tulloch's article largely focuses on highlighting the narrative "frames" (in-text descriptors) of climate refugees through two very large hegemonic, for-profit news media leviathans: BBC and Al Jazeera. Frames in this study are also used as highlights, key terms, for which Høeg and Tulloch wil use to demystify the communicative norms of international news platforms in question. By encapsulating the identifying these frames (*victim, security threat, activist,* and *abstraction*) the authors will analyze the way in which these key terms symbolically portray climate refugees. Both BBC, and AJE news outlets have a unique "professional logic" in their journalistic practices, and easy

access to news actors who are conducive to frames that are analyzed in sample of their research. Between the two multilingual global outlets, framing theory is utilized for the more qualitative textual analysis of the articles gathered for the study, including the words used to describe the refugees of climate disasters. BBC and Al Jazeera were specifically picked for their "contrasting discursive strategies," agenda, and underlaying power structures.

In other words, both BBC and Al-Jazeera represent powerful forms of communication through the narratives that they construct, and then broadcast to a global audience. Høeg and Tulloch motivations for analyzing these two transnational news media outlets stems from their review of the literature and their own motivations in their studies. For instance Farbotko (2010) also brings up the notion of *wishful sinking*: "Only after they (climate refugees) disappear will the islands become an absolute truth of the urgency of climate change, and thus act as a prompt towards saving the rest of the planet" (Farbotko, 2010; p. 5). Other concerns regarding the media representations of climate refugees, include Bettini (2013) who claims that narratives of fleeing refugees are framed in unison with humanitarian and national security agendas reduce the concerned populations to the status of victims, "either to protect or to fear" (Bettini, 2013; p. 67). The purpose of Høeg and Tulloch's study is thus seeking to investigate how climate refugees represented between the global North and global South: BBC and Al-Jazeera. Both are hegemonic international news organizations that contribute to the framing of climate refugees. Furthermore, they also contribute to constructing the political agenda on global issues such as climate change and migration, often taking different stances.

Considered as "noncitizens," climate refugees are marginalized to their limited agency in the spaces of online web news articles. According to the United Nations, a *refugee* is an individual who has been forced to flee from their own country from conflicts, war, or violence, but *climate refugee* is not recognized by the UNHCR's Geneva Refugee Conventions of 1951. This means that there are refugees who are displaced from their homes and are unable to claim the status of refugee, and consequently, cannot seek asylum from within the current judicial system. Another state led system known as the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), does not recognize *climate refugee* since the concept "does not exist in international law," and use the specific term *disaster-displaced person* (PDD, n.d.) PDD's unwillingness to prioritize climate refugees in an international framework, even as the global north and the global south are reluctant to take on greater responsibilities, despite scholars and environmental organizations advocating otherwise.

To make matters even worse, Hartmann (2010) observes that the U.S. Department of Defense benefits from the media "security threat" frames to strategically to "serve its own interests and increase its budget," and that "future alarmist rhetoric" could be used to "militarize development assistance and distort climate policy" (Hartmann, 2010, p. 233). Høeg and Tulloch thus describe how apocalyptic narratives on climate change refugees promote equanimity among readers, and fail to address the blatant destruction caused by the economic imperialism of the west. Bettini (2013) claims that "climate refugees are depicted as someone to either fear or protect" except for the radical, taking away any possibility for climate change activist to "form their own political agency" (Bettini, p.68). The role of the climate refugee is then subjugated to the xenophobic depictions in westernized media outlets, quashing any notion of responsibility for the destruction of the environment through carbon emissions. Philo, Briant, and Donald (2013) argue that many of the conflicts that from which refugees flee are "directly attributable to the actions of Western powers" (Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013; p. 48). With United States pulling

out of the Paris Agreement in 2016, the United States refuses to acknowledge the climate change its responsible for, including the lives of those who are "displaced" by anthropogenic climate change caused by other industrialized nations.

The Methodology

From 2000 -2017, Høeg, and Tulloch have collected 29 individual online news stories – 14 from BBC and 15 from AJE – covering climate change migrants. The articles gathered for their research were located on the Al Jazeera and BBC website search engines, and by searching terms like "climate refuge" and "climate migrant." Articles that were only loosely related to the climate refugees were removed and the gathering process revealed that there were fewer articles regarding climate refugees in the first 10 years than the last 7. The sample was comprised of a total 29 articles, ranging from present-news, feature articles, photo, video, radio, and TV media genres that all affect the representations of climate refugees. The literature review revealed that studies regarding the media representations of climate migrants and refugees were centered around peoples from the Pacific island. Thus, Høeg, and Tulloch aim to add to the literature within a global context, and emphasize the transnational aspects of the discursive frames employed on climate refugees.

A multimodal content analysis is thus used to explore depth in the wide scope of the study. Kress (2010) found on the *social semiotic,* that suggests researchers to move away from "linear methods of interpretation to analyze multiple dimensions of mediated meaning making." In other words, communication and its *meaning* are generally always multimodal, and the research scholars conduct should reflect this to form what Kress calls the *modal ensemble* that are made up of two or more modes of communication (Kress, 2010; p. 28). Høeg, and Tulloch also mention that the "former colonial influence" of the BBC continues to exercise *soft power,* a form of indirect attractive, influence, on the other different modes of mass media news communication on the world. In contrast to this, Al Jazeera based in Qatar – a former British protectorate that has amassed the highest income per capita in the world – critiques the norms accepted by the global North power politics (Loomis, 2009). AJE sample articles used the terms *climate change, Africa,* and the most ubiquitous *humanitarian crisis,* meanwhile the BBC counterparts often utilized *science, science and environment,* or *Asia.*

Results

Results showed that the photographic images used in the online articles revealed several issues when it came to othering climate refugees and removing their agency in the process. In general, both the BBC and AJE articles that utilized photos that were long shots that provided social distance, ambiguous identification of the refugees involved, and that a significant number of recurring images featured nameless refugees walking, or swimming through waist to neck high waters. Captions used for these images did not provide valuable information, and the people involved were taken out of their respective geographic context to become a distant global problem. "Poor people fleeing" as Høeg, and Tulloch described them in the context of the articles in which they collected. Themes from the BBC reflect an issue of numerousness: Approximately 20 million people will become ecological refugees," "deteriorating environment could drive about 50 million people from their homes by 2010," "The UN is predicting 50 million environmental refugees by 2030," or "there are potentially hundreds of millions of

people." These arbitrary figures affect the public's perception of the issue as journalist seek to remove the abstracted instance of the climate refugee without giving a voice to them.

When the root causes of global warming are suppressed, as in headlines such as "rising sea levels have submerged several islands and created thousands of refugees," or "a million residents (…) face bleak future as climate refugees as level of water wipes out villages," climate refugees are deagentialized. In other words, climate migrants are seen as mere outcomes of natural forces, and not the consequences of anthropogenic climate change in general. The disastrous effects are "powerfully depicted as unavoidable and thus make the public think that there is not much, they can do about it." when the water in itself is to blame, not the underlying cause of sea level rise, then the burden of responsibility of the global north is reduced. In this regard the findings indicate that through techniques of aggregation, determinism, anonymity, and disempowerment, climate refugees are broadly represented in a manner that "reinforces existing power systems" (Høeg, and Tulloch, 2019; p.244). Hence climate refugees are manifested as deterritorialized speechless actors, and are left without a means to mobilize, advocate, and demand political action for policy change.

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

Power exercised in the frames *victim, security threat, activist,* and *abstraction*, reflect an issue that is indicative of agendas set by dominant international news medias from predominantly the global North (BBC) than the global South (AJE). While the BBC dedicated a lot of its professional resources to talking about refugees rather than interviewing them (deagentialized refugees), Al Jazeera took the time to meet refugees where they were and provided "openings for common understanding and action." If anything, this article reflects the problem that the climate refugees face from hegemonic world governments and maybe more specifically the global news media. Høeg, and Tulloch reveal how dehumanizing the western, global North powers are within a media studies context and constrain refugees in deagenitalizing ways. To make changes for a better world we must be able to communicate for them, and if anything, critical communication scholarship is a pathway to revealing the issues in the realm of media communication. Meaning in communications is semiotic or symbolic, and so we should learn through affective measures how to communicate about the "others" in a humanizing and power giving manner. Advocacy demands awareness and support for communities that are vulnerable to the exigences of climate change, in a society dominated by an ideologue of material consumerism, and maximizing profit over human lives.

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