

## The Non-Human Interest Story: De-Personalising the Migrant<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*We argue that newspapers deliberately employ techniques to dehumanise and depersonalise news stories in order to cultivate distance between the reader and human subject in newspaper accounts. We posit this as a dominant technique in discourses of immigration in newspaper discourses. In the process the migrant is narrated as the sub-human entrapped through socio-legal terminologies and deviance discourses that both silence and trivialise human suffering. We highlight the case study of the refugee settlement in Calais dubbed the 'jungle' to illuminate this phenomenon. We argue that the depersonalisation of immigration stories is a sustained technique in media to submerge the ethical and humanitarian paradigms presented by immigration.*

### Introduction

Britain has seen more migration into the country than most other European states however the media debates about it are often virulent and the newspapers periodically run anti-immigration campaigns in which they demand tighter border controls. Since the opening of the Channel Tunnel, Calais has become a particular point of tension. Large numbers of migrants congregate in the town and its surrounding areas while waiting to sneak or leap aboard passing vehicles headed from Britain. In their valiant attempts to cross the Channel many have lost their lives taking extreme risks in the quest for a better life. Various attempts have been made to discourage them from coming to Calais in the first place. This has ranged from blocking the construction of any shelter for them, demolishing those they build for themselves and deportation.

Despite the dominance of human interest dimensions in news stories and despite their use to highlight the suffering of refugees in American and Canadian newspapers, we found a general absence of these in Britain's mid-market coverage of illegal migrants in Calais. Instead the *Express* and *Daily Mail* de-personalize and de-humanize reports on illegal migrants. They are constructed as sub-human akin to animals or insects in much the same way as terrorists have been post 9/11. Alternatively, they are constructed as non-human; their basic needs denied, their presence rendered invisible by the actions of

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the authorities, forcing them to occupy a liminal space between life and death. The trauma and suffering of these migrants often silenced.

### **Human interest frames/stories and refugees**

Traditionally, human interest is the second most commonly used frame and story in newspapers particularly in highly competitive media markets such as Britain, partly because they are seen as attracting and keeping readers particularly women (Neuman 1992). Although commonly associated with celebrities and tabloidization (Conboy 2013) the human-interest story has a long history of narrating the suffering of ordinary people as well (Semetko, Holli A. 2000). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it referred to 'chatty little reports of tragic or comic incidents in the lives of people' for the New York Sun (Hughes 1940, pp.12–3) and encompassed coverage of both the trivial and the life-changing, the banal and the trauma. These were equally the distinguishing features of the Express and Daily Mail when launched in the early 1900s and they remain so today (Greenslade 2004).

It is therefore reasonable at first glance to expect human interest dimensions to be a key feature in 'immigration stories' given the heightened public salience, personal trauma and suffering attached to it. Such an approach would focus on the 'personal or emotional dimension of an event, issue or problem' (Steimel 2010, p.224); casting spotlight into private lives of individuals or groups affected by an issue and bringing a proximity between the person and the reader (Fine & White 2002). The articles would use visuals, 'adjectives or personal vignettes ... [that] can generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion' (Semetko, Holli A. 2000, p.100). They would offer 'compelling narratives' of transcending adversity (Fine & White 2002, p. 61), being subjected to trauma and succumbing to tragedy. Human interest stories constructed in this way would appeal to a sense of a 'common humanity' that 'portrays a situation that finds men all just human beings' and 'helps the reader consider how he would feel in the circumstances' where the suffering is of 'persons shown to have essentially one's own nature' (Hughes 1940, pp.212–5). They also potentially offer a view on a wider world than that of the reader (Park 1923).

Existing research has highlighted such dimensions in stories about refugees who in the process are presented as 'people' (Steimel 2010) who were 'suffering violence, torture or physical abuse' and experienced 'threats and narrow escapes' in their home country (Steimel 2010, p.237). These stories provide a 'human face to a far-away tragedy' and 'an important moment of connection with people very different from themselves' (Robins 2003, pp.29, 44). However they are also deeply ideological and problematic. While human interest frames and stories allow the reader to identify with the suffering of refugees they provide 'surface explanations of complex international situations' (Robins 2003, p.44). They may be 'profound in creating social linkages' but these can also 'direct attention away from ... [what] might improve the life' (Fine & White 2002, p.85).

We argue that while the human interest story may personalize the refugee's trauma and suffering in their home country perpetuated by distant others, it de-personalizes what is happening in the 'new' country perpetuated by those more familiar to readers. Crucially when the person is labelled an illegal migrant rather than a refugee they are further de-personalized and de-humanized through this illegality making their suffering illegitimate. In migration discourses in Fortress Europe the human interest story

becomes a non-human interest story with the central protagonist constructed as a sub-human or non-human. Agamben's notion of the *Muselmann* captures this liminal figure of the immigrant cast between visibility and invisibility, tangible yet non-present.

The *Muselmann*, the central figure in Agamben's book, *The Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and Archive*, is beyond trauma, morality or human dignity. Robert Bernstein (2002) in reviewing the 'Muselmann' refers to it as a term for those in the camps who 'were reduced to "living corpses," "nameless hulks"; beings who were presumably human but seemed to lack any dignity, spontaneity, or humanity. Hannah Arendt in her writings on evil observed that camps not only 'exterminate people and degrade human beings' but have the capacity of "transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not."

Bernstein refutes the simplistic reduction of the *Muselmann* into a 'mere thing'. He points out that the *Muselman* is an indefinite category of social production (both in discourse and practice), "At times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other'. The *Muselmann* as a liminal figure between human and non-human, and represents a 'limit experience' where our normative 'ethical, political, medical, and biological concepts and categories break down' (Bernstein 2002). It is this breakdown of categories which we draw on in this paper, where legal and ethical concepts such as 'responsibility and dignity' cannot address the liminal space of the *Muselmann*. In effect, the *Muselmann* is "beyond" our moral discourses (Bernstein 2002).

The inhabitants of the 'jungle' are liminal figures where the moral discourses are suspended so exist beyond the moral but within illegal frameworks. The social imaginary of the 'Muselmann' with relevance to Calais is then amenable to 'fiction' where the suffering is displaced through deviance. The moral categories become obliterated in their depictions to the outer world. In media depictions, suffering and the human-interest dimensions are not techniques which are offered to the inhabitants of the camps in Calais. As non-humans, they stand beyond the moral discourses and like the *Muselmann*, their bodies are inscribed by the biopolitics of Fortress Europe.

### **De-personalizing and de-humanizing the sub-human migrant**

De-personalized stories of suffering draw on a 'dispassionate' style of reporting (Preston 1996, p.112) that 'creates an emotional distance between the audience and the people suffering' (Robinson 2002, p.29; Neveu 2002). Elsewhere we have argued that the Calais migrants are de-personalized through pseudo-rational discourses of the failure of government policy to stem the 'flood' of migrants into the town and across the Channel (Howarth and Ibrahim 2012; Ibrahim 2011). Dehumanizing techniques include the use of metaphors that associate illegal migrants with the degraded barbarism of the jungles and laying 'siege' to the white suburbia of Calais (Howarth & Ibrahim, under review).

Here we develop this analysis further arguing that parallels can be seen in British newspaper dehumanizing of the migrants of Calais and metaphoric constructions of post 9/11 terrorists in American newspapers which reduce the other to the as the 'animal or aggressor' (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira

2008) or in the Canadian newspapers as the 'enemy-as-animal' or the 'enemy-as-insect' (Steuter & Wills 2009). The British newspapers use of such devices can be seen in the insect metaphor of the Calais migrants 'swarming' trucks headed across the Channel (Mail on Sunday Reporter 2009; Rawstone 2009). Animalistic discourses are intrinsically linked to the barbarism of the jungle but also go beyond this to include migrants 'scavenging' for any materials they could find that would be of use (Daily Mail 2009). The organizations working with the migrants claimed that the Calais police and authorities 'treat people like animals' (Daily Mail Reporter 2009; Garnham 2009). What these studies have in common is that constructions of terrorists and illegal migrants as the other do so by portraying them not only as the 'enemy' but also as pseudo- or sub-human in the sense of less than human.

However, there is a further, more disturbing and relatively unexplored dimension in newspaper discourses we analysed in which the Calais migrants are constructed as non-human in the sense of a negation of the human akin to Agamben's *Muselmann* (1999).

### **The migrants of Calais: beyond the sub-human to the non-human**

One way in which the Calais migrants are reduced to the sub-human is by displacing their suffering to a distant locale or a non-place – 'war-torn' or 'war-ravaged' home countries (Allen 2009a; Sheldrick 2013) where their 'family was threatened' (Allen 2009c) and their sons at risk of being recruited or killed by the Taliban (Fernandes 2009). In fleeing they become complicit – newspapers argue - with the criminal, the people traffickers who move them across Europe in a journey that 'took months and involved great hardship' (Fernandes 2009). Again suffering in Calais is at the hands of people traffickers or the 'inhumane squalor' in which they live so the humane response of those who know best is to destroy these camps (Bracchi 2009). Or it is self-inflicted by burning off the tips of their fingers so their fingerprints cannot be used to identify then deport them (Bracchi 2009). Any suffering inflicted through harassment by police or treatment by border guards is ignored by the newspapers (for the counter-discourse, see Rygiel 2011).

They were also reduced to the sub-human by de-legitimizing one of the basic human – and animal – needs for shelter. The two newspapers we looked at objected to any form of shelter whether provided by charities or the migrants themselves on the grounds that these served as a 'magnet' for more (Fagge 2009; Tristem 2007; Finan and Allen 2010). Furthermore, the repeated demolition of visible shelters formed part of a strategy of rendering their presence invisible. After the violent and brutal destruction of the Calais jungle in 2009, the migrants sought 'hideaways', 'hideouts' and 'hidden culverts' to avoid detection by the police (Giannangeli 2009). Unable to openly cross the border, the migrants would 'hide' on trucks or 'smuggle' aboard trains headed for Britain (Fagge 2009; Sparks 2009). Thus they were rendered invisible by authorities who refused to give legitimacy to their presence but at the same time the migrants themselves sought the protection of invisibility.

The migrants were also rendered non-human through their occupation of the liminal or betwixt and between spaces. At a temporal level, the shelters they erected were caught between the past and present located as they were on former industrial sites or wartime bunkers. Their occupation of these rendered Calais, Dunkirk and other coastline ports a 'waiting room' (Fagge 2009) used by migrants 'waiting for a chance' to smuggle aboard a vehicle headed for Britain (Reid 2007) or playing a 'waiting

game' that goes on for months (Sparks 2012). The migrants also eked out a liminal existing between life and death. The desperate leaping or sneaking bodies pitched the migrants between the prospect of a new life in Britain or death while trying to get there. The containers on trucks that they hid in put the migrants at risk of suffocation (Reid 2009) or toxic chemicals (Allen 2009b) and every week more than one dies trying to cross to Britain (Bracchi 2009).

What our analysis highlights is that Britain's mid-market press have not drawn on the typical human interest dimensions that dominate news coverage in competitive media markets and that have been used in other countries to personalize and humanize the suffering of refugees. Instead, they have labelled the Calais migrants 'illegal' and from that has followed a series of techniques that de-personalize, de-humanize and de-legitimize their suffering. In the process the traumatized are reduced to the sub-human with animalistic or insect-type behaviour or the non-human with illegitimate basic needs, their presence rendered invisible and their existence liminal: Agamben's Muselmann.

### **Critique of Suffering Research**

There has been renewed interest in media depictions of suffering in the recent years. One contentious area of this research is the tendency of scholarship to portray the West as looking at those in the 'East or the Global South' and the East as being consumed by the West. The act of consuming suffering from a distance through technology and the subjects of the suffering become dichotomised into two kinds of humanity; those who watch from the West, and those who are watched, recipients of the humanitarian gaze in the East. Humanity is not universal or common and the creation of a secondary humanity in the East through the vantage point of the West congeals this into a cartographic duality of 'the West' and 'the Rest'. This bi-polarity of suffering has become a hermeneutic bind in media studies; elongating a colonial perspective where centre and periphery remain firmly entrenched. The subaltern remains the subject of suffering.

Often such scholarships truncate humanitarian agency from longer historical trajectories of colonisation, orientalism and missionary activities (from forced conversions to proselytization). The packaging of suffering without the historical contextualisation become re-invented as a mediated commercial solidarity without quite acknowledging the commodification, aestheticisation and packaging that has happened over time through visual aids such photography, moving images and evangelism orchestrated through technologies such as lantern magica (magic lantern) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Trauma always had an audience and suffering is a well-established trope in human communion and disaggregation. The human interest story is a residue of this integral pull in our human psyche towards the abject. In media, the human interest story and suffering become techniques which psychologically manipulate audiences while tapping into wider ideologies and belief systems. The journalistic technique of the human interest story derives its potency as an emotive tool for it can be both invoked and denied to the audience. The invitation to gaze at suffering and the denial of the suffering can be ideologically determined as in the case of the 'Jungle' in Calais, where the liminal status of the inhabitant puts them beyond the moral constructs of dignity, bestowing them the ambivalent binary of the Muselmann; not quite a corpse but not alive either.

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