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# **Ethical Limits to Pejorative Speech in Media Narratives of Refugees**

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# Ethical Limits to Pejorative Speech in Media Narratives of Refugees

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# Abstract

As part of the ongoing debate on freedom of expression, this thesis addresses the tension between media freedom and the harms that result from pejorative media narratives of refugees. The debate often focuses on speech types that can be linked to more apparent harms, such as hate speech.

Pejorative media narratives are often overlooked in discussions about freedom of expression because they lack an explicit intention to promote harm and their effects are not immediately visible. With the influence of the media growing continuously, however, it is becoming increasingly important to consider the ethical boundaries of pejorative media narratives. This thesis explores the question: On what grounds, if any, can limits on media freedom of expression be justified? By taking an egalitarian approach, I contend that a commitment to the moral equality of individuals warrants limiting media freedom of expression in cases where equal moral status is undermined. Because pejorative media narratives of refugees perpetuate structural harms that infringe on their equal moral worth, certain limits are warranted. Considering the costs of limitation, I conclude that media organizations should self-regulate by implementing ethical guidelines for reporting on refugees.

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# Introduction

In an era characterized by the widespread presence of the media, news media outlets play a significant role in shaping public opinion and attitudes towards various social issues, including the matter of immigration. Media coverage of refugees is often pejorative, meaning that refugees tend to be portrayed in a negative light. They are often presented as cultural, economic, and national security threats (De Cock, Sundin, and Mistiaen 2019, 40) and associated with criminality and bad behaviour (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 132). A recent article by British newspaper the *Daily Mail*, for example, refers to “suspected terrorists” posing as “would-be refugees” that “pose an active threat in the UK” and stay there “at the taxpayers’ expense” (Barret 2023). Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* published an article in 2017 with the controversial headline “Hopeless asylum plague continues unabated.” Phrases that similarly foster negative perceptions, such as “A flood of refugees,” “Europe inundated by refugees,” and “Influx of asylum seekers must decrease,” also regularly appear in the media (Vierbergen 2023). Pejorative media coverage as such often leads to suspicion and negative judgment of refugees as a group. By disseminating negative stereotypes, pejorative media narratives promote xenophobic attitudes and exacerbate the marginalization of refugees (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 132, 166).

Media narratives can thus have real-life consequences for disadvantaged groups in a society. This reality poses an important challenge for media freedom of expression, a principle that is often championed as a cornerstone of democratic societies. The challenge lies in striking a balance between upholding the ideal of freedom of expression and protecting vulnerable social groups from the harmful effects of pejorative media narratives. In this thesis, I focus on media narratives that cast refugees in a negative light. Refugees, individuals who have been forced to flee their home countries due to persecution, violence, or other humanitarian emergencies, are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. They tend to

struggle with past trauma, economic hardships, language barriers, social exclusion, difficulties of integration, and lack many legal rights in their host countries. Their struggles tend to be exacerbated by pejorative media narratives that perpetuate negative stereotypes. By analysing TV and press narratives, as well as their effects on refugees, I assess the harms of pejorative speech in media representations.

This thesis thus seeks to explore the ethical boundaries of media freedom of expression in the context of negative refugee narratives. The challenge at issue, which addresses the tension between media freedom of expression and the potential harms inflicted by pejorative media narratives, is part of the ongoing debate on freedom of expression and harm. Freedom of expression has long been a contentious issue in philosophical debates, and it is becoming increasingly important as the influence of the media continues to grow. Many thinkers have explored the possible tensions that arise when considering the harms that result from particular forms of expression. Although most agree that there are certain harms that justify restrictions on freedom of expression, they debate about where to draw the line. What harms are significant enough to warrant limits to freedom of expression? Debates about expression and harm involve different ideas about the scope and character of harm. What tends to be missing in these debates is regard for a particularly subtle and pervasive type of expression: pejorative speech. The harms associated with pejorative speech are less visible than the harms resulting from more explicit types of speech, like hate speech and offensive speech. Yet, pejorative speech is arguably more harmful because it is significantly more prevalent and influential. This thesis evaluates the structural harms that result from pejorative media narratives of refugees and explains why these harms are wrongful. It addresses the question: On what grounds, if any, can limits on media freedom of expression be justified? In what follows, I argue that a commitment to the equal moral status of individuals warrants limiting media freedom of expression in cases where equal moral status is undermined.

Because pejorative media narratives undermine this moral equality by contributing to structural inequalities, they ought to be counteracted.

This thesis is organized into three main chapters. In the first chapter, I review the debate on freedom of expression in light of the famous harm principle. I make a distinction between *direct* and *structural* conceptions of harm. In chapter two, I identify a distinct category of expression: pejorative speech. I consider how pejorative speech shapes media narratives of refugees and discuss the structural harms that result from these narratives. Finally, I demonstrate why these harms are wrongful from an egalitarian perspective. I contend that pejorative narratives contribute to structural inequalities that infringe on the equal moral status of refugees, a significant wrong that warrants limits. Considering the costs of limitation, I conclude that media organizations should self-regulate by implementing ethical guidelines for reporting on refugees. With this thesis, I hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the limitations of freedom of expression, grounded not only in the prevention of harm but also in the pursuit of a more equal society.

## **Chapter 1.**

### **Expression and harm**

Freedom of expression is often considered a cornerstone of democracy. Many think that it is a fundamental condition of legitimate government. According to Ronald Dworkin, laws and policies need to be adopted through a democratic process in order to be legitimate. He maintains that for a process to be truly democratic, people should be able to freely express their convictions about certain laws and policies (Dworkin 2006, 2). It is only when

individuals are able to practice their right to free speech that political decision-making reflects the opinion of the people.

Although freedom of expression is a vital democratic right, there are few people who argue that it should be unlimited. There are various reasons why governments might be justified to limit free speech: maintaining public order, safeguarding national security, and protecting individuals from abuse are just a few examples. Still, it is not always clear where we should draw the line. One of the main elements of the debate on free speech concerns the possible tension between freedom of expression and freedom from harm. Certain types of expression – including threats, incitement to violence, and hate speech – have the ability to harm individuals or groups in a society. The challenge lies in balancing the principle of free speech against the real-world harms that speech can cause.

## 1.1 Direct harm

In theoretical debates about the link between expression and harm, the idea of harm is understood in various ways. Philosophers have different ideas about the scope, nature, and moral weight of harm. In what follows, I identify and differentiate between direct and structural accounts of expression-induced harm. I begin by discussing direct accounts, which focus on immediate harms suffered by individuals that can be causally attributed to particular expressions. The first direct approach I discuss is developed by John Stuart Mill in his seminal book *On Liberty*. According to Mill, human liberty encompasses freedom of conscience, thought, feeling, opinion, and expression. The liberty to express and publish opinions is a fundamental element of the liberty of thought (Mill 1978, 15-16). These freedoms secure us against corrupt or tyrannical governments and the imposition of beliefs by other people (Mill 1978, 18). In his discussion of liberty, Mill introduces his famous ‘harm principle.’ This principle entails that the only valid reason for restricting human liberty is to



prevent harm to others (Mill 1978, 13). It is not immediately clear what Mill means by harm, but his discussion suggests a narrow conception that defines harm as a direct violation of the liberties of others. When an expression directly incites an act that endangers the rights of another person, it ought to be limited. Mill uses the example of expressing the opinion that corn dealers starve the poor. He explains that expressing this opinion in print is acceptable, but becomes unacceptable when stated to a potentially violent mob gathered before the house of a corn-dealer, because this would directly endanger him (Mill 1978, 53).

Another direct approach to expression-induced harm is presented by Joel Feinberg. Feinberg puts forward a principle for justifying limits to liberty that is broader than Mill's harm principle: the 'offense principle.' According to the offense principle, "[i]t is always a good reason in support of a proposed criminal prohibition that it would probably be an effective way of preventing serious offense (as opposed to injury or harm) to persons other than the actor, and that it is probably a necessary means to that end" (Feinberg 1988, 1). This principle suggests that it is legitimate to restrict some types of expression if they are highly offensive to others. Feinberg defines offense as an unpleasant state of mind caused by the wrongful conduct of another. He stresses that offense is distinct from harm, being less severe and of a different nature (Feinberg 1988, 2-3). However, I maintain that offense can be interpreted as a form of harm, albeit a lesser one compared to Mill's harm principle. After all, being offended implies a sense of injury. It involves a negative emotional state that, when significant enough, can impair a person's psychological well-being.

A third direct approach to harm is provided by Jonathan Seglow, who focuses on the harm that results from a specific type of expression: hate speech. By hate speech Seglow means instances of speech that express strong feelings of hostility towards and intentionally attack members of vulnerable minorities on the basis of attributes like race, ethnicity, or religion (Seglow 2016, 1104). According to Seglow, hate speech promotes a direct harm

because it injures the self-respect of those it targets. He explains that self-respect is a form of self-assessment. Hate speech undermines the self-respect of targeted individuals because it denies their agency and entitlements, communicating a message that negates their standing as capable agents deserving of basic liberties and rights (Seglow 2016, 1109, 1113).

Because Feinberg, Mill, and Seglow address harmful consequences of expression that are direct and immediate, their approaches are characterized as direct accounts of harm. Mill focuses on harms to individual liberty, directing his attention to circumstances under which there is a linear connection between expression and harm, like when speech incites violence. Feinberg focuses on how actions, like expressions, directly affect the mental state of individual persons by causing offense. Seglow focuses on how hate speech causes a direct harm to the self-respect of targeted individuals.

## **1.2 Structural harm**

Direct accounts of harm are important to consider in the debate on freedom of expression, for direct harms are often significant. However, it can be argued that direct approaches are too narrow because there is another dimension to harm that they do not capture: a structural dimension. Structural accounts of harm shift the focus from individual instances of harmful speech to the broader social structures that perpetuate harm, especially to social groups that are already vulnerable and marginalized. Iris Marion Young describes structural harms as “harms that come to people as a result of structural processes in which many people participate” (Young 2003, 7). Social structures, as Young defines them, encompass the rules, norms, practices, and uses of language that condition social interactions (Young 1990, 22). These structures are the cumulative result of large numbers of individuals participating in structural processes. They have the ability to produce consequences that harm people (Young

2003, 3-7). Examples of harmful social structures are racism, sexism, and other societal systems that perpetuate inequality and discrimination.

Structural accounts of harm help us understand the broader social context that impacts the opportunities individuals have and the constraints that limit their actions and opportunities. Where direct accounts focus on immediate harms experienced by individual persons, structural accounts shed light on the systemic nature of certain harms. Direct accounts presuppose a linear connection between expression and harm, meaning that expression directly and immediately causes harm to others. Structural accounts, on the other hand, recognize that the causal connection between expression and harm can be complex and indirect. Within this framework, harmful speech is seen as part of a larger structure where stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory attitudes are perpetuated over time. This entails that an expression relates to a structural harm through its contribution to broader social structures. The cumulation of harmful expressions reinforces structural conditions that harm individuals, meaning that the relation between expression and harm is indirect and nonlinear. Hence, structural accounts recognize harms that are cumulative and indirect results of expressions, pointing towards a more nuanced and comprehensive notion of harm.

Sune Lægaard, for example, takes a structural approach to harmful speech. In his discussion of the Danish Cartoon Controversy – which involved the publication of twelve controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed on 30 September 2005 – he discusses the harm of oppression. Lægaard explains that certain expressions, like the Mohammed cartoons, perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce existing power imbalances that contribute to the oppression suffered by disadvantaged groups in a society (Lægaard 2007, 492-493). Oppression is structural because it is embedded in underlying ideas, norms, assumptions, and meanings – including media and cultural stereotypes. These structural conditions are harmful because they subject social groups to marginalization, systemic violence, and other injustices

(Young 1990, 41). Lægaard thus recognizes that harms induced by expressions can be indirect and nonlinear. In the case of oppression, there is no linear relationship between expression and harm. Instead, the harms suffered by individuals are mediated by social structures.

Another structural account of harm can be found in a more recent article by Leonie Smith. Although Smith does not focus on the idea of harm, she nevertheless highlights a type of harm that is relevant to the debate on free speech: namely, epistemic harm. Epistemic harm is a type of harm or injury that pertains to a person's capacity as a knower – their ability to know, understand, perceive, and share insights. Smith focuses on the harm involved in testimonial injustice, which occurs when a speaker is viewed as lacking credibility and is not taken seriously by other people. She argues that marginalized groups experience this kind of harm as a result of negative and stereotypical beliefs promoted by the media. When media outlets report pejoratively on marginalized groups, they harm their ability to epistemically participate. This is because pejorative reporting reinforces background conditions of bias and prejudice that undermine the credibility of minority groups (Smith 2020, 86-88). Smith's account can be interpreted as structural because it addresses structural conditions that undermine epistemic participation. Epistemic harm bears no direct, linear relation to speech. Instead, it can be attributed to conditions of bias and prejudice that are perpetuated by particular expressions.

The third and final structural approach I discuss is presented by Jeremy Waldron, who discusses how hate speech harms the dignity of targeted individuals. Hate speech involves statements that abuse, threaten, insult, or degrade members of vulnerable minorities on the basis of attributes that are tied to their identity (Waldron 2012, 8-9). Dignity, as Waldron defines it, implies a sense of equal moral status and entails that individuals have a right to be treated as an equal member of society (Waldron 2012, 5). According to Waldron, dignity is not about subjective feelings of hurt or offense, but about objective features regarding the

equal treatment of individuals in a community (Waldron 2012, 106-107). In *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Waldron argues that hate speech injures the dignity of targeted individuals. That is to say, it compromises their status as equal members of a society. This is because expressions of hate speech injure their reputation, which makes others less inclined to treat them as equals (Waldron 2012, 106). Waldron makes an important point here, and I will come back to his argument in this thesis. Despite the fact that Waldron does not explicitly discuss the significance of social structures, his approach can be interpreted as a structural account of harm. This is because his argument highlights how hate speech perpetuates structural conditions of discrimination, exclusion, and violence that harm the dignity of individuals in a society (Waldron 2012, 4). Where Seglow sees a direct relation between hate speech and the harm to self-respect, Waldron indicates a relation that is indirect and nonlinear. By arguing that hate speech undermines social conditions that enable individuals to be treated as equals, he addresses the structural dimension of inequality.

### **1.3 Beyond harm: an egalitarian approach to expression**

Each of the accounts discussed in this chapter offers valuable insights into the relation between expression and harm. When it comes to the debate on freedom of expression, structural accounts of harm are particularly relevant because they offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this relation. Unlike direct accounts, they highlight the broader structural causes and consequences of certain forms of expression. In what follows, I focus on a type of speech that is often overlooked in debates about freedom of expression: pejorative speech. Pejorative speech, a concept briefly considered by Smith, has effects that are largely structural in nature. The harms associated with this category of expression are less visible than the harms resulting from other types of speech, like hate speech. Although the consequences of pejorative speech are less explicit, it can be argued that this speech type is more harmful. This is because pejorative speech is significantly more prevalent and influential than more

explicit speech types. As opposed to hate speech, pejorative language is often normalized and tolerated to a certain extent. It can be found in various forms of communication, like everyday conversations, media, social media, entertainment, and political discussions. It is unfortunately ingrained in social discourse. In this thesis, I assess the structural harms associated with pejorative narratives of refugees and consider how they affect the principle of moral equality, a principle that lies at the basis of liberal societies. Liberal societies tend to be committed to a sense of egalitarianism. Egalitarianism defends a sense of equality, which can be interpreted in terms of equal distribution, equal treatment, equal opportunities, or equal relations, to name a few. Regardless of what form of equality they favour, all egalitarian views share a commitment to the principle of moral equality. This thesis explores this egalitarian concept as a possible justification for limiting media freedom of expression. It seeks to uncover a tension between the equal moral status of individuals, which can be seen as an important foundation of liberal societies, and the structural inequalities perpetuated by pejorative media narratives of refugees.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Pejorative speech and refugee narratives in the European media**

In the previous chapter, I discussed different forms of harm that result from particular types of expression, like hate speech and offensive speech. In this chapter, I focus on the harms that arise out of a distinct type of speech: pejorative speech. Pejorative speech induces harms that are less evident than harms resulting from hate speech, for example. Yet, it has the ability to promote detrimental conditions that significantly impact the lives of individuals. First, I

formulate a definition of pejorative speech that distinguishes it from other harmful speech types. I then consider how pejorative speech informs narratives of refugees in the European media. For the purpose of this thesis, I focus on narratives promoted by TV and press news media. TV and press news media have a significant influence on shaping public perception because they have a wide audience reach and are often perceived as credible sources of information. Finally, I identify the structural harms that result from pejorative media narratives of refugees.

## **2.1 What is pejorative speech?**

I define pejorative speech as a speech type that conveys negative connotations or casts a negative light on members of a particular group through the use of negative stereotypes, derogatory terms, or biased language. Pejorative speech is distinct from hate speech, which is often defined in terms of public statements that abuse, threaten, insult, or degrade members of systemically oppressed groups on the basis of attributes like race, ethnicity, or religion. Promoting or expressing hostility towards Jews on the basis of their Jewish identity would be an example of hate speech. Pejorative speech is also distinct from offensive speech, which is a more general category containing objectively wrongful expressions that cause a negative emotional state in targeted individuals. Making derogatory comments about someone's abilities, for example, can be considered offensive speech.

A distinctive characteristic of pejorative speech is its lack of a deliberate expression of hatred or offense. Offensive speech, considering that it refers to objectively wrongful speech acts, often presupposes an intention to cause a negative emotional state in another person. Hate speech is used deliberately to demean, devalue, or discriminate against individuals or groups on the basis of certain characteristics. There exist many different conceptions of hate speech, but at the very least it involves an intentional expression of hatefulness. Apart from this, hate speech is characterized by the use of epithets that are intended to vilify targeted

groups. These terms typically take the form of ‘fighting words,’ words that tend to provoke aggressive or violent reactions (Brink 2001, 131, 135, 139). It can be argued, then, that hate speech involves an intention to promote hostility or violence towards members of particular groups. Pejorative speech, on the other hand, does not involve the use of epithets or fighting words. While it is often used to shape perception by presenting information in a negative way, pejorative speech lacks the explicit intention to express or promote hostility. As a matter of fact, it does not involve a direct expression of hatefulness, even if the agent expressing it does harbour an underlying animosity towards the targeted group. In contrast to hate speech, pejorative speech does not involve the expression of this underlying hatred. Instead, it can be characterized as a subclass of discriminatory speech, which David Brink defines as “speech that reflects group stereotypes and represents groups or their members as inferior by virtue of these stereotypes” (Brink 2001, 133). Pejorative speech, as a type of discriminatory speech, specifically focuses on biased language with negative or derogatory connotations.

Pejorative speech thus refers to performances of language that present members of a particular group identity in a negative way: narratives, frames, and other pejorative discursive practices. A typical example of pejorative speech is: ‘Refugees are a burden on our economy, and they bring crime and unrest to our neighbourhoods.’ This statement portrays refugees as economic liabilities and associates them with criminality and social instability, contributing to a negative stereotype. While it fosters fear and prejudice towards refugees, it does not explicitly express hatefulness towards refugees, nor does it promote hostility. Hate speech, on the other hand, is more explicit because it involves a deliberate expression of hatefulness. An example of hate speech against refugees would be: ‘Refugees are parasites draining our resources and a plague on our society. We must lock them up and stop them from spreading like a disease.’ This statement explicitly dehumanizes refugees and advocates for their



removal. It intentionally expresses hatred, incites people to take action, and promotes hostility, prejudice, and discrimination.

Although pejorative speech does not presuppose an explicit expression of hatefulness, it is important to note that both pejorative language and hate speech contribute to a hostile social environment for marginalized groups. Hate speech and pejorative speech are best characterized based on their link to systemic conditions of oppression. To qualify as hate speech, an expression must be publicly directed at a group subjected to systemic discrimination (Gelber 2019, 407). Like hate speech, pejorative speech can be characterized as an act that perpetuates systemic oppression against groups. Its emphasis on negative stereotypes and use of biased language seeps into culture and normalizes prejudice towards targeted groups. This contributes to their stigmatization, discrimination, and a climate of hostility. Pejorative speech thus feeds into the broader patterns of social structures that perpetuate harm to individuals. While hate speech similarly contributes to harmful structural conditions, it also produces harms that affect individuals more directly. This is because it tends to encourage hostility, meaning that it has a more obvious and immediate connection to violence. The harmful consequences of pejorative speech, on the other hand, arise more gradually. Due to their subtle and pervasive nature, the effects of pejorative speech tend to accumulate over time, shaping social attitudes and perceptions in ways that may not be immediately apparent. The causation is therefore indirect, mediated by broader social structures. Pejorative speech amplifies detrimental structural conditions rather than directly causing harm to individuals. It reinforces oppressive ideas and stereotypes that condition social interactions and disadvantage vulnerable groups in a society.

## 2.2 Pejorative narratives of refugees

Although the harms of pejorative expressions are indirect, they are nevertheless significantly influential. Pejorative speech is particularly influential when used by powerful media corporations with a significant audience and reach. The media play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of social issues, including issues related to migration. Based on several empirical studies into media representations of the refugee issue, I identify three key features of pejorative media narratives of refugees in the European media.

### *1. Pejorative narratives evoke negative connotations*

The first feature of pejorative media narratives of refugees is their use of a language that evokes negative connotations. Media outlets often use words that cast refugees in a negative light by contributing to dehumanization, fearmongering, othering, and scapegoating. By describing the refugee issue using words like ‘waves’ or ‘floods,’ for example, they evoke connotations of danger or lack of control. Apart from this, media narratives commonly portray refugees as ‘the other,’ as a homogenous group of aliens that threatens public order (Schrover and Schinkel 2013, 1128-1129, 1132). This othering rhetoric reinforces the idea of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and often leads to social exclusion. Pejorative narratives as such bring with them associations that elicit fear and fuel negative emotions (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 136).

Studies into media representations of refugees in Sweden and Belgium, for instance, show that negative depictions of refugees prevail. News media advance narratives that portray refugees as a threat to culture, economy, and national security. Reports on refugees often rely on negative stereotypes that present them as maladjusted, criminal, and dangerous. For example, a commonly reported theme in news coverage of this issue is criminal behaviour perpetrated by refugees (De Cock, Sundin, and Mistiaen 2019, 40-41, 45). A study into TV and press coverage of refugees in the United Kingdom also reveals pejorative tendencies.

According to this study, news frames of refugees in the British media are predominantly hostile, with the media using negative expressions like “no right to be here,” “coming here for benefits,” and “taking taxpayers’ money.” Apart from this, themes that evoke negative connotations are widespread, including exaggeration of refugee numbers, criminal behaviour, burden on the welfare and job market, the need for border controls, and threat (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 55-57). This media rhetoric scapegoats refugees, unfairly blaming them for societal issues.

### *2. Pejorative narratives lead to unwarranted generalizations*

The second feature of pejorative media narratives of refugees is their tendency to use and promote unwarranted generalizations. Refugees are predominantly presented as a collective: faceless, undifferentiated, and overwhelmingly massive (De Cock, Sundin, and Mistiaen 2019, 52). Because the media normally disregard positive stories, representations of refugees overemphasize negative portrayals that typically lack sufficient evidence. These negative portrayals tend to be racially based, leading to suspicion and negative judgment of an entire community (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 136). Hence, false generalizations occur when pejorative narratives, which are often unsubstantiated in the first place, lead to generalizations about an entire group of individuals. Unwarranted generalizations also arise on account of the blurred distinction between refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants in news coverage (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 165). Many media outlets tend to use these distinct legal categories interchangeably. What is more, they often label all undocumented migrants, including refugees who lack legal channels for entry, as ‘illegal immigrants.’ This pejorative term generalizes individuals from different situations and implies that they are all criminal or fraudulent (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 61).

### *3. Pejorative narratives have real-life consequences*

The third feature of pejorative media narratives of refugees is their ability to produce real-life consequences for the individuals they claim to portray. According to numerous studies, media frames shape the public perception of the refugee issue. Pejorative narratives tend to perpetuate false generalizations and stereotypes of refugees. As a result, people adopt negative opinions about refugees that are based on media gossip rather than personal experience or factual evidence (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 166). This fuels bias and creates a climate of hostility, which influences how refugees are treated by others in a society (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 138). Hence, negative or stereotypical depictions of refugees influence social interactions by shaping the way they are perceived and treated by others. In the next section, I will explore the real-life consequences of pejorative media narratives in more detail.

### **2.3 Pejorative language and structural oppression**

Because media narratives play an important role in shaping public perception, they have considerable social consequences. Narratives that build on pejorative language contribute to structural processes that disadvantage marginalized groups in a society. By reinforcing negative stereotypes, they perpetuate structural oppression – a concept that refers to systemic conditions that diminish a social group. Young explains that structural oppression is embedded in cultural ideas and practices that condition social interactions and relations between groups in a society (Young 1990, 41). Rather than being the result of tyranny, it derives from relations of power and inequality that result from structural processes (Young 1990, 41).

As Young clarifies, structural oppression is a phenomenon with various overlapping facets. Pejorative narratives of refugees contribute to structural oppression in several ways. First, pejorative media narratives contribute to the *marginalization* of refugees.

Marginalization is a form of structural oppression that entails exclusion from meaningful

participation in social life. It implies a sense of inequality between members of different groups in a society. Members of marginalized groups, like refugees, are systematically excluded from a context of recognition and interaction (Young 1990, 53-55). Refugees are marginalized on account of their lack of citizenship status. Because in most countries voting rights are reserved for citizens, refugees are excluded from full democratic participation (UNHCR 2023). They are also marginalized on account of language and cultural barriers, which make it difficult to integrate into their host societies. This creates significant challenges for social, economic, and political participation. Overall, refugees face many conditions that push them to the edges of a society. Pejorative media narratives contribute to their marginalization by amplifying conditions of prejudice, discrimination, and hostility. As research shows, negative or stereotypical portrayals of refugees contribute to increased isolation and stigma (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 138), leading to their systematic exclusion. By casting refugees in a negative light, pejorative media narratives contribute to their marginalization.

Second, pejorative media narratives of refugees contribute to *cultural imperialism*. This structural condition also presupposes a specific kind of power imbalance. It entails that the dominant meanings of a society are imposed on oppressed groups, as a result of which their experience is invalidated and ignored. Hence, cultural imperialism is about unequal relations between groups in a society. Members of oppressed groups are alienated, silenced, and stereotyped by prevailing cultural ideas. These ideas shape how they are perceived and treated. Individual members of oppressed social groups are devalued as persons and framed as inferior on the basis of their group identity (Young, 58-60). Refugees also experience cultural imperialism. They are defined from the outside, by the dominant meanings that circulate in a society. As a result of the cultural stereotypes and prejudices that shape how other people view them, they are stigmatized and ignored. This structural condition is perpetuated by

pejorative media narratives of refugees, which spread false generalizations and fuel negative perceptions. When the media portray refugees as a threat to national security, for example, they impose a definition of refugees as ‘the dangerous other.’ Meanwhile, the experience of refugees is given little to no media attention and is rendered invisible as a result. By promoting biased and negative portrayals of refugees, pejorative media narratives alienate refugees and invalidate their own perspectives.

Third, pejorative media narratives contribute to *powerlessness*, a structural condition that implies a lack of agency or autonomy. Individuals that suffer from powerlessness lack the capacity to determine the conditions of their own life. Apart from this, they lack opportunities for the development of their skills and respectability in social interactions (Young 1990, 56-57). Refugees experience powerlessness in various ways. First and foremost, refugees do not have access to democratic decision-making processes because of various legal barriers. When it comes to the policies that affect their situation, they have little to no voice that allows them to exert an influence. As a result, they have very limited control over their own circumstances. Because language and cultural barriers make it more difficult for refugees to participate in social and political spheres, this sense of powerlessness is reinforced. Refugee voices are silenced even further by the negative stereotypes and prejudices that circulate in a society. Because they are associated with these negative ideas, their credibility and respectability is damaged. This results in a sense of powerlessness that has an epistemic character. As is argued by Smith, pejorative media narratives undermine the epistemic participation of members of oppressed groups. They promote stereotypical ideas that damage their credibility as speakers, as a result of which they are not acknowledged or taken seriously (Smith 2020, 86-88). Miranda Fricker identifies this type of harm as a testimonial injustice, a credibility deficit that is owed to prejudice relating to the social identity of a speaker (Fricker 2007, 28). This epistemic harm can be seen as a symptom of cultural imperialism and a form of

powerlessness. Refugees experience this epistemic powerlessness because they are not given the credibility or recognition they deserve due to prejudice and stereotypes related to their refugee identity. This powerlessness is amplified by pejorative media narratives, which contribute to prejudice and exclude refugee perspectives. Research shows that media coverage of the refugee issue lacks stories being told from the point of view of refugees (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 137). Media narratives exclude refugee voices, silencing them and reinforcing their exclusion (De Cock, Sundin, and Mistiaen 2019, 41). In this way, pejorative narratives contribute to the powerlessness experienced by refugees.

Fourth, pejorative narratives of refugees perpetuate conditions of *systemic violence*. Systemic violence refers to various aggressions ranging from harassment, intimidation, and degradation, to more extreme, physical forms of violence. It is a form of structural oppression because it is directed at individuals solely on the basis of their group identity. Members of oppressed groups experience violence because of dominant meanings that stereotype and stigmatize them (Young 1990, 61-63). In the same vein, refugees tend to be targets of violence because their refugee identity is associated with otherness, criminality, and threat. These negative associations are perpetuated and amplified by pejorative media narratives that rely on false generalizations and derogatory stereotypes. Research confirms that media narratives that portray refugees in a negative light have real-life consequences, in some cases leading to physical attacks. Pejorative news coverage of refugees has even infiltrated school playgrounds, with ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ becoming terms of abuse (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013, 166-167). By promoting negative associations, pejorative media narratives contribute to systemic violence experienced by refugees.

## Chapter 3.

### An egalitarian critique of pejorative speech

In the previous chapter, I formulated a definition of pejorative speech and conceptualized the harms it promotes. In this chapter, I demonstrate why the effects of pejorative speech are not just harmful, but also wrongful. In doing so, I evaluate pejorative narratives of refugees from an egalitarian standpoint. I contend that the structural harms perpetuated by these narratives constitute wrongs because they undermine the equal moral status of refugees.

#### 3.1 The implications of equal moral status

As a result of their forced displacement, refugees lack the legal status of citizenship in hosting societies. Citizenship status affords individuals equal rights within the boundaries of the political community to which they belong.<sup>1</sup> Although refugees are granted a set of legal protections on account of their refugee status, they lack certain legal rights that are specific to citizenship. As a result, they do not enjoy full legal equality in the societies that host them. While refugees are not equal to citizens from a legal point of view, liberal societies are typically committed to a principle of egalitarianism, a general doctrine that emphasizes the ideal of moral equality for all individuals. This commitment to equality can be interpreted in various ways: in terms of equal basic rights, equal distribution of resources, equal treatment, equal opportunities, and equal relations, to name a few. Irrespective of the interpretation that is favoured, egalitarian beliefs typically hinge on the foundational idea that all individuals share an equal moral status. This commitment to moral equality requires equal respect for all

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<sup>1</sup> This relates to the philosophical debate about the moral significance of citizenship, with some thinkers arguing that citizenship involves ethical considerations related to identity, belonging, and membership. Some argue that citizenship generates moral rights and obligations. While the debate on the moral significance of citizenship is important, it is beyond the scope of this thesis (see David Miller, *On Nationality*).



individuals, regardless of whether one has citizenship status. Despite lacking equal legal rights, refugees are entitled to equal respect. The opposite is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with liberal values, which require respect for humanity and equal moral worth. We cannot devalue refugees because they are ‘outsiders’ or ‘other,’ seeing as this challenges the liberal assumption of the equal moral worth of all individuals. All individuals, regardless of their nationality or legal status, have equal moral worth.

Although there are various egalitarian perspectives on what the moral equality of individuals entails, they all have one important thing in common: it requires some form of equal treatment. Egalitarian thought encompasses a wide range of interpretations of what equality should look like. This extensive discussion goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will briefly consider some views on what the equal moral status of individuals requires. First of all, a basic understanding of equality entails that rules and laws should be applied equally and uniformly to all members of a society. This conception of egalitarian justice is often criticized for adopting a one size fits all-approach. Critics claim that it is based on a false sense of neutrality that ignores existing differences between individuals and groups in a society. Instead of promoting impartial laws and rules, it universalizes the interests of the most powerful group and imposes a biased construction of laws on all others (Young 1990, 116). An alternative, more comprehensive understanding of egalitarian justice requires the realization of political conditions that allow citizens to participate as equals in a society. Thomas Christiano defends this view, arguing for the realization of what he calls ‘public equality.’ He asserts that the equal moral status of persons requires the equal advancement of interests for every individual in a society (Christiano 2008, 12). In addition, this equal advancement of interests needs to be realized by way of a public and transparent decision-making procedure that considers all diverse interests equally. In this way, people can recognize that they have been treated as equals and that their perspectives have been given

equal consideration (Christiano 2008, 51). This condition of publicity protects people against a biased political world that reflects the interests of one group while the interests of other people are subordinated (Christiano 2008, 61). In this way, the principle of public equality secures a form of political equality that can be recognized by all people in a society.

Although it provides us with a more complete understanding of equality, it can be argued that the principle of public equality gives insufficient attention to social conditions, instead focusing its conception of equality on political conditions. It restricts the scope of egalitarian justice to the basic institutions of a society, as a result of which it fails to consider the larger social structures that underlie these institutions. Structural background conditions, like the practices, norms, and rules that govern social interactions, perpetuate inequalities between groups (Young 1990, 22). As I argued earlier, they promote relations of oppression and domination that pose significant constraints on individual persons. It is true that certain political conditions are required for individuals to participate as equals in a society. However, the realization of these political conditions is not sufficient to secure social equality. To advance equality in a society, it is important to consider and counter the structural background conditions that produce inequalities. Structural inequalities like marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness are at odds with the moral equality of individuals. As is argued by Young, the equal moral status of individuals requires the promotion of two fundamental capacities for all people: the ability to develop and express their own values, and the ability to determine the conditions of their own actions. She explains that these capacities are impaired by conditions of oppression and domination – relational inequalities that stem from the norms, practices, symbols, and stereotypes that are embedded in social structures (Young 1990, 37-38). What is more, structural inequalities infringe on moral equality because they undermine social conditions of equal respect and recognition. As Charles Taylor contends, members of oppressed groups are often harmed by misrecognition – a lack of

recognition of their equal moral worth. They tend to internalize images that stereotype them and portray them as inferior. These images shape their identity, their understanding of who they are, and have the ability to undermine their self-respect (Taylor 1994, 25, 64).

Seeing as structural relations of inequality undermine equal moral status, a commitment to the moral equality of individuals requires their elimination. Hence, we arrive at an account of relational equality, as defended by Elizabeth Anderson. According to Anderson, “[t]he proper negative aim of egalitarian justice is not to eliminate the impact of brute luck from human affairs, but to end oppression, which by definition is socially imposed” (Anderson 1999, 288). She posits a relational understanding of egalitarianism that is about establishing social conditions that secure equal relations among individuals in a society. In this view, egalitarianism is the antithesis of inegalitarian structures like racism and sexism, which make distinctions in the moral worth of individuals based on race, gender, or some other social identity (Anderson 1999, 312). As Anderson explains, relational equality involves countering [oppressive norms and working towards equal respect and the equal recognition of individuals as moral agents (Anderson 1999, 319). It is important to note that Anderson offers an account of relational equality that applies to citizens in a democracy. This account requires capabilities that ensure that citizens participate as equals in a society, including access to education, freedom of occupational choice, and rights to political participation, which are necessary for functioning as equal citizens (Anderson 1999, 318). Because refugees do not have citizenship status, they fall outside of the political society that Anderson describes and lack many of the capabilities she underscores. Nevertheless, the idea of relational equality is not just relevant for citizens. Considering that it is grounded in the recognition of equal moral worth, relational equality also concerns refugees. It requires that individuals, regardless of their nationality or legal status, are treated with equal respect and recognition. This entails that

liberal societies – on account of their commitment to moral equality – ought to counter structural inequalities that undermine the equal moral status of refugees.

### **3.2 An egalitarian argument against pejorative speech**

As a result of structural relations of inequality, refugees are pushed to the margins of social life, alienated and stigmatized, deprived of their autonomy and voice, and exposed to conditions of systemic violence. They face structural constraints, like limited access to education, job opportunities, and resources essential for personal development. Apart from this, they face limitations on public participation that harm their agency and well-being. Overall, refugees face persistent challenges in asserting control over their own lives and identities on account of structural inequalities in a society.

As we saw in the previous chapter, pejorative media narratives of refugees contribute to conditions of marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and systemic violence. They use derogatory language, promote generalizations, silence refugee voices, and fuel negative perceptions that amplify structural inequalities. They contribute to conditions of discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion, as a result of which refugees are neither perceived nor treated as equal members of a society. Instead, they are seen as other and treated as inferiors. This aligns with the point that Waldron makes about hate speech (Waldron 2012, 106). Pejorative speech, like hate speech, injures the reputation of targeted groups, which makes others in a society less inclined to perceive and treat them as equals. As a result, refugees find themselves bereft of their capacity to develop and express their own values and to determine the conditions of their own actions. Katharine Gelber makes a similar point about hate speech, arguing that it harms individuals by perpetuating conditions that marginalize and exclude them from public deliberation, impacting their ability to engage in self-development and self-governance (Gelber 2019, 407). In the same vein, pejorative speech

perpetuates structural inequalities that undermine these fundamental capacities. What is more, pejorative media narratives contribute to a lack of recognition of the equal moral worth of refugees by promoting demeaning or negative portrayals. When internalized, these portrayals can undermine their sense of worth and self-respect.

These harmful structural conditions, which are at odds with the equal moral status of refugees, represent substantial moral reasons for limiting pejorative media narratives of refugees. Pejorative media narratives go beyond harming refugees; they wrongfully harm them by undermining their equal moral status. A commitment to the moral equality of all individuals warrants limiting media freedom of expression in cases where equal moral status is undermined. For this reason, liberal societies, which express such a commitment, ought to limit pejorative media narratives of refugees.

### **3.3 The cost of limits**

Pejorative media narratives of refugees come with significant moral objections and there are considerable moral reasons to impose restrictions on this specific category of media expression. However, it is also important to recognize that reasons for limiting media freedom of expression need to be weighed against the costs of imposing these limits.

The media play a vital role in the mass dissemination of information in a society. Due to their wide reach and use of rapid technologies, they are able to distribute information to large numbers of people in no time. On account of the media's role as mass communicator, media freedom of expression is an important principle in democratic liberal societies (Oster 2015, 28). There are several reasons to suppose why imposing restrictions on this principle is harmful. It can be argued that restrictions on media freedom of expression violate democratic liberties that protect individuals from the coercive power of the government. Freedom of expression as a general value safeguards individuals from government interference, allowing

them to freely express their opinions without fear of repercussion. Considering the wide reach of the media, media freedom plays an important role in facilitating freedom of information, which promotes political scrutiny, transparency, and accountability (Whyte 2021, 48). Government control over the media, on the other hand, undermines a free and independent media that serves as a check on government power. This can lead to censorship and the manipulation of information, which may result in unchecked government power and abuse. Moreover, media freedom of expression facilitates the open exchange of information, ideas, and opinions in a society, which is essential to a free and informed democratic dialogue (Oster 2015, 28). Limiting media freedom of expression stifles this open discourse and can lead to the restriction of certain perspectives or information. It can be argued that prohibiting pejorative narratives of refugees suppresses certain viewpoints on an important societal issue – the refugee crisis. This can be considered anti-democratic, as it implies content-dependent restrictions on free speech that exclude particular opinions and information from political discourse.

It is certainly true that media freedom of expression is a crucial democratic principle and legal restrictions will possibly do more harm than good. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that freedom of expression is not an absolute right – it needs to be balanced against other moral principles. This is especially true for media freedom of expression, considering that the media play a powerful role in shaping public discourse. Media narratives have a significant impact on public perception, as a result of which they influence the social conditions that shape individual lives. As we have seen, pejorative media narratives of refugees condition social interactions in a way that contributes to their exclusion and stigmatization, among other things. Taking the special power of the media into account, possible consequences of media narratives should not be taken lightly. The right to media freedom of expression comes with special responsibilities. This includes a responsibility to

shield vulnerable groups from harm, a moral principle that may warrant certain restrictions on media expression. Because it is a matter of balancing one moral principle against another, the measure of restriction must be proportionate in comparison to the harm produced. I maintain that in the case of pejorative refugee narratives, the harm is significant enough to warrant some restrictions. This is because these narratives contribute to social structures of oppression that undermine the equal moral status of refugees, a harm that is especially wrongful given the moral foundations of liberal societies.

Although restrictions on pejorative media narratives are warranted, it is not immediately clear what form they should take. Because pejorative speech is usually subtle and implicit, the regulation of this type of speech is more complex to navigate compared to more explicit forms of speech, like hate speech. The regulation of hate speech varies across countries, but many countries implement laws that address this type of expression, albeit in different ways. In the United States, hate speech is only illegal when it directly incites overt hate crimes like targeted violence (KPEKOLL 2017). Other countries, however, enforce laws against hate speech that categorically forbid this type of speech. In Canada, for example, hate speech is part of the criminal code (Government of Canada 2023). Illegal hate speech is also defined in EU criminal law (European Commission 2023). In these cases, hate speech is regulated through governmental legislation, leading to penalties for those who engage in it.

Laws against hate speech are typically based on its deliberate evocation of words that are likely to incite or promote hostility. Pejorative speech, on the other hand, does not involve an explicit intention to promote hatred and the harms it produces are indirect and cumulative. These aspects make it more challenging to establish a legal basis for regulation. It is likely that legal intervention is not suited as a measure against pejorative speech because it does not carry harmful intent. Apart from this, pejorative speech is more common and normalized than hate speech. Therefore, the regulation of pejorative media narratives should be based on a

different approach. Limits on media freedom of expression do not need to fall back on legal enforcement and there are indeed good reasons to suppose why they should not. Considering the potential dangers of government interference, such as the corruption of a free and independent media, I acknowledge that this would be a disproportionate measure. However, I suggest that limits on pejorative media narratives should be implemented in a different way: by means of self-regulation. Media organizations should implement ethical guidelines for journalism that promote fair and unbiased reporting and protect vulnerable groups in a society from harm. Several organizations have already proposed guidelines for migration- and refugee related journalism. The *Ethical Journalism Network*, for example, published the following list of guidelines:

1. Reporting about migration and refugees should be based on facts and avoid bias. It should be impartial, inclusive, and transparent. Apart from this, it should steer clear from narratives motivated by politics and emotion.
2. Reporting should adhere to the legal definitions of different migrant categories – including asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers – and accurately articulate the rights associated with each.
3. Reporting should show humanity without collapsing into the victimization of a narrow humanitarian framework.
4. Reporting should include the voices of individuals that represent migrant and refugee communities.
5. Reporting should avoid the use of inflammatory language that can lead to hatred, including words like ‘swarms,’ ‘floods,’ and ‘waves’ (Ethical Journalism Network 2018).

If applied carefully and consistently, these guidelines have the ability to foster an ethical media discourse based on respect for humanity and equal moral worth. By promoting the recognition of refugees as equal moral agents, they counter structural relations of inequality.



## Conclusion

By evaluating pejorative media narratives of refugees, this thesis sheds light on a type of speech that promotes implicit but real harm. Pejorative speech is often overlooked in debates about freedom of expression because it lacks an explicit intention to promote harm and its effects are not immediately apparent. Discussions of freedom of expression often focus on the harms associated with more explicit types of expression, like hate speech and offensive speech. The effects of these speech types are more immediate and palpable, whereas the harms associated with pejorative speech are systemic and cumulative. Despite its subtle and implicit character, pejorative speech has pervasive consequences. This is especially true for media narratives that are informed by pejorative speech, which often have a wide reach and become ingrained in public discourse. By categorizing this type of speech and identifying its effects, we can enhance our understanding of how to address and respond to it.

As part of the ongoing debate about freedom of expression and harm, this thesis addresses the tension between media freedom and the harms that result from pejorative media narratives. As the influence of the media continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly important to consider the ethical boundaries of media freedom of expression. The media play a powerful role in shaping public perception, and media narratives have a significant impact on the social life of individuals. To address this reality, this thesis focused on the question: On what grounds, if any, can limits on media freedom of expression be justified? I have argued that a commitment to the equal moral status of individuals warrants limiting media freedom of expression in cases where moral equality is undermined. Because pejorative media narratives of refugees contribute to structural inequalities that infringe on their equal moral status, they ought to be counteracted. Refugees are not just harmed by pejorative narratives; they are

wrongfully harmed. On account of undermining their equal moral status, these narratives perpetuate a wrong significant enough to warrant certain limits. This argument has significant moral implications for real-world practices. Taking the costs of limitation into account, I concluded that media organizations ought to counter pejorative narratives by means of self-regulated ethical guidelines for journalism on refugees.

It is important to note that this thesis gives limited attention to the extensive and diverse debate on egalitarianism and its intricate relation to the position of refugees in a society. Discussions of egalitarianism often focus on addressing inequalities within a particular society, emphasizing the rights of citizens. Because refugees are not legally recognized as full members of a society, they tend to fall outside the scope of egalitarian justice. However, if we consider a foundational idea of egalitarian thought – the equal moral status of all individuals – it appears almost untenable to deny refugees equal respect. What the moral equality of refugees entails ultimately remains a controversial matter that may benefit from alternative perspectives. In any case, there is an uncomfortable tension between the legal status of refugees and the egalitarian foundation of liberal societies, and it remains unclear how it should be resolved. Additional analysis is needed to unpack the implications of egalitarian principles for the rights of refugees in liberal host societies.

In recognizing the wrongful harm inflicted upon refugees through pejorative media narratives, this thesis contends that the imperative to protect the equal moral status of refugees serves as a compelling justification for imposing certain limits on media expression by way of self-regulation. As we navigate the complex intersection of rights and responsibilities, it becomes clear that countering these narratives is not merely a matter of mitigating harm but a crucial step towards affirming the inherent equal moral worth of every individual.

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