

Securitization and Refugee Resettlement Policy: Using Social Media to Understand Public Attitudes

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis answers the question of how public opinion toward refugees and asylum-seekers expressed in opinion polls compares with that expressed through commentary on news articles posted by Cable News Network (CNN) on social media. Using a study of 2,022 Facebook comments regarding the plight of Syrian child Omran Daqneesh during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign, it reveals competing narratives in favor of and against the opening of American borders to individuals escaping conflict in Syria. The analysis of textual data encompasses themes of securitization and cosmopolitanism, the results of which provide clarity and texture to complement existing opinion poll data. While such polls provide snapshots of public opinion, an analysis of social media commentary reveals more clearly what and how people were thinking about Syrian refugees fleeing conflict and entering the United States at a specific point in time. This study leads to a heightened understanding of the nuances contributing to public opinion of refugee policies and assesses social media's capacity to reveal complexities of citizens' thinking.

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

As the 2011 Syrian Civil War continues to engulf the Middle Eastern country, waves of civilians displaced by the conflict are forced to flee their homes as refugees and seek asylum in regions such as North America and Europe. In this thesis, I study the attitudes expressed on Facebook, a popular social media website, by members of the public in order to understand their reasons for supporting and opposing the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States. I expected that security concerns would be a primary motive for opposing refugee resettlement and anticipated that supporters would promote more open borders and a responsibility to protect Syrians' human rights. My analysis confirmed that security, primarily against terrorism and acts of violence, is important for those who oppose bringing Syrian refugees into the United States. It also reveals that most of the online commenters were less concerned with terrorism and more concerned with the well-being of civilians escaping conflict. My analysis also found a segment of commenters voicing more moderate opinions: posters in this group support refugee resettlement if certain conditions are met or they support only certain types of refugees. I also compare the sentiment expressed in social media commentary to that documented by opinion polling during the same period.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

On June 3, 2017, a group of three assailants drove a van onto London Bridge, initiating an attack that claimed the lives of eight and injured an additional 48. A day later, United States President Donald Trump, posting on his official Twitter account, used the attack as further justification for his policy banning migrants from several predominantly Muslim countries, stating “We need to be smart, vigilant and tough. We need the courts to give us back our rights. We need the Travel Ban [sic] as an extra level of safety!” (Trump, 2017). This suggestion came as part of a series of tweets regarding the London attack, one of which accumulated 237,788 likes, more than 37,000 comments, and 73,052 retweets, becoming Trump’s 10<sup>th</sup> most-retweeted post of the year (Keith, 2017). With the advent of social media as a prominent source of news for many Americans, Trump is not unlike millions of other citizens who take to these platforms to voice their opinions on transnational migration, national security, and countless other issues.

In this thesis, I examine discourse on the subject of refugees escaping conflict in Syria and seeking asylum in the United States, using an analysis of social media posts authored by readers responding to an article and video published on the Facebook page of Cable News Network (CNN) in 2016. My analysis revealed that a significant number of comments revolve around themes of securitization and cosmopolitanism, while others land somewhere in between. I juxtaposed these findings with public opinion poll results in an effort to better understand the reasoning that may be behind survey responses. In doing so, this study adds a level of nuance that polling is inherently unable to achieve.

Whereas opinion polls are useful for gaining a summary perspective of individuals' views on particular issues, a content analysis of social media posts offers richer detail on the precise attitudes of individuals and, in many instances, reveals the rationales for their perspectives. For example, my analysis found multiple instances of online commenters being open to the idea of Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States, but only if they were vetted beforehand, due to various security concerns. While the sample population in my analysis is unlikely to accurately reflect the U.S. population, it does provide insight into the opinions of online newsreaders, which can supplement the existing literature on securitization theory and on public opinion on asylum policy. It may also provide a starting point for future research and debate on the subject of asylum and refugee resettlement policies.

### Background

On June 16, 2015, real estate and reality television icon Donald J. Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States of America. Building his campaign around a vision to “make America great again,” among his initial promises was a stronger stance on immigration (*Time* Staff, 2015). In September of that year, his broader stance on immigration was applied to millions of refugees from Syria, a country embroiled in civil war since 2011. Although then-candidate Trump first suggested he was open to accepting more victims of the conflict, a day later he proposed only a limited U.S. role in the crisis and, in November 2015, he pledged to block Syrian refugees from entering the United States (Kopan, 2015). On January 27, 2017, now-President Trump's campaign rhetoric culminated in Executive Order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into

the United States” (National Archives and Records Administration, 2017), which barred individuals from Syria and several other countries from entering the United States.

The social media age of the twenty-first century represents a significant evolution in political communication, on a scale comparable to that of radio and television in the twentieth century. Although Trump’s platform of choice is Twitter, rival company Facebook dominates among the majority of Americans: according to a 2016 survey of U.S. adults, 44% use Facebook for news coverage, compared to only 9% who use Twitter for the same purpose (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Twelve years after its founding in 2004, Facebook had transformed from a relatively obscure website for Harvard University students into a prevalent information source for most Americans.

Unlike radio and television, Facebook offers consumers the ability not only to obtain news, but also to contribute to an ongoing and public discussion with other users around the world. Individuals can participate in open debate and make their views known, often receiving affirmation of these opinions by way of *likes* on their posts. In this aspect, Facebook is distinct from social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram but similar to ones such as Twitter and Reddit. In comparison with all of these platforms, Facebook stands out as the oldest outlet and, with the most total users, offers the potential for larger audiences than either Twitter or Reddit.<sup>1</sup> Compared to Twitter, it is also more supportive of deeper discussions, due to Twitter’s 280-character limit on public posts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Facebook self-reports 2.23 billion monthly users, as of June 2018 (Company Info, 2018). YouTube, its closest competitor in social media, self-reports 1.9 billion monthly users (Mohan, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Until 2017, the limit was 140 characters.

## Significance

This thesis contributes to the scholarly literature by examining securitization and cosmopolitan discourse and public attitudes expressed on Facebook, a popular social media website. In a 2016 study for Pew, Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer (2016) reveal that 44% of the U.S. population uses Facebook as a news source. Larger percentages of users at Twitter and Reddit receive their news from those sites, but each represents a smaller market share at 16% and 4% of the country, respectively (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Popularity aside, Facebook and other social media sites are unique in that users are not required to respond within a set timeframe, in a face-to-face capacity, or even at all. Users can be emboldened to speak their minds and put forth positions they may feel uncomfortable advocating for or simply discussing in a more personal capacity. They have time to research their arguments, draft their comments, or reconsider their support for a position, rather than forcing an immediate response. According to Amir Hatem Ali (2011), because Facebook and many of its competitors are free to use and require only basic technical knowledge, they “transcend socioeconomic and racial barriers” and support dialogue among varied audiences (p. 213).

Additionally, Facebook gives individuals a chance to reach an immensely larger audience and validate their perspectives. For example, Ali (2011) suggests that, in 2011, Facebook was influential in rallying support for social movements in Egypt, where five million residents maintain accounts on the site. Every time a comment is posted on a public Facebook article, it becomes visible not only to every subscriber of the page<sup>3</sup>, but to every

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<sup>3</sup> Potentially ranging from the tens of thousands into the millions. CNN, for example, has over 30 million Facebook followers as of October 2018.

individual who has friended another individual who likes the article. It is also visible to anyone who publishes a response in the comment section of the initial article unless one or both users block the other or place them on a restricted list.

Typically, Facebook users can both determine the audience of their content through the use of various privacy settings and, to some extent, regulate the content that appears in their news feed. However, because news articles are published without privacy restrictions, any content posted in the comment section will be publicly visible to all Facebook users as well as readers without an account. These public posts can be shared freely by internet users across multiple platforms, giving them the potential to transcend basic discussion and go viral and achieve meme status. In some cases, they have even warranted additional publications by journalistic sources, such as the *New York Times*, which features readers' feedback in a "Top 10 Comments of the Week" article (Moore & Underwood, 2016).

Given the distinctive traits of social media discourse, this thesis expands the broader discussions on migration discourse, while more specifically responding to and complementing the existing literature addressing refugee and asylum-seeker narratives in social media, which are outlined in the literature review. It also contributes to public opinion literature and the ongoing policy debate over Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States.

### *Social Media and Public Opinion*

Before proceeding with my literature review and analysis, it is essential to clarify my use of *public opinion*. While the term typically refers to polling intended to resemble a

larger population, in this thesis I use *social media public opinion* to refer to the opinions and reasoning used by individual members of the public. Although public opinion surveys offer broad insight into public preferences, an examination of a non-representative sample of social media commentary reveals how individuals deliberate policy issues and what considerations are most important to them. In this regard, my thesis supports the “...broadening of the definition of public opinion to include its social dimension,” as put forth by Anstead and O’Loughlin (2015). Their research and other literature on public opinion and social media analysis are discussed in later chapters.

### Methodological Approach

The bulk of my analysis was an evaluation of 2,022 Facebook comments authored by 1,579 users in response to a news article regarding the Syrian refugee crisis and published by CNN. When examining these posts, I coded them based on their approval or disapproval of granting asylum in the United States to Syrian refugees, as well their rationales. The objective of my thesis was to understand how members of the public think about Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers (such as their preferred policy responses) and to compare the sentiment found in social media commentary to that found in opinion polling. Although the sample found in the body of comments does not represent the population of the United States, it does provide insight into public thinking on the subject and answers the question of why some people support or oppose refugee resettlement.

The five primary classifications of comments were *securitization*, *cosmopolitanism*, *mixed sentiment/conditional support*, *sympathetic*, or *unsympathetic*. Three additional groups were labelled as *other*, *possible bot/spam*, and *n/a*. *Securitization* was applied to

comments attempting to turn the Syrian refugee crisis into a security issue—for example, claiming that asylum-seekers are potential terrorists. The *cosmopolitanism* category includes posts that support allowing refugees to resettle in the United States and also illustrates modes of de-securitization with appeals to humanity over national identity. *Mixed sentiment/conditional support* means that the author supports some refugees (e.g. children) but seeks to exclude others, or s/he emphasizes helping Americans before non-Americans. *Sympathetic* commenters were deemed likely to support refugee resettlement but do not offer clear opinions. *Unsympathetic* commenters oppose such policies or responded negatively to the CNN article supporting refugee assistance. Comments that offer no clear position, were posted by bots or contain spam, or were excluded from the analysis were coded as *other*, *possible bot/spam*, and *n/a*, respectively. These codes are touched on throughout the literature review and are explained thoroughly in Chapter Two.

### Organization of the Thesis

Throughout the following chapters, I outline my methodology, theories, analysis and findings. In Chapter Two, I describe my methodology in fuller detail. I begin my literature review in Chapter Three by examining existing scholarship on securitization theory and cosmopolitanism and how they intersect with studies of refugees and transnational migration. Chapter Four concludes the literature review with an analysis of literature on public attitudes, social media and politics, and the methodologies used in previous studies. In Chapter Five, I present my analysis of social media discourse and public opinion polling. Following this, I discuss my findings and offer concluding thoughts on the thesis as well as suggestions for future research in Chapter Six.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology**

My thesis is based on a content analysis of readers' comments posted on social media. The specific comments included in my dataset were written in response to a prominent article and video published by CNN during the ongoing Syrian Civil War, which will be coded thematically and then evaluated using the theories outlined in Chapter Three. Before proceeding with the main analysis, I conducted a pilot analysis to test my methods and probe for limitations and potential obstacles. I begin by describing the news article used in my analysis and the reasons for its selection. Next, I discuss the comments found in my dataset and how they were coded, and then I offer examples of online commentary from my pilot analysis. Following this, I consider the limitations of my methodology in the chapter conclusion.

#### Article Selection

The news article used in my analysis, "He will be our brother': US boy asks Obama if he can adopt Syrian refugee," was published by CNN on its Facebook page and website on September 22, 2016 (Corkery, 2016). I chose CNN because it has the largest number of viewers with mixed ideology (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley & Eva Matsa, 2014). While it is the most popular source for those with "mostly liberal" or "consistently liberal" political views, it is also the second most-popular choice (after Fox News) for those with "mostly conservative" views (Mitchell et al., 2014).

The subject of the CNN article, video and subsequent user commentary is an American child's letter to President Obama, asking permission to adopt a Syrian child who

was filmed after surviving an explosion. The first comment was authored by CNN itself, providing a link for viewers interested in helping Syrian refugees. Due to these aspects, the conversation may tilt toward more cosmopolitan and sympathetic responses. However, it is also possible they could provoke negative statements deriding the idea. This social media post and body of comments were chosen, among other reasons, because they frame the conversation toward the subject of bringing refugees into the United States versus keeping them out and provide an opportunity to study social media public opinion due to the density of responses concerning a single issue. While broader articles can yield high volumes of commentary, they lead to broader, scattered comments across several topics.

I chose this particular story for two reasons. First, it captured the public's attention and elevated the public's focus on Syria to a level previously unseen throughout the country's current civil war. The "Syrian refugee" referred to in the title is Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old boy who survived an explosion resulting from an airstrike during the armed conflict in Aleppo, Syria, in August 2016. Photographs and videos of the event were widely shared across the world via social and traditional media. Internet searches regarding the crisis sharply rose, and news outlets devoted substantial attention to it. Second, it was published in 2016, months before the presidential election, when voters were at a critical stage in deciding whether to vote for candidate Trump, who advocated for stricter border policies, as described previously. The article's topic and first comment about refugee assistance also led to more comments debating the issue, providing data for my analysis. Additionally, the article received 2,022 comments, substantially more compared to other articles.

During the article selection process, I searched the Fox News Facebook page for similar articles, both on Daqneesh and Syrian refugees more broadly, but found none on Daqneesh and few on Syrian refugees. The number of user responses to these articles were far fewer than the CNN article eventually chosen for my thesis. Fox News did publish a story to their website on the letter to Obama regarding Daqneesh (Fox News, 2016); however, I was unable to locate a related post on the Fox News Facebook page. This could be attributed to a decision made by the publisher, or possibly a technical glitch.

Facebook was selected for my analysis due to its popularity with American newsreaders. According to a 2016 study by Pew Research Center, nearly half (44%) of the U.S. population relied on Facebook for their news consumption, far surpassing competitors YouTube (10%), Twitter (9%), and Instagram (4%) (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Demographically, the same study found that Facebook newsreaders were 43% male/57% female and 65% were white, non-Hispanic while 34% were non-white. In terms of age, 31% were 18-29 years-old, 38% were 30-49, 22% were 50-64, and 8% were 65 or older (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). The Pew study also found that 33% had a high school diploma or less education, 34% had some college, and 33% held a college degree. In terms of party affiliation: 22% identified as Republican, 31% as Democrat, and 32% as independent (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

After the 2016 election, Facebook took increased action to remove fake accounts from its platform. Though these practices were also carried out on millions of accounts just before the 2016 election (Kates, 2017), the company reported hundreds of millions were removed in the final quarter of 2017 as well as through 2018 (Community Standards

Enforcement Report, 2018). The commentary used in my analysis was scraped in December 2017, meaning it was potentially affected by these efforts.

### Data and Coding

My dataset consisted of the 2,022 user-generated comments posted by 1,579 Facebook accounts in response to the CNN article. I analyzed and thematically coded each comment using the categories listed below. After parsing the entire comment section, I detailed my findings and then compared them to public opinion polls conducted during the approximate timeframe. To aggregate the comments, I received assistance from a university data consultant, who used Python software to extract the following: the entirety of the comments for the selected article, the corresponding post and author identification numbers for each comment, the username of the authoring account (typically a given name and surname), the date and time the comments were posted, and the body of text. While Python was used to compile the comments, I coded each comment manually, without using software. Authors' identities were anonymized and each was provided with a new identifying number for reference within my analysis.

When performing my study, most comments were considered and were only excluded if the authors identified themselves as foreign citizens in their comments or posted spam and other messages with no relevance to the original post. Comments written in languages other than English, containing only emojis, or tagging friends were also discounted, unless they provided other accepted content. If a post contained external media, such as images, videos, or links, only the text was considered. If there was no

accompanying text, the comment was excluded. If a user posted more than once, the comments were collectively analyzed and coded a single time.

The discursive categories used in my thesis, as well as a sample of my pilot analysis, are provided below:

- *Securitization*—comments suggesting refugees, asylum-seekers, or otherwise displaced people posed a threat in some form. Relying on the theoretical framework outlined by Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde (1998) and discussed in Chapter Three, I considered threats from a broad perspective, not only from a military standpoint but also those from economic and societal standpoints. Comments in this category both rejected policies of resettling Syrian refugees in the United States and attempted to securitize the issue.
- *Cosmopolitanism*—comments signaling inclusive attitudes and supporting Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States. Statements suggesting a moral or legal responsibility to protect refugees and asylum-seekers due to international human rights agreements or other reasons were included in this category. This category also included comments that supported the narrative of the article, wherein an American child seeks to adopt a Syrian child to live in the United States.
- *Mixed Sentiment/Conditional Support*—comments that neither solely securitized the issue nor presented fully cosmopolitan ideas. This category consisted of statements adhering to a form of the priority thesis (which is examined and explained in Chapter Three), as well as those supporting certain segments of the Syrian population but not others and those who desired specific requirements, such as a vetting process for asylum-seekers.

- *Sympathetic*—comments that expressed concern for Syrian refugees or vague support for the article’s narrative but did not meet the criteria to be considered *cosmopolitan*, did not explicitly support granting asylum requests in the United States, and did not explicitly support American families adopting Syrian children. These comments leaned toward granting asylum requests but did not clearly indicate this.
- *Unsympathetic*—comments without securitizing discourse but containing negative reactions to the CNN story, negative sentiment toward Syrian refugees, or disapproval of asylum for Syrians.
- *Other*—comments that did not fall into other categories, did not express a position on the issue, or did not offer a clear position.
- *Possible Bot/Spam*—comments containing spam or messages indicating they may have been posted by a bot rather than a human user.

Table 2.1 provides examples of some of the main types of commentary, which were selected from my pilot analysis.

**Table 2.1***Sample of Facebook Comments from Pilot Analysis*

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Code</b>
"Let him adopt him, when he grows up and gets to know How America meddled with his country and religion! He will be in a good position to kill his adopted brother and countrymen....."	Securitization
"No son, he could be terrorist"	Securitization
"We need to more people like this lovely 6 year old boy. It's kindness like this that gives me hope for humanity."	Cosmopolitanism
"Well you can't ask Obama first off you got to go through their government. Second off if his parents once the kid then the parents could pay every bit of money it cost taxpayers money for assistance or anything there is enough American kids in this country that needs a home first pick your own f***** people first"	Mixed/Conditional Support
"Aw sh*t! Here we go again. Comment section turned political. This is about human rights, not Democrat, or republican. Smh."	Cosmopolitanism
"Lovely ...but it's just not that simple is it! Many considerate and caring people in this world who would move mountains to help but there are dynamics involved when thousands , a million people alone flooded into Germany along with the Syrian plight. Terrorism is high on the agenda and people are wary and scared. It's awful...if it were just the kids for a safe haven maybe it might work but that's would be considered cruel ."	Mixed Sentiment/Conditional Support
"Why would you put a link up to really help, they just wanted their little bit of fame and be on the news, if they really wanted to help they would've, instead of trying make headlines!"	Unsympathetic
Note: Comments were posted in response to the article "He will be our brother': US boy asks Obama if he can adopt Syrian refugee" by Claire Corkery, posted to Facebook by CNN on September 22, 2016.	

Because the opinion polls conducted during the timeframe of my analysis were primarily concerning the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States and not providing foreign aid to affected regions, I assessed users' responses along similar lines. Although comments in multiple categories indicate support for foreign assistance, such as humanitarian programs, economic development, military intervention (all of which could qualify as cosmopolitan in some form) but disapproval of granting asylum in the United States to displaced Syrians, this factor was outside the scope of my analysis.

During the pilot study, I discovered numerous posts linking to either cosmopolitanism or securitization, as well as many that fit neither type. I also recognized other commonalities, such as religious sentiments, fears of terrorism, and political statements, many of them non-sequiturs with no relation to the comments, the article, or even the general topic of refugees and migration. While most of the above comments were coded as securitization or cosmopolitanism, some were coded as *mixed sentiment/conditional support, sympathetic, or unsympathetic*, as they represent more nuanced thoughts on the issue. The *mixed sentiment/conditional support* comment was part of a larger body which did not necessarily oppose refugee resettlement in the United States; however, they strongly emphasized a desire to provide for American citizens first and were conscious of national resources, or were sympathetic toward Syrian refugees but were loath to support them without certain conditions being met (e.g. initial vetting procedures), or they advocated for certain types of refugees (e.g. children) but not others. These more detailed perspectives provide deeper insight into the reasons individuals might support or oppose refugee settlement in the United States. The result of this thesis is an increased knowledge of the concerns influencing public views on refugee policies. In

addition, the study can be seen as a test of social media's usefulness for future public opinion studies.

As an American news service, CNN presumably attracts comments from mostly American readers. However, at least one comment was from a self-identified foreign national; while a high volume of these instances would complicate the objective of comparing the comments to American public opinion polls, I did not find this to be the case.

### Limitations

Although my methodology offers unique insight into public attitudes toward refugees and asylum-seekers, it may not be capturing wholly American opinions. As touched on in the previous section, the comments posted to the CNN Facebook page are not necessarily authored by American readers and, while CNN is a US-based news outlet with a predominantly American audience, there are no mechanisms to prevent non-US readers from publishing comments in response to their social media articles. Nevertheless, though I anticipated comments from international readers, I expect them to be marginal due to CNN's focus on American news stories (as opposed to CNN International). It is possible that, because these are citizens of other countries reading "international" news, they could contribute to a minor increase in cosmopolitan commentary; however, this is speculation. To mitigate the possible effect, comments wherein the author identified as a non-US citizen were coded *n/a*.

Another limitation is the selection of a CNN article. According to a Pew study, although CNN has the most moderate viewership of the major news networks, containing the highest percentage of viewers with mixed ideology and being the second most common

source for individuals with mostly conservative views, overall it is still more popular with liberals than conservatives, who primarily follow Fox News (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Eva Matsa, 2014). This may have resulted in commentary that was more liberal and less conservative, and not reflective of the general U.S. population. Simultaneously, the study found that conservatives are more likely to encounter opinions they agree with than liberals are (Mitchell et al., 2014). This could indicate that online commenters trend conservative, or it could be that conservatives' preference for Fox News makes them more likely to encounter other conservative opinions. In addition, the article I selected is about an American child asking to adopt a Syrian refugee and the comment section contains a link from CNN to help their readers assist refugees in need. Because of this, it is possible that the comment section attracted a higher number of readers who are sympathetic toward refugees and asylum-seekers.

While the comment section on this article may not provide a sample representative of the U.S. population, it still provides public opinion insights in accordance with Anstead and O'Loughlin's (2015) framework. While this thesis contributes to understanding social media public opinion, the term *public opinion* is not meant to imply that my data encapsulates a sample representing the U.S. population. Instead, it seeks to better understand the opinions of 1,579 members of the public.

There is also the conceivable existence of propaganda posts designed to manipulate and mislead the public with deliberately false information, often in a provocative manner. Such content is typically disseminated into conversations with genuine commentators, with the goal of sowing discord. Intentionally malicious posters have existed for years but gained prominence in the aftermath of the 2016 election, due to alleged coordinated efforts

on behalf of the Russian Federation to use hired “trolls” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, ii), affecting the election results to an as-of-yet undetermined degree (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017).<sup>4</sup> While Facebook has introduced changes to reduce the influence of purposely misleading news stories (Pierson & Lien, 2018) and empower users to judge the credibility of publishers (Hughes, Smith, & Leavitt, 2018), I will examine comments from September 2016, more than a year before these functions were implemented. I attempted to identify these posts during my coding and analysis, though some could remain undetected.

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<sup>4</sup> Content of this nature is often labelled with the neologism “fake news,” a contemporary form of yellow journalism. The term is applicable to print, broadcast, and social media.

## Chapter Three

### Securitization and Cosmopolitanism

This chapter outlines the primary theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. First, I examine existing literature on securitization, the development of the concept, and the previous scholarly applications most relevant to my thesis. Throughout the chapter, I illustrate these theories with examples from the presidential campaign and administration of Donald Trump. Following this, I outline the specific cosmopolitan principles informing my thesis and how they are used as a de-securitizing mechanism in the debate over refugee resettlement policy.

#### Theories of Securitization

Traditionally, the subfield of security studies has been chiefly concerned with “...the military element and the state in the conceptualization of security” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1998, p. 1). As a result, much of the literature is comprised of military and political affairs, examined from a realist point-of-view and forgoing broader analyses of the contributing social, economic, or environmental aspects. Especially since the 1990s, other conceptions have emerged to challenge the status quo, widening the dialogue. In this section, I review competing theoretical frameworks in security studies, outline the concept of *securitization*, and discuss the specific framework adopted for my thesis.

Among the diverse theoretical camps in security studies, realism has long been the principal theory (Lynn-Jones, 1999; Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010). Another perspective, known as Critical Security Studies (sometimes referred to as the Welsh School), attempts to link Critical Theory to international security studies in opposition to

conventional realist approaches (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014). Though these perspectives take meaningful strides in expanding the security debate, as this section argues, the Copenhagen School offers a framework most appropriate to my research aims.

During the Cold War, security analysts were understandably more concerned with *security* conceptualized as militaristic threats to state sovereignty. However, as tensions subsided the field began to consider broader issues and other potential sources of insecurity. One of the scholarly developments of this period was the Copenhagen School, which seeks to address new security challenges especially in non-military domains. Described as a blend of social constructivism and traditional realism (Williams, 2003), the school's objective is to offer an analytical structure that values eclecticism and expands security studies beyond the standard military-political scope by accounting for a wider range of issues which are culpable in state insecurity.

The first step in the school's evolution was Barry Buzan's 1983 book *People, States, & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, wherein he makes the case that security analyses should account for five distinct sectors. These sectors are summarized in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1***Overview of Copenhagen School Securitization Sectors*

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Description</b>
Military	Internal and external threats of force against the state, challenging state sovereignty. Can also apply to non-state actors such as tribes or regional entities.
Environmental <sup>5</sup>	Threats to the environment and environmental threats to humanity, e.g. pollution, global climate change
Economic	Generally, any event that could harm a state's economic well-being. Some examples include: A global financial crisis which could, in turn, weaken the state economy, an alarming rise in income inequality among a domestic population, or the fear of foreign workers taking jobs from citizens
Societal	Threats to identity, especially community identity. For example, the fear that refugees could radically change the demographic structure of the United States or affect the religious and linguistic status quo
Political	Challenges to governmental systems and sovereignty, excluding military-based threats. This sector also encompasses concerns over human rights.
<i>Note: Summaries of the securitization sectors are based on the work of Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde (1998) in <i>Security: A New Framework for Analysis</i>.</i>	

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<sup>5</sup> Buzan (1983) uses the term “ecological sector” to refer to what he now labels the “environmental sector.” The latter is used at least as early as 1990 by Buzan, Kelstrup, Lemaitre, Tromer, and Wæver in *The European Security Order Recast: Scenarios for the Post-Cold War Era*.

In a later book, Buzan, Kelstrup, Lemaitre, Tromer, and Wæver (1990) apply these same ideas in an effort to forecast the future of European security beyond the Cold War, with an emphasis on non-military policy areas.

While these past works are significant in expanding the discussion of what constitutes *security*, Wæver, Buzan, Kelstrup, and Lemaitre's (1993) *Identity, Migration, and the New Security Agenda* is of most relevance to this thesis, as it dedicates considerable effort toward connecting the Copenhagen School principles with migration issues.

Published in the early days of the post-Cold War period, it narrows the agenda to focus on societal security in Europe with an analysis of migration, ethnic nationalism, and identity.

While one reviewer asserts that they were not the first to suggest expanding the scope of security studies (Booth, 1994), another recognizes that the book is nevertheless among the first attempts at exploring European security issues through a society-centric lens, rather than a state-centric one (Stanger, 1995).

The five sectors, while independent from one another, are not siloed and often overlap. It is not uncommon for a particular issue (like immigration) to be securitized across multiple sectors. Nevertheless, societal security is notably salient on the subject of immigration. Wæver, Buzan, Kelstrup, and Lemaitre's (1993) premise attempts to shift away from state-as-referent-object analyses and toward a societal sector focus, due to a lower probability of armed conflict in the region and heightened tensions among its nations and identity groups, whose boundaries do not necessarily reflect those of their respective states. In one chapter, Buzan also cites statements from French politicians tying

immigration to security and the country's desire to reduce asylum claims at their borders (Buzan, 1993).

Within the volume, contributors Martin O. Heisler and Zig Layton-Henry (1993) explain two key factors in natives' resistance to immigrants. The first, they argue, "...is the perception of citizens that their state and society have become much more open to foreigners of all sorts, and that they no longer have the firmly bounded quality that formerly seemed to be the case" (Heisler & Henry, 1993, p. 156). One cause, they posit, is the reluctance of some first- and second-generation residents to adopt local customs and become full citizens of their new country. The second key factor is a feeling that an excessive number of immigrants are "...present in some tentative, irregular or illegal status..." (Heisler & Henry, 1993, p. 156). These reservations may also influence popular discourse on immigrants as well as asylum-seekers.

Also germane is the book's discussion of terrorism, as some commenters in my pilot analysis raised concerns that asylum-seekers could actually be radicalized operatives or have the potential to engage in acts of terror once inside the United States. In a chapter titled "Civil War, 'Terrorism' and Public Order," David Carlton (1993) explores these phenomena and how they affect the dynamics of the societal sector. Of particular note is his section on terrorism. He clarifies that his focus is not "...those seeking to change frontiers or create independent states..." (p. 178), but instead on the possibility of "...groups drawn together by [ethnic, linguistic, and religious] loyalties may become involved in violence for other reasons" (Carlton, 1993, p. 178). His assertions demonstrate how and why acts of political violence relate more to the societal sector than the political sector of security studies.

Societal security is unique in that the referent object—societies, rooted in the concept of *nations*—is less-explicitly defined. Thus, to demarcate these intangible referents, Wæver et al. cogently cite Benedict Anderson’s theory of *imagined communities*, with *imagined* denoting existent but arbitrarily-defined groups with which individuals relate and identify (Wæver et al., 1993). This may influence my analysis, as it is likely that my data will encompass numerous instances of societal securitization, with commenters arguing that approving asylum requests could threaten American society and culture in some way. In theory, each securitizing actor could have its own definition of “American society and culture,” and my inquiry will have limited ability to identify these differences; however, the actors’ general fears of a societal threat will be nonetheless clear and able to support my conclusions.

For an illustration of societal securitization, one can look to the Trump administration. To explain President Trump’s rhetoric and the logic driving his policies toward refugees, Todd Scribner (2017) uses the perspective of Samuel Huntington’s 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The Trump administration treats refugees and migrants in general as a credible threat to United States national security, and asylum programs are, by extension, a potential vulnerability to America’s borders (Scribner, 2017). This alleged threat posed by these refugees stems from what Scribner describes as a “culturally based [conflict]” pitting Americans against Islamic society, and Trump’s policies represent a “pre-political” response (p. 264-265). Huntington’s thesis is again invoked in a separate piece by Jeffrey Haynes (2017), who notes the efforts of Trump and other members of the Republican Party “...to highlight the

perceived virtues of American ‘Judeo-Christianity’ while...denigrating the values and ethics of Muslims...” (p. 67).

This West-versus-Islam attitude has been supported by a number of individuals in the Trump administration to varying degrees, most notably former Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon (Delkic, 2017; Haynes, 2017)) and more fervently by Sebastien Gorka, former Deputy Assistant to the President (Haynes, 2017). In a review of Gorka’s 2016 book *Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War*, one writer suggests that Gorka’s recommendations be used in conjunction with a ban on Islamist migrants and monitoring Islamic cultural centers (Ibrahim, 2017). Although supporters of the administration and its policies maintain varying degrees of antagonism to Islam, their securitizing views collectively manifested with the executive order to halt immigration from several primarily Muslim countries.

While the aforementioned literature offers a gradual introduction to the integral components of the Copenhagen School, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* by Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde (1998) is the first to offer a thorough and comprehensive overview of its philosophy, its core tenets and the idea of *securitization*. In addition to the book’s more-detailed definitions of the five sectors of securitization, it provides a template for the securitization process and presents its three constituent elements, which shape my analysis:

- **Referent objects**—“things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival”
- **Securitizing actors**—“actors who securitize issues by declaring something—a referent object—existentially threatened”

- **Functional actors**—“actors who affect the dynamics of a sector” but are neither the referent object nor a securitizing actor (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 36).

In the context of my thesis, the referent object is the United States and its comprising national and state economic systems, its citizens, and its (broadly defined) society. The securitizing actors are the online commenters using speech acts to frame the discussion of Syrian refugees along security lines. Through an individual-level analysis, I will determine how the audience both securitizes and de-securitizes the debate over refugee resettlement policy and ascertain a sample of the considerations influencing online commenters’ perspectives.

The Copenhagen School emphasizes the security implications of speech acts, a concept called *securitization* and defined as “...the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization” (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1998, p. 23). In other words, securitization is an attempt to convince an audience that an issue is actually a *security* issue, rendering it exceptional and superseding other, “standard” political matters and possibly requiring distinctive policy responses. Using this concept, I will screen online comments for indications that Syrian refugees are viewed as a security risk, either to the physical well-being of Americans, to the political system, or in other ways.

One example of securitization is the Trump administration’s efforts to convince the American public that refugees and asylum-seekers from Syria and other predominantly Muslim countries increased the potential for a terrorist attack on American soil and, thus,

sought to exclude such individuals from entering the United States through executive action. Much of the Copenhagen School's analytical framework concentrates on the speech acts of elites. When elite actors, such as members of the executive branch of the Federal Government of the United States, successfully securitize an issue, this can potentially lead to the audience securitizing the issue, as well. Given this, I expect my data to encompass a portion of comments focusing mainly on the audience's fear of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Since its introduction through the Copenhagen School, the securitization concept has been adopted by critical security theorists, as well as Paris School and Risk School scholars. In her book, *Climate Migration and Security: Securitisation as a Strategy in Climate Change Politics*, Ingrid Boas (2015) offers a thorough overview of the four schools of securitization and identifies key differences and similarities between each. As Boas details, the Paris School's emphasis rests on securitizing practices by professional participants in the policy process (either through governmental positions or with stakeholder organizations), and its primary level of analysis is the administrative, whereas my analysis concentrates on securitizing speech acts occurring at the individual level; for this reason, the Paris School is not an ideal framework. Likewise, Risk School approaches are also suboptimal, due to their preference for positive security (Boas, 2015),<sup>6</sup> while my analysis is examining *negative* securitization (in that it is invoked as a means of exclusion) and contrasted with cosmopolitanism. Finally, critical security, although crafting novel

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<sup>6</sup> Which Boas (2015) describes as "...[conceptualizing] security in terms of risk, based on notions of potentiality and uncertainty, and argues that securitisation can result in the logic of positive prevent and positive risk management" (p. 45).

alternatives on securitization, is not fully attuned with my research as it also primarily relies on a positive frame of securitization<sup>7</sup> (Boas, 2015).

Boas situates herself among the “second-generation” of securitization scholars (Strizel, 2011a, 2492, as cited in Boas, 2015), who seek to better understand the roles of both the context and the audience of securitization, in conjunction with the initial securitizing actors (Boas, 2015). In their assessment, despite the work dedicated toward understanding the actions of securitizing actors, there is insufficient focus on the impact of the audience and the context in which the securitizing speech act takes place; addressing this gap can offer more robust insight into the securitization process (Boas, 2015). This thesis will, in part, respond to this area in the literature, as the audience – social media commenters – additionally serves as the co-securitizing actor, with numerous individuals attempting to securitize the issue while others advance cosmopolitan views, and others still occupying varying positions in between.

Whereas Boas and the second-generation place unique emphasis on the influence of audience and context, the weight of Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde’s agenda is concentrated on the policy areas, or “sectors,” in which elite actors securitize discourse. For my analysis of public attitudes concerning resettlement and asylum policy, both Copenhagen School sectoral considerations and Boas’ audience-context approach are essential, due to the complexity of individual perspectives; as such, a synthesized approach is most prudent. These wide-ranging views are acknowledged by Daniel Tichenor (2002), in *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, where he describes the history of American immigration policy as one marked by “... fierce debate on the economic, social, cultural, and

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<sup>7</sup> What Boas (2015) refers to as “...the emancipatory quest for human security” (p. 40).

national security consequences...” (p. 1). To study the debate over refugee resettlement policy along similar lines, my thesis will rely on the aptly comprehensive framework of Buzan et al., while emphasizing the audience’s role in the securitized narrative.

### Cosmopolitan Ethics

As is revealed later in the sample comments in Chapter Two, one of the main counterarguments against the securitization narrative is cosmopolitanism, where proponents invoke the idea that non-citizens should be treated equally to citizens and given protection from persecution, in an attempt to de-securitize the issue. Some commenters may also argue that it is the responsibility of the United States to protect the human rights of Syrian refugees implied by the numerous international agreements the country has supported, parallel to the concepts of humanism and humanitarianism.<sup>8</sup> Other commenters offer conditional support for refugee resettlement but express the need to provide for American citizens first or that individuals applying for asylum undergo a vetting process. This *priority thesis*, occasionally referred to as *patriotic priority*, has been the subject of past cosmopolitan literature, and its place in my analysis will be discussed later in this section, along with the philosophies of humanism and humanitarianism, which I consider as elements under the umbrella of cosmopolitanism. I will first provide background on the concept of cosmopolitanism and the ideas of cosmopolitan priority, humanism, and humanitarianism, before charting my working definition for this thesis at the conclusion of the chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Although the basic idea that humans are citizens of a shared world community can be traced earlier, Pheng Cheah (2006) writes that the modern concept of cosmopolitanism was originally proposed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, with his idea of world citizenship and his position that outsiders should receive cordial treatment in foreign territory. However, Cheah notes that, although Kant advocated for an inclusive world, accommodating of human rights and increased cross-societal interactions, his model nonetheless respected the function of state sovereignty. Rather than a single world sovereign, he instead envisioned a world federation system, wherein human rights were a priority but subject to the laws and customs of individual states (Cheah, 2006). According to Cheah, in Kant's view, world citizenship is utilized by individuals, but secondary to their state citizenship.

In *The Ethics of Immigration*, Joseph Carens (2013) adopts a similar cosmopolitan stance in his argument for more open borders, accepting of both refugees and economic migrants, while recognizing the finite potential of such a policy with regards to state capabilities and public attitudes. His perspective respects state sovereignty while still accepting both the practical benefits and, foremost, the moral reasons for supporting migrants through childhood education programs, employment opportunities, and other "social and administrative rights" (Carens, 2013, p. 143) open to citizens and other members of the state. Carens' stance toward refugees is framed along similar humanitarian lines, and also attributes the state's obligation to protect and resettle due to causal and normative rationales. For the purpose of my analysis, *cosmopolitanism* will be used to broadly characterize comments supporting the intake of refugees in the United States, as well as those dismissing securitization narratives. Following Carens, Cheah, and Kant's

thinking, comments supportive of refugees while acknowledging state sovereignty and individuals' non-resident status will also be coded as cosmopolitanism, unless a "priority" logic is appealed to (covered in the following section), or they explicitly suggest forms of foreign aid in lieu of refugee resettlement in the United States.

Carens' reasoning that moral responsibility should be the principal motive for open borders is parallel to that of other scholars, including those building their analysis on philosophies of humanitarianism. Hugo Slim (2010), for example, argues that humanitarian efforts toward civilians displaced by war should be predicated on "morally responsible politics" as first outlined by Kant, as opposed to a simpler "ethic of charity," taken up by individuals (p. 2). Other analyses designed to more precisely study cosmopolitan angles could certainly divide these categories further and separately assess public attitudes reflecting humanitarianism, humanism, compatriot priority, and other aspects. However, in the context of this thesis, which seeks to incorporate security and priority narratives, these ideals as well as those of humanism, etc., are considered to be branches of the wider cosmopolitanism philosophy.

### Compatriot Priority

Elsewhere, contemporary theorists have deliberated the manner in which outside parties should be accommodated compared to legally recognized members of the state. Charles Beitz (1983) examines how cosmopolitanism can be practically reconciled with nationally oriented policies, with specific attention to immigration. In his view, while the merits of cosmopolitan policies have been made, the "national ideal is still dominant in common-sense moral thought" (Beitz, 1983, p. 592). Further, he considers the morality of

the “priority thesis,” which ranks citizens ahead of non-citizens, proposing that it “...could be nothing more than a reflection of relations of social power...” similar to racism and sexism (Beitz, 1983, p. 593). Aside from securitization and cosmopolitanism, this *priority* theme will be represented by a third category in my analysis, wherein online commenters grapple with a middle ground between protecting refugees from their prior circumstances and securitizing national borders.

The priority thesis is later revisited by Richard Miller (1998), whose “...case for favoring compatriots...” derives from what he explains as “...a morality of equal respect...” (p. 206). Although Miller supports “patriotic bias in tax-supported aid” (p. 206), he professes that “...[patriotic] priority does not totally exclude support for foreign aid in the presence of relevant domestic burdens” (p. 210). Nevertheless, he defends the importance of maximizing domestic aid before diverting resources to “disadvantaged foreigners” (Miller, 1998, p. 210). Miller does not, however, extend his arguments to include private contributions, independent of public funds. Though his main arguments are directed more toward debates of policy formulation, his modified *patriotic priority* will also be encompassed by a third coding category in my analysis.

More recently, Carens (2013) contributes to the priority dialogue, contending that, while a degree of “priority for compatriots” (p. 273) is expected and something that he, himself, advocates, he does not equate this with a need to “...[exclude] peaceful outsiders seeking to enter and settle” (p. 274). Further, while he acknowledges that some may advocate for a total equivalence between the treatment of all people, regardless of state affiliation, he views this position as “extreme” and “unrealistic” (Carens, 2013, p. 273).

Nevertheless, he emphasizes that societies do still have a responsibility to support otherwise-affiliated persons, particularly on the grounds of human rights.

Carens (2013) also contests some of the common concerns posited by anti-immigration backers: threats to national security and state sovereignty, hazards to public order, the possibility of overwhelming the public welfare system, and a radical shift in national culture and identity. These fears link directly to the military, political, societal, and economic security sectors established by Buzan and other Copenhagen Scholar scholars and have been noted by migration scholars such as Tichenor as well. A thorough analysis of my data will reveal with more clarity how these discursive logics are applied to the current Syrian refugee crisis, and my review of public opinion polling and literature in Chapter Four will uncover the extent of these broader anti-refugee sentiments in the United States and among social media newsreaders.

The question of priority considered by Beitz, Carens, and Miller is one that is reflected in online discourse, specifically in that some opine that the United States should help citizens to a greater extent before (or in place of) helping Syrian refugees. Others blended these views with securitizing logics, by suggesting asylum-seekers be permitted entry only after passing a thorough vetting process, effectively prioritizing the safety of the American public from a (real or perceived) threat posed by those fleeing the Syrian conflict. Although they encompass varying ideological motives, several individuals in the preliminary study have expressed support for policies implementing a form of priority condition; as such, those individuals expressing any degree of prioritization of American citizens above refugees and non-citizens will be coded in a distinct category in my main analysis.

In doing so, I will demonstrate how the wider philosophy of cosmopolitanism is invoked to de-securitize the debate over refugee resettlement policy and push for more inclusive public policy. Because the opinion polls used in my analysis focus on questions of refugee resettlement in the United States, comments coded under “cosmopolitanism” will be those that express approval toward granting asylum requests from Syrian refugees. While other comments may contain cosmopolitan elements, such as a desire to assist non-citizens through humanitarian programs or military intervention, they will be given other designations for the purposes of this analysis. The “cosmopolitanism” category will comprise statements advocating a less rigid adherence to national immigration laws, increased deference to international human rights agreements, and a general sense of responsibility to protect individuals seeking asylum in the United States. On the other hand, those favoring policies that permit entry under certain conditions (e.g. prioritizing American citizens and residents) will be classified in a category separate from those invoking cosmopolitanism or securitization.

While my analysis was constructed by coding social media comments using a total of seven categories, the primary substantive categories were those covered throughout this chapter: securitization, cosmopolitanism, and the priority thesis (as part of a broader “mixed sentiment/conditional support” category). *Securitization* coding was applied to comments expressing fear toward Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers, or those arguing that these groups pose a threat to the United States in some way. *Cosmopolitanism*, on the other hand, was used to denote comments which de-securitize the issue or support refugee resettlement policies. Finally, *mixed sentiment/conditional support* included statements advocating compatriot priority policies (e.g. helping homeless Americans first before

helping non-Americans), or those that approve of some refugees but not others (e.g. children but not adult men, or individuals that have undergone a vetting process. Comments coded under this category may have included securitizing or cosmopolitan narratives, but also present nuanced perspectives that do not fall solely into either camp. Using these theoretical foundations, I gained insight into the reasoning behind individuals' views on refugee resettlement which can be combined with public opinion polls in order to establish a more complete understanding of public attitudes.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Public Attitudes and Social Media**

To assess public attitudes regarding Syrian refugee resettlement, I examined the opinions expressed through social media commentary; to this end, Chapter Four covers three sections: public opinion scholarship, contemporary opinion polls, and literature regarding social media, political discourse, and public sentiment. The public opinion literature discussed in the first half of this chapter ranges from scholarly work on the public's historical positions concerning refugees and other migrants, to contemporary public opinion polls and analyses of these polls. Throughout 2016, a variety of opinion polls of U.S. adults indicate that the American public largely securitizes the issue of refugee resettlement policy. Scholarly studies offer similar findings, with the American public typically siding against pro-refugee policies and, in the rare instances of popular support, the public will does not necessarily translate into conforming policies.

The subsequent section begins with an overview of social media as a tool of political communication and lays out some of its defining characteristics. Following this, I highlight scholarly considerations of the impact of Facebook and online news on governance, society, and public attitudes. The chapter then concludes by examining previous methodology used to analyze social media public opinion.

#### Public Attitudes and Refugees

In this section, I discuss scholarly work detailing contemporary and historical debates on refugees and transnational migrants, as well as the connection (or disconnection) between policymakers and popular opinion. The literature outlined here

will inform my analysis as I attempt to draw comparisons among these themes, those found in my data, and the attitudes expressed in public opinion surveys.

In “Another Story: What Public Opinion Data Tell Us About Refugee and Humanitarian Policy,” Brad Blitz (2017) explores a potential connection between humanitarian and security objectives in the United States and European Union, in which discriminatory policies favor “skilled populations that can be easily assimilated” (p. 381); migrants suited to these requirements offer the potential to offset purported economic security threats, which could explain Western policymakers’ preference for them. However, Blitz notes that these restrictive policies are sometimes enacted despite popular support for increasing humanitarian assistance to refugees, indicating a disconnect between policymakers’ preferences and those of the broader public. In the same article, he highlights three attributes unique to the current Syrian crisis that distinguish it from past examples: enhanced reporting practices from individuals on the ground, increased levels of social media activity, and more reliable public opinion data.

Furthermore, Blitz (2017) details a problem in popular discourse: the conflation of *refugees* and *illegal* immigrants. He notes that while, legally, these terms are used distinctly in Western systems, “popular discourse on immigration often conflates the two categories, which increasingly undermines the universal right to asylum” (Blitz, 2017, p. 394). This erroneous logic is not limited to observers: In *International Migration: Evolving Trends from the Early Twentieth Century to the Present*, Susan Martin (2014) explains that asylum-seekers themselves will often attempt to enter a country using the same processes as those not seeking asylum. In other instances, Martin states that individuals may be fleeing conflict, but they seek to emigrate for economic opportunity, resulting in “mixed motive

migration” (p. 59). In these situations, governments will sometimes opt to exclude these individuals from receiving asylum, despite their circumstances warranting the protections of a genuine refugee (Martin, 2014). Similar misconceptions may occur in my data, with some respondents believing refugees have suspect motives and securitizing the issue along economic or other lines, due to a lack of understanding of asylum protocols and with little consideration of the contributing factors leading asylum-seekers to take such measures.

Blitz’s and Martin’s findings that refugees and economic migrants are sometimes viewed as one and the same could also play a role in shaping public opinion, affecting how people respond to surveys gauging support for each of these groups. Some respondents may be more receptive to asylum-seekers and refugees fleeing conflict, whereas others may feel more positively about those seeking employment, viewing them as more likely to become net contributors to the economy. It is also possible that respondents could be unfamiliar with the difference between refugees and economic migrants, leading to their opinion of one group influencing their opinion of the other. Likewise, online commenters may follow similar response patterns.

Historically, American policymakers, mass opinion, and public policy have often been misaligned with one another on immigration, and political elites favored pro-immigration policies despite significant public opposition. To some degree, contemporary attitudes toward migrants are mirrored by historical attitudes, dating back to the American colonial era. The “cultural threat” alleged by contemporary immigration skeptics echoes past views espoused by Benjamin Franklin, who later became one of America’s Founding Fathers. Franklin discussed his concerns in a May 9, 1753, letter to British scientist Peter Collinson, stating his uncertainty of German immigrants and his conviction of their failure

to assimilate to local culture and their preference for their native German language rather than English (National Archives and Records Administration, 2018). While Franklin's views changed decades later after the founding of the United States and he became more open to immigration (Tichenor, 2002), in this instance, Franklin's logic aligns with Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde's concept of societal security.

Tichenor (2002) notes that, while a vocal nativist bloc has long existed in the United States, before the twentieth century it seldom held the level of political support necessary to affect policymaking. In his analysis, he describes the ideological diversity of the Founders, ranging from "Cosmopolitans" who "Encouraged" immigration with "Expansive" civil rights for immigrants, to "Classic Exclusionists," who sought "Restricted" immigration with "Restrictive" civil rights (Tichenor, 2002, p. 50). Opposition to immigration materialized in various forms throughout eighteenth and nineteenth century America, both through issue-based advocacy groups and through political party platforms (Tichenor, 2002). However, in spite of their aims, "...nativist political mobilization ultimately bore few policy fruits" (Tichenor, 2002, 46). Tichenor attributes this to path dependence theory, and the subsequently inability of the public to change course (or its desire to remain as it were) resulted in a pro-immigration momentum that continued for decades. Regardless of the persistence of anti-immigrant movements, policymakers offered few appeasements.

Nevertheless, Tichenor (2002) also cautions that path dependence does not offer certainty in policy outcomes, and that "critical junctures" (p. 49) can lead to new directions in lawmaking. The nativist movement gained further support in 1920 with the election of Warren Harding to the presidency, and the first National Quota Law was passed in 1921 (Tichenor, 2002). Although a series of restrictive immigration laws were passed between

1875 and 1917, most were limited in scope and were not designed to counter the influx of Europeans, then the largest source of immigrants to the United States (Tichenor, 2002). The 1921 and 1929 quotas laws diverged from this, and led to decreased southern and eastern European immigration, with lesser impacts on groups from other parts of Europe (Tichenor, 2002). Tichenor concludes that these, as well as those aimed at Asian immigrants, were motivated by racial prejudice and nationalism. Although these policies were supported by lawmakers, as Blitz's (2017) analysis shows, immigration policy is not always crafted in accordance with public opinion, and the extent to which these policies may have represented the attitudes of the electorate is unclear.

Such a gap between lawmakers and the public was less prevalent during the refugee crises of the twentieth century. Throughout this period, refugees faced their own unique obstacles in gaining admission to the United States, and humanitarian appeals were not always sufficient, as the United States displayed persistent reluctance to open its borders to individuals fleeing conflict and persecution. Tichenor (2002) acknowledges that this was particularly true for Jewish refugees. On the subject, he writes: "Appallingly few Jewish refugees who sought sanctuary in the United States from the rise of the Nazi regime until the end of the Second World War secured authorized entry" (Tichenor, 2002, p. 151). Tichenor reveals that Jewish asylum-seekers attempting to enter the United States from Europe during this period were victims of the same obstacles faced by other refugees from the continent, emphasizing "...how impenetrable the admissions process was for southern and eastern Europeans..." (p. 151), and how their plight tied into the larger American policy debates of the era. Susan Martin (2014) describes the international response to the plight of refugees in the 1940s as a "failure" (p. 60), and although the mission of the

International Committee on Refugees (ICR) became more inclusive during this period, it had little impact on displaced European Jews, victims of the most pressing crisis facing the ICR. Martin writes that this reform “...was adopted, in part, to avoid taking specific action on Jewish refugees” (U.S. State Department, 1943, as cited in Martin, 2014, 60). A proposal to seek a diplomatic solution to protect Germany’s persecuted Jewish inhabitants was on the table at the 1943 Bermuda Conference, as was a proposal to allow these individuals to evacuate through the Allied blockade, but neither was supported by the attending delegations; Martin notes that the American representatives viewed them as “radical” (U.S. State Department, 1943, 155, as cited in Martin, 2014, 60).

Following the Second World War, this indifference to refugees was also reflected by the public. During three separate crises in Hungary, Indochina, and Cuba, opinion polls revealed that majorities disapproved of their government’s plans to resettle displaced persons in the United States (DeSilver, 2015). An exception occurred in 1999, when a Gallup poll found that 66% of Americans supported the relocation of Albanian refugees fleeing conflict in Kosovo (DeSilver, 2015). This anomaly overlapped with a period of heightened immigration in the United States, possibly attributed to positive economic impacts (Tichenor, 2002). Despite the economic growth, some politicians continued to call for heightened border controls, resulting in galvanized immigrant voter blocs.

#### Public Opinion Polls Before and After the Media Coverage of the “Daqneesh Photo”

To understand public attitudes at the time of the photo article and comments analyzed here, I used the iPoll database hosted by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research to identify public opinion polls conducted in August 2016, when the Daqneesh

story first came to light, as well as the three-month periods before and after it occurred. However, no polls concerning the topic of refugees were conducted in May of that year. Thus, in this section, I have elected to discuss ten surveys from the six-month period of June-November 2016.<sup>9</sup>

In the months preceding the Daqneesh incident, American public opinion generally favored policies that scaled back support for refugees. Specifically, polls throughout this period found that a majority of respondents opposed resettling Syrian refugees in the United States, viewed these individuals as a critical or important threat, and believed that reducing the number of migrants and refugees was mostly or always effective in combating terrorism (See Appendix A for a list of opinion polls conducted in the months leading up to the Daqneesh story's publication). Other polling during this time revealed that majorities believed the United States "should allow fewer [Syrian] refugees" and viewed these individuals as a "moderate," "somewhat high," or "extremely high risk" (See Appendix A for more information on these surveys).

Later that year, public attitudes toward refugees temporarily reversed. In September 2016, the first poll conducted after the Daqneesh story broke found that a majority of respondents expressed conditional support for Syrians seeking refuge in the United States (Table 4.1). However, polls conducted in subsequent months suggest this apparent shift was only temporary. While a November poll revealed a slim majority believed refugee assistance should be a "very important" or "somewhat important" goal, three other polls conducted in October and November found that a majority of respondents

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<sup>9</sup> An additional poll conducted in November 2016 was excluded due to its focus on legislative strategy rather than policy substance.

thought the country was accepting too many refugees, that it does not have a responsibility to do so, and that national security should be prioritized above refugees from “terror prone” regions (See Appendix B for a summary of opinion polls conducted in the months after the Daqneesh story was published).

<b>Table 4.1</b>		
<i>September 2016 Opinion Poll: Should the U.S. Allow/Not Allow Vetted Refugees into the Country?</i>		
<b>Poll Question</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Notes</b>
“Which comes closer to your opinion about Syrian refugees who want to come to the United States?...The US should allow refugees from Syria into the United States as long as they go through a security clearance process. The US should not allow any refugees from Syria into the United States at this time.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 61% Should allow</li> <li>• 37% Should not allow</li> <li>• 3% Don’t know/No answer</li> </ul>	Respondents: National adults
Source: CBS News/SSRS—Social Science Research Solutions, September 2016		

Of the ten opinion polls considered in this chapter, only one clarifies that refugees are individuals fleeing conflict, so it is conceivable that survey respondents may have been unaware of the difference between refugees and economic migrants and, therefore, did not distinguish between the groups when answering. Others, such as the September 2016 CBS News survey, provide respondents with only general options and do not account for conditional support based on, for example, the number of refugees they believe the government should accept into the country; rather, they are provided a terse (and in the

case of the CBS News poll) trinary set of answers from which to choose. Although social media comments are unlikely to provide the robust sampling offered by these polls, they may offer improved understanding of the policy considerations influencing the public attitudes of a given set of individuals.

### Social Media, Political Discourse, and Public Opinion

As an instrument for political communication, social media has been employed for a variety of purposes, including but not limited to official communication on behalf of lawmakers (such as Trump's twitter posts), an advocacy tool used by community organizers and, most relevant to my thesis, a means of qualitatively assessing public opinion. As will be reviewed in this section, one readily available source of public sentiment data is online comment sections, found on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to major news (e.g. FoxNews.com, ESPN.com) and commercial (e.g. Amazon.com) websites.

Daniel Rellstab (2015) classifies online comment sections as a "hybrid genre between chat and forum" (p. 112). Elsewhere, they have been described as "...one of the most democratic public spaces in our society, one that is not filtered by the media or pollsters and where there is broad and relatively uncensored access both for consuming and disseminating political information" (Hoffman 2015, 221). While letters to the editor served as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century proto-comment section, 21<sup>st</sup> century, "Web 2.0" variations include, among others, "polls, blogs, forums, citizen reporting sections, or—the most widespread form of user-generated content—comment sections" (Rellstab 2015, 112). According to Karen S. Hoffman (2015), an important distinction found in the web variant is that, unlike

traditional editorials, online comments are seldom vetted before their publication, and often do not compel disclosure of the author's identity. Regardless of this difference, Hoffman asserts that, despite their reputation as "uncivil and negative" (p. 11), online comment discourse and traditional discourse do not greatly differ. These discursive conduits are also tools used by political institutions and actors to support their objectives. Specifically, Twitter and Facebook have experienced heightened popularity among elected officials, candidates, parties, and research organizations as channels to communicate with supporters and potential supporters (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016) and assess public opinion (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012; Zeng, Chen, Lusch, Li, 2010).

As Chapter Two discussed, one of the limitations of my data is the uncertainty of the composition of the sample, and whether or not the comment section will simply attract like-minded readers. However, prior scholarship on the intersections of social media, news consumption, and political discourse offers some insight on what may be found, and the discursive environment created by platforms such as Facebook. In a nod to the growing significance of online news and social media, Cass Sunstein (2017) uses *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* to better understand their dynamics and questions their ability to generate an informed electorate and a healthy civic order. In particular, he describes the concept of the "Daily Me," characterized by an "architecture of control," wherein each user has the capability to fully screen what he or she sees and hears (Sunstein, 2017, p. 1). This Daily Me exploits the human tendency for homophily, leading individuals to seek out and associate with those who are similar to themselves (Sunstein,

2017).<sup>10</sup> Within Sunstein’s hypothetical architectures of control, users are able to concentrate their attention on items (e.g. social media) that confirm their preconceptions while tuning out potentially conflicting information. Though not solely caused by human nature,<sup>11</sup> these inclinations, he contends, may exacerbate political polarization and confirmation bias, rather than broaden the knowledge of citizens (Sunstein, 2017). While his Daily Me concept is not yet reality, Sunstein asserts that social media websites like Facebook and Twitter are a step in that direction. On one hand, this may suggest that a news article publicizing cosmopolitan ideals (such as the CNN article selected for my analysis) will in turn lead to comments from proponents of the same ideals.

On the other hand, while Sunstein argues that online news and social media enable users with the power of selectivity, other scholarship suggests this may not be the case. Using survey analyses of British, German, and Italian audiences, Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) conclude that, even if users’ primary use for social media is apolitical, such as communicating with friends and family, they are often exposed to political information unintentionally. In a study for Pew Research Center, Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer (2016) find this to be true with Facebook: in a survey, 62% of Facebook newsreaders stated they do not intentionally seek out news on the platform; rather they are incidentally exposed to it while using the site for other purposes. Jaime E. Settle (2018) makes similar claims about Facebook in her book *Frenemies*, saying “...political information is presented in a social, entertaining format, but people cannot opt out of exposure to hard news on the

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<sup>10</sup> Others refer to internet homophily and selective information habits as “cyberbalkanization” (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996; Brainard, 2009, as cited in Chan & Fu, 2017)

<sup>11</sup> Companies like Facebook and Google are also culpable, using algorithms to influence the stories to which their users are exposed (Sunstein, 2017).

site easily, because there are not separate ‘channels’ for hard and soft news on the News Feed” (p. 64). This indicates that users may not exercise total control over their social media intake as Sunstein proposes, and they will occasionally be exposed to political information through incidental means, such as a family member sharing it through their account. As a result, such outlets confront citizens with perspectives that they were not expecting or not aware of. With news outlets as widespread as CNN, this may ring especially true. Facebook comment sections, in general, are another example: participants have little control over what they do or do not see,<sup>1213</sup> and though they have the capacity to sort comments using three options—*Most Relevant*, *New*, or *All Comments*—they cannot sort by ideology or even keywords. Rather, they can only choose to read or not read what is presented on their screen. Beyond these choices, they are limited in their ability to filter the content on their page. They do have the option to hide a comment, which then prompts them if they wish to block the user or contact Facebook staff, but they cannot selectively avoid exposure to specific types of comments.

In 2016, when CNN published the article on Daqneesh, users had only two options to sort comments: *Top comments*, meaning the ones with the most likes and replies,<sup>14</sup> and *most recent* comments. Article comment sections were also not hidden by default, and a preview of the comments was in plain view on users’ newsfeeds.<sup>15</sup> Given this, analyzing an

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<sup>12</sup> Aside from blocking users, though this will not prevent the initial exposure

<sup>13</sup> This applies only within specific comment sections. Outside of individual sections, users have the ability to block any news page at their discretion

<sup>14</sup> The specific *top comments* update as the conversation evolves, so the *top comments* presented to one user may not be the same *top comments* presented to another user.

<sup>15</sup> In a later update, Facebook altered the default status of comment sections so that they remained hidden unless a user opted to expand them. Should a user choose to engage in the discussion, they cannot be certain of the political views they will encounter.

article's responses will shed light on how users reacted when faced with information counter to their perspective and also how others responded to information with which they agreed. Specifically, with the CNN article used in my analysis, sympathetic commenters will likely encounter several opinions consisting of negative or critical feedback toward refugees. Likewise, critics and opponents of increased refugee assistance efforts will be confronted with inclusive, cosmopolitan attitudes.

Once comments are posted to Facebook, the public can provide feedback in the form of replies (text, links, images) and reactions (*Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, or Angry*, each with a corresponding emoji). On other websites, this can take the form of up votes (signaling approval) or down votes (signaling disapproval). Drawing on a previous study, Sunstein (2017) discusses users' ability to manipulate comment sections and public perceptions through the use of up and down votes. Using an unnamed social media website, researchers discovered that placing an artificial up vote on a comment resulted in a 32% increase in the likelihood that the next user would also up vote and 25% total increase throughout a five-month span (Muchnik, Aral, & Taylor, 2013, as cited in Sunstein, 2017). These planted positive responses also increased overall reactions to the comment; however, an experiment with artificial down votes did not replicate a comparable number of negative reactions, only the increase in responses (Muchnik et al., 2013, as cited in Sunstein 2017). Although this experiment may not have been conducted with Facebook, its results could plausibly transfer using the site's variation of user reactions. Either manually or with bots, artificial reactions and comments could be used to manipulate the site's algorithms, driving selected comments to the top of the comment section and giving them the appearance of popularity.

Inadvertently, through their countless comments and reactions, social media users contribute to a virtual biome of social media public opinion data, and an increasing number of researchers across different fields of study are recognizing its value for tasks such as sentiment analysis, data mining, and assessing the public's mood and perspectives on particular topics. Legal scholars have suggested that social media posts could support public opinion research on matters related to crime and criminology (Prichard, Watters, Krone, Spiranovic, & Cockburn, 2015). In addition, public health scholars have cited the contributions of Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms in monitoring outbreaks of influenza (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010; Signorini, Segre, & Polgreen, 2011, as cited in Mollema et al., 2015) and measles (Mollema et al., 2015). For political science and public policy, a few examples include assessments of public attitudes in Iran, a state with limited freedom of expression (Elson, Yeung, Roshan, Bohandy, & Nader, 2012), appraising Egyptians' views of Islamists (Gazzar, 2013), and using online rumors as "improvised public opinion" (Kwon, Bang, Egnoto, & Raghav Rao, 2016). Though each of these works seeks to achieve diverse objectives, all of their analyses rely primarily on social media commentary as supplemental public opinion data to provide a different picture from the one offered by public opinion surveys.

To frame my analysis, I defer to the concept of public opinion outlined by Nick Anstead and Ben O'Loughlin (2015) by adopting the term *social media public opinion*. As the authors acknowledge, *public opinion* most commonly refers to methods such as opinion polling which rely on meticulous sampling to resemble target populations. Within the context of social media, they argue that a new definition of public opinion is necessary to incorporate new methods, asserting that "social media public opinion research may not

offer a representation of the entire public but it ...enables studies that focus on social interaction and conversation rather than simple preferences, and introduces a strongly temporal dimension to public opinion research” (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015, 205-206). This reasoning, the authors contend, distinguishes social media as an “organ of public opinion” (Bryce, 1888, as cited in Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015, 205). This updated terminology paves the way for scientific avenues like semantic polling. Anstead and O’Laughlin’s article builds on Anstead’s previous work studying political sentiment and social media which included, among other methods, “qualitative thematic analysis of media coverage...to assess how social media data were being used to inform discussion of public opinion in political coverage” (p. 206).

Though my analysis relies on my own evaluation of specific social media content, a number of other studies have relied on automated software to oversee data processing, with the intention of ascertaining details such as word frequencies. Others have opted for manual approaches similar to mine, with the goal of examining the substantive discourse and its underlying meanings. For automated content analysis, the primary methods of analysis are *unsupervised learning*, which classifies textual tone using predefined word sets, and *supervised learning*, which provides more specialized results but requires a more demanding process (González-Bailón & Paltoglou, 2015). These methods are particularly well-suited for evaluating larger quantities of text for broad insights, but prevent a more nuanced analysis made possible through human-conducted assessments, which are more equipped to account for factors such as sarcasm or spam comments. The drawback is that manual assessments require more time, researchers, or both.

One example of content analysis software is Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, or LIWC, whose word dictionary provided the core for multiple subsequent word sets (González-Bailón & Paltoglou, 2015). LIWC is a tool with multidisciplinary and multilingual appeal, having been used by scholars for opinion mining on movies and consumer products<sup>16</sup> (del Pilar Salas-Zárate et al., 2014), views on mental health<sup>17</sup> (Li, Jiao, & Zhu, 2018), and political attitudes<sup>18</sup> (Elson et al., 2012) among other examples. In the third instance, the authors utilize a LIWC-based methodology to explore public opinion in Iran, where traditional means of public opinion study are hindered due to national policies toward freedom of expression.

Though their work offers convincing analysis and findings, Elson et al. suggest their computer-assisted LIWC method could achieve even stronger results if combined with manual content analysis. In one example of a primarily manual content analysis designed to study refugee discourse, Rellstab (2015) begins with an overview of the varying terminology and word counts found in his data, but then supplements these findings with qualitative inquiry focused on their context. By using membership categorization analysis, Rellstab documents the precise ways the online communities of Swiss news sites label and define migrants and refugees in comparison to the journalists writing the news articles to which the users are responding. Through this approach, he found that commenters typically label refugees and asylum-seekers differently than the journalists who penned the articles, and that they often defer to ‘negative categorizations’ (Rellstab, 2015, 130). His encounter of terms such as *economic refugee* (Rellstab, 2015, 122) also ties into Blitz’s and

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<sup>16</sup> Using Spanish social media content.

<sup>17</sup> Using Simplified Chinese social media content.

<sup>18</sup> Using English social media content.

Martin's conclusions regarding the misconceptions between refugees and economic migrants and the suspicion of their motives. In this example, the data sources are online comments posted in response to news articles on the newspaper's website and involve smaller, niche audiences. Nagwa El Gazzar (2013) also defers to human-driven analysis when he applies qualitative discourse analysis to a collection of comments to assess public attitudes toward Muslims.

Rellstab's study is not the only one to reveal negative stigmas placed on refugees by social media users. In a shallower but methodologically parallel piece, Rettberg and Gajjala (2016) uncover securitizing, anti-refugee sentiment on Twitter, finding that Syrian males are especially vulnerable. By examining images and texts connected to #refugeesNOTwelcome, they find that Middle Eastern male refugees are often portrayed as, among other labels, rapists, terrorists, and generally dangerous. Rettberg and Gajjala also identify a common theme of mistrust among readers, going so far as to question the moral integrity of refugees and predicting future violent incidents. This evidence suggests that online commenters commonly hold refugees and asylum-seekers in negative regard or view them as a security risk in some form. My pilot analysis is indicative that my data will confirm their findings, encompassing similar negative themes, though the ratio of negative comments as well as the specific themes may vary. At least one comment in the pilot analysis suggested that the Syrian boy in the photograph may grow up to be a terrorist and inflict harm on the United States. Rellstab and Gazzar's research designs in particular correspond to the methodology used in this thesis, as Chapter Two outlines.

In this chapter, I detail the historical relationship between the masses and incoming refugees and migrants. Especially since the twentieth century, the public has maintained a

contentious relationship with refugees and immigrants in general, and Tichenor's description of the various rationales for exclusion can be explained by different modes of securitization, particularly in the societal sector. However, polling shows that, during the month in which the Daqneesh story went viral, public opinion temporarily shifted. The disconnect between policymakers and members of the public also described by Tichenor was found in my analysis, where commenters disagree with the cosmopolitan stance presented by President Obama in the CNN article. This chapter also examines the various methodology for analyzing public thinking communicated through social media. The context provided here was combined with the theories of Chapter Three and applied to my analysis in Chapter Five.

## Chapter Five

### Analysis

In this chapter, I analyze the social media comments in my dataset to achieve two objectives: first, to uncover the specific narratives and rationales that influence individuals' opinions toward refugees and asylum-seekers, and second, to answer the question of how the views expressed through online comments compare to public opinion polls on related issues. I begin with an overview of my findings, including general statistics regarding my data and an outline of the broader themes, and the prevalence of each. The following sections is organized around these themes, offering deeper analyses. The chapter then concludes by comparing the comments to public opinion surveys. Each comment that is quoted and attributed to a social media user is presented *sic erat scriptum* unless otherwise noted.

#### Overview of Social Media Comments

After extracting the Facebook comments from the CNN news article, I identified 1,579 unique accounts among the 2,022 comments; a total of 228 users authored two or more comments. A breakdown of how the 1,579 users were coded is provided in Table 5.1.

<b>Table 5.1</b>	
<i>Summary of Social Media Comments</i>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of Users</b>
Cosmopolitanism	495
Sympathetic	238
Mixed sentiment/conditional support	49
Unsympathetic	168
Securitization	55
Other	400
Possible bot/spam	11
n/a	163

A plurality of commenters (495 of 1,579) express agreement with the article and/or support Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States, and were classified under *cosmopolitanism*. An additional 238 respondents offer statements that appear sympathetic to the Syrian child in the article or to refugees in general but do not clearly indicate whether or not they support granting them asylum. Opposing the article’s narrative and the proposal of accepting Syrian refugees into the United States are 168 users categorized as *unsympathetic* and 55 who securitize the issue. An additional 49 comment with more mixed perspectives, attempting to balance humanitarian concerns with the national interest, as well as the political realities facing the United States and the international community.

Elsewhere, the dataset contains posts from 400 individuals whose statements do not fit into the main thematic clusters. Many of these comments offer clear statements but

the authors' views on asylum policy are not made clear, nor can their sentiment (e.g. sympathetic or unsympathetic) be reasonably concluded. Separately, 11 users are flagged "possible bot/spam" for various reasons. Some repeatedly comment with lengthy political messages, sometimes with contact information. In one instance, the author seemingly attempts to antagonize other readers with repetitive comments. While many comments in the *other* category are also marked by inflammatory discourse, they tend to be isolated examples, rather than overt spam messages.

Finally, 163 users posted items that were evaluated and subsequently excluded from my opinion analysis and were coded *n/a*. While substantive but unclear comments were placed in the *other* category, *n/a* comments contain little relevant information. Examples include users "tagging" their friends so they would receive a link to the article,<sup>19</sup> posts in languages other than English, from authors who were self-identified foreign citizens, or containing only emojis, and blank comments with no text.

The rest of this chapter will be used to present my analysis and findings. First, I discuss the comments exhibiting messages of *securitization*. Following this, I contrast them with those labelled as *cosmopolitanism* and continue by reviewing the *sympathetic* and *unsympathetic* comments in the third and fourth sections, respectively. The fifth examines the opinions attributed as *mixed sentiment/conditional support*. Finally, I consider the *other* and *possible bot/spam* posts, before I transition to the analysis of opinion polls.

### "Syrian child now. Terrorists in 10 years:" Securitizing the Refugee Crisis

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<sup>19</sup> Comments that included both tags and substantive content were counted normally.

In the comment set, I identified 55 users who posit security concerns regarding Syrian refugees. The most common fear is that Syrian refugees could carry out acts of terror and violence upon entering the United States. Though instances of environmental, military, political, and economic securitization<sup>20</sup> are minimal, allegations of threats in the societal sector are numerous, as will be explained here.

A large number of commenters, such as User 942 (“He's a terrorist cell”) purport that Syrian refugees, including the child in the story, are potential terrorists, intent on harming the United States. Terrorist attacks, which pose threats to law and order and human life, can be viewed as imperiling societal identities in a direct way by endangering the well-being of those who represent and contribute to these identities. On another level, the securitizing actors’ suspicions of Syrian refugees being or becoming terrorists are also emblematic of societal insecurity through their mistrust of “others” or “them,” in this case meaning refugees and asylum-seekers. In total, the word *terrorist* appears 46 times in the comment section and was used by both securitizing actors and non-securitizing actors. One individual responds to the article:

He hasn't learned yet to be cynical, because he is too young to understand that there are people overseas who would like to kill him because he is an American. Is the story cute? Yes. Practical? Maybe not. He'll understand more as he gets older and learns about things like Sept. 11th, things like the terrorism that grips Europe.

The European experience plays a role in others’ perceptions as well. User 21 comments:

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<sup>20</sup> Economic concerns were present in the data but tended to be simple considerations as opposed to threats and as a result were not coded as *securitization*.

The German citizens were told to help, they did. Last week they issued a public safety warning for females to wear sneakers so they could out run their rapist.

Their immigrant and refugee rapist. My body, my choice! no rape.

User 1298 believes the child could be affiliated with the Islamic State, a terrorist organization, stating: “this is the way to enter in USA....for ISIS by pretending to be a refugee...or with the help of child by showing emotion.” Different readers allude to a violent threat without implying an element of terrorism. Specifically, there are comments such as “Yeah let them all come over here so they can blow us up” and “Have u ever heard of Trojan HORSE.” User 468 cautions “...that the refugee will slit his throat in his sleep because that is what he has been taught.”

Other occurrences of societal sector securitization could be found in the concerns over specifically Muslim refugees coming to the United States. “Adopting Islamic child is dangerous,” in the words of one reader. And, in a response to a comment, User 1476 states: “But I can name plenty of Muslim attacks, Muslims are not welcome here.” One respondent expresses pessimism, believing assimilation is crucial but not likely to occur, and at the expense of the public. S/he writes:

“They already have indoctrinated misconceptions and values that are not the same as ours. So to believe the assimilation to our society will happen is a fallacy that will endanger so many while using our valuable resources that were meant for actual citizens.”

This respondent’s concerns may border on economic securitization, depending on the author’s meaning behind the term *resources*.

Of the few examples of political securitization, one commenter explained his concerns regarding Sharia Law and a potential challenge to the United States Constitution, in an instance that also encompasses societal securitization:

If only he knew the situation with the refugees is more complex than he thinks. We can't risk having refugees. It would be nice to help them but some may be in ISIS and most Muslims in Syria practice Sharia Law, which is a way of life contradicting the Constitution.

Separately, User 271 considers the issue of American sovereignty: "In order to save te sovereignty of the US soil. U should say no. Possibility is there after ten or twenty years or even thirty years later the real demons will be transformed from a kid into ISIS." This comment fits with Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde's (1998) definition of political security in that it suggests a "...nonmilitary [threat] to sovereignty" (p. 141); however, the mention of a terrorist organization may indicate the user has concerns that overlap with the societal sector.

### Cosmopolitanism and De-Securitization

As outlined in Chapter Two, *cosmopolitan* comments support granting asylum in the United States to Syrian refugees. Though this code was applied to more comments than any other, it also contains the least diversity of opinion due to its intentionally limited definition. A sizeable portion of this group is made up of short statements of approval for the story and the idea of adopting a Syrian child ("Beautiful gesture!"; "So wonderful;" "We can all learn much from this child!"). References to *humanity* or *humans* (rather than national identity) are also common. Beyond these simple positive messages are ones of de-

securitization, with cosmopolitan narratives used as a remedy for others' fears of refugee terrorist attacks. This section will illustrate such examples.

In response to the efforts to securitize the issue of refugees and asylum, several respondents commit to de-securitizing the issue and alleviating these worries. In particular, one reader proclaims: "The kindest, smartest kid ever! We have terrorists in our country now they are called DRUG DEALERS! We need to worry about them and street thugs more than anyone from any where!" Another offers a quote s/he attributes to former South African president Nelson Mandela:

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human than its opposite.

The commenter follows the quote with several hashtags, including "#humanity." His contribution apparently serves to convince readers that Daqneesh is young and does not intend to harm Americans; in addition, it attempts to de-securitize the issue by suggesting terrorism can, at least in part, be defeated through attitudinal changes.

In one comment thread, User 1494 queries a fellow reader as a means of asserting that Syrian refugees pose minimal danger. Specifically, s/he writes "...How many Syrian refugees have been involved in terrorist attacks? I'll wait for an answer from a reliable source. until then, you go ahead and live in fear and i will help those in need." User 1512 also encourages a de-securitizing narrative, noting: "Oh and America has 'adopted' a lot of folks in the last 520 years. Timothy McVeigh and Dylann Roof<sup>21</sup> also come from long lines of

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<sup>21</sup> Timothy McVeigh was a convicted domestic terrorist; Dylan Roof was convicted on multiple hate crime charges, among others.

immigrants” and asking, rhetorically: “So how about we start screening for the young caucasian guys too? Oh, not fair, right...” Another rhetorical question is posed by User 1536, who asks: “Do you even understand the difference between a refugee and a radical Islamic terrorist?”

On a final note for this section: as is the case in a number of *securitization* comments, religious sentiment is also common throughout the *cosmopolitan* responses. In this case, it often takes the form of Biblical quotes used to convey where the author stands on the issue. One of the more prevalent is “out of the mouths of babes,” an idiom with religious origins which implies children are a source of wisdom or strength. In the context of the online comments, it was interpreted as a message of approval.

### Sympathetic Sentiment

Separate from the *cosmopolitanism* comments that clearly favor bringing Syrian refugees into the United States are those expressing sympathetic attitudes but stopping short of unambiguously supporting the article’s proposal. *Sympathetic* commenters typically demonstrate that they are affected by the story in some way, perhaps causing them to stop and think about the reality of the conflict in Syria, including the human costs associated with it. There are also several references to a phrase associated with Donald Trump Jr., son of President Trump.

Among those who respond positively without indicating approval of Syrian asylum-seekers, most either commend the American boy who wrote the letter to President Obama about adopting Daqneesh, sympathized with Daqneesh himself, or both. In general, many of these comments place emphasis on the two children featured in the story. A commenter

expresses his/her understanding of the Syrian boy's situation, writing: "Poor kid. I feel ya. It's a horrible place for children over there. It breaks my heart," and others describe the story as "sad" and express other negative emotions toward the story. On the other hand, some users react with positive sentiment, appreciating the American child's intent to help a child in another country. One person writes "A child has more compassion than we do," as another observes "Kids now teaching adults to love one another ... Smh." In the words of another reader, the story is "so human..." Attempting to change the focus of the discussion, User 590 questions the solution to adopt a Syrian child: "Beautiful but can't we just stop this war & let the Syrians live peacefully."

The statement made by Donald Trump Jr. which received attention was his comparison of Syrian refugees to Skittles, a type of candy.<sup>22</sup> Trump Jr.'s words are referenced in the CNN article and also in numerous comments; for example:

- "And Donald Trump Jr called people like him a "poisonous skittles " . That's all what you need to know before voting ..."
- "Nope, he might be a poison skittle. Can't be having that! (Sarcasm in case anyone might miss that)"
- "Trump jr refers to this innocent child as a skittle. He is a husband a father etc. he is cruel."
- The Mean Orange Ogre and his heartless spawn won't allow this to happen you dear little guy. To them he is a "poisonous skittle."

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<sup>22</sup> In a tweet, Trump Jr.'s statement "This image says it all. Let's end the politically correct agenda that doesn't put America first. #trump2016" accompanies a Trump-Pence campaign advertisement containing a bowl of the colorful, fruit-flavored confections, that reads: "If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem" (BBC News, 2016).

In addition to these, there are several other references to the tweet throughout the article's comment section.

### Unsympathetic Attitudes

The 168 *unsympathetic* comments mostly reflect dismissive attitudes toward the story of the CNN article. Some commenters do applaud the American child's desire to support Daqneesh but for different reasons do not support the idea of actually bringing him to the United States. Others simply voice disagreement with no further explanation, such as User 869 ("DON'T CARE!!"), User 956 ("Hell no"), and User 1474 ("No"). Many do not like the idea of bringing a Syrian child to the United States but offer other solutions, such as changes to U.S. foreign policy. The most prominent finding among these comments was that a significant number of readers question the authenticity of the article, going so far as to claim the story is staged propaganda.

Among those who commend the intent behind the message despite disapproving of the message itself are three commenters who suggest adopting a refugee child ignores larger realities. User 105 states "Its Easy to be so kind hearted when you know nothing of the world" but does not provide clarification. Likewise, User 98 describes the American boy as "kind hearted" but does comment further, saying: "The boy is kind hearted and all but it takes money to sustain one person let alone thousands of refugees. I get it's a good cause, but we're a broke country, we have our own poor and jobless. Don't be naive and ignore economics." While this could be interpreted as supporting a policy of compatriot priority, the author does not clearly indicate that s/he would back such a policy after "poor and jobless" Americans were provided for; as a result, it was coded *unsympathetic* because User

98 opposes giving asylum to Daqneesh. In another instance, User 1543 writes “nice sentiment kid...”, however claims “...but we don’t want them here., build and protect your own land., we are not a hotel”.

Rather than bringing refugees into the United States, some suggest that the American government should assist displaced Syrians through other means. One commonality was found among the several individuals who offer proposals to modify U.S. foreign policy. For example, User 317 posts: “He should have asked Obama to stop illegal wars he involved the States in. Though, Obama is just a puppet of war-profiteers which rule this country and slaughter millions of innocent in other countries including the family of a poor child pictured as well as millions of other children like him.” Similarly, User 366 criticizes the policies of the administration of then-President Barack Obama, writing: “Tell Obama to stop Dirty power games Instead Adopting One kid Coz millions in Iraq ,Afghanistan , Syria are suffering like this kid”.

Another discursive cluster revolves around assisting Syrians without resettling them in the United States. In one of his/her multiple comments, User 1426 asks “Why don't we just go in and take out ISIS all together instead of this, [']We took out a major player of ISIS today.['] I have yet to hear we took out troops of ISIS. Then go in and help the Syrians rebuild their country. They don't want to come here. They want to be in their own country. But the world won't allow them.” User 1359 also suggests foreign assistance, in a comment acknowledging “This kid will need a lot of therapy” and, in another, “Help them over there.” Although these comments could be regarded as cosmopolitan in the sense that they advocate using American resources to assist non-Americans, they do not express support for allowing them to resettle in the United States. User 1426, in particular, promotes

national distinctions between Americans and Syrians, with statements such as “They don’t..” and “they want...” and “...them.”

A substantial number of users are skeptical of article and video, suggesting it is a deliberate attempt by CNN, the wider media, or left-wing politicians, to manipulate the public to some end. According to User 1465, the article contains a “FAKE LETTER PROPAGANDA FAKE LETTER PROPAGANDA FAKE LETTER”. Separately, User 536, calls it “Another bs story put out by the bought and paid for media[,] Research the photo and story”. User 1392 voices disapproval over Daqneesh’s story trending in the broader media, asking “How many times is the same picture gonna be use for the sheep to keep believing propaganda lies to the viewers!!! Wake up!!!!” User 201 claims the story is “Bloody fake. Propaganda. Just like clock boy. Using kids for emotion.”<sup>23</sup>

Other skeptics view the article as political, with the intent of supporting 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. These individuals display no concern toward Daqneesh or the Syrian refugee crisis in general and provide little or no other feedback on the news article’s content. In one instance, User 1488 criticizes the story as “More propaganda BS for the Hillary sheep...,” while in another, User 1173 argues, “This is not news, it is another Hillary advertisement to promote her wanting importation of thousands more Syrians. Nicely played CNN.” User 521 accuses the Clinton campaign directly, saying: “Clinton campaign gang is behind it , how did the boy know about it , forget this.” User 1310 articulates different concerns, dismissing the current narrative and pivoting toward

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<sup>23</sup> “[C]lock boy is likely a reference to a 2015 incident where a Texas teenager was arrested for bringing a homemade clock to school. He was later invited to the White House by President Obama and received media publicity for what transpired; in August 2016, a lawsuit on his behalf led to renewed media coverage (Schuppe, 2016).

domestic concerns: “Staged. CNN human interest story. Help American Veterans.” This comment, while prioritizing American service members over Syrian refugees, does not advocate that veterans simply come first; rather, it ignores the concerns of Syrians entirely and given this the remarks were deemed *unsympathetic* rather than *mixed sentiment/conditional support*.

### Mixed Sentiment/Conditional Support

“LETS FIX AMERICA FIRST!” exclaims User 1215. “America first,” advises User 1350, aping the rhetoric. Within the comments presenting mixed opinions and suggesting conditions be met before permitting Syrian refugees to enter the United States, the most prevalent theme is one of “American/Americans first,” in a line of reasoning that matches the priority concept discussed in the cosmopolitan literature in Chapter Three. Though Users 1215 and 1350 offer little explanation, others elaborate their views by encouraging policymakers to provide first for domestic groups, such as military veterans and victims of gun violence. Others are concerned with knowing who precisely is being given asylum, asserting their desire for a vetting process for those seeking refuge in the United States. A third common thread is represented by those advocating for child but not adult refugees. This section will detail the nuances of these more moderate proposals.

“America first,” a recurring adage in American politics, has been adopted intermittently by politicians in the United States, often in domestic debates of foreign affairs (Rothman, 2016). During the course of his presidential campaign, Trump, like many before him, embraced the concept, first expressing his approval of it in an interview (Rothman, 2016) and later used it to describe his approach to foreign policy (Transcript:

Donald Trump's foreign policy speech, 2016). In response to the CNN article on Syrian refugees, several readers communicate similar attitudes, either explicitly or implicitly supporting an "America first" approach to the crisis. One user writes: "Let's take care of our veterans, homeless, and hungry kids...then worry about the refugees." Another user also backs veterans as well as the homeless, in a shorter remark: "Help United States veterans, homeless first." Some seek progress on other issues before diverting public resources toward asylum-seekers, such as helping the African-American community. User 29 advocates for Americans in general, commenting: "We got our own people in our country to take care of and to worry about first..."

In some cases, wherein a commenter otherwise supports offering asylum to Syrian refugees but also seeks to vet them, a securitizing logic is seen but as a measure of caution rather than total exclusion. One reader states plainly: "Let's do extreme vetting then no problem!" User 1534 illuminates his fears, writing:

I hope that the parents understand that people from these countries want to kill Americans. Until they can be properly vetted all these refugees should not be let into America. Europe is a complete mess and other countries are sending them back.

Hillary Clinton wants to bring in 550% more refugees from these areas. Not Ok!

A different user supports vetting for adults but is less worried about the backgrounds of children, in his/her comment: "Yes but we'll have to vet any adults coming with him." The topic of refugee vetting procedures also occurs in other areas of the data. In a debate with another individual, one respondent, coded as *cosmopolitan*, states "...These refugees you see being brought here have been vetted...some for more than two years..."

Another example of commenters deeming refugees a potential threat can be seen in the approval of children (and sometimes women) refugees but disapproval of others. User 32 argues in favor of asylum for younger refugees, opining: “We should bring in the refugee children and give them food water and shelter.” Similarly, another writes: “Yes let's take 6 yrs old and under. The rest stay the hell out of other countries.” User 458, on the other hand, approves only of orphaned Syrians: “I have a problem with refugees coming into this country but I do not have a problem with family adopting the children that don't have parents.” Expressing his/her concerns with potential terrorism, User 1539 bargains: “If it was women and children coming sure. But being the majority is men with ties to Isis and are fighting age. NOPE..” Whether it be vetting, fitting a certain profile, or ensuring American interests come first, each sample response listed in this section shares the belief that refugee resettlement is permissible only under certain conditions.

#### *Other; Possible Bot/Spam Comments*

For my objective of studying rationales for public attitudes on refugees and asylum-seekers, *other* comments offer the least relevant content. The majority of these comments comprise unrelated political statements, neutrally toned questions, or conversational back-and-forth. Additionally, there are many insults aimed at other readers, and some that debate relevant subjects like immigration policy without giving the authors’ perspectives on the topic. While these comments do not offer discernible opinions on refugee resettlement policy, some provide opinions on other respondents’ views. In response to two commenters’ foreign policy suggestions, User 1486 counters: “ahh the war tactics specialist posts a comment on social media questioning other war tactics specialists.”

amazing. Must have been a tough call from that armchair,” and in a separate comment, “armchair generals,” suggesting expert opinion should be valued over popular opinion on the issue.

A portion of these readers also defend the legitimacy of the CNN article despite offering no apparent opinion on the subject. Multiple readers question that the six-year-old American in the video actually wrote the letter to Obama. In response to one, User 158 writes:

My son is 6, you'd be quite surprised how smart they are..they listen to everything and pick it all up..my son has a passion for animals when he seen the aspca commercial he cried to save the animals and wrote a story about it with pictures.

User 160 also trusts the article’s authenticity and says “I pity you because you find it so hard to believe. You must not have children of your own or you're just blind to their love and innocence. Such an angry, crappy life you must lead with that attitude.”

Lastly, the 11 *possible bot/spam* comments are among the lengthiest posts in the dataset. Some provide contact information to the public readers, while one is not in English. User 1351 offers to provide supernatural assistance, and another posts a recurring message asking other readers to add him/her to their friends list. User 1380 seems more likely to be an individual posting spam rather than a bot, as s/he posts similar and drawn-out comments multiple times, all of them advocating for CNN anchors, celebrities, and supporters of Hillary Clinton, including former president George Herbert Walker Bush, to adopt Syrian refugees.

### Comparing Social Media Commentary with Public Opinion Polls

Thus far, I have analyzed and coded the entirety of the Facebook comment section associated with the CNN news article and outlined the diverse perspectives published by its readers. I will now use this section to compare the aggregates to the September 2016 public opinion poll discussed in the literature review.

As outlined in Chapter Four, the CNN article used in my analysis was published in September 2016, and only one public opinion survey (Table 4.1) was identified during that approximate timeframe. In short, the survey asks respondents if they approve of vetted Syrian refugees entering the United States. To this, 61% answer *should allow*, 37% answer *should not allow*, and 3% answer *don't know* or had no answer. To compare these results to my collection of online comments, I first excluded the 574 commenters coded as *other*, *possible bot/spam* and *n/a* because their opinions are unclear or they are from outside of the United States. Additionally, the *mixed sentiment/conditional support* comments were divided based on their support for refugees on the condition that they undergo a vetting process; three specifically note their support for vetted refugees, and 46 are presumed to be against this as they mention other requirements that they deem necessary but do not mention vetting. The adjusted breakdown of the relevant 1,005 commenters is provided in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2***Comparison of Social Media Comment Aggregates to Public Opinion Polling*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Number of users***</b>	<b>September 2016 Poll Result</b>
Cosmopolitanism + Sympathetic + Mixed*	736 (73%)	61%
Securitization + Unsympathetic + Mixed**	269 (27%)	37%

## Notes:

\* = Three of the 49 *mixed sentiment/conditional support* comments which were in favor of vetted refugees.

\*\* = 46 of 49 *mixed/conditional comments* that do not express outright support for vetted refugees.

\*\*\*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: CBS News/SSRS—Social Science Research Solutions, September 2016; explanation of results is provided in Table 4.1.

From this comparison, I found that, similar to the CBS News/SSRS opinion poll, a majority of my sample of social media commenters supports vetted Syrian refugees. However, the Facebook commenters are actually more supportive of vetted refugees than those polled by CBS News/SSRS during the approximate period. This could be due to the limitations explained in Chapter Two, and a news article sympathetic to refugees could be drawing readers who share this view, or it could also be attributed to CNN's popularity with liberals, who tend to support more cosmopolitan asylum policies. However, it is important to note that these results are based on the assumption that *sympathetic* commenters support allowing vetted refugees into the country. Hypothetically, if half (119

of 238) of these individuals are actually against this proposal, then the percentages shift to 61% *support* vetted refugees versus 39% *do not support* vetted refugees, which would be more in line with poll results from the same month. If all of them are, then the division becomes 49.5% *support* and 50.4% *do not support*.

Throughout this chapter, I detail my analysis of the remarks of 1,579 individuals and discuss specific comments representing the larger themes contained in my data. I also demonstrate that, with some caveats, online comments can be an adequate tool to study samples of social media public opinion. While they are not representative of the entire national population, they do offer detailed insights into policy debates from individuals who are presumed to be mostly of that population. In the following chapter, I discuss the significance of my findings and provide concluding thoughts.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

This study begins to identify the reasoning behind the public's position on refugees. In my analysis, I found that 1,005 of the 1,579 commenters state clear positions on the issue of resettling Syrian refugees in the United States and, in some cases, more specific policy preferences. Most of their comments contain sentiment that is either cosmopolitan or sympathetic toward Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers. These respondents frequently comment with themes of humanity and a desire to assist an innocent child victimized by conflict. A large number of commenters do not explicitly support refugee resettlement, but do offer sympathetic statements suggesting they are likely to support asylum for displaced Syrians. About a quarter of respondents in the opinion analysis (269 of 1005) are generally against resettling vetted Syrian refugees in the United States, with 55 of 269 securitizing the issue; 168 of 269 oppose resettling Syrian refugees in the United States but do not mention security as a reason, and 46 support limited exceptions, such as child refugees, but disapprove of all others. Concerns over terrorism and violence are recurrent, while many offer blunt rejections of asylum-seekers with little explanation. Overall, 73% of commenters<sup>24</sup> support vetted Syrians and 27% do not support them. These findings are not fully aligned with a public opinion survey during this period; however, they do offer some similarities, discussed later in this chapter. My final chapter discusses these findings and their contribution to the literature and makes suggestions for future research.

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<sup>24</sup> Excluding those coded as *other*, *possible bot/spam*, or *n/a*.

## Discussion of Findings

My analysis reveals that the sentiment contained within my sample of online comments is not a precise reflection of opinion polling during the same month. However, it does mirror the trend in that a majority of social media respondents do appear to favor granting asylum to Syrian refugees rather than opposing it, as Table 5.2 indicates. More significantly, it identifies specific explanations as to why members of the public support or oppose refugee resettlement in the United States. Refugee resettlement policy is shown to be a highly politicized issue, with some commenters parroting the opinions of President Trump's son (either supportively or mockingly) and others using the subject to attack policies that they disagree with or promote their chosen political candidates, ideologies, and parties. The level of politicization was likely affected to some degree by the politicization in the CNN article, which includes reporting on President Obama and Trump Jr.'s stances on refugees and asylum policy.

Furthermore, as the analysis reveals, it is common for individuals to exercise an "extreme version of politicization," as Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde (1998, p. 23) describe it, and securitize the issue. Terroristic threats to society are a top concern for several respondents and motivate opposition to granting asylum. These fears notwithstanding, some commenters still support allowing Syrian refugees to reside in the United States after they have successfully completed a vetting process to verify they do not pose a threat to national interests or safety. Cosmopolitan, de-securitizing narratives are a common response to the alleged refugee threat, typically founded on notions of human decency and respect for people regardless of their national affiliation, as opposed to international treaty obligations to process asylum requests and ensure the well-being of applicants under

consideration for resettlement. Similar narratives are also used when acts of securitization are not present, to support those seeking refuge. I also found that the debates over refugee resettlement are not limited to policy. Users' comments repeatedly conflate policy discussion with discussion of Syrian individuals. While some commenters choose to focus on details of a potential plan to resettle Syrian refugees in the United States, others concentrate more on the individuals by scrutinizing their motives and questioning their status as refugees.

The comparison of opinion polls discussed in Chapter Four and referenced in Appendix B demonstrates that any effect the Daqneesh incident may have had on public perception had evaporated within a matter of weeks. Polls published in the following two months (October-November 2016) reveal diminished support among the American public for Syrian refugees, with the highest level of support being a narrow 51% majority in favor of refugee resettlement (compared to 61% in September 2016).

Regarding my methodology, I found that social media comments are indeed a useful complement to public opinion surveys. As expected, a significant portion of the comments were unconstructive, but they did not hinder my analysis. In terms of sampling, although the comment section of a single article (or even several articles) cannot be used to represent accurately the broader American public, it can be useful for gauging sentiment and studying the intricacies affecting public attitudes. Additionally, in Chapter Two I suggest that the cosmopolitan nature of the CNN article may result in a higher number of these comments, and my analysis did not contradict this. Though this could be attributed to the tone of the article, it could also be a result of more sympathetic public attitudes during

this period. Or, as suggested in Chapter Five, it could be due to the political leanings of CNN's readership.

My analysis of social media public opinion differs from polling-based public opinion studies in that it offers deeper explanations on how certain individuals felt about a particular topic at a point in time. In offering their perspectives, many commenters reveal first where they stand on the issue of Syrian refugee resettlement, and second, why they hold these views. These insights could potentially assist advocates, policymakers, or other stakeholders whose work is influenced by public attitudes or who seek to change public perception.

#### Effects of Case Selection on Results

For my analysis, I chose a CNN story containing graphic images of a Syrian child and published to Facebook two months before a U.S. presidential election. The article's focus (an American child seeking to adopt an endangered Syrian child), publisher (CNN), date of publication (during the midst of the Syrian Civil War and the final months of a U.S. presidential election cycle), platform (Facebook), and the timing of the data scrape from Facebook (more than a year later) all potentially played a role in the resulting user commentary.

Both the timing of the article's publication and the timing of the commentary's extraction from Facebook may have affected my analysis due to potential impact on the themes found in the comments and the available content in the comment section as a whole. The article was published in September 2016, and throughout this month and the month prior there were numerous armed engagements related to the Syrian Civil War,

including airstrikes (Perry & Barrington, 2016) and a chlorine attack (Hume, Khadder, & Naik, 2016), which were responsible for scores of deaths and injuries. And, on September 21, 2016, the day before my chosen article was published, media sources reported an airstrike had killed several international aid workers (Syria Conflict: Air Strike Kills Five Medical Workers, 2016). Within this context, the story of young Syrian child victimized by the conflict may have resonated especially strongly with Western newsreaders. In the days prior to the September 22 CNN article on Daqneesh, Trump Jr.'s "Skittles" comment was also circulating throughout the media (in addition to being referenced in the article itself), and this had a notable impact on the commentary, as well.

As touched on in Chapter Two, after the controversy regarding Russian influence on the platform during the 2016 election cycle, Facebook responded by instituting a number of changes. In addition to improving the functions of the website to marginalize misleading news stories, Facebook initiated new efforts to remove fake accounts. Upon inspecting my data, I found that some users posted responses to comments from individuals whose original comments were no longer present in the comment section; this suggests that the account may have been removed from the website, or that the author may have simply deleted their comment(s). Although a number of commenters engage in arguments and, at times, uncivil discourse, there are fewer instances than I anticipated and a portion of those present appear to have been initiated by comments that were removed (either by Facebook moderators or the authors).

My decision to examine commentary from a single news source also may have affected the sentiments identified in my analysis, due to the ideological leanings of its followers. Hypothetically, a CNN versus Fox comparison may have led to more balanced

user commentary, given that Fox News' audience is more conservative than that of CNN (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Eva Matsa, 2014). My analysis reveals that 73% of commenters favor policies allowing vetted Syrian refugees to enter the United States; if these commenters were aggregated or compared with commenters on a Fox News article, the impact may have been increased numbers of unsympathetic and securitizing commenters.

### Advances to the Literature

My thesis offers new perspectives on social media discourse and public attitudes on the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers. My findings corroborate Tichenor's (2002) historical analysis of migration in the United States, specifically his assertion that debate on the subject often follows "...economic, social, cultural, and national security" (p. 1) themes. This supports Hoffman's (2015) notion that social media discourse does not greatly differ from other forms of discourse, despite presenting a unique form of communication for users. In addition, my thesis offers discursive examples of securitization and cosmopolitan ethics, including the compatriot priority concept discussed in Chapter Three.

The analysis of social media commentary also bolsters the literature on securitization and how the theory can be used to understand public attitudes on refugees and asylum-seekers. My thesis provides insight into the role of the audience and the context of securitizing speech acts, and how these efforts play a role at the individual level of analysis. Specifically, while elite actors are often responsible for securitization efforts, grass-roots level securitizing actors contribute much the same on the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers. The analysis also highlights the relationship between migration, securitization, and the societal sector. In the previous chapter I identified specific instances

of societal insecurity stemming from asylum-seekers, mainly revolving around concerns of terrorism and acts of violence. To a lesser extent, political sector securitization is also present and illustrated through comments about American sovereignty and an alleged threat to the U.S. Constitution by supporters of Sharia Law. Economic securitization, though anticipated, is not largely present in the data.

My findings add to the general Copenhagen School dimensions of negative security and the emphasis on elite actors. As laid out by Boas (2015), this branch of security studies typically examines negative frames of securitization; within the data, this is represented by newsreaders who invoke securitization to exclude Syrian asylum-seekers from resettling in the United States, despite having little evidence to support these views. The statements of President Barack Obama and Donald Trump Jr. were also heavily influential on the comments, showing that elites speech acts (whether cosmopolitan in nature or securitizing) do play a critical role in whether or not the mass public will view an issue as a security issue.

My thesis contributes to the cosmopolitan literature by demonstrating how the philosophy can explain modes of de-securitization in support of refugees. The idea that Syrians' lives are as valuable as Americans' lives, thus obligating the American public to protect them, is exemplified in the data. While few commenters explicitly cite the country's obligation to protect refugees or relevant international treaties, these beliefs are implied through their respect for non-Americans and references to *humans*, *humanity*, and *human values*.

The *compatriot priority* concept discussed by Carens (2013) and others is observed in a new context in this thesis. Specifically, it was illustrated by the multiple occurrences of

“America first” philosophies, such as calls for policymakers to focus on programs for American military veterans or homeless citizens ahead of programs for foreign refugees. My analysis depicts some of the ways it is used by social media commenters to justify the exclusion of refugees without any outward consideration of the circumstances they face in their countries of origin. These findings reinforce Beitz’s (1983) argument that national interests still win out over (what he believes) are solid arguments for cosmopolitanism in the broader immigration debate.

Additionally, the findings in my analysis support Anstead and O’Loughlin’s (2015) proposal to expand the meaning of public opinion to include the attitudes expressed on social media. Comments posted to platforms like Facebook and Twitter are not feasible for assessing levels of support within a population, but they are helpful in making sense of why the mass public may support certain policies over others. This feature allows online commentary to support other public opinion methods, mainly surveys carried out using prescribed methods. Using these methods, my thesis also adds to the literature on refugee resettlement policy, providing information for stakeholders and policymakers on where certain people stand on the issue, or at least where they stood at a particular point in time and how their perspectives were influenced in light of a major news story. Social media public opinion also adds a temporal aspect to the study of public attitudes, providing clues as to how current events and other political phenomena shape individual perspectives.

### Future Research

Subsequent research could address the limitations in my thesis to obtain further insights. For example, in my analysis I rely on one set of comments from a single article

written by CNN, but a future study could use samples of online commentary from two or more news sources (such as Fox and CNN) to gain different insights and balance out the liberal-trending audience of CNN. Though this still would not provide a representative sample of the U.S. population, it may provide increased diversity in opinion. Another option is choosing samples from different points in time to see if and how the discourse changed. In this thesis, I analyzed comments occurring mostly over the same few days and discourse responding to a single article published two months before a major presidential election. Other studies could examine discourse occurring both before and after an election, at the beginning of the campaign season compared to the end of the campaign season, or at multiple points irrespective of political events, to see how the different points in time affect the responses posted by newsreaders. Future research may also benefit by analyzing responses to a news article taking a different position. In Chapter Five, I examine online comments related to an article with a sympathetic and cosmopolitan stance; another approach could involve using an article with a securitizing or unsympathetic tone instead. Using any of these approaches, researchers can gather data on how different contexts and audiences influence discourse and public attitudes conveyed through social media.

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Appendix A: Public Opinion Polls on the Subject of Refugees, June-July 2016

<b>Poll Question</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Notes</b>
“Would you support or oppose the United States taking each of the following actions with respect to Syria?...Accepting Syrian refugees into the United States”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 36 % Support</li> <li>• 60% Oppose</li> <li>• 4% Not sure/Decline</li> </ul>	<p>(Chicago Council on Global Affairs &amp; GfK Knowledge Networks, 2016a)</p> <p>Respondents: National adults (half sample)</p>
“Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all.)...Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 43% Critical</li> <li>• 42% Important but not critical</li> <li>• 15% Not important</li> <li>• *Not sure/Decline</li> </ul>	<p>(Chicago Council on Global Affairs &amp; GfK Knowledge Networks, 2016b)</p> <p>National adults (partial sample)</p> <p>* = less than .5 percent</p>
“In your opinion, would you say that the following actions are always effective, mostly effective, rarely effective, or never effective in combating terrorism?...Limiting the flow of migrants and refugees and increasing border controls”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 23% Always effective</li> <li>• 34% Mostly effective</li> <li>• 33% Rarely effective</li> <li>• 7% Never effective</li> <li>• 3% Not sure/Decline</li> </ul>	<p>(Chicago Council on Global Affairs &amp; GfK Knowledge Networks, 2016c)</p> <p>National adults</p>
“The United States is currently permitting about 10,000 refugees from Syria to enter the United States after a security screening process. Do you think the US should allow more or fewer refugees to enter the country, or is the current number about right?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11% Should allow more refugees</li> <li>• 33% Current level is about right</li> <li>• 53% Should allow fewer refugees</li> <li>• 3% Refused/Not answered</li> </ul>	<p>(Associated Press &amp; GfK Knowledge Networks, 2016a)</p> <p>National adults</p>

<p>“How would you rate the risk that Syrian refugees in the United States might commit acts of religious or political violence in the United States?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21% Extremely high risk</li> <li>• 18% Somewhat high risk</li> <li>• 34% Moderate risk</li> <li>• 18% Somewhat low risk</li> <li>• 6% Extremely low risk</li> <li>• 3% Refused/No answer</li> </ul>	<p>(Associated Press &amp; GfK Knowledge Networks, 2016b)</p> <p>National adults</p>
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Appendix B: Public Opinion Polls on the Subject of Refugees, October-November 2016

<b>Poll Question</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Notes</b>
“Do you think the number of...refugees admitted into the US is too high, too low, or about the right amount?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 57% Too high</li> <li>• 12% Too low</li> <li>• 29% About the right amount</li> <li>• 2% Refused</li> </ul>	<p>(Enns, Schuldt, &amp; GfK Group, 2016)</p> <p>Respondents: National adults (half sample)</p>
“Do you think the US has a responsibility to accept refugees from Syria into the country, or do you think the US does not have a responsibility to do this?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “40% US has a responsibility to accept Syrian refugees”</li> <li>• “54% US does not have a responsibility to accept Syrian refugees”</li> <li>• 6% Don’t know/Refused</li> </ul>	<p>(Pew Research Center &amp; Princeton Survey Research Associates International, &amp; Abt SRBI, 2016a)</p> <p>National adults (half sample)</p>
“Do you support or oppose suspending immigration from “terror prone” regions, even if it means turning away refugees from these regions?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50% Support</li> <li>• 44% Oppose</li> <li>• 6% Don’t know/No answer</li> </ul>	<p>(Quinnipiac University, 2016)</p> <p>National registered voters</p>
“Thinking about the issue of immigration, how important of a goal should each of the following be for immigration policy in the US?...Taking in civilian refugees from countries where people are trying to escape violence and war.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29% Very important</li> <li>• 32% Somewhat important</li> <li>• 21% Not too important</li> <li>• 16% Not at all important</li> <li>• 2% No answer</li> </ul>	<p>(Pew Research Center &amp; Abt SRBI, 2016b)</p> <p>National adults</p>