Victims, burdens, and problems: A thematic analysis of *Le Journal de Montréal* news coverage of Roxham Road

Victimes, fardeaux et problèmes : Une analyse thématique de la couverture médiatique du Chemin Roxham par Le Journal de Montréal

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ABSTRACT

Roxham Road, a rural road in Quebec, was a longtime hotspot for migrants and asylum seekers entering Canada from the United States that the province's news media paid close attention to, until the entry point was closed in March 2023. Scholarly research has identified frames in the coverage of this controversial crossing point between 2017 and 2019, when the number of irregular arrivals was considered a "crisis." This article extends the research to the post-pandemic era, and during a new "crisis," by presenting an inductive thematic analysis of 55 online news articles published in Le Journal de Montréal, the province's most-read newspaper, throughout 2022. The results point to binary coverage that rarely speaks to migrants, and that portrays Roxham as a problem requiring policy-oriented solutions. Although aspects of the coverage remained stable in 2022, temporal and provincial specificities stand out, in particular the importance given to the French language, Quebec politics, and conflicts between the provincial and federal governments.

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RÉSUMÉ

Roxham Road, un chemin de campagne au Québec, a longtemps été un point névralgique pour les migrants et les demandeurs d'asile entrant au Canada depuis les États-Unis, un sujet largement couvert par les médias québécois, jusqu'à la fermeture de ce point d'entrée en mars 2023. Des recherches académiques ont identifié des cadres dans la couverture de ce point de passage controversé entre 2017 et 2019, lorsque le nombre d'arrivées irrégulières était qualifié de « crise ». Cet article prolonge ces recherches dans l'ère post-pandémique et lors d'une nouvelle « crise », en présentant une analyse thématique inductive de 55 articles de presse en ligne publiés dans Le Journal de Montréal, le journal le plus lu de la province, tout au long de l'année 2022. Les résultats révèlent une couverture binaire qui donne rarement la parole aux migrants et qui dépeint Roxham comme un problème nécessitant des solutions politiques. Bien que certains aspects de la couverture soient restés stables en 2022, des spécificités temporelles et provinciales se distinguent, notamment l'importance accordée à la langue française, la politique québécoise et aux conflits entre le gouvernement provincial et fédéral.

INTRODUCTION

> On a des lois qui protègent notre frontière, qui nous protègent, qu'on a votées et qui sont en place. Mais le premier ministre, pour des raisons idéologiques, en raison de son multiculturalisme débridé, il dit : la loi sur l'immigration, moi je ne la respecte pas? Voyons donc! (Bellerose, JdM, January 12, 2023).[1]

This quote, from Frédéric Bastien, founder of the anti-federal group Justice pour le Québec, exemplifies an overarching trend in *Le Journal de Montréal*'s coverage of Roxham Road: characterizing the border, a geographical and legal demarcation line, as something that protects Quebecers against external disruptions. This nationalistic view of the border calls for increased state sovereignty as an answer to cultural insecurity and heightened migratory flows from the Global South.

From 2016 to 2023, Roxham Road, an eight-kilometre transborder path located in Southern Quebec, crystallized tensions around the irregular entry of asylum seekers into Canada that were ultimately reflected in the media. This unofficial entry point was a migration hotspot before Canadian authorities closed it on March 25, 2023, following a revision of the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) between Canada and the United States, which now applies to the entire land border. Fluidity has nonetheless long characterized the two sides of the border (MacDonald & Ayres, 2023). In the 19th century, the Underground Railroad had routes in New England allowing enslaved people to reach Canada (Bourgeon et al., 2017). Franco-Canadians later migrated southward to contribute to New England's industry in the early 20th century (Bourgeon et al., 2017). More recently, residents of the area, interviewed by a *Washington Post* journalist, recalled American resistors to the Vietnam War and Central American conflicts fleeing across the border (Craig, 2018). Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, increased measures to secure the border were taken (MacDonald & Ayres, 2023). Similar to the first Roxham Road migratory "crisis" in 2017, the years 2022 and 2023 saw calls for the "modernization" of the STCA and fixing its so-called "loophole." The March 2023 decision to close Roxham was preceded by the August to October 2022 Quebec provincial election campaign, during which immigration was a much-debated issue (MacDonald & Ayres, 2023). François Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) was re-elected in a landslide, taking 90 of 125 seats, after a first term during which he advocated for more Quebec sovereignty within Canada, especially on matters of immigration, and stressed the importance of the French language and Quebec's distinctiveness as a francophone nation with its own identity in North America. During the election, *Le Journal de Montréal* offered a platform for politicians with more restrictive stances on immigration to express their views, namely François Legault (CAQ), Paul Saint-Pierre Plamondon (Parti Québécois, PQ), and Éric Duhaime (Parti Conservateur du Québec). The present research identified themes in articles about Roxham Road published on the website of *Le Journal de Montréal* in 2022. *Le Journal* is commonly considered to lean toward the right side of the political spectrum. The author considers Roxham Road under both its geographical and human aspects, focusing on how the place and the people crossing here are depicted during a moment of so-called "crisis." The findings are discussed within existing scholarship on Roxham Road and the media portrayal of asylum seekers in Canada, including those pertaining to critical border and migration studies, establishing comparisons that highlight the stability and ruptures in the 2022 coverage of Roxham Road. The discussion of the findings highlights Quebec-specific features, such as the salience of cultural threats, provincial politics, and the ongoing politicization of immigration in the province (Xhardez & Paquet, 2020). Exploratory in nature, the results of this thematic analysis do not intend to draw generalizations on Quebec's media landscape and practices but, rather, hope to identify further research avenues on the media portrayal of asylum seekers in the province, and to open discussions among journalism practitioners.

[1] All translations are from the author, who is a bilingual French speaker. "We have laws that protect our border, that protect us, that we voted for and that are in place. But the Prime Minister, for ideological reasons, because of his unrestrained multiculturalism, says: the immigration law, me, I don't respect it? Come on!"

LITERATURE REVIEW

The situation at Roxham Road has generated growing scholarly interest in the past years.[2] Yet, the size of this academic corpus focusing closely on Roxham Road remains modest. As of August 2024, my scan found just nine peer-reviewed articles specifically using the term "Roxham Road" in publicly available databases.[3] While more may exist, the specific term "Roxham Road" seems to have entered academic research more recently, evolving from a purely geographic feature to a conceptual place. The present review introduces this burgeoning literature—which includes media-oriented approaches—that reflects various scholarly perspectives on Roxham Road. Additional publications on the media portrayal of immigration in Canada and public attitudes toward Roxham Road add context to the analysis.

Roxham Road: An object in the making for journalism

Roxham Road has been scrutinized on different scales and through diverse media: individual immigration discourses on social media publications (French Bourgeois & Esses, 2024); analyses of an immersive virtual reality documentary photography exhibition (Cressman, 2019; Fan, 2022), and; the use of oral histories of refugees and advocacy groups to create a "counter-archive" (Reynolds et al., 2023). Most of the research on Roxham Road has been conducted by scholars in legal studies (Mercier & Rehaag, 2020; Mayrand & Smith-Grégoire, 2018; Plouffe- Malette & La Charité-Harbec, 2024; Arbel 2013; Arbel & Brenner, 2013) and political science (Côté-Boucher et al., 2023; Belkhodja & Xhardez, 2020; Leuprecht, 2019). Belkhodja and Gratton (2022), Perzyna and Bauder (2023), and Duncan and Caidi (2018) delved into the media portrayal of Roxham Road specifically. In their research on citizens mobilized to support asylum seekers, known as the BnotB collective, Belkhodja and Gratton (2022) conducted an inductive analysis of 689 articles (editorials, news, and opinion pieces) published between January 2017 and August 2018 in four Quebec dailies: *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*, *Le Journal de Montréal,* and *the Montreal Gazette*. Their analysis reveals that the collective's "lived border" contrasts sharply with the "imagined border" created by the mainstream media (p. 4). Their findings unveil three main media portrayals: (1) "the border's legitimacy is rarely questioned," while "the legitimacy of asylum seekers is rarely acknowledged" (p. 7); (2) the border as "an object of control and protection," and; (3) the negative consequences for Quebec society of hosting asylum seekers.

Drawing a parallel between the framing of Wet'suwet'en protesters in British Columbia and Roxham Road's irregular asylum seekers, Perzyna and Bauder (2023) used comparative critical discourse analysis, and two theoretical frameworks (settler colonialism and securitization theory) to identify three dominant frames in media coverage of the *Toronto Star* (31 articles) and the *National Post* (31 articles): (1) the rule of law; (2) the common good, and; (3) human rights. Newspaper articles and opinion pieces were considered. Overall, the political alignment of the newspapers was reflected in the tone of the articles, with *The Star* "more likely to express views that were empathetic [. . .] and more likely to critique government actions than *The Post*" (p. 77). Most significantly, they found that both newspapers lacked diverse sources. Voices of irregular asylum seekers tended to be "completely silenced" (p. 7). In the coverage of irregular asylum seekers, spanning over three years, between 2017 and 2019, the authors found that people crossing the border are depicted as defying the rule of law, and therefore criminalized, and noticed an overreliance on the word "illegal" linked to a strong emphasis on crossing statistics that reinforced the criminalization of asylum seekers, who tended to be othered and racialized. Moreover, asylum seekers were seen as threats to the integrity of the immigration system, and economic burdens on the welfare system, exploiting Canada's generosity with so-called "fraudulent," "fake," and "undeserving" claims (p. 86). The human rights frame is almost absent in the *Post*, which favours protectionist measures against irregular asylum seekers, while the *Star* heavily re-

[2] Roxham is also the object of master's theses, although these were not included in this literature review. See Mekerian, 2023; Rinfret, 2022; Senat, 2022; Abba, 2020.

[3] This includes articles published in either French or English that refer to Roxham in their title or summary.

lies on human rights discourse, stressing Canada's moral imperative to keep up with its "humanitarian reputation" (p. 86-87).

Duncan and Caidi (2018), focusing on the concepts of the governmentalities of mobility and truth, analyzed how mass media portrayed irregular migration at the border through a content analysis of 146 news articles published in 2017 by six Canadian outlets (*The Globe and Mail*, CBC News, the *Toronto Star*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *National Post*, and the *Toronto Sun*). The main trend is that "immigration is generally framed . . . as a problem in need of a solution," alongside a "narrative of pressure," a "strong policy emphasis and a privileging of politicians' discourses in the crafting of the narrative," as well as "emphasis on law and order from government actors" (p. 334). The authors argue this coverage reinforces a narrative of humanitarian securitization, partly constructed in opposition to the Trump administration's treatment of migrants on its territory and at its borders (pp. 336-337).

Media portrayal and public attitudes toward asylum seekers in Canada

Previous research on media framing, public attitudes toward refugees, and immigration policy provides an important contextual bedrock for analyzing the coverage of Roxham Road and understanding its blind spots. Most significantly, Lawlor and Tolley (2017), in a 10-year automated content analysis of *The Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Vancouver Sun*'s coverage of immigrants and refugees, found a discursive hierarchy between refugees and economic immigrants, arguing that refugees are "portrayed as less deserving and less beneficial to Canada and more threatening than immigrants" (p. 969). Previous Canadian research on irregular sea border crossings in British Columbia found that the media portrayed arrivals as a "crisis" and an "invasion" underlining the potential threats to the host society that included the spread of infectious diseases and the entry of potential terrorists into Canada (Mahtani & Mountz, 2002). This problematization of refugees by the media and subsequent dehumanization has been found to lead to more negative attitudes (Esses et al. 2013). More generally, the aforementioned findings on media framing align with research conducted in other contexts. In Europe, Gottlob and Boomgaarden's compilation (2020) includes migrants depicted as "'object[s] of control,' 'illegals' or 'victims'" (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Horsti, 2008), "'aliens' or 'intruders'" (Van Gorp, 2005; Wodak, 2008), and "'the cultural other'" (Khosravinik et al., 2012).

Lawlor and Tolley's research (2017), spanning from 2005 to 2014, did not encompass the 2017-2019 "crisis" at Roxham Road. Starting from 2017, Côté-Boucher and colleagues (2023) called into question the framing of Roxham as a "crisis" by recontextualizing the gradual erasure of asylum seekers from the Canadian public sphere since the 1990s. Describing the situation at the border as a crisis "betrays a short-sighted approach to migration policy where agentic asylum seeking is constructed as an extraordinary event that must be dealt with through emergency means, rather than a normal, albeit increasingly politicized, phenomenon for which institutions must be prepared," the authors state (p. 2-3).

Yet, public opinion surveys suggest Roxham Road is mainly considered a "crisis" by Canadians. One Angus Reid survey found that 67% of respondents called the situation a "crisis," and that 65% agreed that "Canada received too many irregular crossers for the country's authorities and service providers to handle" (Angus Reid, 2018).[4] An Ipsos survey found the belief that most refugee claimants are not "genuine" refugees is shared by 47% of Canadians (Ipsos, 2019, in Leuprecht, 2019, p. 26).[5] Contrary to the image of Canada as a generous country, Leuprecht (2019) underlines there is no Canadian "exceptionalism" regarding the acceptance of immigration in the country. Acceptance of the current status quo is based on other factors, including high-skilled and well-educated newcomers' rapid integration into society and

[4] Online survey conducted from July 25 to July 30, 2018. Representative randomized sample of 1,500 Canadian adults. The margin of error is +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20

[5] Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren't refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage of our welfare services."

economic spinoffs (p. 19).

The abovementioned research suggests the media has disproportionately portrayed Roxham Road as a problem in various ways, depicted asylum seekers as a burden, questioned the legitimacy of their claims and sustained a narrative of control and protection, therefore paralleling findings that media portrayals of refugees in Canada contribute to their problematization and dehumanization.

METHOD

This article aims to extend the literature on Roxham Road in the post-pandemic era by examining themes in the coverage of the year 2022 in a Quebec-based outlet. Through an inductive thematic analysis of a corpus of 55 articles, my research provides an overview of the news coverage of Roxham Road in an emblematic Quebec newspaper. The corpus was collected from the Eureka database and *Le Journal de Montréal* website. I used the keyword "Roxham" to search for news articles published on the website of *Le Journal de Montréal* between January 1, 2022, and January 31, 2023. The articles retrieved from the database and the outlet's website were cross-checked on Google News to ensure as complete a dataset as possible.

This research exclusively focuses on news articles. Duplicates, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and any other items that did not fit into the news article category were removed. In news articles, reporters are supposed to present facts neutrally, while columnists are more overt about their opinions. Excluding opinion pieces does not remove biases from the corpus, but rather focuses the analysis on coverage that is supposed to be more informative and trustworthy, according to journalism's standards (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

In total, 221 items were initially retrieved. Following the exclusion phase described above, 166 articles were removed, resulting in a final dataset of 55 articles manually analyzed following an inductive thematic analysis process, with myself, a French speaker from France, as principal coder. The second coder, a journalism professor, reviewed 10% of the corpus in early-stage coding development.

Thematic analysis emerged in psychology and has since been exported to various fields and types of data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The six phases outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020) were followed in an iterative way to identify patterns of meaning within the data: familiarization: initial code generation; initial theme generation; theme review; theme definition; naming, and; report writing. The process of corpus collection allowed me to become familiar with the content of the selected articles. After reading each article multiple times, initial, descriptive codes were established in each article. Initial codes were compared to each other and then systematized across the corpus. From these initial codes, I extracted encompassing themes and sub-themes. Initial themes were then reviewed, refined, and then named and turned into final themes that were ultimately tested by re-reading the articles.

Selecting a publication

Le Journal de Montréal, a tabloid owned by the Québecor Group, commonly considered to lean toward more restrictive positions on immigration, had the highest readership among Quebec's main media outlets in 2021 (Centre d'dtudes sur les médias, 2022). *Le Journal de Montréal* and *Le Journal de Québec* often publish the same articles in both outlets, broadening their dissemination to over 40% of all weekly news readers of Quebec's main dailies in 2021 (Centre d'etudes sur les médias, 2022).

It must be emphasized that *Le Journal*'s coverage is not representative of the entirety of Quebec's media landscape and that generalizations cannot be drawn from this research. In addition to its readership and ownership structure, *Le Journal*'s unique characteristics, such as its tabloid format and distinct tone, may influence its coverage of immigration. As Montreal is located approximately 60 kilometres from Roxham Road, and is a transit and/or destination point for asylum seekers, the geographical proximity may also inform *Le Journal*'s coverage. It can be noted that *Le Journal* has a history of reporting on Roxham Road episodically during moments of "crisis." It extensively reported on heightened border crossings in August 2017. The number of articles published stands out

compared to other Quebec outlets (Belkhodja & Gratton, 2022).

The year 2022 set a new record in the history of border crossings in Canada: 92,175 asylum seekers crossed the border, regularly and irregularly, 42% of whom logged their claim at Roxham Road (Schué, Radio-Canada, January 21, 2023), and Quebec accounted for 98% of all irregular entries into Canada (Gagnon, JdM, November 20, 2022). This record of arrivals contrasts with lower figures in 2020-2021 due to COVID-19 border closures. The time frame includes the October Quebec provincial elections, which generated political commentaries on the situation at Roxham Road. January 31, 2023, corresponds to the end of a month of coverage on Fritznel Richard, a Haitian migrant who died of exposure in December 2022 while attempting to cross the border at Roxham Road into the United States.

FINDINGS

This section presents the three main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis and their respective sub-themes: (1) a perceived problem; (2) proposed solutions, and; (3) divergent narratives. The analyzed coverage of Roxham Road appeared to be unbalanced. Theme 1 (perceived problem) was the most prominent among the corpus, followed by Theme 2 (proposed solutions), while Theme 3 (divergent narratives) constituted a clear minority.

Main Theme 1: A perceived problem

The coverage we examined of Roxham Road is often binary. The articles focus either on the problems Roxham Road causes in Quebec, or on the challenges asylum seekers face and the solutions proposed to fix the situation. Roxham's impacts on the province belong to the notions of burden and danger. The line between these two concepts is thin. The burden encompasses the frustration expressed regarding the cost asylum seekers represent, while the danger implies a perceived threat to the integrity of Quebec society.

Sub-theme 1.1: Impacts on Quebec

Large parts of the coverage portray Roxham Road as a prominent burden because of the costs and resources associated with hosting asylum seekers, most prominently emergency housing, but also social services, education, health, and legal assistance. *Le Journal* reporting echoed the wider housing crisis the province faces. Journalists provided detailed information on refugees' housing conditions in emergency shelters, pointing out that the migrants were being "fed and housed on the province's dime" (Richer, JdM, December 19, 2022).

Concerns around the burden asylum seekers represent are voiced by different actors, including the Quebec government, the Parti Québécois (PQ), and community groups that help refugees. Quebec's Premier François Legault is quoted in *Le Journal* claiming that the province's *capacités d'accueil* has reached their maximum, and that further asylum seekers represents an insurmountable challenge. The coverage includes quotes from ministers in the CAQ cabinet, who maintain the same discourse. PQ parliamentary leader Joël Arseneau is quoted denouncing the fact that Quebec has failed to host asylum seekers with dignity. The articles include interviews and comments by community groups that claim to have reached their capacity. Régine Laurent, an influential former nurse and frequent analyst featured on TVA— which is owned by Quebecor—voices these concerns and urges the federal and provincial governments to act.

The idea that Quebec's capacities are at their maximum is reinforced by the source quotes in *Le Journal*'s coverage stating the province has already been generous enough toward asylum seekers. The tension is exacerbated by the fact that migrants who arrived at Roxham Road may not be considered genuine political asylum claimants, but rather economic migrants. This view that they are "bogus" refugees is expressed by François Legault (Gagnon, JdM, November 19, 2022).

The situation is also portrayed as unfair for Quebec, which is described as disproportionately impacted by the irregular migration phenomenon compared to other Canadian provinces. *Le Journal* reported on the views of PQ leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon and his predecessor Jean-

François Lisée, who both argued that Quebec is a victim of Ottawa's lack of will to alleviate the burden. Another article specifically mentioned the belief that Justin Trudeau's 2017 tweet, in which he welcomed to Canada "those fleeing persecution, terror and war," is the cause for the rising border crossing figures (Richer, *Réfugiés,* JdM, December 3, 2022).

The coverage indicates Roxham Road is perceived as a danger to Quebec in other ways, including security, crime, health, and the future of the French language. Articles repeatedly used the word "illegal" to refer to border crossings and asylum seekers, emphasized the rising crossing figures, used the image of Quebec being "submerged" (Richer, *Réfugiés,* JdM, December 3, 2022), or referred to Eric Duhaime asking to "close the tap" (Moalla, JDM, September 27, 2022), all of which implied feelings of danger and invasion. The coverage gives the overall impression that the situation is out of control. Crossing figures and statistics are also heavily emphasized, reinforced by descriptions of Roxham Road as a popular, easy-to-cross border that is advertised as such worldwide.

Among security matters, health is cited as a source of concern. Articles mention that Roxham Road was closed for a part of the COVID-19 pandemic. One article reports that migrants tested positive for the virus, including the omicron variant, and were quarantined. Another recalls Quebec's request to close Roxham Road due to rising COVID-19 cases. Feelings of danger were also present in two crime-related stories published in *Le Journal* that involved alleged U.S.-based criminals escaping the United States by entering Canada through Roxham Road. Another article, in which a journalist interviewed a local independent candidate in the 2022 provincial election, drew a parallel between Roxham Road and the perceived rise of criminality in Montreal:

> Dans ceux qui viennent par le chemin Roxham il y a des gens bien, mais il y en a qui viennent, ils montent les gants [sic; gangs], on les voit à Montréal, ça tire maintenant dans les McDo, dans les parcs. (Lavoie, JdM, September 25, 2022).[6]

Another article features an interview with Frédéric Bastien, founder of Justice pour le Québec, an anti-federal group that brands itself as "defending Quebec's rights." Bastien criticizes the federal government, arguing that laws protect Canada's borders and, in turn, protect Canadians (Bellerose, JdM, January 12, 2023).

The situation at Roxham Road is also described as threatening the integrity of Quebec as a francophone nation. Articles reported concerns that the arrival of asylum seekers represents a challenge in terms of francization[7] and integration. The coverage indicates these concerns by quoting Legault, government members, and PQ politicians. In some cases, francization concerns expressed by Quebec political actors are directed at the federal government. The opposition between Quebec and Ottawa is pointed out in terms of values. Canadian multiculturalism is perceived as in opposition to Quebec's need to retain its specific francophone identity by a member of the PQ (Lajoie, May 10, 2022, JdM). One article explains these concerns are shared among the majority of Quebecers. Citing a survey,[8] it claims Quebecers think non-Francophone immigration is the main threat to the French language. Francization challenges were sometimes linked to more general debates on immigration targets, a major theme of the 2022 Quebec provincial elections.

Sub-theme 1.2: Impacts on asylum seekers

The coverage describes Roxham Road and its consequences as impacting asylum seekers negatively throughout their journey to Canada. Coverage of asylum seekers' lived experiences, whether inside or outside Canada, focuses on lack of agency, destitution and victimization.

Although most migrants' journeys start from

[6] "Some of the people who arrive from Roxham Road are good people, but there are some who arrive, and they establish gangs, you see them in Montreal, they're shooting now in McDonald's, in the parks."

[7] "The process of making or becoming French-speaking" (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.).

[8] Léger survey, May 2022. *Le Journal* did not provide other information or hyperlinks to identify the survey. A CTV News Montreal (2022) article mentioning the same survey provided more information on the source: 1003 Quebecers able to express themselves in French and English, data collected from May 4, 2022, to May 7, 2022.

their home countries outside of North America, most coverage of Roxham Road focuses narrowly on crossing conditions at the U.S.-Canada border and living conditions for asylum seekers in Canada. The situation asylum seekers face in their home country is only briefly described in some articles. The reasons cited for departure are violence, threats, discrimination, religious persecution, and economic destitution. The most present country of origin in the coverage is Haiti. One article noted that a third of people lodging a claim after entering Canada irregularly in 2022 were Haitian. There are also a few references to other countries of origin including Colombia, Mexico and Nigeria.

Le Journal's coverage uses themes of violence and danger to describe the asylum seekers' journey to Roxham. When covering the Darien Gap, a transborder jungle region located between Colombia and Panama, *Le Journal* included detailed first-person accounts of threats, including wild animals, organized crime, murder and sexual crimes, in a long-form report titled "La route des migrants" (Therriault & Dugas Bourdon, JdM, September 17, 2022).[9] In contrast to the migrants' dangerous journey, the article describes living in Canada as a dream that motivates them to endure these hardships. The next goal in the asylum seekers' journey is to cross the Canadian border at Roxham Road. *Le Journal* often describes this entry point as "safe" and "easy."

Articles report on human smuggling as a problem occurring at the border. Asylum seekers are depicted as victims of this lucrative business. Interestingly, while much of the coverage presents crossings from the United States to Canada as safe, the same cannot be said for articles that report on migrants crossing in the other direction, from Canada to the United States. These articles instead portray north-to-south border crossings as more dangerous due to weather conditions during the winter, including snow, snowstorms, freezing temperatures, hypothermia and other cold-related injuries. Detailed examples that encompass such dangers can be found in accounts of the death of Fritznel Richard, a Haitian asylum seeker who died in December 2022 when crossing into the United States. One article explains why being an asylum seeker in Canada contributed to Richard's choice to cross at an irregular point, since he could not leave Canada before obtaining refugee status. Using Roxham Road to cross from Canada to the United States is perceived as a rising trend by residents of the area. The articles mainly relate the phenomenon to personal choices and circumstances, such as people trying to reunite with their families in the United States.

Finally, *Le Journal* reports on the hardships asylum seekers face inside Canada. These accounts focus on the difficulties of finding suitable accommodation in the context of the housing crisis in Montreal, and gaining access to public services. They also mention refugees' vulnerability to scams. A main hardship is the waiting time to receive a work permit and get asylum claims processed. Asylum seekers are depicted as victims of Ottawa's slow bureaucracy and mismanagement of the situation. Many articles mention these waiting times, sometimes up to two years, and the consequences of being undocumented. The coverage also notes that asylum seekers suffer separation from their families, especially children, for multiple years. The death of Fritznel Richard in December 2022 shed light on this reality, as the man was trying to reunite with his wife and toddler living in Florida.

Main Theme 2: Proposed solutions

The solutions covered in *Le Journal* to "fix" Roxham Road can be divided into two categories: short-term crisis management and long-term diplomatic actions. Both solutions are portrayed as sources of tensions between Quebec and Ottawa.

Sub-theme 2.1: Crisis management

The coverage emphasizes the conflicts between the federal and provincial governments over the management of Roxham Road and asylum seekers. Politicians accuse the federal government of wanting to make the situation permanent and promote irregular crossings because of the federal immigration processing facilities installed at Roxham Road. Legault and St-Pierre Plamondon are quoted asking for Roxham Road to be closed,

[9] "La Route des Migrants" did not focus exclusively on stories related to Roxham Road. However, for the purposes of this study, only excerpts referring directly to Roxham Road were included in the analysis.

which Trudeau counters by stating that closing the entry point will only divert migratory flow to other parts of the border and make the situation more dangerous for asylum seekers. Trudeau, Liberal MPs and ministers stress Canada's obligations regarding asylum seekers' rights and the capacity to perform security screenings at Roxham as reasons for not shutting it down before reaching a diplomatic solution with the United States.

One element in the coverage crystallized this Quebec/Ottawa conflict: the $500 million the federal government invested at Roxham Road to host asylum seekers and organize services in the area. This topic and dollar amount, first reported on by Radio-Canada, was repeatedly included in *Le Journal*'s coverage, in addition to suspicion of corruption and conflict of interest. *Le Journal*'s coverage doubled down on these questions by focusing on how a local campsite owner, who donated money to the Liberal Party of Canada, was awarded a $28 million federal contract to host migrants, which raised questions of a potential conflict of interest. Articles also reported on the heated debates on Parliament Hill between the Liberals and opposition parties.

Criticism and tensions between Ottawa and Quebec contrast with moments of negotiation between Justin Trudeau and François Legault about federal money and resource transfers to Quebec. Paul St-Pierre Plamondon's January 2023 comments about the potential rise of extremist political movements in Quebec were the source of a controversy reported in *Le Journal*. The PQ leader said that closing Roxham Road would be a solution to avoid the rise of radical anti-migrant movements and, therefore, preserve social peace. St-Pierre Plamondon used the situation to play up the PQ's pro-Quebec independence agenda. He criticized Legault on the idea that the situation at Roxham Road is supposedly the consequence of federalism and the CAQ's failure to push Quebec's interests within Canada.

Another aspect of the strategy to manage the "crisis" is to monitor the border and control asylum seekers. References to the police, whether provincial or federal, and the border authorities' involvement, are a common trend in the coverage. The articles do not always describe these actors' specific missions, but instead illustrate that police forces and authorities are playing a role in managing the situation. Examples show that the RCMP intercepts and rescues migrants. Depictions of deported migrants and alleged criminals sent back to the United States contrast with more "deserving" migrants, such as the case of a Haitian healthcare worker who faced deportation threats while he was a "guardian angel" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the articles also scrutinize the police for failing to control crossings and smuggling.

Le Journal's coverage often invokes the federal government's failure to tackle irregular crossings. The article titled "Saint-Armand: un deuxième chemin Roxham chez lui" is particularly critical of the RCMP's inaction to prevent and stop asylum seekers from crossing the border:

> Malgré ses appels répétés à la Gendarmerie royale du Canada (GRC) et au Service des douanes et de la protection des frontières—les deux entités qui gèrent la frontière canado-américaine—personne ne semble vouloir prendre la situation en main. (Giguère, JdM, September 24, 2022)[10]

Another story also criticizes the federal government for allegedly letting unsuccessful asylum claimants vanish into thin air while they were supposed to be deported. Another measure to control the situation, according to Eric Duhmaine, would be to build a "wall", which is an option that resonates with Donald Trump's wall at the U.S.-Mexico border. The analysis found that Roxham Road is sometimes made part of wider discussions on the question of selecting immigrants, especially in the context of the 2022 provincial elections. Duhaime has branded himself as a defender of "legal" immigration, in opposition to "illegal" and "disorganized" immigration originating from Roxham Road.

Sub-theme 2.2: Diplomacy

The coverage presents renegotiating the STCA with the United States as a long-term solution to ending crossings at Roxham Road, as demonstrated in quotes from both Justin Trudeau and François

[10] Despite repeated calls to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Customs and Border Protection - the two entities that manage the Canada-U.S. border - no one seems willing to take the situation in hand."

Legault. As articles note, all political parties, federally and provincially, agree on the necessity to revise the STCA, stressing the importance of regular, legal, and orderly immigration. The federal NDP and Bloc Québécois criticize the federal government's perceived lack of willingness to revise the STCA. They ask for its immediate suspension as a perceived solution to a diplomatic dead-end.

Negotiations with the United States are seen as a slow quest toward a desirable outcome. *Le Journal* coverage places special emphasis on this slowness and the federal government's unwillingness to share information about the negotiations. "Modernizing" the agreement is presented as a necessity because it no longer fits the realities of migration at the border.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit in October 2022, and President Joe Biden's planned visit to Canada in March 2023, sparked hopes an agreement had been reached. Again, federal and provincial politicians hoped that an agreement would be announced. Trudeau tempered these hopes, saying there would be no announcement during the visit.

Main Theme 3: Divergent Narratives

Sub-theme 3.1: Opportunity

Looking beyond the problem/solutions dichotomy, coverage of Roxham Road includes themes of migrants as an opportunity for the economy, provided they are able and allowed to join the workforce. This idea is present in *Le Journal* and is voiced by a wide range of actors, including the Liberal Party of Quebec, community groups, business owners, and asylum seekers themselves.

Le Journal reported on the specific case of the restaurant sector wishing to recruit more asylum seekers in non-specialized jobs. The following quote illustrates the clear link between asylum seekers and the labour shortage:

> Les restaurateurs se désolent du fait que des dizaines de milliers de demandeurs de statut réfugié n'aient pu être mis à contribution pour réduire leurs besoins criants en matière main-d'œuvre. (Richer, *Chemin*, JdM, December 3, 2022)[11]

References to Roxham Road were intertwined with the issues of labour shortages and immigration quotas. This can be linked with the debates on these questions that occurred in 2022 and culminated during the Quebec provincial election that same year. The opportunity theme is also associated with criticism of work permit processing delays by Ottawa. Community groups interviewed said they are concerned with these delays, as they force asylum seekers to remain in poverty or opt for the black market. The opportunity discourse in the articles is reinforced by instances of empathy towards certain hardworking and "deserving" asylum seekers who are unfairly treated by bureaucracy.

Sub-theme 3.2: Victims deserving sympathy

An underlying message of sympathy is sometimes expressed toward those facing hardships in *Le Journal* articles. Sympathetic coverage is more present in articles focusing on individual stories, rather than general accounts of migration. Narratives expressing sympathy tend to humanize asylum seekers, for instance, through references to their families living abroad and elements of their personal lives that could make their stories more unique or relatable. However, the line between sympathy, pity, and victimization is thin. Expressions of sympathy can reinforce the image of migrants as helpless. The coverage of the death of Fritznel Richard offered examples of more sympathetic coverage. *Le Journal* reported in detail on the course of events that led to his death in the wooded area around Roxham Road using the tone of a tragedy. It emphasized that Richard was the alleged victim of a smuggler who drove him to Roxham Road despite a snowstorm. *Le Journal* interviewed Richard's mourning widow, interviewed neighbours at Roxham Road, some of whom expressed incomprehension and pity, and obtained a reaction from Stéphanie Valois, president of the Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association, expressing her empathy:

> On peut comprendre [M. Richard de vouloir retrouver sa famille], exprime Me Valois. Quand on le rapporte à nous, d'être

[11] "Restaurant owners are disappointed that tens of thousands of refugee claimants could not be put to work to alleviate their pressing labour needs."

> séparé de son enfant pendant 3 ou 4 ans, ça n'a pas de sens. On ne peut pas imaginer ça.
>
> (Faucher, JdM, January 8, 2023)[12]

DISCUSSION

The inductive thematic analysis of 55 articles revealed that, overall, Roxham Road is discussed in a binary way. News articles overwhelmingly concentrate on defining Roxham Road as a problem (Theme 1) that requires policy-oriented solutions (Theme 2). Divergent narratives (Theme 3) that do not fit into these two categories only constitute a clear minority of the coverage. The following section contrasts these findings with previous works on the coverage of Roxham Road, focusing on shared trends as well as differences induced by the temporality and scope of the study.

Stability in coverage

Past literature on Roxham Road has identified prominent features of the coverage that were noted in this study, too. First, as this study concludes, previous studies have found *Le Journal de Montréal*'s Roxham Road coverage employs a problem/solution dichotomy that displays few alternative narratives. In their examination of the 2017 coverage, for example, Duncan and Caidi (2018) noticed this binary discussion, stating that "migration is generally framed (across the publications examined) as a problem in need of a solution" (p. 334). The construction of Roxham Road as a political problem therefore calls for policy-oriented solutions like heightened security and control at the border, and reforming the STCA through discussions with the United States.

Second, my study found little change in the mostly negative *Le Journal* coverage revolving around the idea that asylum seekers are a burden for Quebec society. This is reminiscent of what Duncan and Caidi (2018) call a "narrative of pressure," or Côté-Boucher and colleagues' (2023) criticism of the "crisis framing" of irregular border crossings. *Le Journal*'s choices may be linked to commercial interests. As Esses and colleagues (2013) underline, negative crisis coverage may be considered more newsworthy by journalists (Vos & Shoemaker, 2009) and favoured by the audience (Soroka & McAdams, 2010). The widespread use of the word "illegal" as well as the widespread emphasis on data about crossings and the focus on political clashes reinforce the impression of a "crisis" at the border. Perzyna and Bauder (2023) noticed how the word "illegal" and statistics can sometimes be combined and used in the coverage of Roxham Road to reinforce "the criminality of irregular asylum seekers by emphasizing the scope of the 'problem'" (p. 85). The authors underline that while these accounts portray irregular crossings as "illegal," crossing the border to ask for asylum cannot be considered illegal under the 1951 Geneva Convention, "so long as [refugees] present themselves without delay to the authorities" (p. 84).

The widespread reliance on politicians' statements constitutes another point of convergence with previous studies. The overrepresentation of Themes 1 and 2, which as "a perceived problem" and "proposed solutions" may be linked to this trend. Belkhodja and Gratton (2022) noticed that media discourse on Roxham Road simplistically portrays the border as a "tool for control and protection" in a way that is detached from the inherent physical limitations of such space. As Duncan and Caidi (2018) note, focusing on these statements and policy-oriented reporting allows political actors to shape the narrative on Roxham Road. In their study, this manifested through a focus on law and order and a message of control that leans towards humanitarian securitization: the maintenance of national sovereignty and domestic security while projecting a message of openness. Humanitarian securitization can be witnessed among political actors who argue that reforming the STCA will promote regular, orderly and safe migrations, and protect the integrity and fairness of the immigration system in Canada. In turn, such policy-oriented coverage leaves little space for the expression of migrants' (and their supporters) voices and perspectives.

My analysis found that the expression of sympathy towards asylum seekers is present in only a thin part of the corpus. The emphasis on figures may contribute to further dehumanizing the peo-

[12] "We can understand [Mr. Richard's wish to be reunited with his family], says Me Valois. When it's reported to us, being separated from your child for 3 or 4 years doesn't make sense. We can't imagine that."

ple behind the numbers and reinforces the impression of a heterogeneous group, while displacement is experienced in diverse ways. The articles that refer to individual cases tend to promote a miserable image of asylum seekers as victims impacted by violence and destitution, with a lack of agency. On the contrary, scholars insist on the necessity to go beyond the so-called "crisis" narrative and broaden the perspectives on Roxham Road. For instance, Duncan and Caidi (2018) argue that the border can be conceptualized as a space of migrant resistance to state power. Belkhodja and Gratton (2022) showcase the forms of solidarity at the border. Reynolds and colleagues (2023), drawing on interviews with asylum seekers who crossed the U.S.-Canada border, argue that counter-archiving the lived experiences of migrants "help[s] to contest state-directed narratives including of migration as a "crisis," of the need for borders to be further securitized, and of states' generous humanitarianism towards a select few" (Reynolds et al., 2013, p. 1199).

Temporal and provincial specificities

Although the present study shares similarities with previous research, the geographical and temporal scopes differ in part, which extends the analysis to the pandemic context and refocuses on Quebec. The corpus, focusing on a single Quebec outlet, differs from Perzyna and Bauder (2023), who analyzed Anglo-Canadian legacy media, and in part from Duncan and Caidi (2018), who included Quebec anglophone publications, the *Montreal Gazette* and some CBC Montreal articles, in their studies of Roxham Road.

"Crises" at the border have been the focus of previous studies. All included the year 2017, which witnessed unprecedented crossings following the election of American President Donald Trump. The present study extends the analysis to a new "crisis" after Roxham Road reopened in November 2021. The Quebec political context changed between 2017 and 2022. François Legault was elected Premier of Quebec in October 2018 with an agenda pushing for increased Quebec sovereignty within the Canadian federation, and asserting a more exclusionary definition of Quebec national identity. This analysis, like previous ones, demonstrates that asylum seekers are portrayed as burdens on the host society's resources. However, cultural and linguistic threats are particularly salient features in comparison with previous studies focusing on Roxham Road. This particularity in *Le Journal* is not surprising, considering that the French language is one of its core topics. Le Bomin (2019) noticed that topics concerning similar issues around the integration and francization of Syrian refugees are significantly more present in *Le Journal de Montréal* than in *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*. Discussions around the French language are ongoing in Quebec. However, the 2022 provincial elections debate may have given a particular media platform for the expression of language threats in the political discourse. Further work is necessary to determine how *Le Journal*'s coverage may contribute to the othering of asylum seekers, a trend that Perzyna and Bauder (2023) have observed in their analysis of the *National Post* and the *Toronto Star* and that Esses and colleagues (2013) have firmly warned against the potential impacts on audiences.

Additionally, the emphasis on political disagreements over the management of asylum seekers and the situation at Roxham Road, as well as the construction of Roxham as a political problem in the analyzed coverage, can be interpreted as a broader symptom of the growing politicization of immigration in Quebec, a phenomenon that is reflected in and amplified by the media. Paquet and Xhardez (2020), drawing on Van der Brug and colleagues' definition of politicization as "the rising salience of immigration in political life" (2015), relate this trend to the advent of the CAQ in 2012, a party that imposed relatively more restrictive stances on immigration in the political debate, used immigration to make political gains and promote its agenda.

On another scale, previous studies of Roxham Road coverage have emphasized the prevalence of a strong discursive opposition between Trudeau's Canada and Trump's United States in regard to the treatment of irregular migrants (Perzyna & Bauder, 2023; Caidi & Duncan, 2018). The tense political climate between the two countries is reflected in Trump's "Muslim Ban" which contrasts with Trudeau's tweet welcoming to Canada "those fleeing persecution, terror & war" (Trudeau, 2017). Duncan and Caidi (2018) note the cover-

age strongly focuses on American politics during the first eight months of 2017. This is not the case in the analyzed corpus. This is at least in part because bilateral relations appear to be less conflictual since the election of Joe Biden. The coverage of the United States shifted from domestic politics to bilateral relations and discussions around the STCA's renegotiation. In addition, *Le Journal* is much more heavily focused on provincial politics, especially in the context of the 2022 Quebec elections, which likely contributes to the lessened emphasis on the United States in the coverage examined for this study. Conflict is presented as mainly a provincial-federal relations issue, inherent to the fact that border control and refugee selection and determination are federal jurisdictions over which Quebec has little control while the province manages the on-the-ground consequences of hosting asylum seekers.

Other elements specific to pandemic and post-pandemic times can be witnessed in the analyzed coverage. Labour shortages, accentuated by the pandemic economic disturbances and then recovery, are salient features of the "opportunity" sub-theme. This sub-theme may be explained by the context of the post-pandemic recovery, where the situation may have increased asylum seekers' desirability despite not being economic migrants per se (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Media coverage of the 2022 provincial elections gave a platform for politicians to voice this perspective. This coverage turns a "problem" into an opportunity and sharply contrasts with perceptions of asylum seekers as "economic threats" to the welfare system (Perzyna & Bauder, 2023, 88) that appeared in a much more systematic way in the rest of the analyzed corpus. Still, this vision is based on the conflation of refugees with economic immigrants.

CONCLUSION

As this study indicates, the voices most concerned with Roxham Road–the asylum seekers–are relegated to the periphery of the coverage. The debate is contained within a problem/solution dichotomy that displays very few alternatives. Negativity dominates much of the coverage that focuses on matters of politics and conflict. Asylum seekers are perceived as either burdens or threats to Quebec. When possible, solutions are discussed in the coverage, but they rarely include asylum seekers' viewpoints and, rather, voice the governments' necessity of strengthening the border and tackling rising numbers of border-crossers. Renegotiating the STCA is seen as a desirable diplomatic solution. Few divergent narratives exist to balance the coverage. They focus on the economic opportunity asylum seekers represent and few display sympathy toward them.

Due to the scope of the analyzed corpus, the results only constitute a part of the wider picture and may not be generalized to the Quebec media landscape. Extending the study to other outlets, varying in types, format and target audiences, could broaden media perspectives on the topic. The analyzed time frame excludes milestones that subsequently occurred, including the meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the revision of the STCA, and Roxham's closure on March 25, 2023, that would likely have influenced the coverage's themes. However, the research contributes to mapping out the complex realities and dimensions of Roxham Road's coverage. The purpose of this research is to look for patterns in the analyzed corpus. Through them, ethical questions may emerge and stimulate scholars and practitioners to further reflect on the portrayal of asylum seekers in Quebec media. The province's media landscape is not monolithic. It is in constant evolution, with media startups emerging and covering refugee stories using more diverse perspectives than those highlighted in this article, including a focus on human rights and the complex, global ramifications of migrations. Among them, dialogue journalism, as exemplified in *La Converse* in Montreal, may constitute an innovative approach to explore due to its emphasis on local community-driven newsmaking.

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