

Click'd: Local Facebook page raises concerns about refugees without getting ugly

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First, a quick lesson in journalism. What you're reading right now is a column — specifically, a column about social media and internet culture. A column is a regularly occurring piece of writing in which an author expresses an opinion. Unlike an editorial, a column does not express the position of a newspaper as a whole. And unlike a news article, a column does not objectively report on hard news stories. I can handle being called a “total liberal moron,” but I can't abide people's failure to differentiate between reported news and commentary. Know your terms, folks.

Moving on...

Last week I explored the uglier side of the Rutland's refugee debate. I understandably struck a nerve among those who felt I had unfairly characterized all people opposed to the issue as bigots by calling out the bigotry I discovered on the two local Facebook groups, Don't Refugee Rutland and Opposed to Rutland Refugees.

Let's get something straight. Much of what I found on those pages was the definition of bigotry — treating members of a racial or ethnic group with hatred or intolerance. This type of language isn't “real talk” or “telling it like it is” or any other slippery euphemism people like to use to justify their prejudices. It was blatant, irrational Islamophobia. By calling it out, I was not shutting down the conversation or stifling anyone's freedom to speech. I never said people can't say these things. In fact, I explicitly acknowledged that freedom.

Still, some argued that by writing critically about these groups, I had revealed my own prejudice — that, pointing out bigotry, was a form of bigotry itself. Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan was the victim of a similar attack this week when he called Donald Trump's comments about federal Judge Gonzalo Curiel's Mexican heritage racist. In response, a Trump surrogate countered that, by calling Trump's comment racist, it was, in fact, Ryan who was the racist.

This is a transparent rhetorical trick that attempts to excuse bigotry by deflecting the critique. If someone says, “All Muslims are terrorists,” and I say, “That's a bigoted statement,” I'm not the intolerant one; the statement is objectively bigoted and empirically false.

To be fair, one could argue that subtler brand of intolerance is at work within Rutland's pro-refugee faction. There are some strident individuals, who are quick to dismiss all the opposition

as uneducated or bigoted. (For the record, I will be doing an analysis of the Rutland Welcomes Facebook group in an upcoming column.) But while both sides have used unfortunate rhetoric, to assert they are the same creates a false equivalency. Criticizing bigoted language is not the same as calling all Muslims terrorists, rapists and pedophiles.

As I noted last week, not all those in opposition have chosen to express themselves with such hateful rhetoric. Rutland First is one such example. The group, which has been circulating a petition to put the refugee issue to a city-wide vote, has been visible and vocal both on social media with a Facebook page and in various peaceful demonstrations around the city. They have also maintained a level of professionalism and civility lacking from the two previous Facebook groups I profiled.

Below is a brief rundown of Rutland First's page, including examples of the content being shared and news sources from which they are getting information and forming opinions.

Page: Rutland First

Likes (members): 259 (as of 6/9/16)

Sample content

Graphs, tables and infographics detailing resettlement costs, refugee demographics, etc.; links to articles about other cities' refugee experiences; videos of Rutland City Board of Aldermen meetings as well as a Rutland Herald video interview with Matt Howland, a city resident who's been pressing the Board of Aldermen for more information about resettlement.

Sample sources

(Note: not all the data posted was properly sourced or attributed, and was occasionally presented absent of context, though much of it appeared to be from the Center for Immigration Studies.)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: A U.N. program designed to support refugee repatriation, integration and resettlement.

New English Review: An online magazine with a literary slant and critical eye toward Islam.

The one article posted from this site is actually a very interesting interview with a journalist about Somali refugees in Tennessee (bit.ly/ner-somalia). However, there are a lot of cultural, social and economic differences between Somalia and Syria so it's difficult to use this case as an example of what Rutland is to expect.

Center for Immigration Studies: A self-professed “non-partisan,” “pro-immigrant, low-immigration,” think tank, whose stated mission is, “providing immigration policymakers, the academic community, news media, and concerned citizens with reliable information about the

social, economic, environmental, security, and fiscal consequences of legal and illegal immigration into the United States.” The Wall Street Journal has criticized the group and its co-founder John Tanton for using data to hide its nativist, anti-immigration agenda. The Southern Poverty Law Center website features a lengthy piece on Tanton and CIS, which argues the group is less independent than they'd have people believe (bit.ly/splc-tanton). The libertarian Cato Institute also took CIS to task last year for flawed methodology used in a report on welfare use among immigrants (bit.ly/cato-cis)

Still, CIS has done a decent job of presenting itself as nonpartisan — indeed, it is regularly cited by mainstream media outlets — so it's likely Rutland First isn't even aware of CIS's less than noble pedigree

NumbersUSA: A moderate, “low-immigration” organization, which professes to be firmly against any intolerance to immigrants. Despite ties to Tanton, even the SPLC concedes the group does not promote extremist views.

Vermont Watchdog: A project of the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, a nonprofit news service. VW is part of Watchdog.org, a well-intentioned national network of conservative websites that report on local and state government.

Center for Security Policy: A conservative think tank run by former Reagan White House official Frank Gaffney, a polarizing political figure prone to anti-Muslim conspiracy theories. The group has been criticized by Democrats and Republicans alike for its extremist positions, and has garnered criticism from the Southern Poverty Law Center, Anti-Defamation League and the Bridge Initiative (an Islamophobia research project at Georgetown University) for its extremist positions. In 2012, Gaffney accused Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin of being a secret member of the Muslim Brotherhood — a claim which was denounced by Republicans, including John McCain and John Boehner. For more about the CSP, check out this BBC article, which explores the group in greater detail (bit.ly/bbc-csp).

Overall, the tenor of the discussion on the Rutland First Facebook page has been grounded and respectful. Commenters have largely stuck to reasonable concerns — mostly about the cost of hosting refugees — and avoided bigoted language. Yes, some of the sources cited above are problematic. The group's affiliation with right-wing conspiracy theorist James Simpson, as documented in the June 6 edition of the Herald, is also troubling (bit.ly/herald-0606). However, none of that extremist rhetoric has found its way into public discussion on the page.

Rutland First proves that a civil conversation about opposition to refugee resettlement is possible. That civility was also on display at Monday's Rutland City Board of Aldermen meeting where several individuals spoke up to say they had questions about the resettlement process they wanted answered, but would ultimately welcome the refugees when they did arrive.

The moderate tone of Rutland First is a refreshing counterbalance to the bad behavior I've seen in other corners of social media. Hopefully, the group will maintain such thoughtfulness and respect as the debate continues.