



Promoting Misconceptions
News Media Coverage of Immigration

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Contents

Introduction	1
Three Tendencies in Media Coverage of Immigration	2
Making News	3
A Contrast of Intense and Ambivalent Interest	4
End Notes	5

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Introduction

Over the past three decades the news media have largely mischaracterized the great wave of immigration that has transformed the United States. The flow of newcomers has developed gradually and most have arrived through legal channels to make new lives here with little public drama. The news coverage of immigration, meanwhile, has been highly episodic and has emphasized themes of illegality, crisis, controversy and government failure.

Moreover, the dominant narratives have focused on the actions of immigrants, law enforcement officials and policy makers, eclipsing key contextual factors that have powerfully influenced both the size and content of immigration flows such as the labor market and the aging of the American work force.

This depiction of immigration as a sudden crisis reflects perspectives and practices that are deeply ingrained in American journalism, and yet these tendencies have only become more accentuated in the ever shorter, more intense news cycles produced by cable television and the Internet. The rapid transformation of the media landscape has also created spaces for new voices of advocacy which have succeeded in mobilizing segments of the public in opposition to policy initiatives, sometimes by exaggerating the narrative of immigration told by traditional news organizations.

Supporters of radically different positions in recent debates on U.S. immigration policy agree that the current system is broken, and hence one need not favor any particular outcome to conclude that stalemate is a mark of failure in the policy process. The evidence suggests that the news media have hindered effective policy making by contributing to the polarization and distrust that surrounds the immigration issue.

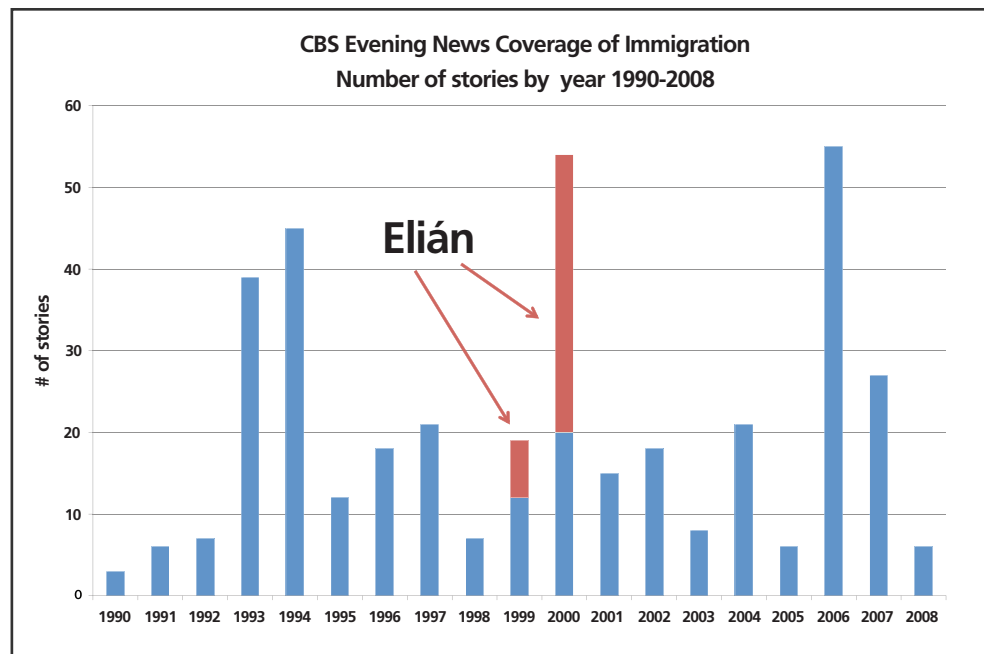
This report is adapted from, and updates, the author's research monograph, "The Triumph of No: How the Media Influence the Immigration Debate," which was published in September 2008 as part of ["Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate"](#) by the Brookings Institution and the Norman Lear Center of USC. In order to understand how coverage of immigration has evolved during a period of great transformation in the news media, various forms of content analyses were conducted on more than 80,000 news stories or commentaries from print, broadcast and digital media dating back to 1980.¹ This research examined both the pace of coverage by a variety of news organizations and the primary focus of that coverage across long periods of time. In addition, coverage of specific episodes by individual news organizations was analyzed in detail, and a separate analysis focused on coverage across all news platforms in 2007, the year of the last major Congressional debate on immigration policy.

Three Tendencies in Media Coverage of Immigration

While individual stories about immigration may have been entirely accurate, the cumulative effect of U.S. media coverage has distorted the underlying realities of immigration. Three major tendencies characterize the way immigration has been covered by the U.S. media:

1. The legendary newspaper editor Eugene Roberts of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times* drew a distinction between stories that “break” and those that “ooze.” Immigration is a classic example of a news story that oozes. It develops gradually, and its full impact can be measured only over long periods of time. In contrast, coverage of immigration has been episodic, producing spikes of coverage and then periods when attention falls off. The spikes have been driven by dramatic set-piece events such as the Elián González saga, congressional debates and protest marches. The surges in coverage have conditioned the public and policymakers to think of immigration as a sudden event, often tinged with the air of crisis.

Consider, for example, that immigration coverage by the national desk of *The New York Times* averaged 102 stories a year from 1980 to 2008 but ranged from a low of 43 stories in 1991 to a high of 217 in 2006. On the CBS Evening News, coverage of immigration in 1993 was nearly six times what it was in 1992 and nearly three times as much in 2000 as in 1999.



2. Illegal immigrants have never constituted more than a third of the foreign-born population in the United States, and that mark has been reached only in recent years. Nonetheless, illegal immigration and government’s efforts to control it have dominated the news coverage in all sectors of the media by wide margins for many years. This pattern of coverage would logically cause the public and policymakers to associate the influx of the foreign born with violations of the law, disruption of social norms and government failures.

For example, an analysis of 1,848 Associated Press stories on immigration topics from 1980 to 2007 showed that 79 percent fit into the framework of illegality. Of 2,614 stories on immigration in *The New York Times* over the same period, 86 percent dealt with illegality in various forms, and that included 83 percent of the coverage in Washington and 88 percent of the stories from elsewhere in the country.

3. Perceptions of the essential actors and causes of immigration have been distorted by media coverage. Immigrants, in particular, but also policymakers and advocates, have dominated the journalistic narratives to the exclusion of other critical actors, especially employers and consumers. At the simplest level, this has deprived the coverage of essential context by underemphasizing the role of the U.S. labor market in determining the size and characteristics of immigrant flows and overemphasizing the role of government. When their attitudes toward immigration turn negative, audiences exposed to this kind of coverage can readily view immigrants as villains and themselves as victims. Distrust of government—a seeming accomplice or an incompetent protector—is a natural by product.

An analysis of the 201 stories about immigration aired on the three broadcast networks' flagship evening news shows in 2006 and 2007 found that employers were quoted in only 12 stories. In contrast, immigrants were interviewed or made statements in 58 stories. On the policy side, only seven stories made mention of sanctions against the employers of unauthorized workers, and it was a minor element in most of them. Meanwhile, 29 of the stories on the evening news broadcasts were about the border and the federal government's failed efforts there.

Making News

When immigration is associated with crime, crisis or controversy, it makes news. Immigrants and political actors are the primary protagonists of these dramas, while the public is a passive bystander. The breathless, on-and-off coverage—more opera than ooze—has mischaracterized a massive demographic event that has developed over decades and mostly through legal channels.

The media has tended to ignore legal immigration even when set-piece news events would have justified coverage. For example, in 1990 Congress passed the first major revision of legal immigration statutes in 35 years, substantially increasing migration flow and changing its composition. It is legislation that has altered the face of America. *The Washington Post* covered the debate leading up to enactment with a total of 2,078 words of news copy in four routine Capitol Hill stories. The bill's potential impact was not examined in Washington's newspaper of record until a week after it was passed. In contrast when Congress produced a law dealing exclusively with illegal immigration in 1986 the *Post* published ten stories about the deliberations in the month prior to passage and seven follow ups in the immediate aftermath.

The transformation of the media by new technologies and business practices has opened channels for a journalism of advocacy that has added a new dimension to the coverage of immigration.

In spring 2006, the Spanish-language media helped mobilize huge crowds to protest legislation passed by the House of Representatives that would have mandated an unprecedented crackdown on unauthorized migrants. Those marches played a role in moving the Senate to block the bill. But, the most visible, and the most effective use of media mobilization has come from the other side of the issue.

Traditional and highly respected news organizations created the narrative of illegality in immigration coverage, but a new breed of advocate commentators led by Lou Dobbs, formerly of CNN, took it to a new dimension. Advocates of tougher enforcement measures have long castigated illegal migrants as a drain on public services, as economic opportunists willing to undercut wages, and as eroding the rule of law. Dobbs upped the ante by characterizing illegal migrants as threats to the health and safety of ordinary Americans and as a category of people who are not merely undesirable but who need to be expelled in order to preserve the nation. Dobbs is by no means an original thinker. He has aped some of the oldest tropes in the nativist repertoire, but he did it as the anchor of the flagship broadcast on a network that promotes itself as “the most trusted name in news.”

A Contrast of Intense and Ambivalent Interest

The Senate immigration debate in May and June 2007 produced a spike in coverage by all news media, but the surge was most dramatic in cable and radio talk shows—and this talk had a distinctly ideological bent. During the six weeks of debate, conservative radio hosts devoted 31 percent of their shows to immigration while their liberal counterparts hardly mentioned it, giving immigration just 3.6 percent of their airtime. Across the whole of 2007 liberal radio talkers gave more attention to the Senator Larry Craig airport men’s room imbroglio than to the topic of immigration. Restrictionist voices opposing the Senate bill also dominated the blogosphere. While conservative blogger Michele Malkin devoted 40 percent of her posts to the immigrant debate in June 2007, the liberal *Daily Kos* only devoted 9 percent of its posts to the subject.

Percentage of Posts on Immigration, 2007

	Daily Kos	Talking Points Memo	Instapundit	Michelle Malkin	Powerline
	(Liberal)	(Liberal)	(Libertarian)	(Conservative)	(Conservative)
February	3%	1%	0%	3%	1%
March	3%	4%	0%	5%	2%
April	2%	1%	1%	4%	1%
May	4%	2%	3%	20%	13%
June	9%	3%	6%	40%	17%
July	4%	1%	1%	23%	2%

Just as the Spanish-language media successfully helped rally public opinion against a highly restrictive measure in 2006, conservative voices in the media helped rally opposition to the legalization program that was a major feature of the bill debated in 2007. Both of these cases represent a new kind of political mobilization in which elected officials, interest groups, traditional media and new media all converge to animate public opinion. These mobilizations were short, intense and oppositional in that they were designed

to block a legislative action rather than to advance an affirmative agenda. And, in both cases, relatively small but highly aroused segments of the public succeeded in producing a stalemate.

Meanwhile, the broad middle of American public opinion is beset with ambivalence towards immigration, particularly illegal immigration, and the effect of the news media can also be seen in these attitudes.² At the most basic level there is considerable fluctuation in the extent to which immigration is perceived as an issue that needs to be addressed by public policy. During periods of greater media attention and policy debate, larger shares of the public tend to see it as a top concern, but then attention drops off rapidly when the spotlight shifts to other issues.

In conclusion, the ways in which the media report the news about immigration helps to frame the crisis in the public mindset and shape the debate. Public opinion surveys have consistently shown more support for policies that would allow unauthorized immigrants to remain in the country legally than for proposals to push them out with enforcement measures. However, support for legalization programs is deeply tinged with anxiety, and worry over illegal immigration has increased markedly since the start of this decade across all segments of the public. The nature of the media coverage of immigration in recent years helps explain this combination of broadly generous attitudes blended with anxiety in the mainstream of public opinion just as it also illuminates the agitation at the far ends of the political spectrum.

End Notes

1 The author gratefully acknowledges research teams at Brookings, the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California which contributed to the content analysis. For a full statement of the methodology see pp. 45-47 of the report. The analytical findings presented here as in the original report are the author's alone.

2 For an analysis of public opinion on immigration see "Migrating Attitudes, Shifting Opinions: The Role of Public Opinion in the Immigration Debate" by E. J. Dionne. Download "Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate" http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/0925_immigration_dionne.aspx



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