

The U.S. Media's Depiction Of Immigration's Impact On Society

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Sandy Hultaker/Reuters

Immigration to the United States has usually been a point of contention across most of the country. Ironically, a country formed by immigrants from the beginning is always uneasy about new “arrivals,” especially those from different ethnic or racial backgrounds than the original English settlers. This constant, persistent pattern resists newcomers’ culture, language, traditions, religion, and values.¹ Even for new immigrants who share the same language, as in the case of the Irish, the previous settlers viewed them with suspicion and resentment. Over time, this has created stereotypes and negative attitudes that affect immigrants directly.

Today, these negative attitudes are focused on Latin American immigrants, especially from Mexico, who are shaping a

new demographic mosaic in U.S. society. No matter where in the United States one travels, Mexican immigrants are a clear, visible presence. Areas that did not traditionally register an important influx of immigrants now experience a significant presence, such as along the Northeast Corridor (from Vermont to Washington, D.C.) and in the Southeast (North Carolina to Georgia). Even places considered non-welcoming to immigrants, such as Wyoming, Montana, North and South Dakota, Mississippi, and Alabama, are witnessing the increasing presence of Latino communities.²

And this social process shapes two major impacts: the growing resistance of white conservatives to the continuing increase of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States—an irreversible trend—and the perpetuation of blame placed on new immigrants for everything negative happening in the country, from national and state budget deficits to language dominance. These two consequences, then, have a direct impact

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on public opinion, which in turn influences public policy. As politicians hear negative attitudes from their constituents, both state and federal elected officials will favor anti-immigration policies. For instance, Reyna and her colleagues found some evidence of the correlation between negative attitudes and support for restrictive immigration policies.³

Another recent study shows that attitudes toward immigrants turn negative based on their legal status. The study by Murray and Marx examines how young white adults perceive authorized and unauthorized immigrants and refugees, finding that they have developed more negative attitudes when they know the immigrants are in the country illegally. A perception of greater threats and anxiety develops when these young adults identify immigrants as unauthorized. A caveat of the study is that these attitudes were identified in mostly urban white upper-middle- and upper-class areas.⁴

And while many media researchers argue that because of the availability of the Internet and its digital social media tools, discriminatory and racist attitudes should decline, the reality is that the pattern has not changed. In fact, some have maintained that the news media polarization that allows the public to select the channels to fit their political ideology has increased the general spread of negative stereotypes and biases against new immigrants.

But this is where the need arises for a central question: How does the U.S. news media distort, misinform, mislead, and use biased reports about immigration when it is touted as an institution facilitating a well-informed citizenry that can make better decisions? This article argues that the main reason is that the existing ideological polarization across U.S. Americans has permeated the news media outlets, which tailor the information they provide to their audience. This is especially true for networks like Fox News and OAN (One America News Network), which shape information to fit the conservative political agenda, and MSNBC and CNN, which fit in with a liberal perspective.

For instance, conservative news media presented the number of deportations under the Obama administration as evi-

dence that the president was soft on controlling the wave of illegal immigration, implying that the border was chaotic and uncontrollable. In his Fox News commentary show, Lou Dobbs reported this “softness,” when in reality the Obama administration deported close to 400 000 people every year. In 2012, President Obama’s deportations totaled 419 000, the highest number in 20 years, up from around only 50 000 when President George H. W. Bush occupied the White House in 1992.⁵ Fact checking, a function of good journalism, was absent in the Dobbs newsroom.

Another example is the inadequate information provided on the number of apprehensions on the U.S.-Mexico border: in 2014, they came to 479 371, or 65 000 more than the previous year. This is another example of how, in fact, the Obama administration has been tough in enforcing border controls. The almost 16-percent hike in apprehensions in one year was missed by most conservative news media reports. Moreover, the 14-percent reduction of Mexican nationals apprehended by the Border Patrol was, again, missed by right-leaning news reports.⁶

Is this lack of unbiased, objective, professional journalism a problem of professionalism in the newsroom or a lack of a clear distinction between news and editorial/opinion segments? In answering this question, scholars are again divided: some argue that the main reason involves what is called “framing” in the newsrooms’ functions and activities. News media framing in the communication research literature means that journalists, reporters, editors, and managing editors operate with a particular view to presenting information in their articles, editorials, or commentaries. This model argues that it is the result of their own personal perspectives, ideology, experiences, and education that are invariably reflected in the journalistic products. Many times, this is modulated, tuned, or changed by editors, who also have their own personal frames. This model is more evident in news organizations that sympathize with a particular ideology or follow a direct editorial viewpoint or interests, thus producing news that reflects that perspective.⁷

For others, the news media sets an agenda either for public opinion or politicians and governments. This model is called “agenda setting,” which simply has tested the assumption that by placing certain news items prominently, with big headlines, or giving them more airtime (in the case of broadcasting), they advance an agenda or influence the public or even governments. Similarly to framing, agenda setting responds to political views, personal perspectives and ideologies, and/or management interests. The challenge for most readers and

audiences is that it is very difficult for them to distinguish when the media is providing unbiased news and information and when they are framing a story or issue or putting an issue on the public agenda.⁸

In the case of immigration, both framing and agenda setting are embedded in the publications and broadcasts the U.S. news media provides.⁹ News organizations provide hard-liners support for their views by showing and publishing stories that depict the U.S. border as a vulnerable point of entry where “anybody” can enter the country freely. The selection of images (photos or video clips) presented to the public are many times old enough that they do not reflect the current reality of the border. Groups and lines of immigrants walking freely across the desert, people boating or swimming across rivers, and runners who cross the interstate highways are repeated over and over to the point that the U.S. public believes there is a real invasion. This is the fuel welcomed by politicians who advocate “securing” or “sealing” the border with Mexico. Little is done to clarify who is crossing, from what countries, and moreover, in what numbers.

Another frequent frame used by the biased press depicts Latino immigrants in many communities using public services like hospitals or clinics, schools, and transportation, projecting an image of masses of illegal and costly abusers. This is then transposed as the abuse of services that many conservative politicians use to promote reduction of public services in needy communities. But one frame that is difficult to dilute is the one that shows Latinos involved in crimes and law violations. This may be the most negative frame impacting immigration: a frame that fuels a perception that violence and the total lack of respect for the rule of law is prevalent among all immigrants, their families, and communities. Another frame that has been widely propagated is that if immigrants are willing to cross the border illegally, they are intrinsically willing to break the law at all times and under all circumstances. So, it is not surprising that U.S. Americans are divided on how they see immigrants when asked in opinion polls. The Pew Research Center reported that 52 percent of U.S. Americans see immigrants as a strength, and 43 percent as a threat.¹⁰

While historically the press has been a source of influence for creating, shaping, and maintaining stereotypes, it is only now, with the world’s major digital and broadcasting advances, that these biases travel faster and deeper. In fact, the U.S. news media has subtly and, in some cases, very openly, tried to set the public policy agenda on immigration. This is the case when Fox News runs three major opinion segments host-

ed by commentators like Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Lou Dobbs, who do not clarify that on their shows, they present their personal perspectives rather than hard, fact-checked news. As U.S. American medium-sized and small communities across the entire country witness the arrival of Latino immigrants, the images and words coming from the media infuse—or diffuse—their previous viewpoints or assumptions.

Alternative professional media present a softer version of Latino immigrants, stressing their contributions to society, culture, and even to tax revenues. Yet, this frame is not as popular as the one that blames immigrants for the weaknesses of the U.S. political, social, and economic system. But, once again, this is nothing new in U.S. political rhetoric. One question that arises is whether U.S. society is totally polarized on attitudes and views of immigrants and immigration reform. The response depends on who answers the question.

Most U.S. Americans relatively marginally support immigrants. But significant gaps exist across political ideologies regarding support for new immigration reform based on party affiliation, whether Republican or Democratic. A 2014 Pew Center survey showed that while 60 percent of Democrats consider it extremely/very important to pass new immigration legislation, only 46 percent of Republicans thought the same.¹¹ This perspective that crosses party lines does not correspond to the large majority of U.S. Americans who believe a reform is needed. Almost three in four U.S. Americans, or 73 percent, agree that there should be a way to stay legally in the U.S. if unauthorized immigrants meet certain requirements; only 24 percent disagree.¹²

Also, when public opinion polls unravel demographic composition, the picture changes based on race and ethnicity. In the same Pew survey, the differences across those characteristics were noteworthy. U.S. Americans who identified themselves as white expressed lower support (44 percent); blacks reported higher support (49 percent); and as expected, Hispanics support the passage of new legislation by a 72-percent margin. The difference between whites and His-

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panics is almost 28 percentage points. This jibes with the premise that previous groups of immigrants are resistant to and distrusting of new immigrants.

Another frame used frequently by the U.S. press is about the levels of education immigrants have when they arrive in the country. This means that Asian immigrants tend to be seen as better for the country because, as they have higher educational levels, they can contribute more; Latino immigrants, on the other hand, with low levels of basic education, are perceived as a liability. While this may be true in the strict sense of educational attainment, some Latino immigrants are highly educated and make significant contributions to the U.S. economy and society.¹³

However, when economic conditions are difficult and employment declines, immigration is perceived as a problem. During the recent severe economic downturn of 2008, about

50 percent of U.S. Americans perceived immigration as a problem rather than as an opportunity. Public opinion about immigration further deteriorated because there was a perception that immigrants took U.S. jobs, depressed national wages, and threatened the U.S. economy. Peri found these results and linked his findings to a strict immigration policy approach.¹⁴

In the face of these daunting conditions, are there any attitudes promising a positive outcome for immigrants and immigration reform? The answer seems to be in the affirmative. Another recent Pew Research Center survey comparing views on immigration over a period of 20 years shows that the view that immigrants provide strength and not weakness to the U.S. is increasing. In 1994, only 31 percent answered that immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents, while in 2013 almost half (49 percent) answered similarly. This is an increase of almost 20 points in two decades. And here is the major contrast: while in 1994, 63 percent answered that immigrants were a burden, in 2013 only 41 percent agreed with the same statement.¹⁵ And the main question remains: What were the most influential sources of information shaping attitudes about immigrants: the news media, personal experiences, or family/friends/colleagues? Scholars in North America will continue to seek a plausible and empirically solid answer. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Pew Research Center, "Most Say Illegal Immigrants Should Be Allowed to Stay, But Citizenship Is More Divisive," March 13-17, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/03/28/most-say-illegal-immigrants-should-be-allowed-to-stay-but-citizenship-is-more-divisive/>.

² Justin Allen Berg, "Whites' Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Are Multiracial Individuals a Source of Group Threat or Intergroup Contact?" *Sociological Focus* vol. 47, no. 3 (2014), pp. 194-217.

³ Christine Reyna, Ovidiu Dobria, and Geoffrey Wetherell, "The Complexity and Ambivalence of Immigration Attitudes: Ambivalent Stereotypes Predict Conflicting Attitudes toward Immigration Policies," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), pp. 342-356.

⁴ Kate E. Murray and David M. Marx, "Attitudes toward Unauthorized Immigrants, Authorized Immigrants, and Refugees," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), pp. 332-341.

⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2012* (Table 39) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2012).

⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *CBP Border Security Reports for Fiscal Years 2013 and 2014* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2013 and 2014).

⁷ James W. Tankard, "The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing," in Reese, Gandy and Grant, eds., *Framing Public Life: Perspectives of Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 2001), pp. 95-106.

⁸ Max E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* vol. 36, no. 2, 1972, pp. 176-187.

⁹ J. Bryant and D. Miron, "Theory and Research in Mass Communication," *Journal of Communication* vol. 54, no. 4 (2004), pp. 662-704.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, op. cit.

¹¹ "Public Divided over Increased Deportation of Unauthorized Immigrants." Pew Research Center, February 23-27, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/02-27-14%20Immigration%20Release.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A significant number of Mexican engineers, managers, and designers working for the auto industry are annually transferred to Midwest locations, especially Michigan and Ohio.

¹⁴ Giovanni Peri, "Immigration, Labor Markets, and Productivity," *Cato Journal* vol. 32, no.1 (2012), pp. 35-54.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, op. cit.