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## **The Myth Of The Criminal Alien: Newspaper Media**

### **Introduction**

The mass media has an undeniably powerful role in shaping and influencing public attitudes about immigration and immigrants (see McCabe, Matos & Walker, 2021). Its strategic deployment reached new levels in the presidential campaign of former U.S. President Donald Trump (see Flores, 2018). Utilizing mass media as a means to frame immigration by centering various violent narratives of criminalization as a means to justify forced removal and deportation of unauthorized people and building political constituents along the way (see Flores, 2017). Framing in the mass media and its various dimensions around immigration and immigrants occurs through multiple strategies. It is not only what it is said and how it is said, but also what is left unsaid (see Scheufele, Dietram & Tewksbury 2007). We will analyze and compare the strategic framing of Latin/Central American immigration through the critical lenses of criminal activity as worthy of forced removal as segments of the mass media establish an intentional goal to promote specific narratives of criminal activity while leaving others aside (see Stewart, 2012). In this piece, we objectively investigate how the framing of Latin/Central American deportation in the media masks the larger criminalization that occurs in the very process of undocumented immigration (see Abrego et al., 2018). In our comparison, we will demonstrate common patterns found throughout our larger newspaper data set drawn from CNN, Fox News and, The Hill while highlighting their differences in the continuous framing of deportation through criminal lenses.

### **Methodology**

The media sources analyzed in this piece were published after former U.S. President Donald Trump signed two immigration-focused executive orders, which combine to intensify the criminalization of immigration (see Abrego et al., 2018), on January 25, 2017, until late September of 2017. The first executive order, "Enhancing Public Safety", and the second, "Border Security and Immigration Enforcement" directly targets "public security threats" stemming from unauthorized immigration in the U.S border between Mexico by prioritizing immediate removal of immigrants with criminal backgrounds and withdrawing federal funds from sanctuary cities. This timeline is critical because there was a 37% increase in Latin/Central American deportations of undocumented immigrants in the U.S and a 42% increase in ICE arrests compared to that same period in 2016 (see Pierce & Selee, 2017).

The data set for this article were drawn from three selected U.S English language newspapers available online. Its ideological stance selected each news source to provide a broader comparison. CNN is our left-leaning institution, The Hill our center, and Fox News our right-wing point of analysis. To select each news article, we conducted a keyword search: immigration and crime, criminal, alien and undocumented. In total, we collected 24 newspaper articles, eight from each new source. In each article, we selected five quotes that mentioned

immigration and crime, compiling a total of 120 passages. We numbered the passages from 1 to 40 in each respective ideological newspaper through this compilation.

For our analysis, we used a random number generation from 1 to 40, which will decrease our own bias in selecting three passages of analysis for each newspaper article. For our data selection, we collected the entire passages respectfully. To avoid our own bias in the analysis, while being mindful of the length and timeframe of this piece, we randomized all the passages and articles in our data set. For our analysis, we chose two randomized passages from two separate articles for each news source. We decided to pick two randomized passages from two different articles for an in-depth analysis of their content. By committing to an in-depth analysis of two passages from only 6 of the total 24 articles that make up the data set, this permits us to critically uncover how the media frames Latino/a deportation through subtle and covert strategies that vary between each news source. While our analysis does not reflect the entire data set, the strategically randomized analysis demonstrates patterns within this specific time period on how the media frames Latino/a deportation. After analyzing each newspaper source, this paper will compare how these three various passages frame deportation narratives through the structural process of removal.

## Comparison

Each newspaper source covered in this piece frames immigration and its socially created correlation to 'crime' in their own ways, varying from objective framing (Fox News) towards more subliminal subjective messages (The Hill and CNN). Our analysis has covered how the appearance of neutrality misleads the public towards subjectively defining complex socio-political phenomenon that criminalizes undocumented immigrants (see Abrego et al., 2017).

Even though The Hill is labeled as a central force in the ideological spectrum (All Sides), the articles covered in this piece demonstrate that The Hill partakes in framing the "undocumented criminal undeserving immigrant" -- varying between objective and subjective narratives. In the overall data collection and randomized passages from The Hill, the institution fails to address the authors' own bias and political leaning (see Farris and Mohamed, 2018). The articles distance the reader from the author's political agenda and affiliations through the absence of bias-acknowledgment. We found cherry-picking statistical methods throughout all the sources analyzed in this piece. The narrative of the undocumented immigrant as a threat to the nation was found in its objective and subjective dimensions in both The Hill and Fox News.

Fox News demonstrates a degree of objective framing of undocumented immigrants and crime through a simplistic and cherry-picking method. Fox utilizes its platform to paint a narrow view of the historically complex and multi-layered structural relationship of criminalization of undocumented movement through selective narratives of criminal activity (see Bleick, Bloemraad & Graauw, 2015). The authors appeal to the public security threat of undocumented immigrants as dangerous enough to jeopardize the safety of the American polity and its broader population. The criminalization of undocumented immigrants is achieved by carefully selecting terminology and statistics without contextualizing its own narrative.

## CNN.

"The number of undocumented immigrant arrests rose by roughly one-third in the first weeks of the Trump administration, largely driven by an increase in the number of non-criminals arrested." Tal Kopan, April of 2017.

In the passage above, Kopan's (2017) tone at first glance appears to be neutral. CNN has a reputation of being a left-leaning institution, and in theory, favors the inclusion of immigrants of all kinds in the U.S social sphere. However, neutrality is a myth (see Chiumbu, Helen & Moyo, 2018). In its subjective sense, the quote demonstrates a degree of framing in relation to the historical structural criminalization that occurs in undocumented immigration (see Abrego et al., 2017). By subjectively defining the socio-political issue of undocumented immigration to the Trump administration, Kopan frames the discussion away from the root production of criminality (see Abrego et al., 2017). Through a series of structural rearrangements first engineered at the beginning of the postmodern era in the 1990s. Criminalization has plagued U.S immigration policy for decades, much before Trump took office. In short, the act of criminalization of immigrants is as long as U.S history itself (see Abrego et al., 2017).

"Critics say VOICE addresses a problem that doesn't really exist. Pro-immigration organizations point to their published studies that show immigrants commit crimes at a lower rate than the general public. The American Immigration Council studied the census numbers from 1980 to 2010, and found that among men ages 18 to 49, immigrants were one-half to one-fifth as likely to be incarcerated as those born in the United States." Tal Kopan on April 26, 2017

Kopan is reporting on the announcement of a possible office of government that being debated during the Trump administration, with its primary purpose being to monitor undocumented criminal activity. After presenting the proposed office, VOICE, Kopan immediately challenges its purpose by providing oppositional statistics. While it is essential to quote findings that debunk the national assumption that immigrants commit more crimes, the author still reserves the same language that Kelly and Trump use when describing VOICE and attitudes on immigration. Although Kopan presents statistical evidence to demonstrate that immigrants do not commit more crime, this has little effect in shifting the narrative (see Hopkins, Sides & Citrin, 2019). Through using the same language and focusing on the association between crime and immigrants, the narrative of criminal immigrants is framed throughout the passage (see McCabe, Matos & Walker, 2020). The image of the criminal immigrant is exacerbated on the right, but through recycling language on left media news sources, the same recycling of violent language occurs.

### **The Hill.**

" Illegal immigrants clearly commit a level of violent and drug-related crimes disproportionate to their population". **Ron Martinelli, April 19<sup>th</sup> of 2017.**

While research has shown that immigrants are inversely related to crime (see Ewing et al., 2015), Ron Martinelli, the author of this article, has used a cherry-picking method to depict undocumented immigrants as sources of violence and criminal activity. The Hill is known for being an institution positioned in the center, meaning it reports little to no bias towards left-leaning and right-leaning politics alike. However, Martinelli, a former police officer, police academy director, and Trump supporter, has framed illegal immigrants as violent criminals to the United States by evoking authority-signals to justify his position. Even though The Hill identifies as a center-positioned news outlet, neither Martinelli nor the institution itself addresses that the author of this article as a right-wing political supportive, and conservative individual. Through

this absence of context about the author, essential standards of journalistic integrity become moot (see Saleh, 2019). Martinelli fails to give context to the evidence he uses to make his point that undocumented immigrants are violent and commit "crimes disproportionate to their population". The reference includes unauthorized crossing of the southern border into the United States, which has become a federal offense in our current postmodern times through a series of structural rearrangements first engineered in the 1990s (see Ewing et al., 2015). Through this cherry-picking method, the author frames selected evidence without giving context that ultimately criminalizes the complex and multi-layered undocumented immigration that takes place in the U.S.

"This created what I call a "home free magnet." Aliens wanting to enter the United States illegally knew that they would be safe from deportation once they had reached the interior of the country unless they were convicted of a serious crime". Nolan Rappaport, April 5<sup>th</sup> of 2017.

The quotation above draws a connection between immigration and the "threat narrative" that is often attached to undocumented immigration stemming from Latin/Central America (see Farris and Mohamed, 2018). Through this threat narrative, the perpetuation of violent frames paints undocumented immigration as criminals. This threat narrative is not only a dangerous tool used to legitimize anti-immigration policies. It is also strategically deployed to dehumanize undocumented immigrants in its dangerous and violent discourse (see Menjívar, 2017). While the Hill is a center-positioned media outlet, the use of the terms like "aliens" to describe illegal immigrants illustrates them as the "other" or the "outsider" that does not belong, which aligns more with right-wing, conservative media agendas. Rappaport continues to use this threat narrative rhetoric when he explains that illegal immigrants would be safe once they reach "the interior of the country." The framing of undocumented immigration as an invader coalition highlights the criminalization that occurs when discussing/analyzing undocumented immigration's complex and historical multi-layered dimension (see Saleh, 2019). This framing facilitates the connection that paints immigrants as the outsiders who are only here to "invade", leading to more punitive policies against immigrants. This quote frames undocumented immigration through an illegal lens which becomes exacerbated through phrases like "aliens" and "reaches the interior of the country".

### **Fox News.**

"We need a layered approach to border security, one that includes technology, manpower, a commitment to the rule of law, and the elimination of incentives for illegal immigration, Chairman Ron Johnson, R-Wisconsin". By Brooke Singman, April 4, 2017.

The passage above illustrates the relationship between immigration and enforcement, explicitly framing this complex relationship through illegality while upholding cherry-picked law as the ultimate power. FOX News has historically been a right-leaning institution, aligning with majority anti-immigrant conservative views, and that is highlighted in the inclusion of Johnson's anti-undocumented immigrant statement. Through using terms such as "manpower" and "commitment to the rule of law" as descriptions of his suggestions for border security, Johnson appeals to the U.S government's historical pattern of expanding immigration enforcement alongside the Southern U.S border (see Abrego et al., 2017). It also appeals to the common

public safety threat associated with immigrants from Latin/Central America (see Farris & Mohamed, 2018). The quote strategically frames immigration through illegality by utilizing selected terminology that centers on Johnson's argument through the reliance on law and order as a tool to protect the nation from unwanted immigrants.

"Rep. Steve King, an Iowa Republican who has been one of Congress' most vocal and persistent proponents of strict immigration policies, lauded the new orders. "We'll be able to build an updated spreadsheet of their [DHS'] activities, arrests and deportations," said King, who long has pushed for more public data on crimes committed by immigrants. "I'm delighted. This is sunshine on the government... he would like to see it include misdemeanors as well as more serious crimes." February 10th, 2017 by Elizabeth Llorente

In alignment with the right-leaning ideologies associated with Fox News, the article by Llorente (2017) further pushes the "threat narratives" attached to undocumented immigrants from Latin/Central American. The article includes statements by Steve King, accrediting his professional work as a Republican representative of Iowa while leaving out his affiliations as anti-undocumented immigration. Through failing to include this critical contextualization of government official King, the author camouflages such white nationalism, which begins to taint the overall discourse of the article (see Saleh, 2019). King's anti-immigrant sentiment is highlighted through his focus on arrest and deportation data, explicitly pushing for the inclusion of criminal conviction records of undocumented immigrants. If implemented, the data-based would be strategically used as fuel for anti-immigration structural rearrangements at all levels of government. The author's inclusion of Kings' sentiments perpetuates the framing of immigrants through criminality. Through the lack of contextualization, such framing is camouflaged and preserved through media and governmental discourses.

## **Conclusion**

The media's framing of Latin/Central American immigration through forced removal centers a criminalized lens that perpetuates historically patterned processes of criminalization that violently impact the lived experiences of immigrants in the U.S. As highlighted in the patterns of media framing demonstrated throughout the six passages analyzed in this piece followed by two randomized passages from each The Hill, CNN, and FOX News, traditional mass media commonly frames immigration through crime while diversifying its strategies in each of the newspapers analyzed in this piece. In contrast, some are more objectively explicit than others. Although our findings support that the media frames Latin/Central American immigration through criminality across the three prominent ideological corners, our project only covers a short time period at the beginning of the Trump administration. Despite this limitation, the criminalization of Latin/Central American immigration can be seen in past and present-day policy, practices, and media representations. However, the socio-legal construction of the "criminal alien" is not a fixed phenomenon. The criminalization of immigration has been historically and socially constructed; and in turn, has the potential to change regarding the demographics of criminalized immigrants. Critically analyzing how the media frames Latin/Central American undocumented immigration contributes to a larger conversation about how immigrants are and can be criminalized in the media now and in the future. Most importantly, it calls for accountability in efforts to transform the ongoing narrative about immigration and immigrants.

### Citations

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