

The Rise of the Myths of Immigration Due to Increased Coverage of Negative Depictions of Immigrants in the Media During Trump's Presidency

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Introduction

Previous research conducted shows that the media is pervasive with anti-immigration framing. Framing, according to Scheufele and Tewksbury, is when topics in news reporting are described and highlighted in deliberate ways which can influence how it is perceived by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Another strategic tool that media utilizes is agenda setting. This is the idea that there is a strong association between the amount of coverage and emphasis the media places on specific topics and the importance attributed to these certain issues by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Therefore, it is clearly evident the power that mass media has in our world today.

We explored these strong attitudinal effects of the media in order to discern if negative immigrant stereotypes and depictions were present in supposedly unbiased, neutral news sources and even in categorized liberal news outlets. Past studies have concluded that certain terminology regarding immigration does in fact prime the public to think more negatively about immigration, but it is unknown if these words appear in non-conservative media. For instance, McCabe, Matos, and Walker found that subjects' opinions on immigration appear more negative when asked about "undocumented Latino immigrants" relative to when they were asked about "Latino immigrants" without the legal modifier (McCabe et al., 2020). Not only does the media's choice of anti-immigrant words and framing affect the public's opinions towards immigration, but research shows that this type of media coverage also leads to greater support for punitive immigration policy among white voters in the U.S. (Farris & Mohamed, 2018). In addition,

research findings show that elites can influence public perception of groups they praise or denounce. Specifically, previous research has found that former President Trump's negative statements about immigration, calling them "rapists" and "criminals," had a negative effect on public opinion regarding the topic (Flores, 2018).

Therefore, this terminology both perpetuates the detrimental myths regarding immigration and impacts public opinion on immigration. We conducted a comparative study to see if these blatantly negative statements and even more subtle terms, that are still exclusionary and convey anti-immigrant sentiment, can be found in what are known to be "unbiased" news sources and even more liberal-leaning news outlets during the first year of Trump's presidency, 2017, and the end of Trump's presidency, 2020. We hypothesize that if we exclusively look at non-conservative media coverage, especially liberal-leaning news sources, then we will see fewer blatantly negative depictions of immigrants.

Data and Methods

Our research was conducted in a methodical way with a systematic selection of sources. Half of the data was collected from known unbiased, neutral news outlets and the other half was collected from more liberal-leaning news sources. We determined which sources were categorized as neutral versus liberal with Otero's Media Bias Chart in **Figure 1**. *The New York Times* and *ABC* were chosen as the two sources with minimal partisan bias because they are both major, common news outlets with high standards of journalistic quality. *MSNBC* and *The Huffington Post* were chosen as the two liberal-leaning sources because they are skewed towards a liberal bias, yet the sources are still reputable and meet high standards of journalistic quality. In addition, the total of these four news sources were chosen because it is pertinent to our research that half of the data is collected from web articles, *The New York Times* and *The Huffington Post*,

and the other half from live TV, *ABC* and *MSNBC*, so that we can control for the possibility of variability between different forms of news and compare the differences in reporting between the two different forms.

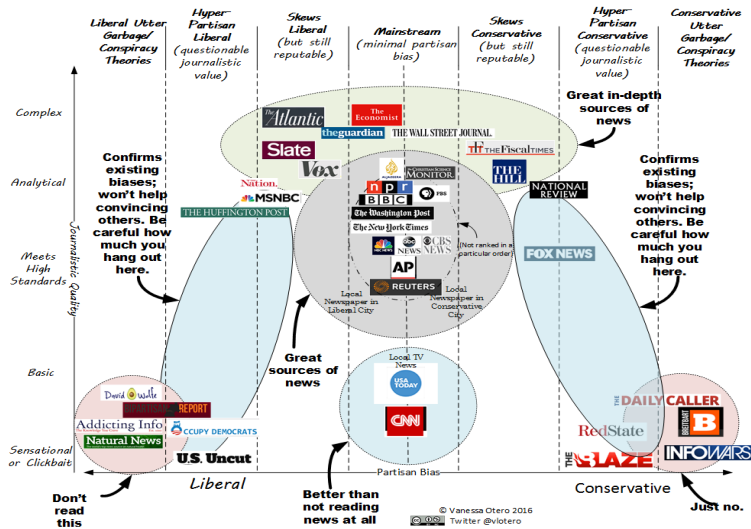


Figure 1. Created by Vanessa Otero based on a multi-analyst content analysis ratings project of articles, videos, and TV shows from 100 news sources (Otero, 2019).

Ten web articles or live TV video clips were chosen from each of the four news sources, equating to 40 sources in total. These 40 pieces of news were systematically selected in the same way from their respective websites. First, on the news outlets' websites we filtered for our time period, five articles/video clips from one news outlet were chosen from the year 2017 and the other five were chosen from the year 2020. Therefore, this adds up to be 20 pieces of news from the year 2017 and the other 20 pieces of news from the year 2020 in total. In order to make sure we fully covered all possible influential data on immigration framing during Trump's presidency, we included a brief search for the years 2018 and 2019 as well to encompass all possible results and eliminate any potential limitations or skewed data that may arise from only focusing on two of the four years of presidency. Second, we entered the term "immigration" into the search bar on each news outlets website. Third, we selected every fifth article that appeared under the search in order to make sure our sample was random and unbiased. With these 40 news

sources selected, we collected quantitative data on the frequency of the following eleven terms: possessive pronouns, undocumented, outsider, asylum seeker, illegal, aliens, criminals, economic burdens, violent/dangerous, rapists, and threat. However, after collecting our data we found that the term “outsiders” was used zero times across all 40 sources, but we noticed the term “border crosser” was mentioned more frequently, so we decided to switch out the term “outsider” and collect data for the term “border crosser” instead.

Of these eleven terms we distinguished between which ones categorize as “blatantly negative” versus “more subtle” yet are still exclusionary and convey anti-immigrant sentiment. We indicate this distinction on the bar graphs with the use of contrasting colors. We define “possessive pronouns” as any “us” versus “them” narratives or “ours” versus “theirs” language found within the pieces of news reporting. This type of language points to nationhood, creates exclusionary discourses, and reinforces the “othering” of immigrants, making them feel as if they do not belong (Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018). For similar reasons this is why we chose “aliens” as one of our eleven terms, because “aliens” suggests that migrants do not belong and the word implies difference, strangeness, and otherness (Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018). The idea of migrants as “economic burdens” was also used as an indicating term within our study because this framing amplifies one of the largest myths regarding immigration. The idea that immigrants take more from the U.S. economy than they contribute is pervasive in the news, however in actuality research shows that immigrants contribute more in tax revenue than they take in government benefits, meaning that immigrants have an overall positive impact on America’s economic growth (Kosten, 2018). Another damaging myth in the media is that immigrants are criminals, this is why “criminals” was chosen as one of our terms in the study. In reality, immigration and crime rates have an inverse relationship, meaning high rates of immigration are associated with

lower rates of violent and property crime (Ewing et al., 2015). This is also why we chose the term “illegal,” since it associates immigrants with criminality and undermines the character of immigrants (Menjívar, 2017).

Results

Former President Trump’s potent, non-factual, negative statements about immigration fueled a wave of anti-immigration framing that spread even to more neutral and liberal news sources over the years of his presidency. The results of our research show that even non-conservative media sources use language that is consistent with anti-immigration sentiments. However, in general there are more subtle terms used in both neutral and liberal sources compared to blatantly negative terms. Although, all graphs, including both liberal and neutral news sources, show a high rate of the term “illegals” used, which is blatantly negative. There is also a high rate of possessive pronouns used in both neutral and liberal news sources which contributes to divisive framing around immigration. Perhaps possessive pronouns are used most frequently in all of the news sources because it promotes exclusivity in a hidden and subtle way, which is how neutral and liberal news outlets get away with using this language so often.

The bar graph in **Figure 2** “Language Used in More Neutral News Sources’ Media Coverage of Immigration from 2017-2021”, shows overall high rates of negative subtle terms and significant traces of blatantly negative terms. The most common language found was the use of possessive pronouns, which was found 57 times in the 20 unbiased news sources. In addition, other subtle terms such as “undocumented,” “border crosser,” “asylum seeker,” and the blatantly negative term “illegals” had high counts as well. When comparing neutral web articles (**Figure 3**) versus neutral live TV (**Figure 4**) on immigration, there is a significant increase in the rate of “more subtle” terms seen in web articles. Therefore, it is evident that web articles do contribute

to negative immigration, however “unbiased” live TV sources show a slight increase in blatantly negative terms found such as “criminals,” “violent/dangerous,” “rapists,” “threat,” and “economic burdens” with the exception of the term “illegal” which was found 26 times in web articles compared to only 22 times on live TV. This is troubling that such drastically negative and opinionated terms that shape public perceptions of immigration and perpetrate immigration myths can be found in these so called “unbiased” and “objective” sources such as *The New York Times* and *ABC*. The article, “Trump Administration Moves to Solidify Restrictive Immigration Policies” from *The NY Times* that we collected data from is a prime example. Within the article, the use of possessive pronouns was found 18 times, the term “asylum seekers” was used 7 times, “border crossers” was used 3 times, and immigrants were described as “undocumented” 5 times within the piece (Kanno-Youngs & Haberman, 2020). What is concerning about this data is the commonly used term “asylum seekers” was not applied to referencing the subcategory of immigrants who are seeking refuge in the U.S., instead the term is overgeneralized to all immigrants in the writing which is problematic since it is used to convey how immigrants need help from the U.S. and are not bringing anything prosperous to the American economy which plays into the U.S. 's hero/savior complex. *The NY Times* can get away with using possessive pronouns and these other terms since they are not blatantly negative, yet it creates an exclusionary discourse regarding immigration and gives space to hidden anti-immigration sentiments. Another example, with the headline “Trump Threatens Government Shutdown Over Immigration” seen on *ABC*, refers to immigrants in blatantly negative terms such as “criminals” one time, a “threat” one time, “violent/dangerous” once, and as “economic burdens” twice (*ABC*, 2018). All of which have the potential and power to influence audiences about their own opinion towards immigration.

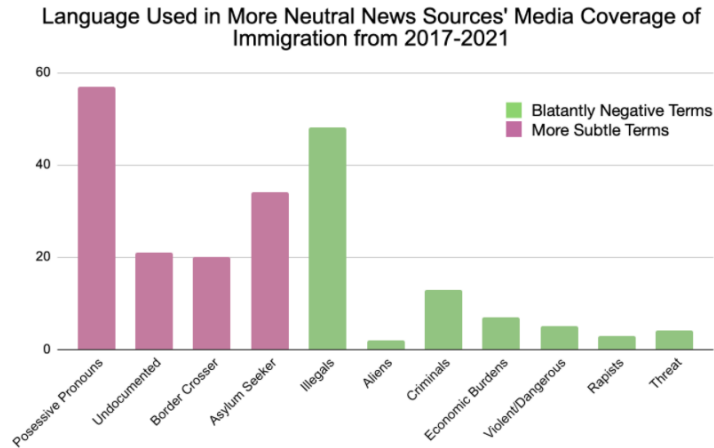


Figure 2. Data collected from 10 articles from *The New York Times* and 10 video clips from *ABC*.

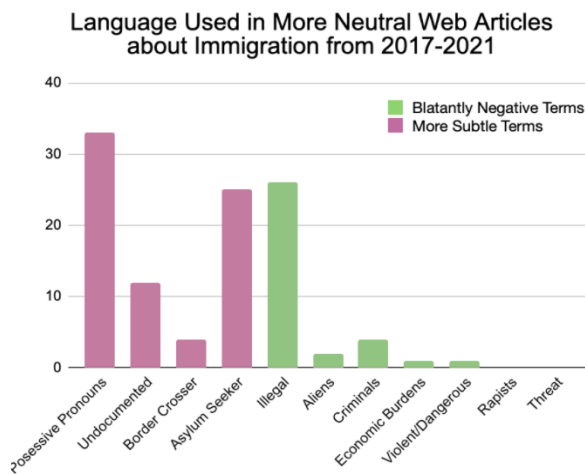


Figure 3. Data collected from *The N.Y. Times*.

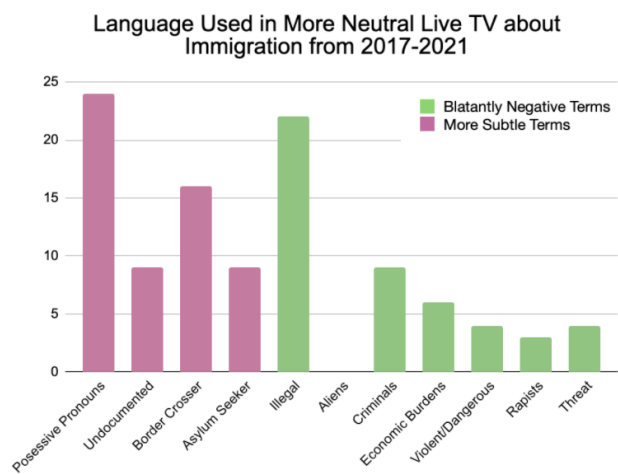


Figure 4. Data collected from *ABC*.

The bar graph in **Figure 5**, “Language Used in Liberal News Sources’ Media Coverage of Immigration from 2017-2021,” shows an overall similar pattern as the neutral news sources data displayed, meaning possessive pronouns were the most frequently counted in both, although 129 times in liberal sources compared to only 57 times in neutral sources. In addition, similar to the neutral news source findings, the “more subtle” terms appeared at higher rates overall versus the blatantly negative terms, excluding the term “illegal” which was also commonly seen. However, the word “illegal” occurred at a higher rate in neutral news sources, 48 times, versus only 33 times in the liberal-leaning sources. When comparing liberal web articles (**Figure 6**)

versus liberal live TV (**Figure 7**) on immigration, there is a significant increase in the rate of “more subtle” terms seen in web articles. For instance, possessive pronouns were found 72 times in liberal web articles compared to only 57 times in liberal live TV. Despite the term “illegal,” liberal live TV showed an overall higher rate of blatantly negative terms. In addition, live TV (compared to web articles) especially victimizes immigrants with an increase in terms such as “asylum seekers,” which paints immigrants as dependents and economic burdens, spreading the lie that they take more from the economy rather than give. The use of the term “asylum seeker” was used only 6 times in liberal web articles versus a total of 19 times in liberal live TV. This could be attributed to liberal live TV’s effort to appeal to pathos to gain sympathy from viewers in order to support immigration. Although the term “asylum seekers” is not blatantly negative, it still depicts a large scale of reducing all immigrants to “refugees” that need “our resources” or “our help” to survive, rather than describing immigrants as highly skilled workers that contribute to the growth of the U.S. economy. For example, the *MSNBC* video clip headlined “Do Migrants Know What’s Expected of Them at the Border” used possessive pronouns such as “us” versus “they/them” 3 times and utilized the term “asylum seekers” 4 times (*MSNBC*, 2018). In general, most of the *MSNBC* live TV news exhibited a high rate of the term “asylum seekers”. In comparison, the liberal news article from *The Huffington Post*, “Stephen Miller, Trump Aide Who Pushed Child Separation, Decries ‘Cruel’ Biden Immigration Policies” shows zero use of the term “asylum seekers,” but instead mentions the blatantly negative term “illegal” twice (Blum, 2021). This displays that even in liberal-leaning news sources, both more subtly negative and blatantly negative terms can be found.

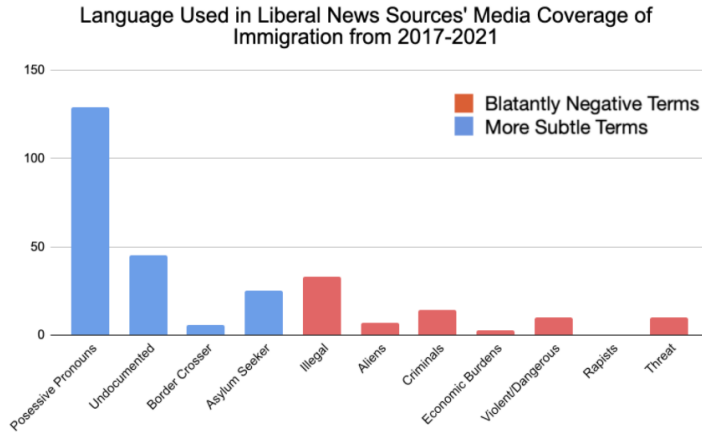


Figure 5. Data collected from 10 articles from *The Huffington Post* and 10 video clips from *MSNBC*.

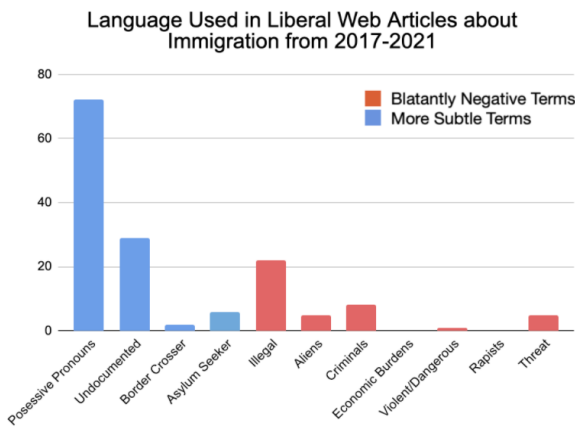


Figure 6. Data collected from *The Huffington Post*.

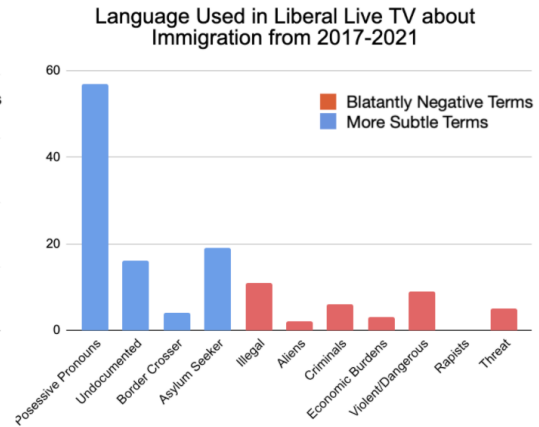


Figure 7. Data collected from *MSNBC*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of analytical tools such as framing, agenda setting, and priming provide a basis of understanding that help us interpret the conclusions of the research regarding the rise of the myths of immigration due to increased coverage of negative depictions of immigrants in the media during Trump's presidency. To answer our research question, yes, blatantly negative terms and more subtle terms that still are exclusionary and convey anti-immigrant sentiment appear in more neutral news sources and even liberal sources. Therefore, we can reject our hypothesis that we postulated since our data found negative depictions

throughout the non-conservative news sources. However, in general there were more subtle terms used in both neutral and liberal sources compared to blatantly negative terms. Although, the blatantly negative term “illegal” appeared at a high rate in both neutral and liberal sources, 48 and 33 times respectively. The most striking evidence found was the extremely high rate of possessive pronouns used in non-conservative media that contributes to an exclusionary narrative in the news against immigrants; a frequency of 129 in liberal sources and 57 times in neutral news sources. In addition, the news reporting victimized immigrants through the use of the term “asylum seeker” which was seen a total of 34 times in neutral news sources and 25 times in liberal sources, painting immigrants as economic burdens which diminishes their true value by overgeneralizing and reducing all immigrants to the subcategory of “asylum seeker”.

Overall, when looking at both neutral and liberal news sources, the “more subtle” terms were found in higher frequency in web articles and blatantly negative terms were found in higher frequency in live TV. It must be noted that most of the blatantly negative terms were either used in quotes or interviews with politicians, not said directly from the sources. The news outlets are not necessarily in support of this language, but they also do not specifically denounce the negative terminology either. This negative coverage, even if quoting anti-immigrant speakers, still is giving space for this anti-immigrant rhetoric which will have an overall influence on public perception of immigration. The research conducted by Scott Blinder supports this idea that media portrayals of immigration affect perceptions of immigrants among the public (Blinder, 2017). All in all, the data from our study shows disappointing proportions of anti-immigration rhetoric within non-conservative media outlets that contribute to priming and framing by further shaping negative mental images of immigration through repeated narratives and depictions, which can have damaging effects by drastically influencing public opinion.

Future Research and Limitations

Due to time constraints and limited researchers collecting data for this study, we were unable to explore the terminology in news sources before the beginning of Trump's presidency. Therefore, there is opportunity for further research on this topic in order to see if there is a statistically significant difference in the tone of media coverage and overall depiction of immigrants before and during the time period of the Trump administration. In addition, the four news outlets chosen for the study are not completely representative of all non-conservative media sources, therefore this surfaces as a limitation and future research should expand the scope, variety, and quantity of news outlets in which they collect data from. The last limitation that these findings contain is within the methodological approach. By exclusively looking for the specific eleven terms, we are unaware if the news sources portrayed immigration in another negative way that could not necessarily be captured from our methodological approach in quantitative data collection. Moreover, future research should focus on collecting qualitative data as well to encompass all aspects of negative framing.

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