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COMBATING BIASES: ILLUSORY IMAGERY IN US NEWS COVERAGE ON CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRATION

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Abstract

This paper comprises of original research and analysis of contemporary news media discourse surrounding Central American immigration in the United States. Subjects of study included more than 50 news articles, images, and videos from a variety of major politically-unaffiliated news outlets for English-speaking audiences. Rhetoric was analyzed in representations of the Central American immigration “crisis” that sparked a trend of media coverage in 2014, as well as several articles that covered events leading up to the “crisis.” Common rhetorical analogies ascertained through media analyses include the representation of immigrants as aliens, diseases, parasites, floods, criminals, natural disasters, terrorists, and drug pushers. Such associations aggravate preexisting xenophobia, heighten domestic anxieties, forgo rationality and objectivity, foster monolithic dialogue, erode informed policymaking, and inspire nationalistic racism. The ubiquity of these racist and xenophobic metaphors underscores news media’s political nationalism that colors the language and mindset of journalism and media consumers. This paper contextualizes contemporary observations with a synthesis of larger-scale media studies, historical accounts of racism in immigration services and news media, the role of the “other” in US society, and critical media theory. The conclusive evidence derived from past studies and my contemporary analyses demonstrate a political predilection for biased diction in news coverage of Central American immigration in the US. The paper notes the work of news analysts, professors, and journalists towards ameliorating subjective, political xenophobia in the news, and calls upon media consumers to participate in a subversion of journalism's racist legacies.

“The Rio Grande Valley has become ground zero for an unprecedented surge in families and unaccompanied children flooding across the Southwest border”

– *Los Angeles Times*

“Experts agree, Central Americans who are deluging the southern border with tens of thousands of their children are breeding not only a humanitarian crisis, but also a serious national security threat to the US”

– CBS News

“The flow of Central and South Americans through South Texas has become an unmanageable torrent within the past month.”

– *Houston Chronicle*

“Communicable diseases continue to be a problem at the New Mexico facility built to house illegal immigrant families surging across the US – Mexico border, and the immigrants themselves aren’t taking their own health care very seriously”

– *Washington Times*

The above quotations typify pervading discourse in current US media reporting on immigrants crossing the border between the United States and Mexico. Four major news sources published these quotes between May and October 2014, in response to the heightened attention to Central American youths entering the US. Each of the cited news outlets claims to be nonpartisan, each has won prestigious media awards, and like all high-minded news sources, each aspires to an exalted level of credibility achieved through “non-biased” reporting. Yet, as illustrated above, their journalists utilize a specific, preordained vocabulary to report on undocumented immigrants. In descriptions of immigrant children seeking refuge in the United States, the four citations concurrently imply war, turmoil, “national security threat,” natural disaster, and plague at the hands of the young migrants. Through the personification of immigrants as incendiaries of social ills, news media engages in dangerous sensationalism, rouses unfounded suspicions, participates in fear mongering, inspires xenophobia, and promotes nationalist anger towards Central American immigrants.

The phenomenon of prejudiced, overdramatized media coverage illustrating immigration has developed through histories of tense foreign relations, nationalism, racism, and the rise of media powerhouses. Media analysts Michael Shifter and Rachel Schwartz attribute the roots of xenophobic discourse, directed specifically towards Central American immigrants, to the origins of US reporting on Mexico. In an essay titled, “Balance on the border? Evaluating US news media portrayals of Mexico,” they pinpoint the foundations of journalism during the Mexican-American

War of 1846 as a catalyst for tendentious US news representations of Mexicans. Explaining the incentives for journalists to twist national opinions, Shifter and Schwartz assert, “Initiated at the height of the US expansionist era, it was the first war covered extensively by US foreign correspondents whose slanted reporting of Mexican ‘backwardness’ was designed to drum up nationalist support.” Reporting of the war with Mexico originally served as a political tool to aggregate American patriotism in order to facilitate the annexation of Mexican land. Shifter and Schwartz affirm that this precedent of a colored journalistic tone set during the Mexican-American War perseveres in modern-day reporting: “The tropes of chaos and barbarity remain present in US media coverage of Mexico today.”

Cori E. Dauber, professor of Rhetorical Studies at University of North Carolina, argues that news outlets hold complex power to influence the mindsets of their readership; as an “objective” messenger, audiences allot heightened credibility to conclusions drawn in news articles. Dauber contends, “If imagery is powerful, it is all the more so when presented as ‘objective.’” The American Press Institute (API) historicizes the pursuit for objectivity in U.S. news media, alleging that in the 19th century, the concept of objectivity required an acknowledgement of bias and transparency in the reporting process. However, the journalism trends at the turn of the century evolved into a focus on realism—the idea of presenting all facts neutrally so that readers could discern the truths in the article. The API cites Walter Lippman, who, in 1919, condemned the naiveté of the shift towards realism, and argued that only “the unity of disciplined experiment” in the “scientific spirit” of the era could adequately ensure the transmission of “valid facts” (“The Hierarchy of Information”). As the API notes, Lippman’s call for applying scientific methodology towards the processing of evidence has had varying success; however, the assertion that a move towards scientific testing of evidence could undo irrationality and biases has persisted in the discipline.

On the one hand, news media consumers can appreciate the industry’s priority on fact-checking and amassing information from verifiable experts. Respected journalism purportedly operates free from political agenda or biased constraints. However, bias remains, and the misleading pretense of objectivity masking subjectivity in news media makes prejudice all the more pernicious—they are not named, expected, or acknowledged as such. Therefore, when inflammatory imagery depicting immigrants as invaders, freeloaders, disease-carriers, security threats, criminals, and drug traffickers permeates news articles, the public is predisposed to digest negative metaphors with heightened acceptance. As rhetoric analyst J. David Cisneros

emphasizes, “metaphors are more than linguistic ornamentation; they are significant rhetorical tools that affect political behavior and cognition. Metaphors create conventional understandings by connecting phenomena with familiar cultural assumptions and experiences.” As Cisneros indicates, reporters wield power through the subtle metaphors that decisively dictate readers’ reactions to articles.

Discussing the misuse of news media power in an essay titled, “Promoting Misconceptions: News Media Coverage of Immigration,” University of Southern California professor Roberto Suro asserts that news sources have incited racism and impeded the potential for balanced debate over the issue of immigration. He foregrounds the role of the news in pushing prejudices into the opinions of constituents and legislators alike: “The evidence suggests that the news media have hindered effective policy making by contributing to the polarization and distrust that surrounds the immigration issue.” He emphasizes that despite newcomers’ ability to “make new lives here with little public drama” the media persistently characterizes immigrants with “themes of illegality, crisis, controversy, and government failure.” Suro and other researchers have surmised that this perpetual pattern of biased discourse in the media establishes associations between supposed social disrupt and the arrival of immigrants in both public and political mindsets.

The persistence of specific metaphors used to discuss immigration in the media reveals underlying politics in allegedly objective news sources. University of California professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics George Lakoff describes the media’s propensity for “framing” reporting to sway an audience. He argues, “Everything you [the reader] understand is a matter of framing... every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework” that emanates myriad connotations, associations, and preconceptions based in historically established rhetoric. His investigations of the subtle infiltration of loaded language and political persuasion in the news underscore the capacity for media outlets to direct public discourse and polarize issues. Based on decades’ of media scholarship and empirical studies connecting media frames, public policy, and readers’ conceptualizations of global issues, Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst assert, “the notion of agenda setting has provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and communications research”; agenda setting theory underscores the powerful influence that the news holds over the constructed narratives of and selective concern for current events (88). Using this conceptual model, Cisneros argues that “this framing [of Central American immigration in news media] is NOT

neutral but dehumanizes immigrants and pre-empts a consideration of broader social and economic concerns.” Researchers such as Shifter and Schwartz further recognize an urgency to subvert decades’ of biased rhetorical frameworks for media coverage of immigration in order to counter “alarmist fervor [which] stifles public debate by forestalling more critical examinations of the problem.” Referencing the scholarship on news media influence, I argue that analyzing and dismantling bias in representation of immigration is of the utmost urgency—the specific frames with which news media sources craft narratives significantly mold and color public opinion of immigrants.

Founded in this historical framework of linking immigrants to illegality, drug violence, terrorism, pollution, environmental damage, and disease, news media today often succumbs to the same conveniently pre-constructed yet racist and hackneyed metaphors as their journalist predecessors. Drawing from past studies and analyses, I conducted an investigation of contemporary media coverage on Central American immigration in major English-language US news outlets, concentrating on the reporting of the 2014 humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border. I studied over fifty contemporary articles reporting on “immigration,” some of which bypassed inflammatory language and some of which propagated discriminatory tropes. Based on the media research above, I flagged language in the aggregated articles that connoted the aforementioned antiquated metaphors—illegality, drug violence, terrorism, pollution, and disease. As I read through the article, themes of natural disaster, sudden threat, social disruption, and economic devastation as byproducts of immigration also emerged as potent patterns, and I included these metaphors in my research in order to dissect comprehensively the contemporary manifestation of xenophobia and anti-immigration propaganda in news coverage.

Examples of contemporary iterations of negative imagery penetrate masses of reporting on Central American immigration in English-language media outlets in the US. Roberto Suro analyzed 1,848 Associated Press stories printed before 2007 pertaining to immigration and found that 79% discussed illegality. In a subsequent study of 2,614 immigration articles in *The New York Times*, he found that 86% foregrounded illegality. Suro theorizes that news outlets centralize the concept of the “illegal” immigrant, despite a significantly larger proportion of legal immigrants than undocumented immigrants in the United States. Thus, he notes an inaccurate conflation between immigration and criminality in media discourse.

The sampling of 2014 news articles similarly belabors illegality. *The New York Times* bemoans the “administration’s failure to secure the Mexican border after years of illegal crossings,” *The Washington Post* describes the “influx of illegal immigrants,” *The Los Angeles Times* report on “31 immigrants spotted illegally crossing the Rio Grande,” and *The Houston Chronicle* describes the crisis as a “flood of illegal immigration.” *Colorado Newsday* pushes the weight and centrality of “illegal” further by asserting, “Murderers, kidnappers, drug traffickers, and sex offenders were among the illegal immigrants.” By describing an immigrant as “illegal,” media outlets axiomatically generate associations with criminality, disregard for the law, and low moral groundings. These generalized misrepresentations disregard the complex economic, political, and social situations that motivate immigrants to leave their home country, and cast an insular, disproportionate focus on the act of crossing the border without legal documentation. Despite advocacy groups’ efforts to retire the word and its dehumanizing ramifications, most articles used the word “illegal” to describe undocumented immigrants. The ubiquity of the term “illegal” begets a depthless, one-dimensional identity for hundreds of thousands of people, thus negating their individual experiences and personhood.

Media emphasis on the universality of drug violence in Mexico further reinforces the embedded construction of illegality. In 2011, Shifter and Schwartz conducted analyses on depictions of Mexican immigrants in three of the most widely read US newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. In the research, they emphasize the popularization of the word “war” to characterize drug-based violence in Mexico. Each newspaper utilized “war” with such ubiquity that Shifter and Schwartz contemplate whether “the use of the word ‘war’ has almost become the journalistic standard in describing drug violence, decisively molding US public perceptions.” In their analysis, they further delineate that descriptors such as “reign of terror,” “criminal anarchy,” “lawless no-man’s land,” “bloody urban battlefields,” and “out-of-control narco-violence,” often add dimensionality to articles on “drug wars” and elicit anxious rumination on the potential for Mexican drug violence to spill over into US land. Shifter and Schwartz argue that the consequential dramatization generates a monolithic discourse on Mexican immigrants, which ignores complex examinations, stonewalls multilateral debate, and inflames US fears and misconceptions.

The identifier “illegal” provokes public concern that immigrants are prone to many types of criminal behavior. The excerpt from *Colorado Newsday* illustrates a reflection of those fears, by emphasizing the many

types of criminals—such as “murderers, kidnappers, drug traffickers, and sex offenders,” who allegedly comprise the population of undocumented immigrants. *The Washington Times* similarly conflates an illegal border crossing with a propensity for felonious activity; in an article titled “With Bombs Away, Drug Traffickers and Illegal Immigrants Make Their Play,” journalist Jerry Seper contends that “Drug and alien-smuggling gangs make use of the ... soft underbelly of border security.” *The Washington Post* quotes radio talk show host Jeri Thompson relaying particularly demeaning fears of immigrants, “It’s not just street urchins from Central America carrying diseases in, but also criminals, thugs, gang members. No other country is dumb enough to have their borders wide open like us.” In conjunction with the stereotypes of Mexican drug violence, inflated by media reporting on the “drug war,” news propagations of drug traffickers and criminals rouse fear and xenophobia in media consumers.

A 2005 news study offers further evidence of the fallacies of immigrant crime portrayed in US newspapers. Conducted by Regina P. Branton and Johanna Dunaway, the study indicated that papers closer to the US-Mexico border have the highest rate of negative news and opinion pieces on immigration, with a particularly high emphasis on immigrants’ drug crimes. Analyzing the study results for the *Pacific Standard*, Lee Drutman alleges that “Actual crime statistics show that levels of immigrant crime do not increase closer to the border. Only the coverage of such crime increases.” This study elucidates the imbedded, yet unfounded stereotypes connecting immigrants with increased criminality and drug violence.

Media’s inculcation of the delinquency of Central American immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border becomes further reinforced through imagery relating immigration with terrorism. The terrorist attacks on September 11 incited a wave of anger and apprehension towards outsiders, which the media both reflected and reinforced with a renewed xenophobic discourse. Excerpts of interviews with politicians, ranging from southwestern representatives like Tom Tancredo and Rick Perry to northeastern congressmen like Scott Brown, assert the urgency of closing the southern border to Central American immigrants in order to decrease the risk of terrorism in the US. Media Matters Action Network (MMAN) emphasizes news commentators’ role in distorting news stories and hyperbolizing potential threats. In an analysis of Glenn Beck, Pat Buchanan, Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly and CNN’s Lou Dobbs, MMAN highlights numerous instances in which each commentator linked open borders, “illegal” immigrants, and lax border security policies with heightened risk of terrorism. By conflating immigration with an increased

possibility of terrorist attacks, media voices generalize entire nations of people as a homogeneous threat, ignoring nuanced challenges, individuality, and complex sociopolitical impetuses for fleeing home countries that do not involve terrorizing the US.

Contemporary media assiduously fans public fear of “Mexican violence” penetrating US borders. For example, Fox News’ Chris Wallace charges that Islamist terrorists could easily infiltrate our “open” southern border and wage warfare on the US. In another article titled, “Congressman: ‘At Least 10 Isis Fighters Caught Trying to Cross into the US,’” Fox News further indicates that the government purposefully avoids admitting the “threat of Islamic State militants infiltrating the US through the southern border.” CBS News compares the Central American humanitarian crisis to the fight against Al Qaeda, propagating the sensation that both situations present dire national security threats and claiming the southern border to be a new front for the War on Terror. Under the headline “Is the Surge of Illegal Child Immigrants a National Security Threat?” CBS journalist Lindsey Boerma expounds,

While lawmakers harp over potential military action to stem escalating sectarian bloodletting at the hands of an al Qaeda-inspired insurgency movement in Iraq and Syria, another issue on the national security front has surfaced after lurking for years in the bowels of US foreign policy concerns: the staggering influx of undocumented minors at the US-Mexico line.

Later in the article, Boerma concludes that the “Central Americans who are deluging the southern border with tens of thousands of their children are breeding not only a humanitarian crisis, but also a serious national security threat to the US.” With this imagery, she recklessly generates an association between self-identified terrorists and children fleeing violence.

The Los Angeles Times evokes similar metaphoric rhetoric that conflates Central American immigration with imagery of war and terrorism through describing the Rio Grande region as a “ground zero for an unprecedented surge in families and unaccompanied children flooding across the Southwest border.” The connotations of “ground zero” suggest bombs, war-struck catastrophe, and sites of terrorist offensives. The same article also characterizes the crisis as an “onslaught of homeless detainees,” using a synonym for violent and incessant assault to portray the rate of undocumented immigrants. Each of these media representations equates the presence of Central American immigrants in southern Texas to the devastation of the September 11 attacks on the US, and thus draws a

dangerous line paralleling victims of violence and poverty with anti-American terrorist organizations. News articles that affiliate immigration with terrorism engage in fear mongering, propagate problematic, imprecise journalism to their readership, and activate flames of restrictionism.

Journalists typecast immigrants as criminals, survivors of drug warfare, and individuals who have become desensitized to violence; Cisneros alleges that news media further molds the immigrant into a “pollutant,” through metaphoric parallels between immigration and environmental contamination. Lisa A. Flores, Associate Professor of Communications and Ethnic Studies at the University of Utah, indicates that the fusion of concerns for pollution and fears of Central American immigration emerged as early as the 1920s. In her essay, “Constructing Rhetorical Boundaries: Peons, Illegal Aliens, and Competing Narratives of Immigration,” she notes that:

Fears that unassimilable and undesirable aliens might pollute the stock and dilute the character of Americanism had not disappeared... The commentaries and tropes that had highlighted the supposed problems of degeneracy, illiteracy, and other forms of pollution could now be transferred from the Asian and European menace to the characters in the narratives of the Mexican problem. (373)

Foregrounding contemporary evidence from papers and televised newsreels, Cisneros demonstrates the propagation of the discourse of pollution and adulteration. Through analysis of articles covering California’s Proposition 187, a ballot initiative introduced in 1994 to limit undocumented immigrants’ access to public services, Cisneros unearths a marked discourse conflating immigration with pollution, generated through “images of biological invasion or contamination.” He evidences this claim with visual analyses, discussing the capacity of images and video to compound meaning in textual and verbal assertions in the news. In a primary analysis, Cisneros deconstructs Fox News footage from 2005 of undocumented immigrants “in a disorganized and huddled heap, in sharp contrast to the peaceful desert environment that they are physically disrupting.” He claims that the depiction of a “chaotic mess” induces fear of a threat to the “ordered, peaceful, and pristine desert wilderness,” similar to the threat of toxic contaminants. In conjunction with newscasters’ descriptions of the magnitude of undocumented immigration, the impending peril to US citizens and natural resources becomes clear.

Cisneros further notes the media’s tendency to depict immigrants as pollutants in images of “unorganized groups of immigrants milling on street corners and sidewalks...disrupt[ing] a sense of order and safety,” and

jumping over fences, exuding a sense of a surreptitious invasion. Most significantly, he scrutinizes Fox News nighttime coverage at the Rio Grande, in which journalists film immigrants walking directly towards the camera, connoting an immediate and direct threat to the viewers. Cisneros discusses the purposefully distorted filmography further:

Particular features of the immigrants are indistinguishable in such adverse lighting conditions. Instead, the night vision lens gives the immigrant bodies a strange neon green luminosity; they blend together, and the footage creates an impression of an ominous and oncoming stream of toxic green pollution. (581)

Thus, Cisneros confirms a media conflation of ecological devastation with immigration from Central America.

Covert incorporations of pernicious imagery into reporting on the 2014 Central American border issue also extends beyond imagery of illegality, drugs, and terrorism. As originally investigated by Cisneros, contemporary articles further the subtle reinforcement of immigration evils through scapegoating immigrants as pollutants. An article in *Tucson Weekly* titled “Trashing Arizona” describes the immigration “invasion” and consequential ecological damage inflicted by the purported “24 million pounds... of trash dumped on our borderlands illegal aliens.” The article, accompanied by an image of heaps of waste lumped haphazardly in a muddy ditch, asserts that water supplies become “especially vulnerable, because these trash dumps are often found at water sources. Some ranchers have reported their wells are contaminated with fecal bacteria, likely the result of so many illegal aliens defecating near water sources.” In rhetoric that delineates and juxtaposes an allegedly victimized group (the US) and a predatory invader (the polluting immigrants), “objective” news becomes colored by biased, circumscribed reporting. Again, journalism covering Central American immigration falls into the same simplistic, hackneyed depiction in which immigrants unabashedly impose damage on the US.

Imagery positing immigrants as contaminants fluidly elasticizes to depict immigrants as germs. Researchers indicate a common intersection of fears of disease with fears of outsiders. Restrictionists and opponents of immigration reform often describe the US-Mexico border as “porous,” signifying a perceived vulnerability to the nation, as well as denoting a need to protect the US from a corporal attack through comparing the nation to a living body. Citing the work of Otto Santa Ana, a researcher of media terminologies utilized in coverage of immigration issues, Cisneros

paraphrases, “When the nation is conceived as a physical body, immigrants are presented either as an infectious disease or as a physical burden.” Two professors of the History of Medicine at the University of Michigan, Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern explore the theme of immigrants as disease-carriers in their paper, “The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society.” Introducing the history of a dynamic heterogeneity in US society, they assert, “Despite the dramatic changes in demography, the meaning of citizenship, and the ability to treat and cure acute and chronic diseases, foreigners were consistently associated with germs and contagion.” Flores dates the origin of media rhetoric assuming Central American immigrants to be disease-carriers to early 20th century xenophobia, noting that:

the common descriptors of Mexicans shifted from docile to diseased and criminal. The mainstream American presses of the late 1920s and early 1930s were filled with commentaries on the pervasiveness of social contagions. Tales of Mexicans with illness appeared and the Mexican threat was depicted as both numerical and visceral, as medical and social metaphors were used. (374)

Paralleling Flores’ historical contextualization, Markel and Stern note the turn of the century as a transformative moment in media depictions of Mexican immigrants, arguing “US immigration and health officials became uncomfortably aware of the openness of the border...besides being cast as transient and uprooted, Mexicans also began to be categorized as diseased and dirty.” After decades of more lenient immigration policy starting in the 1960s, Markel and Stern reference a resurgence of restrictionist sentiments during the 1980s AIDS crisis; pervasive health-based xenophobia reemerged as a product of heightened fears of foreign disease-carriers.

Today, in our connected global community, public anxiety over the potential for foreign diseases to penetrate national borders has magnified. Laura Murphy, writing for *The Guardian*, identifies the pervasion of modern media rhetoric inaccurately portraying Latin American immigrants as disproportionately high-risk disease carriers, citing headlines such as “Border Patrol Agents Test Positive For Disease Carried By Immigrants” and slander asserting that immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border cause disease-based deaths of US children.

Journalists fortify this antiquated angle in contemporary articles through portrayals of Central American undocumented immigrants as disease-carriers and origins of epidemics. Writing for *The Chicago Tribune*,

Cal Thomas raises suspicions that immigrants from the south bring disease with them, and therefore should be denied entry into the US. He claims:

The Department of Homeland Security website published a list of restrictions and prohibitions on aliens wishing to enter the United States. Among those barred are people with a ‘communicable disease of public health significance.’ From various media reports it appears some of those flooding our southern border have, or are suspected of having, such diseases.

Rhetoric conflating immigrants with the impending arrival of unwanted germs permeates news articles and provokes irrational fear of newcomers. News media reflects enhanced, health-based xenophobia in the current call to close the US-Mexico border to safeguard against Ebola. Despite the reassurance of health officials, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergies and Disease, who remarked that while Ebola cases exist in the US, none have been reported in Central America, newscasters, journalists, and conservative politicians continue to perpetuate the tenuous concern that an Ebola epidemic will enter the US through an undocumented immigrant.

The Daily Caller further claimed that thousands of US children caught the “deadly EV-D68 enterovirus” this fall, which “was likely propelled through America by President Barack Obama’s decision to allow tens of thousands of Central Americans across the Texas border, according to a growing body of genetic and statistical evidence.” The Center for Disease Control and Prevention confirms that an unusually high number of US citizens fell ill this year with the EV-D68 enterovirus, a respiratory illness, but of the many patients with the virus, only twelve have died, and the cause of their deaths have not been attributed to the virus. Furthermore, the CDC does not accuse Central American undocumented immigrants of projecting the virus onto the US population; the report summarizing the disease, risks, and precautions never mentions Central Americans or immigrants. Thus, *The Daily Caller* disseminates an unsubstantiated statement that undocumented Central Americans in the US cause a break out of the virus, instilling fear in the public, ostracizing immigrants, and broadcasting disinformation. However, through citing purported “genetic and statistical evidence,” *The Daily Caller’s* article masquerades as a reliable and objective source. By skewing language to imply greater scientific evidence, the paper manipulates rhetoric to gain credibility and distort reality, while compounding preexisting xenophobia.

Alarmist analogues linking undocumented immigrants with impending natural disaster further stir xenophobic disquietude in news media consumers. National news outlets apply the term “flood” to describe the border crossings with dogged consistency. For example, NBC News, Fox News, *The New York Times*, CNN, *The Los Angeles Times*, CBS News, *The Huffington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, and many more prizewinning news sources propagate a sensationalist parallel in their use of “flood” as a descriptor for the humanitarian crisis, thereby metaphorically interlacing characterizations of immigration with uncontrollable waves of catastrophic waters. “Flood” dehumanizes the individual experiences and circumstances for each immigrant, imposes an assumed destructive nature on a vast population of people, and associates immigration with a negative image, inculcating readers with a reinforced bias.

Journalists further bolster the visual corollary of immigration as natural disaster with echoing metaphors and magnifying descriptors such as “flowing across” (*The Washington Post*), “engaged in a calamity” (*The Washington Post*), “surging across” (*The New York Times*), and “an unmanageable torrent” (*The Houston Chronicle*). When electing verbs such as “flowing” and “surging” that connote strong, immediate movements as adjectival expansions of the term “flood,” journalists develop inflated layers of alarm and immediacy to the potential destruction. “Calamity” confirms the threat of the “flood’s” devastation, and the imagery of “an unmanageable torrent,” a promulgation of mayhem and ruination, exemplifies vitriolic hyperbole that departs cohesively from the claim of objectivity. *The Los Angeles Times* similarly describes “a seemingly endless surge” of immigrants, aggravating fears of a ceaseless disaster. CBS News chides “Central Americans who are deluging the southern border with tens of thousands of their children.” Here, “deluging” denotes both catastrophic flooding of US lands and purposeful intent; the author reprimands perceived acts of deliberate devastation by Central American parents who inundate the US with their children.

The Houston Chronicle uses the verb “disgorge” to describe immigrants disembarking from a bus. A term often used to describe river overflows and oil spills, synonyms of “disgorge” include belch, spit, expel, vomit, and spew, and the connotations imply rapid expulsion of unwanted contents. Yet rather than insert a commonplace descriptor for “getting off the bus,” such as disembark, exit, alight, walk off, descend, or leave, the journalist decisively wrangled the undertone of the sentence by integrating an association between immigrants and vomit and floods. In a subsequent sentence, the author asserts that “the steep influx of children and families in particular has

caused turmoil,” sustaining the metaphoric conflation of Central American immigration as a turbulent, cataclysmic flood.

News media also distorts depictions of undocumented immigrants by highlighting an nonexistent suddenness of the situation. As illustrated by Roberto Suro, “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.” Suro analyzes the rises and dips in media attention to immigration, and postulates that spikes in coverage correlate with a heightened perception of a magnified issue. However, undocumented immigration occurs even when news outlets focus reporting elsewhere; thus, Suro contends that increases in immigration journalism inaccurately constructs public understanding of an immediate, isolated issue.

When discussing the “current crisis” (*The Washington Post*), reporters often omit the contextual backdrop, thereby failing to ground contemporary coverage in the historical palimpsest of social, political, and economic exigencies that continue to shape the current manifestations of Central American immigration issues. Between May and July of 2014, *The New York Times* delineated a “sudden mass,” an “influx,” and a “surge” of undocumented immigrant youths crossing the border in three articles, without acknowledging the historical framework which suggests that Central American immigration has not occurred suddenly, but rather continues as a trend ignited decades ago. By forgoing historical repercussions and reporting on immigration as an abrupt, unforeseen crisis, journalists fail to recount veritable information to their readers and demarcate Central American immigration as a precipitous, accelerating threat.

Perhaps the most efficacious appeal to latent xenophobia in US media consumers manifests in news articulations of imminent social disrupt upon the admittance of undocumented Central Americans to US society. The representations of immigrants’ social threat occur in two overarching tropes: devastation to physical and figurative social spaces, and drain on finite economic resources. In an article titled “In Texas’ Rio Grande Valley, A Seemingly Endless Surge of Immigrants” from June 13, 2014, *The Los Angeles Times* exposes the media’s preoccupation with the perceived social menace of immigration. Authors Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Cindy Carcamo illustrate undocumented immigrants crossing through the Rio Grande Valley, spoiling the peace of a riverside park, and disturbing US families enjoying picnics and ballgames. They report, “Anzalduas Park, a 96-acre expanse of close-cropped fields and woodland that sits on the southern bend of the river, has turned from an idyllic family recreation area into a high-traffic zone for

illegal migration.” In this description, Hennessy-Fiske and Carcamo juxtapose two antiquated, yet embedded traditions—the dream of bucolic, family-oriented America contrasted with the stereotype of the infiltrating southern neighbor. The authors surreptitiously provoke readers to contemplate the potential for US national values, such as the unified family and halcyonian pastoral spaces, to persist while “illegal migration” interrupts social settings.

These journalists further underscore the assumed disruptive nature of undocumented immigration in an account of a pregnant immigrant giving birth in the park: “Not long ago, a Honduran woman barely made it across the river before giving birth among the park’s red and blue picnic tables and signs warning ‘Children at Play.’” In selecting details connoting family values—such as the colorful picnic tables arranged and painted for family gatherings and the signs protecting US children—Hennessy-Fiske and Carcamo direct the emotion of their article to vilify the Honduran woman as an invader who engages in obscene activity in family settings. Rather than concentrate on the details of a woman who traveled thousands of miles from home while carrying a baby and gives birth without physicians’ aid, medical care, or privacy while alone in a strange country, the authors demonize her as a representative face for the Central American immigrants who threaten US families by going into labor while “children [are] at play.”

Fox News reinforces the imagery of immigration as social disruption with another allegory: “Imagine you’re about to sit down for supper when suddenly 760 folks show up on your front porch wanting fried catfish and hushpuppies.” This framing asserts that immigrants again threaten the viability of US family life, privacy, and resources. By interweaving allusions to invading private homes, demanding food, and interrupting a family dinner, the journalist constructs another correlation between the disparagement of family values and immigration by forging a tie between immigration and invasion, threat to property, and thinning of resources.

Fox News also inflates public concern for economic ramifications spurred by undocumented immigration. In an article titled, “Crisis in the Classroom: Surge in Illegal Immigrant Kids Poses Challenge for Schools,” reporters emphasize economic burdens for public school systems, claiming that immigration’s imposition of “additional strain on the resources” will prove to be a “major challenge for school administrators across the country.” Disregarding their adherence to a persistent opposition to tax increases that would serve to redistribute funds and assist struggling public school systems, Fox News shrewdly professes anxiety for the consequences of undocumented

immigration on public welfare in a strategic ploy to garner widespread opposition to immigration. Depicted as freeloaders and burdens to taxpayers, the article denigrates undocumented immigrants by presenting them as heretics of the “American dream”—of success achieved through steadfast determination and diligence. Their tactic molds undocumented immigrants into leeches sucking the US economy for undeserved benefits and into a population threatening the persistence of US “values” such as hard work and belief in the meritocracy.

The representation of undocumented immigrants as entitled economic parasites reverberates throughout news media. *The New York Times* reports “Child welfare had been outstripped by sudden increase [in immigrant children],” *The Independent Sentinel* cautions “Resources will be poured into illegal children instead of citizens,” and *The Chicago Tribune*, echoing the sentiments of Fox News, affirms that districts will be “stretching funds and setting off improvisation at public schools.” *The Houston Chronicle* asserts that immigration has “caused major overcrowding at Border Patrol stations severely overtaxing an agency and facilities.” Their article titled, “The Effect of Illegal Immigration on the Service Industry” also emphasizes immigration’s threat to job security for US citizens: “Given the increase in the supply of labor, service industry jobs are scarcer than they otherwise would be.” Finally, *The Washington Times* describes perceived consequences for Black Americans, urging readers to “focus on unemployment to get an idea of how African Americans and other historically disadvantaged groups are adversely affected by high levels of immigration.” By framing the angle of the article to foreground potential impediments to US citizens, rather than underscoring the pressing crisis confronting immigrants, journalistic rhetoric reinforces unilateral deliberation.

As exemplified by the cited studies and articles, many scholars and journalists have acknowledged and investigated the extent and ramifications of predetermined, perverted representations of immigration in the media. Despite the endurance of unsophisticated discourse in the news, the publication of their findings has dilatorily catalyzed a reevaluation of the consequences of euphemistic connotations. The Associated Press, the award-winning independent news-gathering organization that feeds stories to most major American news sources, publicly removed both “illegal immigrant” and “illegal” when used as a descriptor for a human from their style book on April 2, 2013. In a political and literary stance against defining a person based on a solitary behavior, the AP founded a precedent that has been gradually followed by news outlets such as *Vox*, National Public Radio, Univision, *USA*

Today, *Politico*, *Buzzfeed*, and University of California Los Angeles' student newspaper, *The Daily Bruin*.

Two weeks after the AP stylebook update, *The New York Times* released a statement intimating that while the corporation encourages “reporters and editors to consider alternatives [to “illegal”] when appropriate to explain the specific circumstances of the person in question, or to focus on actions,” the newspaper would not ban the usage of “illegal immigrant.” A public editor of *The New York Times*, Margaret Sullivan, argues for the reporters’ right to use “illegal” in an opinion piece published in 2012: “It is clear and accurate; it gets its job done in two words that are easily understood.” She refutes any “implication that those described that way necessarily have committed a crime,” thereby denying the potential for dehumanizing connotations of identities summarized by criminality.

Multidimensional perspectives have begun rippling through immigration coverage and complicating rhetoric in *The Chicago Tribune* as well. In an article titled, “When Children Cross Over the Border,” reporter Steve Chapman provides a human angle, investigating the perspectives of the newcomers, rather than simply potential impact on the US. He chastises news sources that inflate xenophobia and fear of health and safety threats on unfounded evidence and berates the bias in immigration discourse in a poignant plea to both journalists and the public: “The surge of kids is a logistical and humanitarian challenge but not a dangerous wave of pestilential predators and vermin. In pondering immigration policy, it's sometimes useful to keep in mind that we are, after all, talking about human beings.” Although reporters like Chapman complicate the homogeneity in immigration coverage, *The Chicago Tribune* maintains xenophobic undertones, as evidenced by the headlines such as “US Classrooms prepare for flood as migrants become pupils” and discussions of the “porous border,” taxpayer subsidies for undocumented immigrants, and immigrants’ potential to spread disease.

Other news outlets have similarly expressed hope that the insular viewpoints covering immigration will acknowledge and appreciate nuances in the conversation. CNN reported on bias in immigration rhetoric, exposing the danger of a Fox News article with a contextual framework constructed from opinions of health experts who overturn the article’s assertion that Ebola could spread in the US from Central American immigrants. CNN quotes Jeh Johnson, the Secretary of Homeland Security, who “warned [media outlets] against creating fear and anxiety in the public by passing on speculation and rumor.” Their article represents the tip of a latent, emergent body of

gradation in the one-sided perspective concomitant with immigration coverage in the news.

Many news analysts also reiterate the ramifications of caustic insinuations in media coverage on immigration. Victoria Esses, a professor of Psychology at University of Western Ontario, conducts research on the undertones coloring immigration reporting in Canada. Though her findings indicate a xenophobic, dehumanizing sensationalism, she remains hopeful that with more research, promulgation of the results, and widespread education, positive change will occur. In an interview with *Wired UK*, she says, "I believe that this is a problem that can be reversed. A major goal of this research is to determine how we can present a more impartial, fact-based view of immigrants and refugees, and counteract the negative messages that tend to be disseminated." She articulates a sentiment shared by many news critics: increasing illumination of the issue will precipitate a transition in the timbre of immigration dialogues.

The conclusive evidence derived from past studies and synthesized with contemporary analyses demonstrates a historical predilection for biased diction in news coverage of Central American immigration in the US. Myriad examples of metaphoric language that effuses adverse connotations percolate "objective" reporting of immigrants on the US-Mexico border. Incisive euphemisms in the news engender associations between immigrants and a slew of encroaching, nefarious menaces - from drug violence and terrorism to floods and plagues. Such associations aggravate preexisting xenophobia, heighten domestic anxieties, forgo rationality and objectivity, foster monolithic dialogue, erode informed policymaking, and inspire nationalistic racism. News analysts, professors, and journalists have begun to deconstruct vernacular rhetoric, inciting the development of progressive variations in immigration discourse. As news consumers, we also have an obligation to respond actively to racist imagery in the media. Through collective multi-fronted resistance, we can dismantle the tradition of interweaving reporting on Central American immigration with predatory, dehumanizing metaphors, overturn predetermined negative discourse, and facilitate informed, productive, and proactive conversation.

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