



Promoting Stalemate: The Media and US Policy on Migration

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I. Executive Summary

US media coverage of immigration has hindered effective policy reform for years, a trend which has been exacerbated by the recent transformation in the ways Americans get their news. The rise of cable television, talk radio, and the Internet has influenced public opinion of immigrants and even shaped immigration policy through their emphasis on “breaking news,” their disproportionate focus on illegality, and their oversimplification of a complex phenomenon by painting the migrant as the protagonist. This has conditioned and even distorted public perceptions by portraying a largely gradual, orderly, and legal phenomenon as chaotic, criminal, and controversial.

While this paper does not argue that the media was the principal impediment to immigration reform during past legislative debates, it shows that news coverage did play an important role in influencing public opinion and creating the current policy stalemate. Despite the public’s overall support for much of the reform agenda and widespread dissatisfaction with existing policies, the media coverage in many ways has heightened skepticism about immigration policy and thus made it more difficult to enact new policies.

II. Introduction

The US media have hindered effective policymaking on immigration for decades, as we will show in this paper, and their impact has increased in recent years as a result of an ongoing evolution in the media industry.¹ Deeply ingrained practices in American journalism have produced a narrative that conditions the public to associate immigration with illegality, crisis, controversy, and government failure. Meanwhile, new voices of advocacy operating in some corners of the media landscape have succeeded in mobilizing segments of the public to oppose policy initiatives, sometimes by exaggerating the narrative of immigration told by traditional news organizations. The combined effect is to promote stalemate on an issue that the public views as in need of urgent reform while conceding that it is also inherently difficult to resolve.

Supporters of radically different positions in recent debates on US immigration policy agree that the current system is broken; one need not favor any particular outcome to conclude that stalemate is a mark of failure in the policy process. Many actors in Washington and beyond played a role in that outcome, and the intent here is not to argue that the media were the decisive players or to rank their influence relative to others. The objective is to understand *how* the media conditioned public opinion and the policy landscape, as the results show that the media — both traditional journalism and new forms of expression — contributed to polarization and distrust.

In order to understand how coverage of immigration has evolved during a period of great transformation in the news media, various forms of content analysis were conducted on more than 80,000 news stories or commentaries from print, broadcast, and digital media dating back to 1980.²

¹ For purposes of this paper, the media are defined broadly to include traditional news organizations as well as news providers with clear ideological identities, commentators, and media personalities who attempt to influence public opinion on policy issues.

² This report is adapted from, and updates, the author’s research monograph, “The Triumph of No: How the Media Influence the Immigration Debate” which was published in September 2008 by the Brookings Institution and the

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

1. *Episodic coverage.* The legendary newspaper editor Eugene Roberts of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times* drew a distinction between stories that “break” and those that “ooze.” Immigration is a classic example of an issue that oozes. It develops gradually, and its full impact can be measured only over long periods of time. In contrast, coverage of immigration has been episodic, producing spikes of coverage and then periods when attention falls off. The spikes have been driven by dramatic set-piece events such as the Elian Gonzalez saga, congressional debates, and protest marches. The surges in coverage have conditioned the public and policymakers to think of immigration as a sudden event, often tinged with the air of crisis.
2. *Focus on illegality.* Illegal immigrants constitute less than a third of the foreign-born population in the United States (nearly 12 million out of total of more than 38 million)³, and that mark has been reached only in recent years. Nonetheless, illegal immigration and government’s efforts to control it have dominated the news coverage in all sectors of the media by wide margins for many years. This pattern of coverage would logically cause the public and policymakers to associate the influx of the foreign born with violations of the law, disruption of social norms, and government failures.
3. *Lack of context.* Immigrants, in particular, but also policymakers and advocates, have dominated the journalistic narratives to the exclusion of other critical actors, especially employers and consumers. At the simplest level, this has deprived the coverage of essential context by underemphasizing the role of the US labor market in determining the size and characteristics of immigrant flows and overemphasizing the role of government. When their attitudes toward immigration turn negative, audiences exposed to this kind of coverage can readily view immigrants as villains and themselves as victims. Distrust of government — a seeming accomplice or an incompetent protector — is a natural byproduct.

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

Today’s media coverage is guided by epistemological frameworks that delineate what constitutes news — frameworks that are deeply ingrained in American journalism and that have survived the extraordinary changes in the media industry. Thus, elements of both continuity and transformation need to be taken into account. The relative newcomers of cable television and the blogosphere, for instance, have shown the same basic tendencies that were evident decades ago in broadcast television and newspapers, even as they introduced an element of strident advocacy into journalism.

Norman Lear Center. The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of research teams at Brookings, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California. The analytical findings presented here, as in the original report, are the author’s alone.

³ Michael Hoefler, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2008*, (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, 2009), http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2008.pdf.

In the 2006 and 2007 immigration debates, the changed media landscape disproportionately amplified discrete sectors of public opinion that aimed to block policy initiatives. In the first act of this drama, the Spanish-language media helped mobilize huge crowds to protest legislation passed by the House of Representatives that would have mandated an unprecedented crackdown on unauthorized migrants, including their jailing on felony charges. New voices in the media played an even more significant role in the legislative drama's second act. In 2007, conservative voices on cable television news shows, talk radio, and the Internet mobilized opposition to provisions of a Senate bill that would have offered legal status — or amnesty, as it was labeled — to unauthorized migrants.

Both cases of advocacy, appearing first on one end of the debate and then on the other, represent a new kind of political mobilization in which elected officials, interest groups, traditional media, and new media all converge to animate public opinion. These mobilizations were short, intense, and oppositional in that they were designed to block a legislative action rather than to advance an affirmative agenda. And, in both cases, the most vocal and aroused segments of the population were those who espoused the *minority* views on illegal immigration. On one end of the policy spectrum this translated to calls for an enforcement-only approach while on the other end, the focus was entirely on legalization.

Meanwhile, the broad middle of American public opinion is beset with ambivalence towards immigration, particularly illegal immigration, and the effect of the news media can also be seen in these attitudes. At the most basic level there is considerable fluctuation in the extent to which immigration is perceived as an issue that needs to be addressed by public policy. During periods of greater media attention and policy debate, larger shares of the public tend to see it as a top concern but then attention drops off rapidly when the spotlight shifts to other issues. Clear majorities of the American public consistently favor measures that would allow the current population of unauthorized migrants to remain in the United States through some kind of a legalization program. And that view is far stronger than the strain of public opinion that favors an enforcement-only approach, which would force the unauthorized to leave the country. But, support for legalization programs is deeply tinged with anxiety. Although this fear is most concentrated among Americans who are older, white, and politically conservative, concerns about illegal immigration (as expressed in public opinion polls) have increased markedly across *all* segments of the public since the start of the decade. The nature of the media coverage of immigration in recent years helps explain this combination of broadly generous attitudes blended with anxiety in the mainstream of public opinion, just as it also illuminates the agitation at the far ends of the political spectrum.

III. Background

New Immigrants, New Media

The current wave of immigration has developed slowly and steadily since the 1970s. During that same period, American journalism has undergone a profound transformation. Although these two very large and very important events are unrelated, they have intersected in ways that make the search for policy solutions on immigration more difficult.

The 1970 US census reported a foreign-born population of 9.6 million, the lowest mark of the 20th century. By an even more important measure, the United States was less a nation of immigrants in

1970 than it had been at any time in its history.⁴ The share of the foreign born in the total population dipped to 4.7 percent, the lowest point ever recorded. At that very moment, however, new flows of immigrants from Latin America and Asia were developing and gaining momentum. By 1980, a new era of immigration was underway and the number of foreign born shot to 14 million. Over the next 25 years, the United States experienced the most intense influx of immigrants in its history, bringing the total to nearly 36 million in 2005. As of this writing, estimates put the US foreign-born population at 39 million. That is close to 13 percent of the population, a share approaching the historic peak recorded in 1890, when immigrants represented 14.8 percent of the population. The United States is once again very much a nation of immigrants, and the current influx appears to have staying power.

The current era of migration has coincided with sweeping structural changes to traditional American news media. When the new migrant flows got underway, the media landscape was governed largely by journalistic norms that were developed in the mid-20th century and emphasized impartial reporting, nonpartisan independence, and aggressive exercise of the press's watchdog role. The publication of the Pentagon Papers and the uncovering of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s represented the apogee of this kind of journalism, which emerged from a media industry with a healthy economic base. At the time, a handful of major news organizations defined the standards and set the news agenda. The three commercial television networks, major metropolitan newspapers, and the national newsmagazines exercised extraordinary reach and influence.

Since then the media landscape has fragmented, and impartial journalism has been relegated to one of several forms of conveying news. That is the result of continuous and accelerating transformation across many domains since the 1980s, and a detailed accounting of this evolution is not our objective here. In sum, technological developments have multiplied the means by which information is received and have created a continuous, highly competitive 24-hour news cycle via cable, satellite, and the Internet. Policy changes, such as repeal of the fairness doctrine, have opened the public broadcasting airwaves to new, often more partisan, voices. Both new technology (the Internet) and old technology (radio) have enabled participation by audiences that were once passive recipients of information. Social and demographic change, as exemplified by hyper-suburbanization and gentrification, have challenged the high-penetration, mass-market business model for metropolitan news outlets. And, the media have mirrored developments in the political arena as well. Heightened partisanship and the proliferation of less structured, often polarized, interest groups have made it more difficult for news organizations to present a coherent news agenda that attracts broad consensus and accurately represents contemporary realities and policy choices.

The trends are stark and accelerating. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ): the network evening news broadcasts have lost roughly 1 million viewers a year for the past 25 years; Sunday newspaper circulation dropped by 11.4 percent between 2001 and 2007; and meanwhile, 37 percent of Americans now regularly get some news on the Internet and the audience for cable news prime-time talk shows jumped by 7 percent in 2007 alone.⁵ This paper explores how the failure of policymaking on immigration is related to changes in the way Americans get their news. In

⁴ Migration Policy Institute, *Foreign-Born Population and Foreign Born as Percentage of the Total US Population, 1850 to 2007* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2008), <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/charts/final.fb.shtml>.

⁵ Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2008*, (Washington, DC: Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008), http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008/narrative_overview_intro.php?media=1.

particular, our intent is to understand the news media's role in helping to engender the current policy environment, which is marked by acute polarization and stalemate amid widespread dissatisfaction with the existing policies.

Political Fragmentation and Grand Bargains: The Failure of Reform

Throughout the current era, immigration has been subject to its own peculiar political dynamics. Both major political parties are internally divided. There is also fragmentation among labor unions, business associations, and even ethnic and civil-rights groups. This is not primarily a matter of two sides holding starkly differing views, pro and con, regarding basic principles (although there is some of that). Instead, much of the fractiousness involves advocates with narrow agendas: growers seeking seasonal farm workers, high-tech firms wanting engineers, libertarians opposed to national identity documents, proponents of rigorous enforcement measures, Asian groups preoccupied with family visas, Latino groups focused on legalization for the unauthorized, others preoccupied with refugees and particular nationalities, unions wanting to grow by organizing immigrants, and the labor movement trying to protect their existing members from competition with immigrants. And there are many other sides to the prism.

Given this kind of political fragmentation, immigration is quintessentially the type of issue that requires a nonpartisan, multiplayer compromise to successfully produce new policy in Washington. Over the course of repeated debates since the 1980s, the basic policy options have remained remarkably the same. Border control and worksite enforcement have been constant themes, along with the manipulation of visa categories to control future flows. Legalization programs for the current population of unauthorized immigrants have also been considered repeatedly, as have temporary worker programs. And, for the most part, the political objective has also remained the same: formulate a grand legislative bargain and forge an ad hoc coalition in which participants are all required to sacrifice something to get most of what they want.

All Elian, All the Time: The Media's Emphasis on Illegality

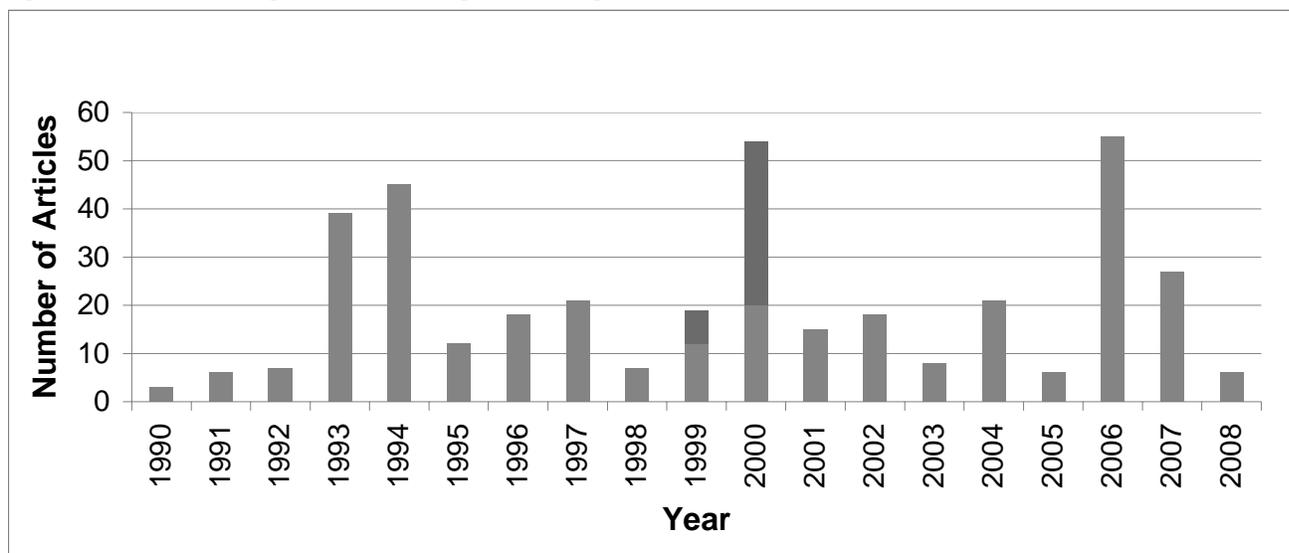
The year 2000 will be remembered in the United States for many reasons: a disputed presidential election, the waning halcyon days between the Cold War and 9/11, and the peak of an economic expansion that pushed unemployment to its lowest point in three decades. But 2000 also should be remembered as a milestone in the history of the American population: that year, more than 1.5 million people born abroad entered the United States, according to the best available estimates. It was the largest single-year influx in the current era of migration and perhaps the largest in American history.⁶

While immigration in general garnered a good deal of attention from the news media in 2000, the saga of a single 9-year-old Cuban boy dominated coverage of the topic. The Elian Gonzalez soap opera, with many twists and turns over his custody and immigration status after his mother died at sea while attempting to reach the United States with him, accounted for more than half (55 percent) of all the immigration coverage in *The New York Times* that year and about two-thirds of the

⁶ Jeffrey S. Passel and Roberto Suro, *Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in US Immigration 1992-2004*, (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2005), <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=53>.

immigration stories on the CBS Evening News (63 percent) and in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (66 percent).⁷

Figure 1. CBS Evening News Coverage of Immigration, 1990-2008



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

By virtue of the attention it grabbed and the messages it conveyed, the Elian story is emblematic of the way American journalism has covered immigration across an entire era: the emphasis fell preponderantly on migration outside of authorized channels. Government actors emerged as inept and inconsistent. The most passionate voices in the public arena drew vivid coverage. Public policy choices floundered in ambiguity. The overall impression was one of chaos, controversy, and contradictions. And that is the overall impression of migration that the media have delivered to the American public for nearly three decades. That is the perception that has shaped public opinion and policymaking. As we shall see, that perception — or misperception — derives from both the kinds of stories selected for coverage and the volume in which they were produced.

IV. How Media Coverage Has Influenced Immigration Policy

Although there has never been another story quite like Elian’s, our analysis of immigration coverage since 1980 reveals three trends: highly episodic coverage, an emphasis on illegality, and a lack of context. We will now examine each of these individually.

⁷ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis of Immigration Coverage by Traditional News Organizations: 1980-2008. Detailed findings from the USC-Annenberg and Project for Excellence in Journalism content analyses can be found in *Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/0925_immigration_dionne.aspx. See also “Note on Content Analysis Methodology” at the conclusion of this chapter.

Episodic Coverage

For the most part, immigration is a slow and gradual event, and yet the news media has primarily covered it as a matter of breaking news. Some of the events driving coverage, such as enactment of major changes in immigration policy, have been of lasting importance; others, like flaps over the employment of illegal nannies by Cabinet nominees, have been sensational and short-lived. Even when such breaking stories are entirely newsworthy taken one at a time — which is generally the way they are assessed by editors — they are misleading when taken as a whole.

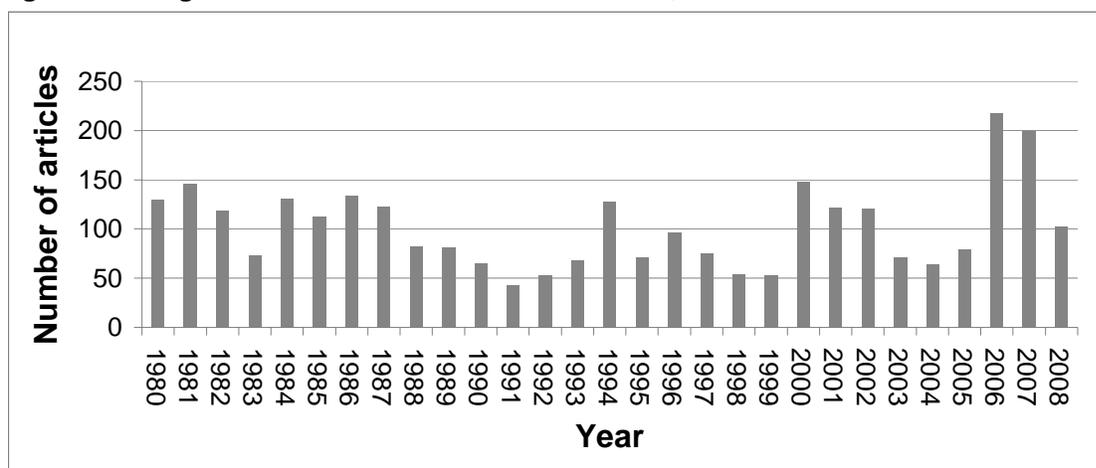
To measure the pace of coverage, the author led a team of researchers at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California that examined more than 17,000 news stories produced by print, radio, and television news organizations from 1980 to 2008 and more than 13,000 blog posts from the height of the immigration debate in 2007. In addition, the author drew on a content analysis of more than 70,000 news stories across all major media platforms conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.⁸ Across all news organizations and all platforms, the pattern is the same: from year to year, even month to month, the volume of coverage spikes in response to set-piece events and unexpected incidents then recedes. Even as the underlying migration kept mounting and Washington continuously debated policy responses, media interest largely faded in the absence of dramatic occurrences that met the simplest definition of breaking news. This pattern is evident going back three decades, but the fluctuations in the volume of coverage have become ever wilder in recent years. In this regard, the most recent transformations in the media, through the rise of cable television, talk radio, and the Internet, have reinforced old journalistic norms by magnifying distortions already evident in the coverage.

To understand how traditional journalistic norms have influenced immigration coverage, it is useful to start with a publication that acts as self-appointed guardian of those norms and that in fact exercises profound influence over news judgment in the entire profession. Although *The New York Times* has produced some of the most extensive and consistent coverage, the newspaper's volume of coverage varies considerably. For the purposes of this study, we examined only news articles produced in the paper's Washington and national bureaus, excluding metropolitan coverage and stories in opinion and feature sections. From 1980 to 2008, the average volume was 102 articles a year, but ranged from a low of 43 in 1991 to a high of 217 in 2006 — a news-packed year with immigrant marches in many American cities and intense congressional debate of the issue.⁹ While the size of the foreign-born population grew steadily over this entire period, the volume of coverage varied considerably from year to year (see Figure 2).

⁸ Detailed findings from the USC-Annenberg and Project for Excellence in Journalism content analyses can be found in *Democracy in the Age of New Media*. See also “Note on Content Analysis Methodology” at the conclusion of this chapter.

⁹ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

Figure 2. Immigration Articles in *The New York Times*, 1980-2008



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

The peaks in coverage are all readily explained by major news events. But, the chronicle of these events renders a histrionic narrative entirely at odds with the underlying development of steady, largely unremarkable migration flows. And the same variability in volume is evident across the entire landscape of journalism such that there can be little doubt that this pattern of episodic coverage has conditioned perceptions of immigration for the American population. This peril is not unique to immigration. The same phenomenon is evident in other realms of policy characterized by slow, steady developments on the ground and periodic bouts of attention by policymakers, such as health care and education.

A journalistic narrative that lurches brusquely between spikes in coverage is likely to create a forceful impression. Audiences will quite naturally come to associate the topic with the fast pace and high drama of breaking news. The larger truth of gradual demographic change and its ancillary effects on society, the labor force, and many other segments of life in the United States can easily get lost when this pattern of coverage is repeated year after year, decade after decade. Such misimpressions not only apply to the way immigration and immigrants are perceived, but they also shape the policy environment. Primed by the pace of coverage, the public might logically assume that Washington is dealing with a crisis or a sudden threat when immigration debates make headlines. In fact, policymaking, like the growth of the foreign-born population itself, has developed slowly over the course of several years each time the subject has been addressed.

The Narrative of Illegality

Unauthorized immigrants now account for less than a third of the foreign-born population in the United States — a peak reached only in recent years. Nonetheless, migrants who have lived in the country without legal status, whether they arrived by foot across the Mexican border or by raft across the Straits of Florida, have drawn much more coverage than those whose presence is blessed by the US government. As a result, the cumulative portrait drawn by nearly 30 years of American journalism emphasizes illegal or uncontrolled migration rather than the much larger movement of people that has been legal and orderly. This emphasis on illegality applies not only to the means by which people enter the country but also to their activities once here. From prison riots by Cuban Marielitos in the early 1980s to murders committed by the predominately Central American Mara Salvatrucha street gangs in this decade, criminality by immigrants has been another recurring and

pervasive theme. People who break the law inevitably draw more attention from journalists than the multitudes who obey the law, and when those lawbreakers are identifiable as members of a group by virtue of national origin, race, nativity, or all three, stereotyping is equally inevitable.

In addition, coverage of the government's role in regard to immigration has been dominated by efforts to devise and implement policies to control illegal immigration. This coverage has overshadowed important legislation and policy processes in the realm of legal immigration that have had much larger and longer-lasting effects on the nation. Scant coverage of the laws, policies, and bureaucracies governing legal migration has meant that the public has been less attuned to government's role in the epochal changes legal immigration has brought to all realms of American society. Even government failures have received less attention when they relate to legal immigration, such as persistent backlogs in processing citizenship and visa applications, than those involving illegal immigration. Instead of focusing on the policies and practices that have had the greatest impact — those regarding legal migration flows — the news media have been preoccupied, in both breaking-news coverage and in enterprise and investigative reporting, with efforts to control illegal flows. Thus, an element of distortion has also developed from coverage of government's role.

These conclusions are based on the content analysis conducted at USC-Annenberg that examined coverage by a variety of news organizations from 1980 to 2007.¹⁰ That coverage is very clearly dominated by various forms of illegality, including: unauthorized entry into the United States and efforts by the government to control it, criminal behavior by immigrants, and malfeasance or incompetence by immigration officials. For example, an analysis of 1,848 Associated Press stories on immigration topics from 1980 to 2007 showed that 79 percent fit into the framework of illegality. Of 2,614 stories on immigration in *The New York Times* over the same period, 86 percent dealt with illegality in various forms, and that included 83 percent of the coverage in Washington and 88 percent of the articles from elsewhere in the country. Of 381 stories about immigration on the CBS Evening News from 1990 to 2007, 87 percent fit the framework of illegality. Results from other news organizations show the same pattern.

The media has tended to ignore legal immigration even when set-piece news events would have justified coverage. For example, in 1990 Congress passed the first major revision of legal immigration statutes in 25 years, substantially increasing — and changing the composition of — migration flows.

The Washington Post covered the debate leading up to enactment with a total of 2,078 words in four routine Capitol Hill stories; the bill's potential impact was not examined in Washington's newspaper of record until a week after it passed.¹¹ In contrast, in 1986 when Congress produced a law dealing exclusively with illegal immigration, the *Post* published ten stories about the deliberations in the month prior to passage and seven follow-ups in the immediate aftermath.¹²

A new element was added to the narrative of illegality early in this decade, and CNN's Lou Dobbs was its most notable proponent. Advocates of tougher enforcement measures have long castigated unauthorized immigrants as economic opportunists willing to undercut wages while also serving as a drain on public services and eroding the rule of law. Dobbs led the way in characterizing

¹⁰ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

unauthorized immigrants as threats to the health and safety of ordinary Americans, portraying them as a category of people who are not merely undesirable but who need to be expelled in order to preserve the nation. Dobbs is by no means an original thinker. He has aped some of nativism's oldest tropes, but he has done it as the anchor of the flagship broadcast on a network that promotes itself as "the most trusted name in news." He has frequently used the language of conquest, an "army of invaders," to describe the migrants, and has described native-born US citizens as "anchor babies," alleging incorrectly that having a child here will protect an unauthorized immigrant from deportation. Dobbs has accused unauthorized migrants with infecting the American population with a variety of diseases, including leprosy, and when confronted with factual errors on such accounts, as he was by Lesley Stahl during an interview for "60 Minutes" on CBS, he has been defiant, telling Stahl, "if we reported it, it's a fact."¹³ Dobbs, who has generated notable ratings gains for CNN, was subsequently given a slot by CBS doing weekly commentary on "The Early Show."

And, Dobbs has not stood alone. Bill O'Reilly on Fox News has repeatedly recounted crimes committed by illegal migrants as evidence of failed immigration policies, growing melodramatic at times as in an infamous shouting match with his colleague Geraldo Rivera in April 2007. "You want open-border anarchy; that's what you want," O'Reilly shouted when Rivera tried to argue that a drunk driver's immigration status was not relevant to his crime.¹⁴ Michelle Malkin, a prominent conservative blogger and Fox commentator, took the same tack in a January 2008 post that was headlined, "Twice-deported illegal-alien criminal is Arizona serial rapist suspect: The bloody consequence of open borders, part 9,999,999."¹⁵

This rhetorical assault on illegal immigration has been directed not only at migrants but also at the government, and often in more vociferous terms.

Washington has manifestly failed in its stated aims of controlling, let alone ending, illegal migration. The size and continued growth of the unauthorized population attest to that. The key question about the framing of immigration coverage is not a matter of accuracy, but of attitudes. Specifically, one has to ask whether the coverage has heightened skepticism about immigration policy in a way that makes the enactment of new policies more difficult. And in fact, there is abundant evidence from the most recent congressional debate that doubts about the government's ability to control immigration became one of the major arguments against enactment of comprehensive reforms. Senator John McCain put it simply, explaining why Congress failed to formulate a new policy in 2007: "Many Americans did not believe us when we said we would secure our borders, and so we failed in our efforts."¹⁶ There is no ready means to measure how much journalism has contributed to this perception through the way it has framed a narrative of illegality. But it certainly has been a factor. So, too, has been another characteristic of the immigration coverage: misplaced protagonism.

¹³ Lesley Stahl, "Lou Dobbs, 'Advocacy' Journalist?" CBS News "60 Minutes," May 6, 2007, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/03/60minutes/main2758082.shtml?source=search_story.

¹⁴ Transcript of Bill O'Reilly and Geraldo Rivera exchange on "The O'Reilly Factor" on Fox News, April 5, 2007, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,264526,00.html>.

¹⁵ Michelle Malkin, "Twice-deported illegal-alien criminal is Arizona serial rapist suspect: The bloody consequence of open borders, part 9,999,999," blog posting on michellemalkin.com, Jan. 14, 2008, <http://michellemalkin.com/2008/01/14/twice-deported-illegal-alien-criminal-is-arizona-serial-rapist-suspect/>.

¹⁶ Speech by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) before the National Association of Latino Elected Officials conference in Washington, DC, on June 28, 2008, http://www.cfrterrorism.org/publication/16688/mccains_speech_at_naleo_on_immigration.html.

Migrants as Perpetrators

A rich body of historical and social science literature has amply demonstrated that large-scale, continuous migration almost always results from the interaction of many factors. At the simplest level, migration is the product of two things: *push factors*, which are the political, social, economic, and environmental drivers that cause people to want to leave their communities of origin; and *pull factors*, those that attract them to a given destination, such as local demand for a particular type of labor. When a migration flow has developed over years, it can also generate its own momentum, as migrants seek to reunite with their families and economic ties develop between sending communities and their diasporas. Suffice to say that beyond oozing, immigration is multi-dimensional. And American journalism is no better suited to covering stories that are multi-dimensional than it is to those that are one-dimensional.

All storytelling, whether factual or fictional, is easiest when narratives can be constructed around the actions of a single person or a group of people. Narratives beg for protagonists, whether they are heroes or villains, victims or perpetrators. This imperative can have particularly perilous consequences when applied to a phenomenon like immigration, and yet migration lends itself to simple narratives in which the migrant is the obvious protagonist. After all, moving from one country to another provides a clear plot with a beginning, middle, and end. It is the kind of dramatic action that readily drives narratives, especially when it involves physical peril, acts of illegality, or both. But, even though the migrants attract the spotlight, an excessive emphasis on them tends to obscure the many social forces that impel their actions. The result can be a deceptive oversimplification.

Taking account of all the factors that produce migration is, of course, beyond the scope of any single news story. But over an extensive body of work, one could hope to see a balance of the individual and societal factors. Instead, the impulse to develop narratives with migrants as the protagonists has proved irresistible for an entire generation of journalists. The story told repeatedly, until it has become a cliché, is of the individual migrating to seek a better life. Whether portrayed sympathetically or not, the migrant is the protagonist who determines the arc of the narrative. The nation or the community at the end of this arc — the destination for the migrant's journey — is a fundamentally passive party. When that narrative is repeated over and over again, an audience in that nation or community will come to see itself as a bystander. When migration is portrayed as the migrant's doing, then all the consequences of migration befall the migrant. And when perceptions turn negative, those consequences are all the migrants' fault and the receiving community will come to see itself as a hapless victim.

The migration narrative produced by American journalism has significantly undervalued the role the United States itself has played in stimulating and shaping the influx. In particular, media coverage has underplayed the importance of the US labor market in determining the size and content of migration flows over many years. The foreign born in general, and especially the young males from Latin America who make up the bulk of the illegal flow, have among the highest labor-force participation rates of any group, given that work is often their primary reason for being here.¹⁷ And, not surprisingly, the actual size of that flow varies from year to year according to demand for these

¹⁷See for example the Pew Hispanic Center's series, *Latino Labor Report* for 2003, 2004, 2006, and 2008, available at <http://pewhispanic.org/topics/index.php?TopicID=32>

kinds of workers. When employers need more workers during economic expansions, the flow increases; during economic downturns, fewer migrants come.¹⁸

Washington policymakers of both parties and across several administrations have recognized these realities — at least symbolically — since the onset of the current migration wave. The need to make the “jobs magnet” less attractive had been a prominent feature of federal debates about the control of illegal immigration since the mid-1970s. And America’s employers, acting both directly and through lobbyists, have explicitly influenced the development of immigration policies over the past three decades to ensure a supply of foreign workers, including a sizable number outside the legal immigration system. Despite their importance, however, employers have been largely offstage and unseen in the migration drama as it has been portrayed by the US media. Of course, there have been important exceptions — excellent stories on specific industries, employers, and the role of work in attracting immigrants — but our intent here is to understand the broad narrative that emerges from the bulk of the coverage. From that perspective, American journalism at best has not fully informed the public and at worst has misled it. As with all media, the three broadcast networks ramped up their coverage of immigration in 2006 and 2007 when it became the subject of congressional debate. But even during this spike, employers drew little attention. An analysis of the 201 stories about immigration that were aired on the three broadcast networks’ flagship evening news shows in 2006 and 2007 found that employers were quoted in only 12 stories.¹⁹ In contrast, immigrants were interviewed or made statements in 58 stories. On the policy side, only seven stories made mention of employer sanctions, and it was a minor element in most of them. Meanwhile, 29 of the evening news broadcast pieces were about the border and the federal government’s failed efforts there. This same distorted narrative is also apparent in coverage set in American communities and that focuses on local issues.

Over the past two decades, a burst of extraordinary economic development and population growth in the Washington-area suburbs of Northern Virginia has coincided with the rise of a new immigrant population, mostly from Central America. Established white, middle-class, suburban populations found themselves contending with rapid population change. In several communities, this produced widespread anxieties and some public displays of animosity toward the newcomers. In response, local governments have attempted to impose their own immigration controls with a variety of measures such as closing down day-labor hiring sites or denying public services to unauthorized migrants. A similar course of events has played out in many other communities across the country.

An analysis of a sample of 312 articles published by *The Washington Post* from 2004 to 2007 on immigration controversies in Northern Virginia found that only 14 focused on the employment of immigrants or their economic impact, and only four actually quoted individual employers.²⁰ This omission from the vast majority of the coverage is all the more extraordinary because much of the controversy was about day laborers, and thus the migration issue was framed specifically as a matter of employment.

¹⁸ Passel and Suro, *Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in US Immigration 1992-2004*; and Rakesh Kochhar, *Latino Labor Report, 2008: Construction Reverses Job Growth for Latinos*, (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=88>.

¹⁹ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

When employers are absent from migration narratives like the *Post's* coverage of the Northern Virginia controversies, a critical element of context is missing. It is as if the audience was hearing only half of a conversation, or more appropriately, half of a transaction. The missing half is the part that explains the role that the audience, the community itself, has played in bringing about the migration to the extent it has benefited from the immigrants' employment. But the coverage was focused elsewhere. While only 14 stories focused on employment, 62 focused on the reaction — most of it negative — that the immigrant influx and attendant controversies had provoked among residents, and 54 stories focused on the political impact. The bulk of the coverage — 142 stories of the 312 assessed — focused on debates, decisions, and actions by public officials.²¹ Thus, the policy disputes as they were worked out in governmental settings were the overwhelming focus of the coverage, outstripping employment — the primary cause of the influx — by a factor of ten to one.

Whether intended or not, the message of this narrative is that immigrants have provoked a crisis in public policy that is disassociated from any underlying social, demographic, or economic trends. Moreover, it is framed as a crisis that can be resolved by policies aimed primarily, if not exclusively, at the immigrants without addressing the larger dynamics that produced the migration. This kind of framing would be almost inconceivable on other issues. Imagine, for example, coverage of a policy debate over energy that did not prominently feature oil and automobile manufacturers, or coverage of health policy debate that did not delve into the roles of hospitals, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies. In the case of immigration, the media's failure to adequately provide context for the policy challenges has produced both lack of understanding and frustration with government's inability to resolve them.

The Road to Stalemate

The tendency toward hyperbolic coverage of policymaking has become more pronounced as the transformation of the media industry has gathered momentum, and it was most obvious in the most recent round of policymaking. In 1986, for example, when Congress enacted immigration legislation, coverage of the topic in *The New York Times* was 20 percent higher than the year before.²² In 1996, when Congress acted again, there was a 37 percent boost over the preceding year. But in the most recent round, coverage in 2006 spiked 175 percent over the year before. The same pattern is evident in the coverage by many other news organizations. The combined coverage on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" programs jumped by 67 percent in 1996 versus the preceding year; in 2006, it more than tripled compared with the previous year. Associated Press coverage was up by 67 percent in 1996 over the year before and by 128 percent in 2006 compared with 2005.²³

A variety of factors were undoubtedly at play in producing this pattern, but it is so consistent across so many news organizations that it is tempting to look for structural factors. As we shall see in the next section, the most recent immigration debate took place in a restructured media environment featuring, as never before, influential participation by cable television, talk radio, and bloggers. That structural change appears to have accentuated the traditional journalistic tendency to focus on immigration when it is a subject of breaking news. As the media environment has become more crowded and varied, competition to cover hot topics has increased.

²¹ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

Developments in Washington have also created new spaces for new media voices that seek to influence policy. The immigration debates of 2006 and 2007 took place at time of turmoil and institutional weakness both in the White House and on Capitol Hill. President George W. Bush saw both his popularity and influence plummet soon after his 2004 reelection due to a variety of factors, including the then difficult course of the Iraq war and the botched response to Hurricane Katrina. Meanwhile, infighting and leadership changes split congressional Republicans, and in 2007, Democrats were trying to protect recent and vulnerable gains that had given them control of both houses. Media voices took advantage of this leadership vacuum.

As Bush began his second term, Rush Limbaugh, the self-appointed guardian of the conservative movement and host of the most popular show on talk radio, warned that immigration had the potential to fatally split the Republican Party. Like many other commentators on the right, Limbaugh did not attack Bush directly, even as the president tried to revive his comprehensive immigration reform plan; instead, Limbaugh emphasized the need to secure the borders. As 2005 passed, stances toughened. In April, Limbaugh repeatedly praised a demonstration by the Minuteman Project and by August he was warning congressional Republicans that they would suffer politically if they did not take action on immigration enforcement. By October, Dobbs was criticizing Bush for “21 months of silence on the issue of immigration reform” and chastising the Republican-led Congress for not taking up the issue.²⁴ At the end of November, Bush took a two-day trip to Arizona and Texas in which he promised more border enforcement, but Fox News host Bill O’Reilly painted the visit as a political effort to shore up his standing with conservatives and questioned Bush’s commitment to get tough. “The president has been intimidated by the far left,” he said.²⁵ House Republicans heard the message coming from conservative media and rushed through an immigration bill composed exclusively of enforcement measures just before they adjourned in the final days of 2005. The most controversial aspect of the legislation would have made it a felony to be in the country illegally and would have criminalized giving any assistance to an unauthorized migrant — even a meal from a soup kitchen.

On March 10, 2006, more than 100,000 people marched through the streets of downtown Chicago to protest the House bill.²⁶ Latino immigrants, their US-born children, labor unions, church groups, and immigrant-rights advocates massed together and demanded that the legislation be defeated. “We are not criminals!” marchers incensed by the bill’s criminalization provision chanted repeatedly. And their accompanying threat — “Today we march, tomorrow we vote” — was aimed not only at Republicans but also at any Democrats who might want to avoid tackling the immigration issue. By May 1, similar scenes had been repeated in more than 120 US cities with protests that involved more

²⁴ Statement of CNN commentator Lou Dobbs on “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” October 19, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0510/19/ldt.01.html>.

²⁵ Statement of Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly on “The O’Reilly Factor,” November 29, 2005, http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&ct=res&cd=2&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnewt.org%2FDefault.aspx%3Ftabid%3D102%26mid%3D380%26articleId%3D1769%26articleType%3DArticleView%26SkinSrc%3D%255BG%255DSkins%252F_default%252FNo%2BSkin%26ContainerSrc%3D%255BG%255DContainers%252F_default%252FNo%2BContainer&ei=19HASu3xA4nQ8Qbxtu22AQ&rct=j&q=Bill+O%27Reilly+%22The+president+has+been+intimidated%22+by+the+far+left+drastic+action&usq=AFQjCNFnK_so1yzcZIZ8tCa-5WAAHIODag.

²⁶ Editorial, “Fight for Rights: Tens of Thousands March for Immigration Reform,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 2006.

than 3.5 million people, according to estimates by the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.²⁷

The marches represented not only one of the largest civic mobilizations in American history but also one of the least structured and most spontaneous, having been coordinated only loosely on a national level and having involved a variety of ad hoc coalitions in individual cities. No clearly identifiable leaders, organizations, or political agendas emerged from all that activity. However, one enduring and growing institution did play a central role in the marches: the Spanish-language media. The national television networks Univision and Telemundo, as well as dozens of local affiliates and hundreds of radio stations, promoted the marches and even offered explicit instructions to participants on how to behave. White T-shirts were the dress of choice, and US flags were far preferable to those of the home country. In Los Angeles, for example, three hugely popular radio hosts, Eddie “*El Piolin*” (Tweety Bird) Sotelo, Ricardo “*El Mandril*” (The Baboon) Sanchez, and Renan “*El Cucuy*” (The Boogeyman) Almendarez Coello, set aside rivalries and their penchant for raucous, often off-color humor to join forces behind the protests. Just as conservative media powers outside of traditional journalism helped propel restrictionist legislation, the equally untraditional ethnic media helped block it.

Several major immigration bills had been introduced in the Senate in 2005, but serious maneuvering did not get under way until just after the marches began. As Washington was immersed in weeks of negotiations and debate, the protests gathered momentum around the country. Though many political factors were at play, the marches kept attention focused on the issue and kept up the pressure on Democrats to block the House bill. In May 2006, a bipartisan Senate coalition passed a comprehensive immigration bill that included a legalization program that would cover most unauthorized migrants, a temporary worker program, and a series of enforcement measures. Given that conservative Republicans controlled the House there was never much chance that the two drastically different pieces of legislation could be reconciled into a bill that could become law. But, in 2006, the Latino radio hosts countered the conservative talkers, and then the Senate countered the House. The result was a stalemate until the November 2006 elections produced a new Congress with fragile Democratic majorities in both houses, setting the stage for the next round.

Stalemate, Act II

After the Democratic victories in 2006, quiet work got under way in Washington to revive comprehensive immigration reform. By early spring 2007, intensive negotiations involving congressional leaders and the White House were taking place. The political strategy, conceived largely by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), was to negotiate behind closed doors, free from the influence of the media. Then, once a deal had been reached, the bill would be taken directly to the Senate floor without hearings or a campaign of public persuasion. Kennedy hoped to minimize debate and amendments so as to produce a quick vote before outside forces could interfere.

On May 17, a Thursday, Kennedy and his allies unveiled what would have been the most massive immigration policy reform in more than two decades. It not only addressed all the pending issues involved with illegal immigration — guest workers, legalization, and increased enforcement — but also proposed a profound change in the legal immigration system, introducing a “merit-based”

²⁷ Bada, Xochitl, et al, eds., *Invisible No More: Mexican Migrant Civic Participation in the United States*, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006).

system that would weigh potential residents according to their economic utility. The plan was to begin debate the following Monday and have a final vote before week's end.

Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL), an opponent of the legislation, said Kennedy and his allies wanted to get the legislation passed “before Rush Limbaugh could tell the American people what was in it.”²⁸ Kennedy was unable to hold to the hurry-up schedule due at least in part to resistance from labor unions and some liberal Democrats to the temporary worker program. The debate dragged on for six weeks, and that was all the time needed for the new tools of media mobilization to rally opposition among conservatives.

A detailed examination of media coverage of immigration in 2007 conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) shows that the volume of coverage across all media was roughly two to three times as high in May and June as it was the rest of the year.²⁹ (Coverage increased less dramatically again in November when immigration briefly became a point of contention in the Republican presidential nomination fight.) The spike in coverage during the six weeks of the Senate debate occurred in all media sectors, making immigration the No. 1 topic in the news for that period. In newspapers, for example, immigration accounted for 2 to 4 percent of front-page stories in the first four months of the year and then jumped to 8 percent during the debate. By July it was back to 2 percent and then disappeared in August and September. The surge was even more dramatic in two other sectors: cable talk and radio talk.

The PEJ analysis of prime-time cable news show coverage on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News found that immigration filled 18.5 percent of the newshole during the Senate debate while it was in the 4 to 6 percent range for four months before and after. Even CNN's Lou Dobbs, after making immigration a major topic for several years, nearly doubled his pace of coverage. For the year as a whole Dobbs devoted 22 percent of his airtime to immigration and that share jumped to 43.1 percent during the debate. The spike was sharpest for any media sector in radio talk. Immigration skyrocketed from a negligible presence — zero in some months — to 22 percent during the Senate debate.

Talk radio also starkly illustrated the ideological divide among advocacy media personalities, and the divide was not so much in their positions as it was on their level of interest. The PEJ analysis found that during the six weeks of Senate debate conservative radio hosts devoted 31 percent of their newshole to immigration while their liberal counterparts hardly mentioned it, giving immigration just 3.6 percent of their airtime. Over the course of 2007 immigration received four times as much attention from conservative talk show hosts than from liberals.

On cable television, the volume of coverage varied according to ideology as well, according to the PEJ analysis. Fox has achieved ratings dominance with a strong following among Republicans and conservatives. Immigration was a major story on Fox in prime time with Bill O'Reilly giving it 19.4 percent of his show during the Senate debate while Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes gave it 16.5 percent. On MSNBC, which has an audience less defined by partisan loyalties than Fox, there was

²⁸ Robert Pear and Carl Hulse, “Immigrant Bill Dies in Senate; Defeat for Bush,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2007.

²⁹ Banu Akdenizli, *News Coverage of Immigration 2007: A political story, not an issue, covered episodically*, (Washington, DC: Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008), <http://www.journalism.org/files/PEJ-Immigration%202007%20Report.pdf>.

no surge during the debate. Chris Matthews, for example, gave it only 5.1 percent of his newshole compared to the 48.5 percent he devoted to campaign coverage.

In the worlds of cable and radio talk the surge only happened on the right. The same was true in the blogosphere.

Stark difference according to ideology emerged in an analysis of the volume of commentary on immigration in 2007 on five major blogs from across the political spectrum.³⁰ On the liberal side, “Talking Points Memo” barely took note of the debate while “Daily Kos” did increase its coverage but it peaked at 9 percent in June. “Instapundit,” usually identified as libertarian in spirit, spiked coverage but only to 6 percent. Meanwhile on the right, “Michelle Malkin” jumped to 20 percent in May and 40 percent in June. Similarly, “Powerline” another conservative blog, surged to 13 percent in May and 17 percent in June.

Table 1. Blog Postings on Immigration on Five Selected Blog Sites, 2007

Percentage of Posts on Immigration, February-July 2007					
	Daily Kos (Liberal)	Talking Points Memo (Liberal)	Instapundit (Libertarian)	Michelle Malkin (Conservative)	Powerline (Conservative)
February	3	1	0	3	1
March	3	4	0	5	2
April	2	1	1	4	1
May	4	2	3	20	13
June	9	3	6	40	17
July	4	1	1	23	2

Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

The advocacy journalists on cable and radio talk and in the blogosphere mirrored what was happening in Washington’s more formal political arena. Most liberals and progressives backed the Senate legislation but with a variety of reservations. Meanwhile, most conservatives opposed it adamantly. Weak support met fierce resistance and the bill was defeated.

The ideological differences in the coverage may also reflect another reality. Operating in a highly competitive atmosphere and still needing to build audiences, the advocacy-focused new media place a premium on attention-grabbing statements. The very nature of those media — broadcast talk and Internet posts — favor terse and intense expressions. As a result, these media sectors may be better suited for protest than for affirmation, particularly when the subject is a complex issue that requires compromise to move forward.

The conservative voices of new media attacked the Senate legislation on many fronts, but their most effective tactic was a simple one: denouncing the legalization program as an “amnesty” that rewarded lawbreakers. Just ten days into the debate, Bush tried to respond to the media voices that had once been among his most loyal supporters. “If you want to scare the American people, what

³⁰ USC-Annenberg Content Analysis of 2007 immigration-related postings on five political blogs – Daily Kos, Instapundit, Michelle Malkin, Powerline, and Talking Points Memo. See Note on Content Analysis Methodology.

you say is the bill's an amnesty bill," he said May 29 during a speech in Glynco, GA.³¹ "That's empty political rhetoric trying to frighten our citizens." But it was already too late.

During May and June 2007, CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight" featured 42 lengthy stories on immigration, hammering the subject every broadcast. The term "amnesty" was used in every story. Over at Fox's "The O'Reilly Factor," the term "amnesty" was applied to the Senate legislation on 18 of 34 stories.³²

A UPI-Zogby Poll taken during the 2007 Senate debate found that 65 percent of respondents agreed that the legislation "represents amnesty for illegal immigrants."³³ A Pew poll taken at that same time asked two sets of respondents about the Senate legalization proposal using exactly the same language except that one version used the term "amnesty."³⁴ Among Republicans that one word produced a dramatic 15-point shift in opinion against the legislation. As the bill was headed for defeat, Mississippi Republican Senator Trent Lott said: "Talk radio defined it without us explaining that there were reasons for it, and the good things that were in it."³⁵

The grand bargain of 2007 — so carefully crafted in private — died a death of a thousand cuts when it was debated in public. In trying to address virtually all aspects of immigration policy, it became not a single defining compromise but a stack of compromises that had too many cross-cutting dynamics. Individual legislators and advocates found themselves trying to fix one or two provisions even as they tried to defend one or two others from alteration. Preventing the debate from devolving into running skirmishes over details would have required strong leadership in Washington. But Kennedy failed to hold key unions, especially the AFL-CIO, which opposed the temporary worker provisions, and Bush failed to hold key Republican moderates.

The battle for public opinion, however, was entirely one-sided. While the conservative talkers and bloggers roared, liberal commentators showed little appetite for the subject. Moreover, powerful interest groups that supported comprehensive reform, such as the major business associations and the Catholic bishops, largely confined themselves to Washington lobbying rather than aggressively promoting their own messages to counter Limbaugh, Dobbs, and the others. The media blitz by the anti-amnesty, pro-restriction voices did not succeed in persuading a majority of Americans to embrace their views. Repeated public opinion surveys have shown that most Americans have consistently favored both tougher enforcement and some kind of legalization program for unauthorized migrants already in the country. In addition, most Americans express generally favorable views toward immigrants and reject the xenophobia that sometimes surfaced among opponents of comprehensive reform. But in 2007, the strident voices of opposition were not trying to enact legislation; they were trying to block it, and in that they succeeded.

³¹ Jim Rutenberg, "Bush Takes On Opponents of Immigration Deal," *New York Times*, May 29, 2007.

³² USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

³³ UPI-Zogby Poll findings accessed from United Press International, "Analysis: Poll data back talk-radio claim," Shaun Waterman, June 25, 2007, http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-31822846_ITM

³⁴ Pew Research Center poll, "Mixed Views on Immigration Bill," conducted May 30-June 3, 2007, <http://people-press.org/report/335/mixed-views-on-immigration-bill>.

³⁵ Comments of Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) on "Fox News Sunday" on June 24, 2007, transcript available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,286442,00.html>.

V. Conclusion

Over the course of three decades, successive administrations and Congresses have failed to deliver on promises to control the border and to maintain a fair and orderly immigration system. So, it is hardly surprising that the American public, which tends not to put much confidence in government in general, is skeptical about Washington's motives and abilities when it comes to immigration. The failure of sovereignty reflected in the state's lack of control over immigration heightens the impact on public opinion. The media, however, have deepened and sharpened that skepticism through portrayals of immigration as a matter of crime, crisis, and controversy. Large segments of the public react like oft-offended victims when new immigration policies are proposed, regardless of whether the emphasis is on rejection or welcome. It is not that the media has falsified the history of US immigration policy. But, it has delivered a relentlessly dark portrayal of that history, one with no victors, let alone heroes, only perpetrators and fatalities. As a result, immigration is unusual, even unique, in the extent to which the enactment of new policy involves overcoming a basic and generalized lack of confidence.

The challenge only grows steeper when new forms of media step in to mobilize the public in opposition to new proposals. Even if the mobilization affects only a minority of the public, the emotions aroused are so powerful that they can have a profound impact. In this, immigration resembles cultural issues like homosexuality or abortion that tend to present fairly simple, either/or policy options. Of course, immigration is anything but that. Rather, policy proposals on immigration tend to be exceptionally complex. But, a media narrative that emphasizes a simplified framework of illegality creates conditions under which moralizing can dominate the debate.

VI. About the Author

Roberto Suro is a Professor at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and a Nonresident Scholar at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). He has nearly 35 years experience in the immigration field as a journalist, author, and researcher. Prior to joining the University of Southern California faculty in August 2007, Mr. Suro was Director of the Pew Hispanic Center, a research organization that he founded in 2001 with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. At the Center, he supervised the production of more than 100 publications that offered nonpartisan statistical analysis and public opinion surveys chronicling the rapid growth of the Latino population and its implications for the nation. Prior to that, Mr. Suro spent more than two decades in journalism, including at the *Chicago Sun Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *TIME* Magazine. In 1985, he joined *The New York Times*, serving as bureau chief in Rome and Houston. Mr. Suro later joined *The Washington Post* as a National staff writer and later served as Deputy National Editor. He is author of *Strangers Among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America*, (Vintage, 1999), *Watching America's Door: The Immigration Backlash and the New Policy Debate*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1996), *Remembering the American Dream: Hispanic Immigration and National Policy*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1994) as well as more than two dozen book chapters, reports, and other publications related to Latinos and immigration.

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Note on Content Analysis Methodology

USC-Annenberg Content Analysis of Immigration Coverage by Traditional News Organizations: 1980-2007

This study was conducted by a team of coders under the direction of Prof. Roberto Suro at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California from September 2007 through July 2008 under the sponsorship of the Brookings Institution and the Norman Lear Center. The results were initially published in *Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate* available at www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/0925_immigration_dionne.aspx.

News media considered in the analysis included newspapers, news agencies, National Public Radio, and three national broadcast networks. A full listing of the news organizations and the periods for which they were studied is below.

The LexisNexis Academic Universe database served as the source for all of the analyses. The full body of coverage by individual news organizations over specific periods was searched using different combinations of search terms to generate the fullest possible sample of stories that primarily dealt with the subject of immigration. Stories from all news organizations were examined in the analysis of the volume of immigration coverage. All stories from *The New York Times*, the Associated Press, *USA Today*, CBS Evening News, and the three television broadcast networks' evening news shows in 2006 and 2007 were further analyzed in detail to determine whether illegality was the frame of the story and that the story's major topic met the following criteria:

- Related to unauthorized entry into the United States by persons from abroad,
- Government efforts to control unauthorized entries,
- Crimes alleged to have been committed by foreign-born persons or by immigration officials, or
- The activities of illegal migrants in the United States.

In the case of large samples drawn from regional newspapers and news services automated searches utilizing keywords and NexisLexis indexing terms were used to determine whether stories were coded as having a framework of illegality. Subsamples drawn over limited time periods were further coded to determine whether a specific subject was involved such as the Elián González saga during 1999 and 2000. Articles published by a selection of news organizations in 2006 and 2007 with an illegality frame were further coded for the use of one of the following illegality "sub-frames": policy development by the executive branch, Congress, or the courts; federal policy implementation; state and local policy development and implementation; pro-, anti-, or mixed public opinion; electoral politics; and migrant experiences. Additional analysis was conducted on coverage by the broadcast networks to categorize the persons quoted.

In addition, the coverage of several specific episodes such as the Minuteman Project protests in Arizona in 2005 and policy-making on immigration by local governments in Northern Virginia from 2004 to 2007 were examined by drawing samples from selected news organizations and by searching with terms related to the specific stories in question.

Additional samples of coverage in 2008 by various news organizations were examined using the same methodology for purposes of this publication.

USC-Annenberg Content Analysis of Immigration Coverage by Political Blogs: 2007

This study also was conducted by a team of coders under the author’s direction at the Annenberg School for Communications from September 2007 through July 2008 under the sponsorship of the Brookings Institution and the Norman Lear Center. The results were initially published in *Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate*.

The data for this analysis came from all blog posts made in the six-month period between February 1, 2007 to July 31, 2007 on five well-known political blogs: Daily Kos, Instapundit, Michelle Malkin, Powerline, and Talking Points Memo. The blogs were selected according to the following criteria: they are among the most popular political blogs, and the primary posts are generated by a single author or a specific group of authors. Together the five blogs represent the spectrum of public opinion. A total of 13,769 posts were examined and of these 545 were identified as discussing issues relating to immigration by using word searches to produce a more limited universe of posts that were then examined in detail.

Tables

Table 1. Immigration Coverage by Traditional News Organizations Examined in the USC-Annenberg Content Analysis, 1980-2007

News Organization	Period Examined	Eligible Sample Size	Filters
<i>The New York Times</i>	1980-2007	2,859	National Desk
Associated Press	1980-2007	1,939*	AM Cycle
Regional Papers	1991-2007	6,370	<i>Atlanta Journal Constitution, Boston Globe, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, San Francisco Chronicle</i>
News Services:	1997-2007	3,760	Copley, Cox, McClatchy
<i>USA Today</i>	1992-2007	715	
CBS News	1990-2007	381	CBS Evening News
National Broadcast Networks: CBS, NBC, ABC	2006-2007	201	Evening news broadcasts
National Public Radio:	1992-2007	1,288	Morning Edition and All Things Considered

* Because of the large volume of content drawn from the Associated Press, a sample was constructed by randomly selecting 25 percent of the articles, or 1,939, from the total population of 7,757.

Table 2. Blog posts Examined in the USC-Annenberg Content Analysis, 2007

	Daily Kos (Liberal)	Talking Points Memo (Liberal)	Instapundit (Libertarian)	Michelle Malkin (Conservative)	Powerline (Conservative)
Total Sample	2,594	2,799	5,547	1,132	1,697
Immigration Posts	109	55	101	176	104

Project for Excellence in Journalism Content Analysis of Immigration Coverage in 2007

News Coverage of Immigration 2007: A political story, not an issue, covered episodically is a report based on additional analysis of content already aggregated in PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI). The results were initially published in *Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate*. NCI examines 48 news outlets in real time to determine what is being covered and what is not. The complete methodology of the weekly NCI can be found at http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology. The findings are then released in a weekly NCI report. All coding is conducted in-house by PEJ's staff of researchers throughout the year. Examining the news agenda of 48 different outlets in five media sectors, including newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio, NCI is designed to provide news consumers, journalists, and researchers with hard data about what stories and topics the media are covering, the trajectories of major stories, and differences among news platforms.

This report focused primarily on stories on immigration within the Index. For this report, all stories that had been already coded as being on immigration were isolated and further analyzed to locate the presence of immigration over a year's worth of news, and how immigration coverage ebbed and flowed throughout 2007. This provided the answers to questions such as: which aspects of the immigration issue did the media most tune into; what was not covered; and who provided the most coverage?

The data for this analysis came from a year's worth of content analysis conducted by PEJ for NCI. The 2007 analysis contains a total of 70,737 stories: 6,559 newspaper stories, 6,520 online stories, 21,320 network television stories, 22, 823 stories on cable news, and 13,515 from radio programs.

A further analysis was conducted on coverage between May 17 to June 28, 2007 which coincided with the announcement of the compromise bill on immigration between the Senate and the White House and its defeat. A separate study on Spanish-language coverage of the immigration bill focused on the time period of June 25 to June 29. For this study PEJ examined Spanish network national evening news on the two major stations, Telemundo, and Univision, and compared it to evening network news on the major networks, ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS.

A more detailed explanation of the methodology can be found at: http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/~media/Files/rc/reports/2008/0925_immigration_diome/0925_immigration_appendixa.pdf