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Narratives of Immigration: NBC and CNN Coverage of Border “Crisis”

An Honors College Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

By Shanna Colleen Kelly

Accepted by the faculty of the Honors College and SMAD, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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Shanna Colleen Kelly

Abstract

This research was conducted through the form of a content analysis of network versus cable broadcast news to see how immigration coverage has shaped journalistic tactics. NBC and CNN were the news outlet representatives. Clips from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive were coded according to their identification of immigrants and visual cues. These results were then analyzed and interpreted to see potential implications of the coverage. Overall, network news incorporated the immigrants into their coverage more with a humanistic approach while cable news took a policy approach.

Introduction:

Since Donald Trump's presidential campaign started in 2016, there has been a surge in immigration news coverage. Over the past four years, the conversation about immigration policy and the Mexican border has far from faded. From DACA to the caravan to the government shutdown, immigration — especially the illegal immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Central America through the southern U.S. border — has been at the forefront of the news agenda in the U.S. The question is whether broadcast networks and cable news channels have provided quality reporting to reveal the complexity of the issue and dug for stories not provided by official sources. Through the content analysis of a total of 300 clips from CNN and NBC, I intend to examine how the issue of immigration is framed through the identification of immigrant sources and visual cues in the broadcast news coverage. The framing of this coverage could be a major contributor or influencer of the public opinion of immigration policy in the United States (Gramlich, 2019).

Literature Review:**Media Coverage of Immigration and Models of Journalism**

Any critical examination of how mainstream media covers the issue of immigration must be understood within the different models of the press in democratic society (see the summary in Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). The information model focuses on feeding the facts to the public objectively so that they can make their own informed decisions. The mediator model views the role of the media as simply reflecting the views of citizens without going beyond this. The critical model focuses on the “watchdog” role of the media and fighting for the people without a

voice against power abuse. The advocacy model steers away from objectivity by promoting the need for journalists to defend ideas by taking a stance in their reporting.

If the news media adopts the role of information provider and mediator, it should closely reflect the policy debate of immigration, which is often dominated by the societal elites — individuals who receive media attention because of their status. On the contrary, reporters who take the critical model should go beyond the stories given by official sources and seek alternative information about the issue. The advocacy model suggests a step further to empower the voiceless and question the views of powerful elites. Therefore, the vital question about the role of the media as it relates to the coverage of immigrants is to what extent the news media takes a humanistic perspective to focus on the stories of immigrants or function as a mirror of the policy debate.

Framing Immigration in the News

My initial research of previous content analysis revealed problematic patterns in immigration news coverage that often only focuses on the legality of the issue to portray immigration as a threat to society. One content analysis that examined the coverage of the controversial Arizona Senate immigration bill (Arizona Senate Bill 1070) in two U.S. national newspapers and two daily papers from the Southwest found that employment, border, crimes and drugs are the primary themes in news content (Tamul and Martínez-Carrillo, 2018). Similarly, another content analysis concluded that the illegality of immigration was a primary narrative that news organizations used with a focus on crime, weak border control and the need for immigration reform and tougher border control (Kim, 2011). In a study of broadcast networks' nightly news coverage on immigration bill reform between 2005 to 2007, the researcher found

that equal airtime was given to people in support of restrictive and welcoming immigration policies. But those on air for restrictive policies were often officials and political figures while those for welcoming policies were immigrants or demonstrators (Hayes, 2008). While these studies illustrated important themes in the media coverage of immigration, they primarily examined the topics of the news stories (e.g. crime, drug) and policy positions that are being emphasized in the news content. Looking into the broadcast network and cable news content, my study will add to the literature by examining the visual cues that are used to portray the subtle context of the immigration issue.

The portrayal of immigrants plays an important role in how immigration is framed as an issue. Many studies show how immigrants are commonly portrayed through the problems they cause, which frames immigration as a threat. It was also found that the human-interest perspective, which frames the story around the immigrants' experience, doesn't decrease the news quality or the value of the arguments and shows that immigration is a lot more complex (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). Additionally, illegal immigrants only make up 10% of sources in mainstream media (Thorbjørnsrud and Ustad Figenschou, 2016), and when they are used as sources, the media also stereotypes immigrants by using them to show a subjective experience or to reinforce a preconstructed view of immigrants as threats or victims (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). Therefore, the identification of immigrant sources serves as a key indicator that defines the power relations in the issue: whether the immigrants are given a central role to voice their struggle with the system or are shown as an anonymous crowd that poses a threat to society.

These previous studies inspired me to focus on how immigration is covered through news narratives and how these are constructed by contextual visual cues and the identification of

immigration sources. In sum, there are three main research questions that I will be asking while conducting my research:

RQ1: How were immigrant sources identified in the story?

RQ2: What visual cues are used in the news coverage of immigration?

In addition, the comparison between network and cable news is key to the investigation. While broadcast networks and cable networks do not directly compete for audience, they compete through their varying content. Cable channels cover more diverse topics and introduce more unique stories that are not covered by broadcast news outlets while broadcast networks focus on providing content that aligns with the mission of “civic journalism” through issue forums and providing solutions to the problems (Bae, 2000). Although there is evidence on how broadcast network and cable channels covered immigrants in general (Dixon and Williams, 2014), the separate examination of broadcast and cable channels is necessary to see if the trends found in previous research are consistent or vary between the stations. Therefore, I ask the following research question:

RQ3: How do broadcast network and cable news channels identify sources and use visual cues differently to present immigrants?

Methodology:

The research was conducted through a content analysis using a sample drawn from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. NBC and CNN were selected as the representatives of media outlets in the network and cable news category since they are available digitally in the

archive, while other television news outlets' content can only be accessed through physical copies of recording with excessive cost. Using an advanced search, the analysis was retrieved from Nov. 8, 2016 — election day — to Jan. 25, 2019 — the end of the government shutdown. The sample included News Segments, “Good Night” Segments, Specials and Evening News but not Commercials nor Program Introductions. To retrieve video clips from CNN, the primary search term used was “immigration,” and a random sample of 150 clips was taken in the order the clips appeared. Two clips were unavailable to stream. Therefore, a total of 148 CNN clips were included in the study. Additional search terms were needed to find the equivalent number of clips from NBC: “immigration policy,” “Mexico border,” “Border wall” and “Migrant.” The sample was then cleaned by eliminating the 15 clips unavailable to stream, the 33 clips that are not relevant to immigration and 2 clips that were from MSNBC. There were 100 NBC clips included in the content analysis.

To reveal the narratives of the immigration issue formed by CNN and NBC, each video clip was coded with the following two categories of variables:

1. Identification of immigrants

ID V1: Whether immigrant sources are anonymous, their first or last name is mentioned or if they're fully identified

ID V2: If ethnic background or country is mentioned

ID V22: Words used to describe the ethnic background or country

ID V3: If age is mentioned

ID V32: Words used to describe age

ID V4: If gender is mentioned

ID V42: Words used to describe gender

ID V5: If the immigrant is mentioned or given a voice

ID V6: Words used to describe immigrants or immigration

ID V62: Context of this terminology

2. Visual cues

VC V1: Crowd of anonymous immigrants in the facilities

VC V2: Crowd of anonymous immigrants not in the facilities

VC V3: Authorities helping immigrants

VC V4: Authorities interacting with immigrants in an official manner

VC V5: If someone other than an immigrant is interviewed

VC V52: Who is interviewed

VC V53: If one or more than one side is interviewed

VC V54: Identification of the sides that were interviewed

VC V6: If an individual immigrant is shown

VC V7: If evident emotion is shown on an individual immigrant

Policy labels: Policy mentioned

Results:

The results reflect the data from the 148 CNN and 100 NBC available clips, all percentages below are the “Valid Percent” found in the frequency tables (see Appendix for codebook and original coding). These results were used to answer the research questions.

The identification variables were analyzed through combined frequency outputs for CNN and NBC to answer Research Question 1: How were immigrant sources identified in the story?

Out of the total 248 clips, 75.5% identified the immigrants anonymously or referred immigrants generally without identifying an individual. Immigrants were given a voice through sound bites or interviews in 23.2% of clips. The ethnic background of immigrants was mentioned 56.5% of the time, the age was mentioned 52.8% of the time and the gender was mentioned 25.5% of the time.

The visual cue variables were analyzed through combined frequency outputs for CNN and NBC to answer Research Question 2: What visual cues are used in the news coverage of immigration?

As seen in Table 1, immigrants were shown in facilities in 17.3% of clips and outside of facilities in 28.6% of clips. Authorities were shown helping immigrants in 2% of the footage while they were seen interacting with immigrants in an official manner in 16.5%. 88.3% of the clips had an interview with someone other than an immigrant and 40.4% interviewed sources from more than one side of the immigrant issue presented such as a Republican and a Democrat. Lastly, 27.8% of the clips showed an individual immigrant.

VARIABLE	# OF VALID CLIPS	FREQUENCY	VALID PERCENT
IMMIGRANTS SHOWN IN FACILITIES	n=248	43	17.3%
IMMIGRANTS NOT SHOWN IN FACILITIES	n=248	205	82.7%
IMMIGRANTS SHOWN OUTSIDE OF FACILITIES	n=248	71	28.6%
IMMIGRANTS NOT SHOWN OUTSIDE OF FACILITIES	n=248	177	71.4%

Research Question 3 concerns the differences between NBC and CNN's immigration coverage in terms of immigrant identification and visual cues.

OUTLET	VARIABLE	# OF VALID CLIPS	FREQUENCY	VALID PERCENT
CNN	Anonymous	n=148	128	86.5%
	First name	n=148	5	3.4%
	Last name	n=148	0	0%
	Fully identified	n=148	15	10.1%
NBC	Anonymous	n=93	54	58.1%
	First name	n=93	5	5.4%
	Last name	n=93	2	2.2%
	First name Someone else mentioned with last name	n=93	1	1.1%
	Fully identified	n=93	31	33.3%

As seen in Table 2, 86.5% (128 clips) of CNN clips referred to immigrants anonymously while only 58.1% of NBC clips did ($\chi^2 (4, N = 241) = 27.535, p < .001$). The ethnic identity of the immigrant was mentioned in 52.7% of CNN clips and 62% of NBC clips. Both sources mentioned the gender a similar amount of times with CNN mentioning the gender of the immigrant in 21.8% of the clips and NBC

mentioning it in 31% of its clips. CNN mentioned the age in 60.1% of the clips while age only appears in less than half of NBC articles. However, the results for the ethnic identity, gender and age variables do not provide trends meaningful for the later analysis.

Individual immigrants were visually shown in 14.9% (22 clips) of CNN clips and 47% (47 clips) of NBC clips ($\chi^2 (1, N = 248) = 30.688, p < .001$). Of those clips, 15 from CNN and 19

from NBC showed evident negative emotion such as crying while 1 CNN clip and 6 NBC clips showed a positive emotion such as laughing.

Immigrants were shown in facilities in 16.2% of CNN clips and 19% of NBC clips ($\chi^2 (1, N = 248) = .323, p = .570.$). There are 13.5% of CNN clips and 51% of NBC clips that showed immigrants outside of facilities ($\chi^2 (1, N = 248) = 41.042, p < .001.$). Authorities interacted with immigrants in an official manner in 10.1% of CNN clips and 26% of NBC clips. Additionally, 2.7% of CNN clips and 1% of NBC clips showed authorities helping immigrants.

As seen in Table 3, NBC gave the immigrants a voice in 43% of clips (40 clips) while CNN only gave immigrants a voice in 10.8% of clips (16 clips) ($\chi^2 (1, N = 241) = 33.198, p < .001.$).

93.2% of CNN clips interviewed someone as a source

other than an immigrant while 81% of NBC clips did ($\chi^2 (1, N = 248) = 8.663, p < .005.$). Of these 138 CNN clips with interviews, 67 clips interviewed sources from more than one side, and of the 81 NBC interviews, 32 used sources from more than one side.

Discussion:

This section will break down the results and their potential implications to understand the narratives that broadcast network and cable news channels adopt to present immigration.

Table 3				
OUTLET	VARIABLE	# OF VALID CLIPS	FREQUENCY	VALID PERCENT
CNN	Immigrant mentioned	n=148	132	89.2%
	Immigrant given a voice	n=148	16	10.8%
NBC	Immigrant mentioned	n=93	53	57%
	Immigrant given a voice	n=93	40	43%

Illustration of Immigrants

Visuals undeniably make up a large part of television news, and the numbers revealed in the above results speak to how these visuals were — or in some cases, were not — used in the construction of immigrants in the news package. To start, it is worth noting that most of the visuals of immigrants — excluding interviews with immigrants — consisted of the same clips on repeat from government handout footage. This indicates a potential for limited access to visuals and it is worth taking into account this government control of imagery.

In an overview, immigrants lack a voice and visual representation in CNN and NBC coverage. When the CNN and NBC results are combined, only 27.8% (69 clips) of the clips showed immigrants and only 23.2% (56 clips) gave immigrants a voice. This means that 72.2% and 76.8% of the clips respectively — the majority of the coverage — doesn't show visuals of immigrants and merely mentions them as the subject of the coverage. While further research

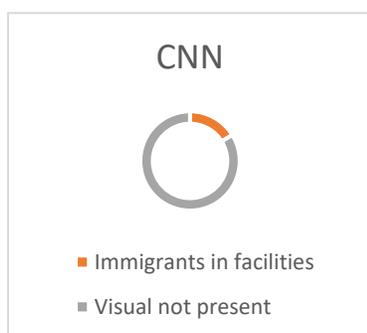


Figure 1A



Figure 1B



Figure 1C

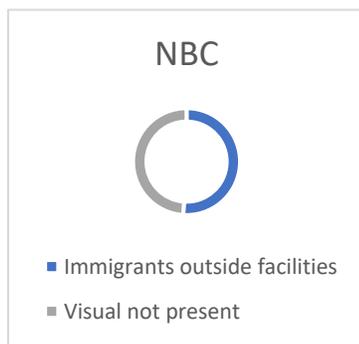


Figure 1D

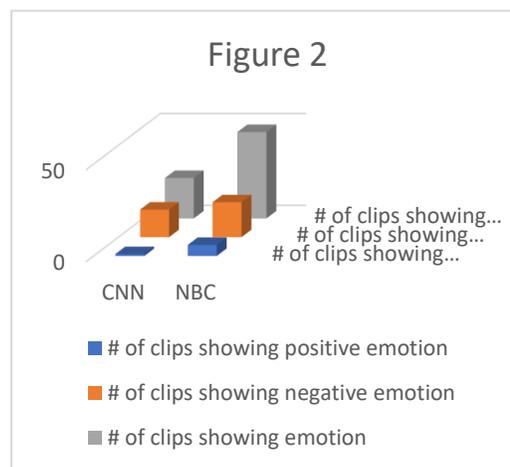
would need to be conducted to confirm this, it is the likelihood that these results reflect the tactics used to cover immigration by more news outlets than just CNN and NBC.

17.3% of clips showed immigrants in facilities and 28.6% showed immigrants outside of facilities. These numbers can be further broken down by outlet as seen in Figures 1A-D. Figures 1A

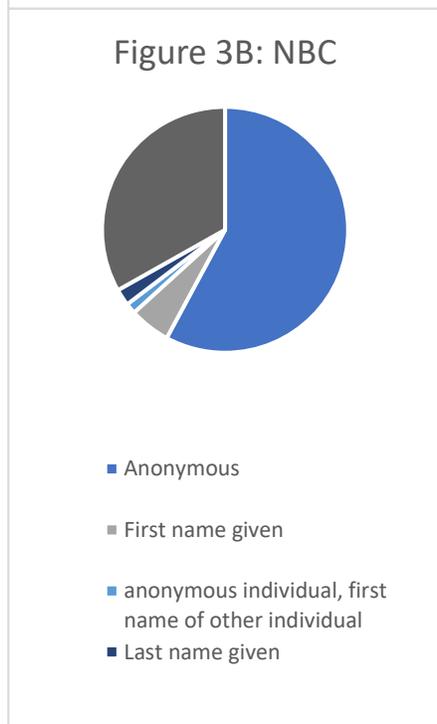
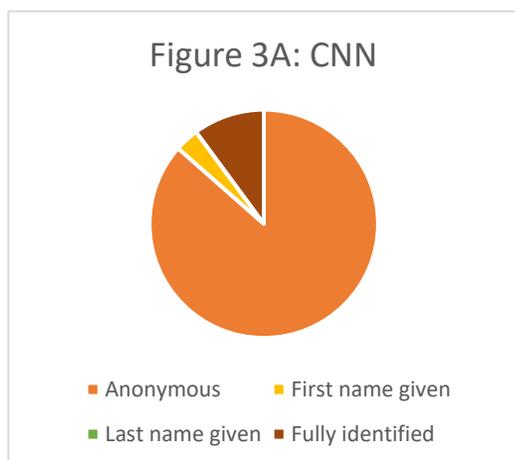
and 1C show that 16.2% of CNN clips and 19% of NBC clips showed immigrants in facilities. Additionally, 13.5% of CNN clips and 51% of NBC clips showed immigrants outside facilities as shown in Figures 1B and 1D. As clearly seen in the figures, almost all the clips didn't show these visuals of immigrants. When the visuals of individual immigrants and immigrants in and out of facilities are cross analyzed, it is revealed that 75% of CNN clips and 41% of NBC clips didn't show a visual of an immigrant at all. Overall, 61.3% of the news coverage didn't have any visuals of immigrants. This likely connects to the low number of clips with authorities interacting with immigrants — 2% of footage shows authorities helping immigrants and 16.5% shows them interacting with immigrants in an official manner.

However, it is worth discussing Figure 1D in particular. Just over half of the NBC clips show a visual of immigrants outside facilities. This can be attributed to the style of the NBC clips versus the CNN ones. As typical with cable and network channels, CNN had more panel discussions and professional interviews while NBC had more traditional news reporting segments where reporters hosted field interviews and talked to the immigrants. This is the reason for NBC giving immigrants a voice in 43% of clips (40 clips) while CNN only gave immigrants a voice in 10.8% of clips (16 clips). Factoring in these different styles of coverage and that CNN also had a higher number of clips, NBC clearly involved the immigrants in their reporting more often than CNN in both visual and sound elements.

It has already been established that immigrants were rarely used in the news coverage for both organizations. However, the clips that did show immigrants revealed a trend. The grey bar in Figure 2



represents the total clips for each outlet that showed evident emotion on an immigrant. Figure 2 also shows the number of clips showing negative and positive emotions (not all clips showing an individual immigrant also showed an evident emotion). Both outlets more often showed negative



emotion — CNN 15 times and NBC 19 times. More than 2/3 of the CNN immigrant visuals and more than 1/3 of NBC immigrant visuals showed an immigrant with negative emotions. These emotions include crying children and screams of fear while immigrants are tear gassed. These visuals — while used in a small portion of the total clips — create a narrative of immigrants as victims.

Overall, 75.5% of clips anonymously identified immigrants or generally spoke of them. Figures 3A and 3B reflect the results of the identification of immigrants between outlets. As seen in these figures, 86.5% of CNN clips referred to immigrants anonymously while 58.1% of NBC clips did. Anonymously naming or generally referring to immigrants was the favorable trend for both outlets, despite it being a non-favorable journalistic tactic that partially takes away from the strength of the source. But once again, NBC

had a closer connection to the immigrants by providing identification for the individuals more than 3 times more often than CNN did.

Other Sources

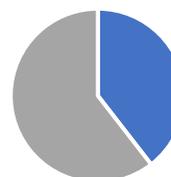
An overall majority of clips, 88.3%, consisted of an interview with a source other than an immigrant. For CNN, this was 93.2% of its clips and for NBC, this was 81% of its clips. What's most interesting about this is the number of clips that interviewed sources from more than one side such as pro-immigration and anti-immigration. Overall, 40.4% of clips did. As seen in Figure 4A, 49% (67 clips) of CNN interviews had sources from more than one side. And as seen in Figure 4B, 40% (32 clips) of NBC interviews had sources from more than one side. The grey regions in the figures show the percentage of clips where only one side was interviewed: 51% of CNN clips and 60% of NBC clips with interviews. This means that more than half of the news segments from both media outlets only showed one side to an issue. Additionally, while the clips were typically only between 2 and 10 minutes long, this amount of time could reflect how long someone may be fully tuned into a news segment between flipping through channels or switching their attention elsewhere while the segment is playing. So, if more than half the time a viewer watches CNN or NBC for a few minutes they only see one side of the spectrum, their views are likely to be influenced one way or the other on immigration. Seeing as it's the job of journalists to provide balanced coverage, neither outlet provided this in around half of the clips coded here.

Figure 4A: CNN



■ Sources from more than one side
■ Sources from only one side

Figure 4B: NBC



■ Sources from more than one side
■ Sources from only one side

The literature review in this study approaches the question of to what extent the media takes a humanistic approach or functions as a mirror of the policy debate. The results indicate that overall, CNN was more policy-oriented with panel discussions and interviews while NBC took a more humanistic approach consisting of more interviews with immigrants as well as more visuals of immigrants. However, neither of the media groups took a solid humanistic approach since both outlets more often anonymously named immigrants or just referred to immigration in general as opposed to identifying them — taking away an important humanizing factor. Additionally, neither outlet properly mirrored the policy debates since both were more likely to interview one side of the debate rather than multiple.

Practical Implications for Broadcast Journalists

These results can be used by journalists to analyze their own immigration coverage tactics and seek improvement in their work. Overall, while NBC has room for improvement, it's results with the identification and visuals of immigrants were significantly better than CNN's. Based off this research, network news did a better job of involving the subject of the issue in its coverage. However, it's important to note that while these three variables may have been stronger for one outlet versus the other, overall, they had poor results. For example, immigrants were too often anonymous or without referral of a particular individual, immigrants were rarely shown in the visuals and more than half of the interviews only talked to one side. These are all factors that broadcast journalists should look to avoid in their future coverage.

The two approaches to immigration that were taken were the humanistic and the policy approaches. Both have value, but based on this research, the humanistic approach included more visuals of immigrants as well as giving them a voice more often. On the other hand, the policy

approach stood out by having sources from more than one side for 9% more of its interviews. Broadcast journalists should look to combine these two tactics for coverage that accurately shows visuals of the subjects, gives voice to the voiceless and shows multiple sides to the story.

Limitation of the Research

The plan was to originally code 150 clips per source. However, due to the low number of clips available and a high number of those clips being unavailable to stream or not about immigration, this was not possible. 148 CNN clips were coded with 2 unavailable to stream and 108 NBC clips were coded with 15 unavailable to stream, 33 not about immigration and 2 from MSNBC. Additionally, Vanderbilt Television News Archive only allows access to NBC and CNN without requesting and paying for discs of other news clips. For future research, I recommend coding more clips if the coder has the funds to pay for more archives. It'd be worth exploring this topic across more network and cable stations if one has the funds and time to do so. This would allow the researcher to compare all networks to each other or compare cable stations typically thought of as on opposing sides to the spectrum such as CNN and Fox News. I also recommend coding every clip twice to make sure there are no faults in the coding and to ensure terminology unity in the way clips are coded.

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Appendix:

Code Book Guide:



Kelly Capstone Code
Book Guide.xlsx

Code Book:



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Book.xlsx