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Abstract

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The View of the Border: News Framing of the Definition, Causes, and Solutions to Illegal Immigration

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Analyzing newspaper articles and television news transcripts ($N=484$), this study explores how American news media have framed the issue of illegal immigration. More specifically, we analyze the way the media present the questions of why illegal immigration is a problem, what the causes are, and how to fix the problem. We also make a comparison across different media outlets (border-state newspapers vs. papers elsewhere; newspapers vs. television news), looking at whether news coverage of the issue has been consistent across the media.

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Over the last two decades or so, illegal immigration to the United States has almost tripled from an estimated 4 million undocumented residents in 1986 to about 11.2 million in 2008 (Camarota & Jensenius, 2008). With the fast-growing number of illegal immigrants, the issue is now an increasingly important topic in American politics, producing a substantial amount of public debate (Dunaway, Abrajano, & Branton, 2007).

At the center of the debate are the questions of what causes the problem and how to fix it. How to define causal and solution responsibility is particularly important because it shapes the overall policy direction and, more important, the domain of society to which the effort to make changes should be applied (Salmon, 1989). News media play a significant role in the process of defining a social problem (Kim & Willis, 2007). The media can “frame” an issue in a certain way, telling the public what is important to know about and how to think about it (Gitlin, 1980).

Analyzing newspaper articles and television news, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of illegal immigration coverage. Although unauthorized immigrants are coming from all over the world, the large majority are from Latin America.¹ Our analysis is limited to illegal immigration from Mexico and other Latin American nations. Our analysis is also limited to news stories published or aired between 1997 and 2006. This 10-year period was selected because the number of illegal aliens has risen most rapidly since the mid-1990s.²

We first explore how American news media have defined illegal immigration as a social problem. Why is illegal immigration a problem? What are the potential consequences? Our study examines which definitions of the issue are most prominent in news coverage. We then analyze how the media have presented the question of causal and solution responsibility. What are the most important causes of illegal immigration? What can be done to fix the problem? We examine which causes and solutions are mentioned more often than others in the news.

NEWS FRAMING OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

News media seek to reduce the complexity of an issue by presenting it in an easy-to-understand, interpretive package. Framing serves as an organizing

¹According to an estimate in 2004 (Passel, 2005), more than 80% of the unauthorized immigrants are from Latin America, with about 57% coming from Mexico.

²Between 1986 and 1995, the number of illegal immigrants in the United States increased from an estimated 4 million to 5 million. In the next 10 years (1996–2005), the number has more than doubled to more than 11 million (Passel, 2005).

theme that connects otherwise discrete pieces of information into a package (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Gitlin, 1980). This packaging process necessarily involves selecting certain aspects of the issue and making them more salient, while leaving out other aspects (Entman, 1993). It is in this selection process that the media can promote a particular problem definition, leading the audience to a certain line of reasoning or interpretation (Scheufele, 1999).

According to Entman (1993), framing *defines a problem* by explaining what its effects are or who is affected, *diagnoses the causes* by identifying the factors producing the problem, and *suggests remedies* by justifying particular solutions. In this way, the media can lead the audience to make attributions of responsibility based on different interpretations or frames offered for the same factual content. In a series of experiments, Iyengar (1991) well demonstrated that the way television framed a social problem influenced viewers' perceptions of who was responsible for causing and solving the problem.

By highlighting certain aspects of an issue, the media can affect the way the audience thinks about the issue (Gamson, 1992). Framing a social problem in a certain way, the media tell the audience which aspects of the problem are most important to think about when making a judgment (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002). A number of studies have well demonstrated that the media can tell the audience *how* to think about a social problem and how to evaluate different solutions (e.g., Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999).

HISPANIC IMMIGRATION AND THE MEDIA

Little effort has been made to examine the definitions, causes, and solutions to illegal immigration presented in the media. Instead, most studies have focused on how *immigrants* were depicted in the media, looking particularly at the metaphors, images, and symbols employed to produce unfavorable portrayals of legal or illegal immigrants.

Analyzing news coverage of the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, Coutin and Chock (1997) found that newspapers promoted stereotypical images of illegal immigrants, calling them greedy, lazy, and a threat to social stability. From an analysis of the 1994 debates over Proposition 187 in California—an anti-immigration referendum—Santa Ana (1999) found that *Los Angeles Times* writers employed such dehumanizing metaphors as “employers hunting out foreign workers,” producing a discourse of “immigrants as animals.”

Dunaway et al. (2007) explained that media portrayals are largely negative because illegal immigration is often associated with drugs, crime, human smuggling, and trespassing. Furthermore, there is a general perception that

immigrants—legal or illegal—create economic tension as they introduce increased competition for jobs and become a burden on government services, particularly in border states (Borjas, 1999). On the contrary, it is not easy to find the media talking about the contributions that illegal immigrants make to the U.S. economy, such as the cheap labor subsidizing consumer food and housing costs (Chavez, 2006).

Studies also examined whether geographic proximity to the United States–Mexico border influenced the way the media presented the immigration issue. By comparing newspapers in California located close to and farther removed from the border, Branton and Dunaway (2006) examined the relationship between spatial proximity to the border and the way immigration is presented. They found that newspapers close to the border were more likely to report negative and illegal aspects of immigration (e.g., arrests, violence, drugs, and human trafficking).

There are several reasons to expect differences between border-state newspapers and the papers elsewhere. First, to the papers in border states, illegal immigration is a local issue that has a great and immediate impact. In other states, the same issue is viewed rather as a national topic with potential implications mostly in other regions of the country (Fairman, 2007). Second, the amount of people's direct exposure to Hispanic immigrants is still different between border states and elsewhere (Sizemore & Milner, 2004), even though the growth of the Hispanic populations in some nonborder states, like Georgia and North Carolina, has been phenomenal recently (Vargas, 2000). As such, the differences between regions may affect not only the amount but also the nature of news coverage (Branton & Dunaway, 2006).

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION: DEFINITIONS, CAUSES, AND SOLUTIONS

Immigration has been a major political issue since the mid-19th century. In the 1840s and 1850s, the focus was Irish Roman Catholics. Between 1880 and 1930, the wave of immigrants from Asia and Europe also provoked political concern (Gabaccia, 2008). Concern about preserving “the American race” led Congress to pass the Immigration Act of 1924, which set immigration quotas by the ethnic proportions of the 1890 Census (Cose, 2008). By the 1980s, the focus had shifted to illegal immigration, particularly from Central and South America. In response to an illegal immigrant population that had swelled to 4 million, Congress passed the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986. The law, however, proved ineffective in slowing the rate of illegal border crossings, which was estimated at 100,000 a month by 1988 (Whitman, 1988).

As the various definitions of the problem demonstrate, illegal immigration is a complex issue. Some define it as a *crime problem*, raising concern about public safety. Drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other violent crimes are often linked to illegal immigration (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007). Anti-immigration groups claim that the influx of immigrants will severely *burden social programs*, including school systems, Medicaid, and law enforcement, particularly in border states. The Center for Immigration Studies estimates that illegal-alien households imposed more than \$26.3 billion in costs on the federal government in 2002 and paid only \$16 billion in taxes (Camarota, 2004). However, evidence is mixed, and there are several studies reporting that the economic impact of undocumented workers is positive overall rather than negative (e.g., Passel & Fix, 1994). To many, *national security* is another concern. Such a restrictionist group as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) contends that illegal aliens endanger the national security by creating a demand for false identity documents and smuggling networks that could potentially assist terrorists in entering the country (FAIR, 2005). The *safety of illegal immigrants* themselves is also a problem. According to Guerette (2007), more than 300 migrant deaths were reported along the border each year since 2000. Many critics define the immigration issue in terms of *jobs lost* to illegal workers seeking higher pay. Sum, Harrington, and Khatiwada (2006) reported that between 2000 and 2005, the number of young native-born men (16–34) who were employed decreased by 1.7 million; at the same time the number of new male immigrant workers went up by 1.9 million.

In discussing the causes, the *weak economy in Latin America*, particularly Mexico, is often cited. Mexican immigrants can earn about twice as much in construction and manufacturing jobs as they do working in their home country (Kochhar, 2005). Others blame *restrictive legal immigration processes*, claiming that the process of becoming a legal worker or resident is so slow and complicated that many foreigners opt to cross the border illegally rather than apply for a legal status (Haines & Rosenblum, 1999). *Lax border enforcement* is another cause (Segal, 2008). One newsmagazine editorial described the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Border Patrol as “among our least competent federal bureaucracies” (Barone, 2007). Many people blame *weak enforcement of federal laws against illegal immigration*, referring to the lack of will to impose harsh punishment on both illegal immigrants and employers hiring them (Lee, 2009).

Solutions are both divergent and passionately debated. Some experts cite a plan to *promote economic development in Mexico* (e.g., Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). They argue that although the plan will not end illegal immigration overnight, it will help Mexicans think about their future in their own country rather than plan for an exit north. Others agree that

the process for gaining legal entry needs improvement (Motomura, 2006). Making the process reasonably simple and affordable can reduce illegal immigration. Many immigration opponents call for *tougher border control*, applauding actions like President Bush's decision to deploy National Guard soldiers to patrol the border (Billeaud, 2006). In 2006, the president also signed a bill authorizing the construction of a 700-mile fence along the border with Mexico. A similar solution involves *stricter law enforcement*. A focus needs to shift away from providing tighter border control and instead concentrate on interior law enforcement with an emphasis on illegal aliens already in the country and employers hiring undocumented workers (Lee, 2009).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Our first research question (RQ1) explores how the media define illegal immigration as a social problem. More specifically, we examine how the media discuss the negative consequences of illegal immigration:

RQ1: How do the media present the question of why illegal immigration is a problem? Have certain negative consequences appeared more often than others in the media?

When examining the research question, we look into whether there are some meaningful differences between television and newspapers in the way they present the immigration issue. Compared to newspapers, television news is distinctively episodic and event oriented (Iyengar, 1991). That is, television messages must provide dramatic stories with appealing visuals (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). In this regard, crime stories become a regular choice of television news because they often involve a dramatic story to tell and a sensational image to present. Studies have demonstrated television's heavy reliance on crime reporting and its tendency to depict non-Whites as violent and threatening (e.g., Entman, 1990). More recently, a report (Montalvo, 2006) prepared for the National Association of Hispanic Journalists showed that Hispanic immigrants are frequently linked to crimes in national network news. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H1a: Television news stories will be more likely than newspaper stories to mention crime as a consequence of illegal immigration.

We also compare newspapers in border states (Texas and California) and the papers where Hispanic immigrants account for only a small portion of

the population (Missouri and Pennsylvania). First, we expect that newspapers in border states are in great need to explain why illegal immigration is a serious problem because the issue is an immediate concern that has direct impacts on the lives of their audiences (Fairman, 2007). Opinion polls have indicated that residents in border states are more likely than people elsewhere to perceive illegal immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country (Dunaway et al., 2007). We hypothesize the following:

H1b: Newspaper stories in border states will be more likely than the paper stories from elsewhere to talk about negative consequences of illegal immigration.

Local newspapers have many reasons to make their news stories as appealing as possible to the interests of the immediate communities (Branton & Dunaway, 2007). It is likely that border-state newspapers tend to define illegal immigration in terms of local context, focusing more on its local implications. Among the negative consequences examined, crime, social costs, and job competition can be considered more locally oriented consequences, whereas national security and safety of illegal immigrants have more national implications. We, therefore, put forth the following hypotheses:

H1c: In talking about illegal immigration, stories in border-state newspapers will be more likely than newspaper stories from elsewhere to mention crime as a negative consequence.

H1d: Stories in border-state newspapers will be more likely than newspaper stories from elsewhere to mention social costs as a negative consequence.

H1e: Stories in border-state newspapers will be more likely than newspaper stories from elsewhere to mention job competition as a negative consequence.

Our second research question (RQ2) addresses how the media frame the causes of illegal immigration:

RQ2: How do the media present the causes of illegal immigration? Which causes have appeared more often than others in the media?

Television is a visual medium; television news must be able to report a story in pictures (Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba, 1993). In this regard, talking about illegal immigration in connection with border control is likely to become a regular choice of television news because it does

provide vivid images of illegal border crossing. Proportionally speaking, television will be more likely than newspapers to focus on border control when talking about illegal immigration:

H2a: Television news stories will be more likely than newspaper stories to talk about weak border control as a cause of illegal immigration.

Of the potential causes examined, weak border control and lack of law enforcement may represent local-level causes, whereas the troubled economy in Latin American and the failure of the immigration system have more international or national implications. We hypothesize the following:

H2b: Newspaper stories in border states will be more likely than the paper stories from elsewhere to talk about weak border control as a cause of illegal immigration.

H2c: Newspaper stories in border states will be more likely than the paper stories from elsewhere to talk about lack of law enforcement as a cause of illegal immigration.

Our last research question (RQ3) addresses how the media frame the solutions to illegal immigration:

RQ3: How do the media present the solutions to illegal immigration? Which solutions have appeared more often than others in the media?

The solutions examined in this study (helping the Latin American economy, immigration reform, tougher border control, stricter law enforcement) are directly matched with the potential causes (troubled economy in Latin America, failure in immigration system, weak border control, lack of strong law enforcement). In comparing television and newspapers, and in comparing border states and states with a small Hispanic population, we put forth the following hypotheses, which are quite similar to the ones presented earlier:

H3a: Television news stories will be more likely than newspaper stories to mention tougher border control as a solution to illegal immigration.

H3b: Newspaper stories in border states will be more likely than the paper stories from elsewhere to mention tougher border control as a solution.

H3c: Newspapers stories in border states will be more likely than the paper stories from elsewhere to mention stricter law enforcement as a solution.

METHODS

Sample

We used a keyword search of the LexisNexis database to locate news articles and transcripts for analysis. Our analysis included news stories published or aired between January 1, 1997, and December 31, 2006. Using the keywords “illegal immigration” appearing in the full texts, we retrieved articles from six regional and national newspapers. The *Houston Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times* represented Texas and California, border states with large Hispanic populations. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* were from Pennsylvania and Missouri, where the size of the Hispanic population is only minimal.³ The *New York Times* and *USA Today* were selected as national newspapers. Because the *Los Angeles Times* was available in LexisNexis for the most recent 1-year period, our analysis of this paper included the articles published in the year 2006 only.⁴ Using the same keywords, we also retrieved news transcripts from three national television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC).

The search produced a total of 2,921 newspaper articles and 473 television news transcripts. Using systematic sampling, we then selected a manageable sample of 50 articles from each newspaper and 50 transcripts from each network (300 articles and 150 transcripts). It was our goal to analyze 50 articles or transcripts from each news outlet.

As our analysis proceeded, we identified a substantial number of items unrelated to the issue, including stories about illegal immigrants from countries outside of Latin America. Many items were also duplicates (the same article appearing in different weekly editions or a tease for later in the

³According to the 2000 U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), Hispanics and Latinos accounted for about 3.2% and 2.1% of the entire populations in Pennsylvania and Missouri. In Texas and California, Hispanics and Latinos composed about 32.0% and 32.4% of the state populations.

⁴Without question, including only the 2006 articles has a number of limitations. In making a comparison between border and other states, in particular, the 2006 articles are overrepresented in the border states. Because it is possible that the 2006 articles are somewhat different from other years, overrepresenting the year 2006 in the border states may bias the comparison. We carried out a multivariate analysis to compare border and other states, *controlling* for the effect of different years (not reported in this article). Findings from the multivariate analysis were not much different from the univariate analysis (the *t* tests reported in this article), suggesting that using only the 2006 articles does not make a significant difference in terms of the overall conclusions of the study. We also have to mention that because of the large number of articles published in the year 2006, the 2006 articles accounted for about 50% of the entire news article population (see Figure 1). Accordingly, about 50% of our sample was also from 2006. Even though the *Los Angeles Times* articles are all from 2006, the possibility to bias our findings is only minimal because about 50% of all other newspapers are also the 2006 articles anyway.

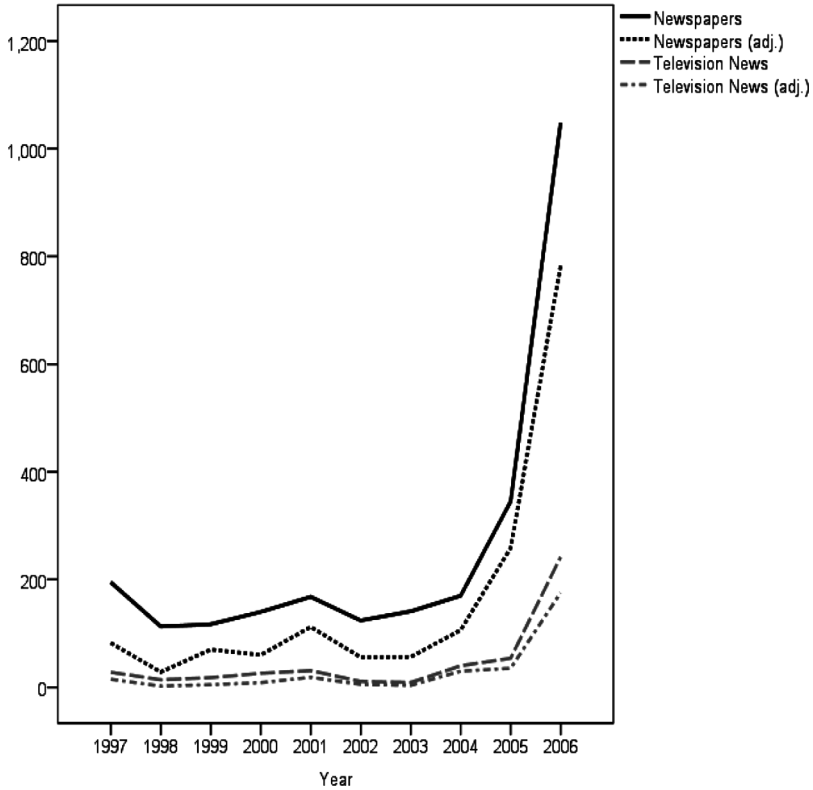


FIGURE 1 The number of news stories talking about illegal immigration (1997–2006). *Note.* The amount of newspaper coverage includes articles from the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today* matching the keywords “illegal immigration” appearing in the full texts. The *Los Angeles Times* was not included because the articles were available for the year 2006 only. The amount of television news contains news programs from ABC, CBS, and NBC matching the same keywords.

program). About 36.5% of the articles and transcripts were unrelated and thus removed from the sample. Because we wanted to analyze at least 50 from each news outlet, we carried out *another* round of sampling, and eventually ended up analyzing a little more than 50 articles and transcripts from each newspaper and each television network.

Coding

Table 1 presents the coding instrument used to specify what may constitute each definition, cause, and solution for illegal immigration. The coding

TABLE 1
 Illegal Immigration: Definitions, Causes, and Solutions (Coding Sheet and
 Intercoder Reliability)

Defining illegal immigration as a social problem (Why is illegal immigration a problem?)

Crime (*Scott's pi* = .86): Increasing crime committed by illegal aliens; Immigration-related crimes (e.g., drug smuggling, human trafficking); etc.

Social costs (*pi* = .79): State aid to education and medical services; Increased demand for prison space; etc.

National security (*pi* = .87): Possibility that terrorists sneak into the United States through Mexico; etc.

Safety of illegal immigrants (*pi* = .85): Potential accidents and injuries in the process of crossing the border; etc.

Taking jobs away (*pi* = .92): Undocumented workers taking jobs away from native-born Americans; Increased job competition; etc.

Others (*pi* = .90): Population overgrowth; Cultural clashes; Immigrants bringing contagious diseases into the United States; etc.

Causes of illegal immigration

Troubled economy in Latin America (*pi* = .92): Poverty and job shortage in Latin American countries; Global economic integration (e.g., the North American Free Trade Agreement: NAFTA); etc.

Failure of current immigration system (*pi* = .74): Unnecessarily restrictive and time-consuming process of getting a U.S. visa or legal status; etc.

Weak border control (*pi* = .88): Lack of manpower, technology, and the will to strengthen border control; etc.

Lack of strong law enforcement (*pi* = .85): Absence of harsh punishment for illegal border crossing; Failure to sanction employers for hiring undocumented workers; Limited political will due to U.S. labor needs; etc.

Others (*pi* = .79): Local law enforcement has no authority to enforce federal law; Wealthy Americans expanding use of cheap servants; etc.

Solutions to illegal immigration

Helping the Latin American economy (*pi* = .79): Making investments in Mexico; Repealing NAFTA; etc.

Immigration reform (*pi* = .69): Making legal entry/stay less complicated and time-consuming; Allowing for a larger number of legal and permanent immigration with well-prepared worker programs (e.g., guest worker program, amnesty of illegal aliens, etc.); etc.

Tougher border control (*pi* = .87): Providing more border patrol enforcement (e.g., more rangers, sending the National Guard to the border, new border patrol technology, etc.); Building a large fence along the U.S.-Mexico border; etc.

Stricter law enforcement (*pi* = .71): Enhanced punishment for illegal entry and reentry; Tougher enforcement on employers hiring undocumented workers; Greater manpower, advanced technology, and a stronger will to enforce current immigration law; etc.

Others (*pi* = .94): Restructuring INS; Banning landlords from housing illegal immigrants; etc.

categories were developed through an extensive review of news articles, scholarly journals, and Internet websites about the issue. The coding sheet was revised several times to its final version as our analysis proceeded.

Definitions of the issue included potential negative consequences of illegal immigration, which all could explain why illegal immigration was a significant problem (see Table 1). These definitions were categorized into six negative consequences: Crime, Social Costs, National Security, Safety of Illegal Immigrants, Taking Jobs Away, and Others. For example, the articles mentioning increased crime as a consequence of illegal immigration were categorized as defining the issue as a crime problem.

Attribution of causal responsibility was categorized into five causes (Troubled Economy in Latin America, Failure of Current Immigration System, Weak Border Control, Lack of Strong Law Enforcement, Others; see Table 1). Solution responsibility was also categorized into five solutions (Helping the Latin American Economy, Immigration Reform, Tougher Border Control, Stricter Law Enforcement, Others), which directly corresponded to the five causes examined.

The entire text of each story was analyzed for the definitions, causes, and solutions. Two graduate students coded the articles and transcripts after having participated in a number of training sessions and pilot tests, where they discussed and agreed on what might constitute each definition, cause, and solution. Intercoder reliability was estimated by double-coding a random subsample ($n = 80$) of the articles and transcripts. Intercoder reliability corrected for agreement by chance (Scott's π) ranged from .69 to .94 with an average reliability of .83 (see Table 1).

The coders first examined whether each news story mentioned any one or more of the six issue definitions (including Others). Each definition was coded as either 0 (*not present*) or 1 (*present*). The coders then determined how many mentions of definitions were made in each story. Although a number of articles ($n = 147$) and transcripts ($n = 84$) contained no mention of definitions, there were also many stories referring to more than one of the six definitions. In many cases, the same definition was mentioned more than once in a single story. No matter how many mentions were made, we counted them as a single mention as long as they came from the same article or transcript. Therefore, the total number of definition mentions was a measure of how many different definitions appeared in an article or transcript, which ranged from zero to six. Using the same method, we counted how many causes and solutions were mentioned in each story. This time, the total number of mentions ranged from zero to five, respectively.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 presents the total numbers of news stories over 10 years (1997–2006) matching the keyword “illegal immigration.” The same figure also

shows *adjusted* amounts, which are the total numbers after adjusting for estimated amounts of unrelated items (e.g., Chinese immigrants) and duplicates.⁵ In 1997, there were only 195 articles (83 after adjustment) published in five newspapers.⁶ In 2006, the number increased to 1,048 (783 after adjustment). Network news coverage (ABC, CBS, NBC) also indicates a sudden increase from 28 news items (15 after adjustment) aired in 1997 to over 240 (176 after adjustment) in 2006.

This obviously is not an unexpected increase given the fast rise in the number of undocumented aliens. Figure 2 clearly shows a rapid increase in illegal immigration since the early 1990s. As the problem has become more prevalent, the amount of social attention—news coverage in particular—seems to have corresponded with its increased social significance. A close look at Figure 1, however, reveals that the amount of news coverage had remained quite stable until 2003; it is since 2004 that the volume of news coverage has grown substantially. Taken together, these two figures indicate that even though illegal immigration has increased rapidly since the early 1990s, it was not until recently that the media began to pay great attention.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the frequency with which each definition (or a negative consequence), cause, and solution appeared in the six newspapers and three television networks. Table 2 shows that the six definitions (including Others) appeared 393 times in the 484 news articles and transcripts analyzed. That is, there was an average of .81 definitions in each news story. Mentions of a cause, as presented in Table 3, were substantially less often with an average of .25 appearances (116 mentions in 484 news reports). The most frequently mentioned were the solutions (see Table 4). The five solutions (including Others) were mentioned 671 times in 484 news stories, an average of 1.39 in each story. A series of *paired-sample t* tests confirmed that references to a solution significantly outnumbered mentions of a cause ($t = 20.86$, $p < .001$) and a definition ($t = 9.06$, $p < .001$). There seems to be a considerable unbalance in the media's treatment of the causes and solutions, with the solutions being discussed far more often than the causes (671 vs. 116).

RQ1 asks how the media have presented the question of why illegal immigration is a problem. Table 2 shows that the media, both newspapers and

⁵The total number of unrelated items and duplicates was *estimated* from their proportions in the news articles and transcripts sampled each year. Across different years, the unrelated items and duplicates accounted for 25.0% (2005) to 60.0% (2003) of the newspaper articles and 25.0% (2004) to 72.7% (1999) of the news transcripts. Adjusting for these numbers, we could estimate that the total amount of illegal immigration coverage would be about 1,873 articles from the six newspapers and about 300 newscasts from the three networks.

⁶The *Los Angeles Times* was not included in calculating the total numbers each year because the articles were available only for the year 2006 in LexisNexis.

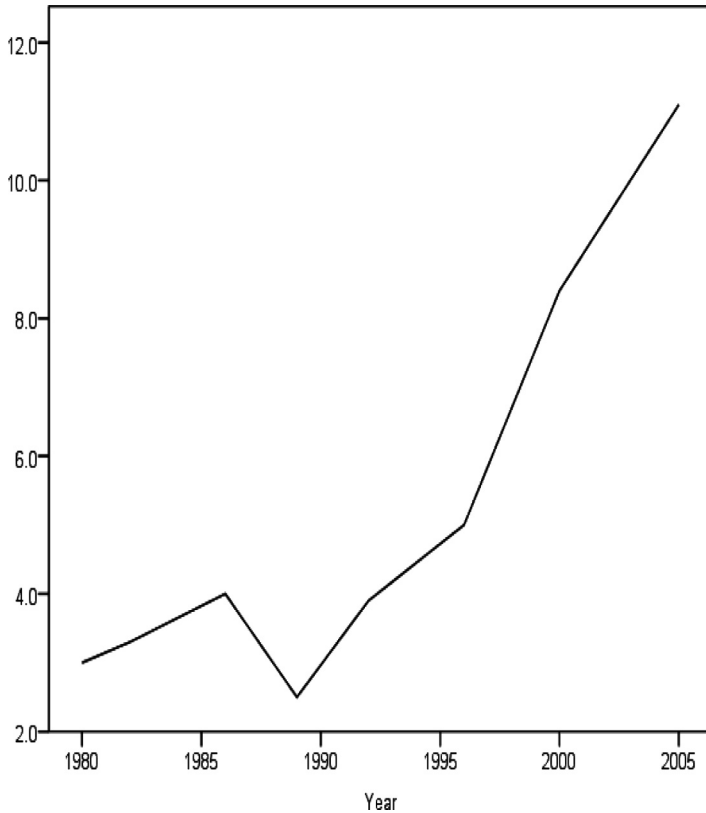


FIGURE 2 The estimated number (millions) of illegal immigrants in the United States. Source: The Pew Hispanic Center (<http://www.Pewhispanic.org>).

television, mentioned Crime most often as a negative consequence. A total of 114 articles and transcripts referred to crimes involving illegal immigrants. Following next were Social Costs and National Security, which were found in 82 and 68 news stories, respectively. Safety of Illegal Immigrants and Taking Jobs Away were mentioned least often, appearing 47 and 41 times each. *Paired-sample t* tests indicated that references to crimes ($M = .24$, or 114 of 484 total) significantly outnumbered mentions of social costs ($M = .17$, $t = 2.70$, $p < .01$), national security ($M = .14$, $t = 4.13$, $p < .001$), safety of illegal immigrants ($M = .10$, $t = 6.39$, $p < .001$), and taking jobs away ($M = .08$, $t = 6.50$, $p < .001$).

H1a predicted a higher likelihood of mentioning crime in television news. Even though television indicated slightly more frequent mentions of crime

TABLE 2
Defining Illegal Immigration as a Social Problem (1997–2006)

Media (N)	Why is illegal immigration a problem (Negative consequences)?						Total
	Crime	Social Costs	National Security	Safety of Illegal Immigrants	Taking Jobs Away	Others	
<i>Houston Chronicle</i> (54)	17	12	10	8	8	5	60
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> ^a (54)	9	14	5	3	6	5	42
Total (border states, 108)	26	26	15	11	14	10	102
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> (55)	10	8	8	1	5	2	34
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> (56)	12	6	4	7	5	7	41
Total (states with small Hispanic populations, 111)	22	14	12	8	10	9	75
<i>New York Times</i> (50)	10	9	7	5	4	5	40
<i>USA Today</i> (52)	14	7	12	3	6	4	46
Total (national papers, 102)	24	16	19	8	10	9	86
Newspaper total (321)	72	56	46	27	34	28	263
ABC (50)	15	9	11	6	4	4	49
CBS (53)	10	9	4	6	2	3	34
NBC (60)	17	8	7	8	1	6	47
Television total (163)	42	26	22	20	7	13	130
Media total (484)	114	82	68	47	41	41	393

Note. Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each definition of the issue.

^a*Los Angeles Times* includes articles published in the year 2006 only.

per story ($M = .26$, or 42 mentions in 163 stories) than newspapers ($M = .22$, or 72 mentions in 321 stories), the difference was not statistically significant. H1a was not supported. Compared to non-border-state newspapers (Missouri, Pennsylvania), a greater proportion of border-state papers (California, Texas) mentioned a negative consequence of illegal immigration. The *Houston Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*, when combined, made an average of .94 mentions (102 of 108 total), whereas there were .68 mentions in each *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article (75 of 111). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.18$, $p < .05$), supporting H1b. Table 2 also reveals that the proportion of border-state newspapers mentioning social costs as a consequence (26 times out of 108, $M = .24$) was greater than that of the papers in non-border states (14 times out of 111, $M = .13$). Again, the difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.21$, $p < .05$), supporting H1d. However, neither of the other two hypotheses about crime (H1c) and job competition (H1e) was supported.

RQ2 questioned which causes of illegal immigration appeared more often in the media. Table 3 shows that Troubled Economy in Latin America was

TABLE 3
 Attribution of Causal Responsibility (1997–2006)

Media (N)	Causes of illegal immigration					Total
	Troubled Economy in Latin America	Failure of Current Immigration System	Weak Border Control	Lack of Strong Law Enforcement	Others	
<i>Houston Chronicle</i> (54)	5	0	1	3	1	10
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> ^a (54)	5	0	0	0	0	5
Total (border states, 108)	10	0	1	3	1	15
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> (55)	2	0	0	2	1	5
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> (56)	6	1	1	5	8	21
Total (states with small Hispanic populations, 111)	8	1	1	7	9	26
<i>New York Times</i> (50)	3	0	1	1	0	5
<i>USA Today</i> (52)	4	3	2	6	5	20
Total (national papers, 102)	7	3	3	7	5	25
Newspaper total (321)	25	4	5	17	15	66
ABC (50)	6	1	2	6	2	17
CBS (53)	1	1	4	1	3	10
NBC (60)	9	0	8	3	3	23
Television total (163)	16	2	14	10	8	50
Media total (484)	41	6	19	27	23	116

Note. Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each cause of illegal immigration.

^a*Los Angeles Times* includes articles published in the year 2006 only.

mentioned most often, appearing in 41 articles and transcripts, followed by Lack of Strong Law Enforcement (27 mentions). Weak Border Control and Failure of Current Immigration System were found considerably less often, appearing in only 19 and 6 news stories, respectively. *Paired-sample t* tests indicated that mentions of Troubled Economy ($M = .08$) significantly outnumbered references to Weak Border Control ($M = .04$, $t = 3.01$, $p < .01$) and Failure of Current Immigration System ($M = .01$, $t = 5.24$, $p < .001$). When it comes to between Troubled Economy and Lack of Strong Law Enforcement ($M = .06$), the difference approached, but did not reach, statistical significance ($t = 1.88$, $p = .061$).

H2a predicted that television news stories would be more likely than newspaper stories to mention weak border control as a cause of illegal immigration. In comparison to newspapers ($M = .02$), as predicted, a larger proportion of television news stories ($M = .09$) made references to weak border control, supporting the hypothesis ($t = 3.05$, $p < .01$). However, none of the

TABLE 4
 Attribution of Solution Responsibility (1997–2006)

<i>Media (N)</i>	<i>Solutions for illegal immigration</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Helping the Latin American Economy</i>	<i>Immigration Reform</i>	<i>Tougher Border Control</i>	<i>Stricter Law Enforcement</i>	<i>Others</i>	
<i>Houston Chronicle</i> (54)	0	18	22	18	18	76
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> ^a (54)	2	25	25	11	19	82
Total (border states, 108)	2	43	47	29	37	158
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> (55)	0	33	26	14	15	88
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> (56)	2	20	16	12	14	64
Total (states with small Hispanic populations, 111)	2	53	42	26	29	152
<i>New York Times</i> (50)	2	24	15	9	21	71
<i>USA Today</i> (52)	2	27	21	14	11	75
Total (national papers, 102)	4	51	36	23	32	146
Newspaper total (321)	8	147	125	78	98	456
ABC (50)	0	28	27	14	14	83
CBS (53)	2	20	23	9	12	66
NBC (60)	0	22	28	8	8	66
Television total (163)	2	70	78	31	34	215
Media total (484)	10	217	203	109	132	671

Note. Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each solution for illegal immigration.

^a*Los Angeles Times* includes articles published in the year 2006 only.

comparisons between border-state papers and papers elsewhere revealed a significant difference. H2b and H2c were not supported.

As far as how to solve the problem (RQ3), the media made frequent references to Immigration Reform and Tougher Border Control (see Table 4). These two solutions were mentioned in 217 and 203 news stories, respectively. It is interesting to note that these two popular solutions are in fact related to the two unpopular causes of the problem (Failure of Immigration System, Weak Border Control) that appeared in the media least often (see Table 3). Following next was Stricter Law Enforcement, which was mentioned in 109 stories. Helping the Latin American Economy was hardly mentioned, appearing only in 10 articles and transcripts. *Paired-sample t* tests confirmed that references to Immigration Reform ($M = .45$) significantly outnumbered mentions of Stricter Law Enforcement ($M = .23$, $t = 8.04$, $p < .001$) and Helping the Latin American Economy ($M = .02$, $t = 18.54$, $p < .001$). Tougher Border Control ($M = .42$) also significantly outnumbered Stricter Law Enforcement ($t = 7.04$, $p < .001$) and Helping

the Latin American Economy ($t = 16.91, p < .001$). However, there was no significant difference between Immigration Reform and Tougher Border Control ($t = 1.07, ns$).

H3a predicted more frequent references to tough border control in television news stories than in newspaper stories. As predicted, each television news story ($M = .48$, or 78 of 163 total) was slightly more likely than a given newspaper article ($M = .39$, or 125 of 321) to mention tough border control as a solution. The difference, however, did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($t = 1.87, p = .063$). H3a was not supported. Again, none of the comparisons between border-state papers and papers elsewhere indicated a significant difference. H3b and H3c were not supported either.

DISCUSSION

Analyzing newspaper articles and television transcripts, this study explored how American news media have framed the issue of illegal immigration. More specifically, we examined how the media have presented the questions of why illegal immigration is a problem, what the causes are, and how to fix the problem. We also made a series of comparisons across different media outlets, looking at whether there are some noticeable differences in presenting the issue. What do our findings tell us about news coverage of illegal immigration? How does this study contribute to the framing literature?

Although illegal immigration has long been a concern, it is only in recent years—particularly since 2004—that the issue has produced a substantial and increasing amount of news coverage. The year 2004 was when President Bush introduced the Fair and Secure Immigration Reform proposal. In 2005, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson declared, for the first time, a state of emergency, claiming that the state had been devastated by the ravages of human and drug smuggling and murder, all produced by illegal immigration (Branton & Dunaway, 2006). In 2006, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger publicly demanded that Congress take action on illegal immigration. That same year, hundreds of thousands of people participated in pro-immigrant rallies across the nation. Chavez (2006) also pointed out that a few political talk-show hosts, such as CNN's Lou Dobbs, Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly, and syndicated radio host Rush Limbaugh have contributed significantly to the increase in immigration news over the recent years. These all suggest that it was probably not just the significance of the issue itself but the prestige of a few political figures and events that defined the issue as a social problem important enough to deserve great media attention. This finding is quite consistent with the agenda-building literature showing that the actual seriousness of a problem

is not necessarily correlated with the amount of news coverage (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Wallack et al., 1993). Rogers, Dearing, and Chang (1991), for example, found that the fast increase in the actual number of AIDS cases during the 1980s was not attracting the media's attention. Instead, it was the stories about Rock Hudson and Ryan White that in fact vastly expanded news coverage of the AIDS issue in the media.

Our findings also tell us about the factors that may affect the media's selection of specific frames. Although many journalists may argue that their choices of specific frames are determined by the facts that are believed to be most important, importance is often a negotiated concept, particularly given the complexities journalists have to face when they seek to make sense of a given event (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). A number of other factors, such as social values, organizational constraints, and journalistic routines, have been known to play an important role in shaping the way news is framed in the media (Scheufele, 1999). Most important, news organizations are for-profit organizations; the stories that attract a large audience become a regular choice (Wallack et al., 1993). In this regard, it is not surprising that the media were most likely to refer to crime when talking about negative consequences of illegal immigration. Linking illegal immigration to a crime story must be a preferred way of talking about the issue because it will necessarily involve drama, conflict, good, and evil, the ingredients to attract a larger audience (Denton, 1999). As Branton and Dunaway (2006) explained, the push for higher ratings and circulation, combined with the public's unfavorable perceptions of illegal immigrants, seem to motivate the media to produce a large amount of crime stories.

Newspapers are, unless they are national papers, in general obligated to represent the interest of local communities (Hamilton, 2004). As the newspapers market themselves as a vital source of local news, they may become subject to the organizational pressure to frame a story in a local context. As such, it is likely that newspapers in border states have framed illegal immigration with a more local focus. Supporting this argument, we found that a larger proportion of border-state news articles, when compared to non-border-state papers, talked about the social costs associated with illegal immigrants. Overall, we also found that each border-state news article was more likely to discuss negative consequences of illegal immigration than an article from a non-border state. Border states directly experience the effects of illegal immigration, such as higher demands for education and increased government spending. In addition to simply having more stories to report, these states may be highly motivated to justify why illegal immigration is a serious problem, trying to raise national concern about the issue.

What do our findings tell us about illegal immigration? What are some implications for immigration policies? First, the media's heavy focus on

crimes raises concern that the media can promote a stereotypical perception that there is a strong link between crime and immigration, reproducing racism and immigrant stigma (Wieskamp, 2007). According to a recent report (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007), immigrants are in fact less likely than native-born Americans to commit crimes. The report shows that among male adults age 18 to 39, who make up the majority of the prison population, the 3.5% incarceration rate of the native-born was 5 times higher than the .7% incarceration rate among immigrants in 2000. These numbers were estimated without considering legal or illegal immigration status. But the report reveals that native-born American males between 18 and 39 are 8 times more likely to be imprisoned for crimes than unnaturalized Mexican immigrants of the same age—a group very likely to have a high percentage of undocumented aliens. Presenting illegal immigration as a crime issue, combined with the images of illegal border crossing, may not only highlight the unlawful entry into the United States but also depict immigrants as *pathologically* lawless, impeding more constructive cross-cultural interactions between the countries (Demo, 2005). Linking illegal immigration to crime is somewhat problematic in a sense that it may likely create nonrealistic and stereotypical portrayals of immigrants.

An interesting finding from our study is that immigration reform and tougher border control as solutions were equally prominent in the media. In our study, immigration reform, as a category, referred to the effort to correct the restrictive and complicated process to become a legal alien. On the contrary, tougher border control represents, at least symbolically, an effort to seal the border and keep out foreign nationals. These two solutions can be seen as opposite approaches to reducing illegal immigration. The coexistence of two contradicting solutions may well reflect the fundamental philosophical disagreement in America on how to approach the issue, one to produce fewer illegal aliens by making it reasonably easy to become a legal and the other to halt the flow of immigration (Simon & Alexander, 1993).

Another significant finding of this study emerges from a comparison between Tables 3 and 4. Although Troubled Economy in Latin America was the most frequently cited cause of illegal immigration, Helping the Latin American Economy was the *least* cited solution. This finding may suggest that the issue of illegal immigration is far more complex than suggested by American news media. Illegal immigration is not a self-contained issue. It is directly correlated to larger economic factors, such as the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Lara & Rich, 2003). As such, reforms to current immigration policy, heightened border control, and stricter law enforcement may merely address the symptoms of a more pressing issue—economic instability in Latin America, particularly in

Mexico. Illegal immigration to the United States will likely continue to be an issue as long as viable solutions for economic stability in the region remain elusive (Massey et al., 2002). Nonetheless, it is very likely that this particular approach may sound too radical to the mainstream audience and thus be rejected in news coverage in favor of less drastic measures.

Our study offers a comprehensive analysis of news framing of illegal immigration, looking at the key functions of framing: defining a problem, diagnosing its causes, and suggesting solutions (Entman, 1993). News framing has important implications in political communications. First, the media can affect the way the audience evaluates the issue, influencing their judgment (Gamson, 1992). Second, the way the public makes sense of the issue can in turn affect their support for particular policies (Kim et al., 2002). Third, different ways to frame illegal immigration may shape not only public opinion on the issue itself, but also people's perceptions of Hispanic immigrants or Hispanics in general. Future research building on our findings needs to examine whether news framing of the issue does in fact influence the audience's views on immigration policies and the immigrants themselves.

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