

Media Ethics Issue:

Mistakes in Immigration Coverage

Immigration is a common societal phenomenon, often even a societal issue, caused by many factors in individuals' lives as well as political climates of nations. As with many societal issues, everyone has an opinion on it. In fact, in media and politics even having no opinion at all can have an impact. Where one information does not reach, another fills in. It is up to media professionals to make sure that correct, factual, information prevails in competing sectors. This work of writing focuses on three examples of how certain media mistakes can cause harm to United States immigrants, naturalized citizens and those born in the U.S. These mistakes include a lack of tenacity, use of insensitive wordage and misinformation.

Migration movements tend to cause dilemmas all over the globe because of the social, cultural, economic and political foundations of the many existing nations. Migrations have in the past been summed up as people looking for a better life elsewhere. Arguably, most immigrants from Central and South American countries have worthy stories to tell as opposed to the stereotypes they are often portrayed as. These individuals are often themselves victims of misfortune in their native countries. Ones with such history must be treated with respect and perhaps even as victims by media channels that choose to cover them.

As human societies evolved, they have become more complex than ever. This presents a challenge for media to research all underlying factors that contribute to stories. When media channels take on this challenge and succeed in their coverage – that is called tenacity. Tenacious coverage discovers the root of the problem. Tenacious coverage does not stop when the story gets too complicated. People rely on journalists and media professionals to be thorough and it's important to understand that they may not have the time or will to dig deeper on their own, as much as maybe they should. News coverage can easily become deceiving when it creates an illusion of being complete. In those circumstances the least that the media sources can do is state their sources and let the listener or reader know exactly what information on the story is missing.

That is how a media publication can protect its integrity, impartiality and transparency. Without such clarity, certain individuals are more likely to take claims or speculations as fact and make ill-informed decisions affecting their communities. Manuel Chavez, an associate professor of journalism and Latin American Studies at Michigan State University, in his article "*Reporting on Immigration: A Content Analysis of Major U.S. Newspapers' Coverage of Mexican Immigration*" Chavez put it as follows, "immigrants' experiences ought to be reported objectively in order for the public to gain a realistic perception of them as well as their communities, aspirations, and participation in U.S. society."

It is mostly talking heads that are prone to making this sort of mistake, given the format of delivery and the conversational nature of news shows on which they appear. However, it is important to note that even opinionated television and print news sources can be taken more seriously than perhaps originally intended. This is a phenomenon that is likely to take place on both sides of the political spectrum. As the Daily Show Effect study, conducted some years ago, suggests, "although The Daily Show is not intended to be a legitimate news source, over half (54%) of young adults in this age group (18-24 year old at the time) reported that they got at least some news about the 2004 presidential campaign from comedy programs such as The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live." (Baumgartner, 344) While late-night shows most often use widely recognized and accepted news sources for their shows and likely fall on the liberal side of things, from the psychological point of view the same effect can happen on the conservative side of things. This creates echo-chambers on both sides of the aisle and immigration as a heavily debated topic ends up amidst both as a target of resolve. The methods of resolve differ and that's where the media can steer the general public in a reasonable direction with factual information. The manner in which this is articulated, the tone that surrounds the messages, is the next mistake of some media.

It can be argued that there is a right and wrong way to refer to a person or a group of people and the struggles they face. The specific choices writers make have an effect on the populace, as suggested in a scholarly article as follows, “a growing body of evidence demonstrates that the way the press frames policy issues can foster fear, particularly with respect to portrayals of immigrants.” (Farris, 2017) It would probably be impossible to discuss immigration coverage issues in the media without mentioning the “caravan” saga that has been taking place during the Trump Administration’s time in office. The term “caravan” itself is questionable and simplified compared to what immigration really looks like in the 21st century. It is demeaning to immigrants when terms are used that simply identify them in a legal sense. Moreover, when it is not about offending them – it’s about communicating to the rest of the community the humanity of the situation. To add to that, a hot topic in the media for quite some time has been the border wall. “Studies show that the words ‘wall,’ ‘border,’ and ‘borders’ have increasingly replaced the words ‘immigration’ and ‘immigrants’ in global news coverage of immigration” stated Roberto Lovato in his opinion piece for the Columbia Journalism Review, “We no longer hear about the DREAMers, immigrant youth whose activism ‘won the nation’s hearts and minds’ just a couple of years ago.” That is an opinion piece, yet unless you happen to be a reporter covering exclusively DACA recipients you may too feel as though the media cycle squeezes topics out. This shows the impact that the news can have on the national narrative when it comes to significant issues. Rather than discussing bureaucratic issues in the DACA recipients’ processes, attention of most of the nation is turned toward a different large-scale story which some could say is more sensational than productive. What stories to run with is a choice that editors must make constantly, seemingly it is a hard task with an enormous amount of responsibility. On the next level, when a choice is made to put out something that is factually wrong, that responsibility has been compromised and abused.

Misinformation and fake news make it easier for a person with ill-conceived motives to rationalize their actions. When such individual sees mainstream media sources acting in support of misinformation that the said person might be following on social media, it enables that person's echo-chamber. "This is due, in part, to the ease of online self-radicalization to violence and the corresponding lack of direct connections between unknown radicalized violent extremists and known terrorists or FTOs", said Assistant Director of the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI Michael C. McGarrity in his statement before the House Homeland Security Committee. "This [ease of online self-radicalization] shortens the window of opportunity for our investigative teams to identify and disrupt an individual before that individual decides to act. The drivers of these domestic violent extremists include perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions, and reactions to legislative actions, and they remain constant ... We anticipate racial minorities, the United States government, and law enforcement will continue to be significant targets for many domestic terrorists ... Individuals adhering to racially motivated violent extremism ideology have been responsible for the most lethal incidents, however, and the FBI assesses the threat of violence and lethality posed by racially motivated violent extremists will continue. Radicalization to violence of domestic terrorists is increasingly taking place online, where violent extremists can use social media for the distribution of propaganda, recruitment, target selection, and incitement to violence." This has increasingly become an issue for social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter to deal with. It is especially an ethical issue for Facebook, which proclaims itself to be a public forum rather than a media channel. This of course is being challenged by many, and the conversation gets especially tricky when it involves financials and advertising.

Advertising falls in the realm of media and unfortunately is also prone to instances of misinformation. Class discussions on ethics have determined before that there is a difference between ethical and unethical advertising. Such difference is clear when a marketer spreads false information via their chosen channels. Anyone who encounters that advertising can become themselves a victim of unethical behavior, and then has a varying degree of potential to spread the said information further through their social circles.

It is possible to argue that tying the three mistakes, lack of tenacity, wordage and misinformation, together into an issue that impacts a specific group of people is a stretch, or a coincidence. One might say that these are vague examples that may fail to translate into material studies of consequences on real people's lives. The purpose of this written work, though, is to highlight the importance of ethical evaluation of work that media produces. When there is even a chance that a writer's or speaker's work may cause unjust harm to anyone – their actions must to be up for an ethical evaluation. Are these really all mistakes? Are these misguided actions performed based on corrupted loyalties?

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