

**United States Immigration Policy**  
**Anthropological Perspective and the Media**

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While the United States is facing an unfathomable amount of problems regarding the continued war in Iraq, a struggling economy and the health care crisis, some of the most prominent cable networks are conceptualizing undocumented immigrants into another one of the “problems” that the general public needs to be aware of in order to combat against them. The average individual ingests information that is readily available and easily accessible, and most importantly does not require them to do their own investigating to form their own opinion. Unfortunately, the individual is then only seeing the side of the news programs. The presence and contribution of anthropologists publicly in this debate is very slim.

The public is quick to believe these opinions and stereotypes from large television networks, and simultaneously they are not only believing them, but also living them on a daily basis. Whereas individuals must inherently take some blame for the reluctance towards immigrants to integrate into the nation, news programs should be at fault for the fabricated information presented to the general public. Anthropologists’ exploration and development on the topic of immigration is certainly valuable, and should be thought of as such in order to increase activism and see effective policy reform. Regardless of political belief, the news fosters misunderstandings, specifically on immigration, in more ways than one, impeding further change on the topic.

The current laws concerning deportation and immigration must be explored and changed in order to better represent individual situations of those living in the United States without the proper identification. My research explores how academic and non-academic sources talk about immigration and how effectively their information is understood and perceived by their audiences. Specifically, this paper will analyze the

differences in perspective and presentation of news programs as well as anthropological sources on their ideas about “Mexican” immigration and undocumented immigrants. Understanding these critical ideas will allow for a more informed discussion on how these differences will affect or possibly hinder future policy reform. Anthropologists’ exploration and development on the topic of immigration in the United States is certainly valuable, and should be thought of as such in order to increase activism and see effective policy reform.

### **Methods**

In order to make the analysis as straightforward as possible, it is necessary to transparently present the methods that I used as I went about this process of critiquing news programs and academic articles from anthropological journals. First, I needed to begin the research process with a complete bibliography that fully represented the academic and non-academic literature pertaining to undocumented immigrants and immigration that could be potentially used as a source. I focused on policy reform because it has the potential to speak more directly to the heart of the issue. Many of the anthropologists that study undocumented immigrants and immigration in the U.S. are activists for amnesty for undocumented immigrants, and focusing on change, the ultimate goal of activism, was the most pragmatic decision. I wanted to use a prominent source of news programming, and Fox News Channel is a major provider that many Americans are receive the facts concerning the happenings domestically and abroad, and most relevantly for this research, immigration. Programs such as The O’Reilly Factor hosted by Bill O’Reilly and The Sean Hannity Show are two major sources for information. I analyzed all transcripts pertaining to immigration from the last ten years, including in 2012 after

Obama announced the DREAM Act that planned to stop deporting young undocumented immigrants who have been in the United States for at least 5 years are willing to college or serve in the U.S. military. Analyzing the themes integrated throughout the news programs' archives and the anthropologists' research brought up some interesting ideas on how each will contribute to the future of undocumented immigrants in America. In order to prove my thesis, I will identify the general approaches that each source type embodies to communicate their information to their audience, and how those themes influence the possibility of change concerning the status of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

### **News Program Sources**

Immigration is a socio-political problem prominent in the news media, and I would argue that this is due to the hysteria created by prominent news sources, such as The Sean Hannity Show and The O'Reilly Factor. They are thriving on their ability to instill resentment, anger and fear into their viewers by not looking at the whole picture. A lot of the information they are presenting is false, and these myths create negative views toward undocumented immigrants as well as those of Mexican decent. These programs are able to build on the hysteria surrounding immigration simply by the terminology regularly used (Cleaveland 2010: 79). Undocumented immigrants are generally referred to as "illegal aliens," or "illegal" immigrants. A study done by Matthew R. Pearson in 2009 investigated the connotations behind these terms and how they affect the prejudice that so many Americans hold toward Mexican immigrants. He argues that describing immigrants as "illegal aliens" poses increased perceptions of threat and conceptualizes them as a

dangerous people (Pearson 2010). This carefully selected terminology then dehumanizes immigrants' validity as legitimate people, and the prejudice can become more and more threatening for Americans, as they do not stop to think how those powerful words shape their thoughts and actions towards a population so justifiably worthy of acceptance.

There are two major myths driving the conceptualization of those without proper U.S. documentation, one being their strain on the economy due to their consumption of social services and ignorance of paying taxes. Bill O'Reilly reported on his program that Los Angeles County will spend \$650-million to provide welfare benefits to illegal aliens, disregarding the validity of the work that undocumented immigrants are doing by claiming, "\$650-million a year in one American county overrides any economic benefit" (O'Reilly 2013: September 19). The truth is, those who want to receive federal aid benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps must prove their legal status to even be considered. As for taxes, they are not excused in the least sense. Every time they purchase a good or service, they are required to pay sales tax. Property taxes are paid through rent, and they are required to pay payroll and income taxes as well. With the way our current laws are set up, undocumented immigrants will never be paid back in benefits such as Medicare and Social Security (O'Reilly 2007: June 14).

The second myth that fosters great misunderstanding on the issue is the programs' ability to use their rhetoric to form a connection between crime and undocumented immigrants. There is no way to prove that undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit a crime in comparison to the average American. Congressman Steve King appeared on The O'Reilly Show to talk a little more in depth about the Dream Act and the crime associated with specifically young, illegal immigrants. He states, "you cite gleaming

examples of successful young illegals while you ignore the indisputable truth about serious crimes or country continues to endure at the hands of young, mostly male, illegal immigrants,” claiming that politicians and journalists are ignoring the criminal behaviors “to push their own open-borders agenda” (O’Reilly 2013: July 26). These immigrants are not only targeted, but are also accused of “major heinous crimes” involving gang rape and “hauling marijuana across the desert” (O’Reilly 2013: July 26). In addition, O’Reilly hosted two analysts on opposing sides. Michelle Malkin related undocumented immigrants to terrorists saying, “If the police who stopped some of the hijackers caught speeding before the 9/11 attacks had bothered to ask their immigration status, there would be 3,000 people still alive in New York City” (O’Reilly 2007: June 14). If undocumented immigrants are consistently blamed for the excessive amounts of crime in the United States, any attempt to reform the current obstacles will be impossible.

Due to the approaches used by news programs, the public can put blame on undocumented immigrants for the problems our nation faces. They are viewed as the enemy as they “take away from the system.” Just two months ago, Sean Hannity explained, “we can’t offer the American dream, if people are playing fairly and robbing the system. It’s time to take back our country and remember the struggle that those who came before us made to give us opportunity” (Hannity 2014). Here, the media is claiming that undocumented immigrants are taking so much away, when in reality they are doing jobs that a lot of people with documentation wouldn’t think about doing. He then follows up, “we were attacked on 9-11 because of the nation we are, the people we are and our beliefs in liberty. If we live with our borders open, and not secured, we are inviting terrorists to

attack us again” (Hannity 2014). The news host is able to instill fear and resentment into the general public by connecting two, seemingly relevant, unrelated topics.

Also, news sources generally use interviews as a way to include the voices of the “experts” as a way to communicate their information and stand point. These programs tend to interview politicians, heads and other celebrities. Including the voices of the actual people affects, or the migrants, could lead to change. The Sean Hannity Show and the O’Reilly Factor misinform many of the people in the United States on the topic of immigration and undocumented immigrants through use of negative terminology, reinforcement of myths concerning crime and economic contribution through the instillation fear and anger through referencing undocumented immigrants as the ultimate enemy, and by hosting and interviewing the “experts” to elicit information on the topic.

### **Anthropological Sources**

Anthropologists have done a lot of research on immigration and a lot of them are activists themselves that work towards granting amnesty to the many undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States. The anthropological perspective is very centered on the morality and ethics behind our nations’ legislation. They deeply look at the issues and weigh out the pros and cons that politicians contemplate. The population is concerned about immigration, as the issue is pertinent and affecting the lives of so many. Unfortunately, the academic writing is not so relevant to the everyday American’s lifestyle. The complexity of the text is limiting in the sense that the average American simply does not have the time and does not want to put in the effort to understand their ideas and perspective on a topic, though they might if they knew it existed.

In difference from news programs, anthropologists are very concerned with the moral and ethical considerations that are lacking in the current, nonexistent laws our country upholds regarding deportation and naturalization of undocumented immigrants. Josiah McC. Heyman is an activist anthropologist and professor who specializes in border trade issues at the University of Texas at El Paso. He has written a considerable amount on the topic of immigration, specifically focusing on borders, states, power, public issues, and engaged social sciences. He expresses how ethnographers and activist anthropologists have a duty to assist in the documentation of immigrants of all legal statuses in our society (Heyman et al. 2009: 7). In the article, "The Study of Illegality and Legality: Which Way Forward?" from 2013, he explains in greater detail some of the aspects that policy makers need to consider. He is determined to assist the border communities and their human rights by researching possible policy reforms that could enforce the protection of the border along with keeping those individuals and undocumented immigrants in mind (Heyman 2013). He analyzes the role of the capitalism at the United States Border, and searches to find the relationship between inequality and capitalism (Heyman 2012). Hilary Parsons Dick analyzes the language used in a series of "Illegal Immigration Relief Acts". After a recent increase in the amount of Mexicans and Dominicans in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, lawmakers in Hazleton passed an anti-immigration housing and employment ordinance that ultimately would fine or deny business permits to employers and landlords who would hire or rent out property to any "illegal" immigrant. As a result, she explains the ever-increasing "legal racialization" of "illegal aliens" due to the direct targeting of those of a certain race and group (Dick 2011: E50). Laws concerning immigration tend to include racializing strategies that promote the "general good" or "defend the national



sovereignty” (Dick 2011: E51). Dick argues how the “legal racialization” in ordinances surrounding immigration further identifies the social differences that create a threatening label.

Additionally, anthropologists have a wider view when it comes to looking immigration in America. Instead of looking solely in the present in their arguments, they give the reader a retrospective look into the history to fully delve into the issues and ideas in the foundational questions behind the controversy. Alvarez presented his research on the anthropological concept of a boundary and how this construction creates social and political identities that greater define the groups in an area throughout history (1995). Fassin is also fascinated by the anthropology of borderlands and how the elements of time and space affect how borders and immigration are accepted by popular culture and society. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, immigration was looked upon as a problem, and immigrants soon began to lose a lot of their rights. Now in the 21st century, we are defined in a time of “global tension,” where “increasing restrictions of human mobility” are seen through the production of walls that encourage isolation (Fassin 2011: 216). Anthropologists are able to analyze the inequality that is occurring, or when contemporary societies are increasing their use of borders and heavy policing in order to keep those of “lesser” societies out.

Anthropological work concerning undocumented immigrants and immigration policy hold a critical role in the activism and engagement realm of academe. Ethnographers hold an essential role in using the anthropological imagination, specific academic training, understanding of cultural differences and fieldwork research experience to look at practical ways of implementing public policy (Heyman et al. 2009). Alvarez

states, “we need to join the people we study by engaging the contemporary world.” (1995: 464). Because so many are uneducated by their television news programs, magazines and newspapers, it is the job of ethnographers and anthropologists who think critically on subject topics that Americans overlook. Because undocumented immigrants are considered this “dangerous” Other, and they take on a new identity that can be agreed upon after crossing a borderline (Heyman 1994: 49).

Heyman discusses the construction of a “virtual wall” and how the militarization and increased policing of the Mexico-US border has ultimately given rise to the large undocumented population. Undocumented workers were once able to travel back and forth, and ever since the border was “secured,” immigrants wouldn’t risk crossing the border back to Mexico after making it to the United States. “The virtual wall involves applying advanced surveillance and computer technologies to border law enforcement” (Heyman 2005: 305). He explains how the physical walls and fences are physical proof and enforcement of the United States’ work to prevent future immigration, when they are really insulting Mexico and “treating it like a threat rather than a partner” (Heyman 2005: 305). The goal of these technological advances such as the ground-level radar used to detect any kind of movement are to have more of an invisible “wall” that will effectively have the same effect as the physical “wall.” This proves how anthropological work deeply analyzes the decisions and actions of the “other” that reinforce the boundary.

Anthropologists look at this issue in a very personalized manner. They present representative data of a collective whole, but use their interviews to focus on personal narratives to tell individual stories that embody the collective whole. All these anthropologists bring vital aspects of the argument of undocumented immigrants to the

table. They look deeply into the history and overlooked topics surrounding immigration to use their training and passion to administer change and activism for those in close-by border communities and affected undocumented immigrants. The way our makes it extremely difficult for young, undocumented immigrants to build lives for themselves and their families. The Dream Act was enacted to gradually grant amnesty to those bound and determined individuals who maybe didn't make the decision to enter the United States because their parents made the ultimate decision to cross the border, but they plan to benefit the nation in some way (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). These anthropologists examined the lives of many young, undocumented immigrants through in-depth interviews to analyze the "nightmare" they awakened to by including their personal stories. When interviews are used, the anthropologists are interviewing real people, such as children whose parents made the ultimate decision to cross the border. Ethnographers who are taking this time to listen to the stories of the young individuals are essentially creating an environment for victims to engage in political change.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

Although anthropologists are so engrossed in the activism revolving around immigration policy reform, the average American is not reading their research and frankly doesn't have time to either. The news programs are readily available for the public and do not require the academic level of those anthropological sources. Josiah McC. Heyman states directly, "if 'we' anthropologists wish to have an impact on the policy arena, we need to write endearingly and accessibly, else we speak only to ourselves" (1998). This testimonial speaks to all of the fascinating research and work that has been done for the last twenty

years by anthropologists who investigate the border and its implications on policy, education, linguistics, and so on. The Sean Hannity Show and the O'Reilly Factor do not share accurate material with evidence to support their claims, and this is why the so much of the general public is ill informed on the key topics surrounding immigration. The difference in how each source type is represented is seen in the ways they present specific information and which information they *choose* to present.

We can conclude that although news sources in the media are widely viewed, they reveal inaccurate information that ultimately instills fear and anger. Anthropological sources, on the other hand, are not widely available and are not targeted for the average American. They present information and research that supports their claims with evidence and real-life examples. The next step for anthropologists is to present their current findings in a way that the general public can easily ingest the information and join their activist journey to ultimately see a transformation of public policy regarding undocumented immigrants and deportation in the United States.

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