Politics, Media and The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

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Since the rise of the penny press in the late nineteenth century, mass media in the United States have served to further nationalistic ideals and endeavors. The examples are too numerous to note in this article, but historically, when U.S. politicians wanted its citizens to unite against a "common enemy," the news media were often willing to lend a hand. The bitter competition between New York newspaper owners William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer remains a classic example of the news media's propensity to "rally 'round the flag."[1] At times that enemy was across the Atlantic, and at others, the "enemy" was just south of border. United States imperial dreams and actions, more often than not, have been backed by "cultural authorities," [2] that is, by members of the news media. The battle cries increased again in the fall of 2016, as the campaign for the forty-fifth president of the United States unfolded.

Donald Trump's now infamous statement about Mexicans "bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists…" was far from innovative;[3] rather, it reflected a long-standing practice of politicians using fear to garner votes and to sway public opinion. In this case, as they have done in the past, national networks played right into the then-candidate's hands, by allowing the now-president to spout vitriolic statements with little effort to fact-check or put the pronouncements into context.

The news media has by-and-large fulfilled its duty to "manufacture consent" among members of the public.[4] The case of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and how the region and its peoples are depicted by the news media historically and contemporarily provides a salient, albeit sobering, explanation for why and how, despite the fearmongering discourse —or perhaps as a result of it—, more than 62.9 million voters cast their ballots in favor of a candidate who seemed ready at every turn to insult a wide range of non-white ethnic groups, practically any non-conservative community, and, in some cases, entire nations.

While Trump's anti-immigrant discourse repulsed some voters, among a certain segment of the population, it reignited a fervor of animosity toward Latinos. In contrast to many Republican and Democratic candidates of the recent past, who chose to side-step the issue of immigration and the border, Trump made these two issues part of his *raison d'être*. Perhaps one of his most publicized messages included his demand to further militarize the U.S.-Mexico border: "I will build a great wall —and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me— and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words."[5]

For historians of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Trump's fervent and sometimes hateful discourse was not new. Nor was it new for activists of Arizona or throughout the U.S. Southwest, who have been struggling against xenophobia for

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decades. Yet, as verbal battles ensued on Twitter (at times between leading politicians and candidates), and "fake news" appeared on social media like Facebook, journalists were challenged by new circumstances that changed the practice of traditional campaign coverage, signaling that there was something new about this wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, and this was not "politics as usual." Consequently, journalists were forced to try to adapt to this new mediascape.

Historical Relationship between Media and Politics along the Border

Throughout the past century, anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands has ebbed and flowed, frequently linked to the country's economic environment. During much of the twentieth century, when economic times were flush, the nation's immigration policies remained lax; but during economic downturns, as in the 1930s and the mid-1950s, immigration policies toughened, along with the terminology that politicians, border patrol agents, and journalists used to describe migrants. To put it bluntly, during difficult economic times, the news media have functioned as a propaganda mechanism for political officials and government authorities such as border patrol agents, who, since the 1950s, have been calling for more personnel and resources to "stem the tide" of undocumented immigrants.[6] In short, media and politics are closely related, at times producing negative results for underrepresented border populations, most notably Latinos and Native Americans. Furthermore, the communication technologies (from the printing press to social media) available to agenda setters influence the relationship between the media and politics.

The news media's role in helping to generate support for militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border reflect a dominant "moral geography" of the region; one that has been defined by nationalism, nativism, and racism.[7] The dominant moral geography provides an ethical map of sorts that establishes who has the "right" to be in the country, and who does not, and where and how borders should be constructed. Activists and border residents have the ability to contest the dominant moral geography, but the powerful structures in place, including the news media, often turn these alternative views into outliers, in conflict with mainstream perspectives.

Press coverage of the borderlands in the 1950s provides an apt example of how the news media helped to shape the

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region's moral geography. By the 1950s, with the immigration exclusionary act of 1924 in place, the term "illegal alien" became entrenched in public discourse. This was partly as a result of the news media's uncritical use of the term. Also, by this time, as Mae Ngai argues, racialized and inconsistent immigration policies, which did not include numerical quotas for Mexicans, resulted in relegating this ethnic group to being known as "the prototypical illegal alien."[8] Then, in 1954, with the country in an economic lull and with Mexicans viewed as the prototypical "illegal alien," the government instituted a mass-deportation program, "Operation Wetback." Newspapers throughout the Southwest frequently used the term without questioning its derogatory tone or impact. In June 1954, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article in which it stated, "A major war on wetbacks, employing a reinforcement of 491 immigration officers recruited from all parts of the country will be launched along the California-Mexico border next Thursday to send tens of thousands of illegally entered Mexican aliens back into Mexico."[9]

The language of war that reporters used to describe an effort against a group of people with whom the United States had not declared an official conflict both demonstrates the need for journalists to generate interest in their reports, and their propensity to reaffirm dominant viewpoints. As a consequence, the news reports inflamed public sentiment toward undocumented people, mainly from Mexico. Over time, the racialized language of imperialism used to portray migrants in the borderlands helped further the project of political exclusion in the region.

Fifty years later, anti-immigrant sentiments spiked again.[10] Perhaps one of the most notable studies on the news media's treatment of the issue of undocumented immigration includes Santa Ana's examination of news coverage of California's 1994 Proposition 187.[11] Voters passed that statewide measure, backed by Republican Governor Pete Wilson, denying unauthorized immigrants public services like health care and education. Santa Ana illustrates how, through the use of animal and water metaphors, news coverage had the result of linguistically dehumanizing Mexican undocumented people.

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Phrases such as the border patrol "ferreting out" undocumented immigrants, and agents trying to stem the "tide"[12] of migrants coming across the border furthered stereotypes and strengthened a moral geography that had been under construction in mediascapes since the nineteenth century.

Another study shows that as the U.S. government began to increasingly militarize the border, and the border began to harden, so too did the images used in television news reports. During the 1990s, in El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, two of the country's busiest border cities, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) implemented "Operation Hold the Line" and "Operation Gatekeeper," respectively. These two programs included a large increase in staffing near the ports of entry and a build-up of security infrastructure. In 1994, after the border crackdowns in San Diego and El Paso, the agency intensified enforcement through "Operation Safeguard" in the Tucson, Arizona, sector of the U.S. Border Patrol. Melissa Johnson's study on broadcast news demonstrates that between the 1970s and 2000s, network coverage of the border skyrocketed, and news reports increasingly used images of fences to denote the international boundary instead of rivers, which were often included in stories aired in the 1970s.[13] The study found that "in the 1970s, only 21 percent of the decade's coverage of the border included a graphic or photographic image of a fence . . . and by the 1990s, it jumped to 61 percent" of the sample.[14] In addition, graphics in broadcast news began to use darker and thicker lines to depict the border, as a way to create a sense of danger along the international boundary.[15]

New Media, New Administration, New Challenges

Thirty years after the great border build-up of the 1990s, despite studies that show that net Mexican immigration to the United States is hovering around zero,[16] and despite conservative statistics that show that between 2001 and 2016, more than 2 500 bodies have been found in the Tucson sector of the border patrol alone, the new administration has called for even more militarization.[17] Trump has called for another dramatic increase in border patrol agents and a "beautiful" wall, which he said "Mexico will pay for." These demands have contributed to rising tension among people along both sides of the border and strained diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico to a point not seen for decades.

The new president's harsh tone represents only one characteristic that signals a departure from past relations among journalists and politicians in the borderlands. Some phenomena have been developing over time, while others are new to the media, politics, and the borderlands landscape. The first involves diminishing information access and transparency following the creation of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11 in 2002. Since DHS's establishment, it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to cover the activities of the third largest government agency. Prior to 9/11, journalists could schedule one-on-one interviews and "ride-alongs" with Border Patrol agents by calling the local Border Patrol offices. Today, these requests must be cleared by DHS personnel in Washington, D.C. Some freedom-of-information scholars argue, "We have reached a tipping point —a crisis situation— when it comes to freedom of information in this country."[18] This statement was made prior to the new administration moving into the White House. The adversarial relationship that the new president has created among members of the press does not bode well for the issue of transparency.

The second attribute that distinguishes current media/politics relations from the past involves the growing economic interdependence between the United States and Mexico. Prior to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the two economies were already becoming increasingly reliant on cross-national business and industry. Today, the level of interconnectedness among the peoples and economies is unprecedented. The isolationist policies that the Trump administration seems to advocate do not seem realistic in 2017, when both countries are so economically dependent on one another.

Finally, changing communications technologies and the manner in which politicians and the news media are using them present new diplomatic, political, and journalistic challenges. Social media have taken the role of gatekeeper and agenda-setter out of the hands of large and elite media and placed them in an unpredictable online universe. Not

only has this caused media conglomerates to look for ways to respond to a constantly changing digital environment, but the invention of new media platforms has big media searching for ways to monetize information in this new setting. To be clear, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have now become some of the most profitable providers of information. At the same time, the public and politicians can harness these digital tools themselves allowing them to bypass traditional diplomatic channels and the news media, so that they can disseminate their own messages for the world to see.

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In January 2017, just days after Trump's inauguration, traditional media were bypassed when he and Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto traded messages on Twitter. Before the two heads of state were scheduled to meet in person in Washington, D. C., Peña Nieto sent a video message to all *mexicanos* via his Twitter account, in which he reaffirmed that, "Mexico does not believe in walls. I have said it time and again: Mexico will not pay for any wall." Trump then posted a Tweet stating that, "If Mexico is unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall, then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting." Shortly thereafter, Peña Nieto stated that, "This morning, we have informed the White House that I will not attend a working meeting scheduled for next Tuesday with @POTUS [President of the United States]." The online exchanges made it clear that U.S.-Mexico relations had entered a new phase, and as relations reconfigured, journalists scrambled to catch up without being caught in the fray of the Twitterverse.

Over the years, the news media have been criticized heavily for creating and perpetuating stereotypes and dehumanizing immigrant populations. Most professional journalists now try to avoid obvious stereotypes in their reporting, though this may still occur from time to time. However, with new and emerging technologies, and a president who seems to relish being a non-traditional politician, reporters have additional obligations, one of which includes covering international diplomacy beyond 140 characters at a time. VM

Notes

[1] Ilia Rodríguez, "News Reporting and Colonial Discourse: The Representation of Puerto Ricans in U.S. Press Coverage of the Spanish-American War," *The Howard Journal of Communications* no. 9, 1998, pp. 283-301.

[2] Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[3] CBS News, "30 of Trump's Wildest Quotes," http://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/wild-donald-trump-quotes/9/, ND, accessed January 30, 2017.

[4] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

[5] CBS News, op. cit.

[6] Celeste González de Bustamante, "Arizona and the Making of a State of Exclusion, 1912–2012," in Otto Santa Ana and Celeste González de Bustamante, eds. *Arizona Firestorm: Global Immigration Realities, National Media, and Provincial Politics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 71.

[9] "Government Maps War on Wetbacks: 491 Additional Immigration Men to Join in Mass Roundup of Aliens," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1954, p. A13.

[10] This also happened in the 1970s, but for the sake of brevity, this essay concentrates on just a few of the moments in which anti-immigrant sentiments surfaced.

[11] Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* (Austin: University of Texas, 2002).

[12] Ibid., p. 84.

[13] Melissa Johnson, "Immigration Images: U.S. Network News Coverage of Mexican Immigration, 1971-2000," paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Meeting in San Diego, May 23-27, 2003.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Jens Manuel Krogstad, "5 Facts about Mexico and Immigration to the U.S.," http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/11/mexico-and-immigration-to-us/, February 11, 2016, accessed January 31, 2017.

[17] Kendal Blust, "Deaths per 10,000 Border Crossers Are Up 5 Times from a Decade Ago," *Arizona Daily Star*, http://tucson.com/news/local/border/deaths-per-border-crossers-are-up-times-from-a-decade/article_c1279aaf-4ad8-51c9-82d8-3143b836f52e.html, May 12, 2016, accessed January 15, 2017.

[18] David Cuillier, "FOIA at Fifty: Has the Sunshine Law's Promise Been Fulfilled?" Testimony, United States Committee on the Judiciary, July 12, 2016, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/foia-at-fifty-has-the-sunshine-laws-promise-been-fulfilled.