CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

香港城市大學

Influence of Political, Economic and Geographical Factors on the Representation of Immigration Issues in the American Press

美國媒體中的移民問題再現：政治、經濟和地理因素

Submitted to
Department of Media and Communication
媒體驗播系
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
哲學博士學位

by
Miriam Hernández Martínez

August 2018
二零一八年八月
Abstract

In the United States, immigration coverage goes hand in hand with the changing demographic and political landscape of the country. Since media salience has provided a platform that has contributed to the polarization of the issue, this dissertation seeks to explain under which political and geographical circumstances the subject has become politicized, and the implications it has for American society and the immigrant population.

Drawing from the literature on agenda building, electoral competition and structural pluralistic theories, this project investigated to what extent electoral and border environments determined the immigration news flow. It especially examined how presidential electoral years and the prioritization of immigration on the political parties’ platforms influenced the issue’s coverage. In addition, it addressed how the South Border geopolitical environment affected the characteristics ascribed to immigration news and how real-world indicators such as economic, demographic and immigration factors shaped the production of immigration themes and the framing arguments within a story.

In order to address the dissertation’s objectives, a content analysis of immigration news, collected from border (Los Angeles Times, San Diego Union Tribune, Arizona Daily Star, El Paso Times and Las Cruces Sun News) and non-border (New York Times and the Washington Post) newspapers was conducted for the 1982-2012 timeframe. A total of 1,288 news stories were gathered and analyzed.

Findings showed electoral seasons did not have a telling effect on the higher salience of immigration since the majority of news occurred during non-electoral periods or only when the issue was actively promoted by the political parties. Regarding location, media border salience towards immigration was steadier and more negative than non-border media, where the issue’s treatment had a more neutral and sympathetic approach.
In a similar fashion, the attribution of responsibility for immigration problems followed this geographic conversation, with non-border media blaming state-local officials for immigration difficulties and border media blaming federal officials. Due to this counter-dialogue of power across time and place, the politicization of the issue of the media can be traced back to mid-1990s, when the national non-border media began to devote above-average consideration to the topic. Lastly, the demographic, economic and immigration factors had weak effects on the likelihood of reporting an immigration theme or framing argument, lending support to the fact that immigration coverage was less a matter of reflecting reality, and more a case of journalistic practices, the influence of political sources and the surrounding environment.

Overall, the findings make an important contribution to the communication and immigration scholarship by showing the impact of geographic location and electoral contexts. By analyzing salience differences between outlets, there was a better understanding of the power exchange different actors have in the agenda-building process, suggesting the relevance ‘macro’ perspectives have for the growing literature of social institutional effects, within the Hierarchy of Influences Model. In doing so, this project responded to scholars’ concerns that examinations of the production of news stories have neglected the relationship between media content and the broader issues of political and social power.