



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

1-1-2009

# Framing the Voiceless: News Conventions and the Undocumented Children in the United States

S. Chen Berggreen

*University of Colorado, USA*

T. R. Crapanzano

*University of Colorado, USA*

C. S. Eastman

*University of Colorado, USA*

---

### Recommended Citation

Berggreen, S. Chen; Crapanzano, T. R.; and Eastman, C. S., Framing the Voiceless: News Conventions and the Undocumented Children in the United States, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 19, 2009, 126-141.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss19/12>

# **Framing the Voiceless: News Conventions and the Undocumented Children in the United States**

**Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen**

*University of Colorado, USA*

**Theresa Rose Crapanzano**

*University of Colorado, USA*

**Cari Lee Skogberg Eastman**

*University of Colorado, USA*

## **Abstract**

Immigration is a major focus of journalistic inquiry, particularly in countries like the US where the prospect of a better life act as a magnet for countless people each year. In the US, such coverage tends to focus on the adult immigrants, particularly the political and economic ramifications that attach to those who arrive without legal papers. This paper looks at the coverage – or lack thereof – of the children who accompany their parents over the border, north into the United States. It argues that these children, who tend to be voiceless whenever this issue is publicly debated, deserve to be represented in the discussions that take place within the media.

## Introduction

Immigration, both legal and illegal, has been the subject of kitchen table conversations, media reports and political rallies for much of the past decade, but recent changes, particularly in U.S. immigration policy, have kindled even more heated reports and conversations about what to do with the country's "illegal" population. Official coverage has largely focused on the political and economic ramifications of the arrival of adults without legal documentation. Some view them as victims of corruption, poverty, and/or unfair policies while others insist they are responsible individuals who make a choice to commit an illegal action by clandestinely crossing into the US. Victim or villain, the focus of the immigration debate has centred primarily upon the plight and decisions of these adults.

Noticeably absent from media discussions of immigration, however, are the voices of the children who often accompany these adults on their journeys northward. Minors who have no opportunity to make their own decisions regarding place of residence are often smuggled into the country alongside their parents or relatives. They have not chosen to come, but are brought by loved ones who wish to keep their families united. Because of their status as persons without documentation, these children face grave dangers both in the borderlands during the crossing, and later as 'underground' members of U.S. communities where their families choose to settle. Others, born in the United States to one or more parents who lack legal status, may themselves be U.S. citizens but may lack normal protections of security and safety because their families live in hiding or in constant fear of authorities. Without the reassurance of legal protection, the families are often subjected to physical or financial exploitation by corrupt employers or other individuals who recognise their vulnerability (Matthews, 1999). Children may also face huge obstacles regarding education, health care and other social services because their families are afraid that seeking public assistance will lead to discovery by authorities (NC Latino, 2003).

These children suffer the consequences of decisions they did not and could not make for themselves. However, as "illegal immigrants" they face the same social and political stigmas and repercussions as the adults who brought them to the US. Their futures depend largely on decisions made by citizens who may not realise the implications of proposed immigration laws on children caught up in the fray.

Because media carry great power to influence public knowledge and opinion about such issues as immigration, it is especially important that the plight of these children be presented and considered through media channels as part of the public debate. Children without legal status, or children who are members of families where at least one parent does not hold legal status, do not have a public voice of their own that can be used to tell their stories or advocate for policy change. It is through official channels such as media that the difficulties they face can be explained, so that the general U.S. public might become aware of and consider more thoroughly the ramifications of immigration law and policy on their lives. This project aims to address the ways in which media in the state of Arizona have approached the unique issues related to these voiceless and vulnerable children: children without rights, children without a country.

## News Conventions

News media adhere to particular conventions in their general news coverage. The study that follows further examines these conventions in three particular areas—framing, sourcing, and the construction of the ideology of childhood—through a content analysis and textual analysis of news coverage of undocumented children.

## Framing theory

Frames in news stories work to structure the representation of reality. As many scholars note, central to an understanding of framing are the ideas of selection and salience—the process by which certain items are highlighted and privileged and therefore become “more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audiences receiving those bits of information” (Kendall, 2005, p. 9). Framing is the process through which meaning is given to the facts presented in the news. In studying framing, absence is in many ways as important as presence—in drawing attention to certain aspects of reality, frames also work to draw audience attention away from other aspects. Framing is then, as Entman (1993) writes, “a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (p. 293). This power is further realised by examining the four main functions of frames—to “define problems,” “diagnose causes,” “make moral judgments” and “suggest remedies.” In constructing problems, as is the case with much news coverage of immigration, journalists typically draw upon “common cultural values” in forming their frames, making the narratives both accessible and resonant to their readers (p. 294).

Iyengar (1991) has further articulated the concept of framing by dividing frames into two primary categories—*episodic* news frames and *thematic* news frames. According to the definitions explicated by Iyengar, episodic news reports are “event-oriented,” focusing on “concrete instances” and live events rather than context (p. 14). They focus on “specific events or particular cases” (p. 2). Thematic news reports often attempt to offer greater explanation of social conditions, causes, attributions of responsibility and offer a larger understanding of the social context of an issue. They “place political issues and events in some general context” (p. 2). While news reports can reflect both episodic and thematic elements, “in most cases one frame or the other predominates” (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2005, p. 62). Iyengar’s studies show a strong predominance of episodic frames in news accounts and that episodic frames have become a mainstay of contemporary journalism.

As noted above, frames are typically used to help define problems and their consequences. In addition, they can also be used to forward a notion of who or what is the cause of the problem as defined through the narrative. Iyengar’s (1996) delineation between episodic frames and thematic frames becomes critical in attempting to understand the relationship between framing and “attributions of responsibility” for societal ills (p. 62). For example, in his studies of poverty-related news coverage, Iyengar notes that the preponderance of episodic frames tends to correlate strongly with “individualistic attributions of responsibility” (Ibid). “In effect, news that dwells on particular instances of poverty encourages viewers to blame the victim,” he writes (Iyengar, 1996, p.65). This can be particularly pronounced when news depicts poverty among racial minorities. Thematic frames, however, because of

the greater focus on context, tend to encourage more of an analysis of causation from broader societal conditions rather than individual actions (1996).

## Sourcing

As discussed above, framing is an “active endeavour”—it requires selections on the part of the journalist. In many cases, these selections are predicated on assumptions of importance or newsworthiness that are not always articulated, but still form the backbone of news routines (Kendall, 2005, p. 10). The judgments regarding sourcing are particularly reflective of these journalistic conventions. Sourcing plays a critical role in framing. If framing is, as Entman (1993) writes, “the imprint of power,” an analysis of sourcing requires researchers to interrogate this power further, asking who has the power to speak and be heard through the lens of the news media (p. 294). The dominant frames (and, correspondingly, the construction of problems, their causes and solutions) are often directed in large part by the sources interviewed.

This becomes a particular concern when analysing the coverage of undocumented children in the news—a group seen as particularly powerless—because of the tendency of journalists to follow the trails of power when seeking sources to interview. A number of studies have critically analysed the sourcing practices of journalists, finding a strong tendency to rely on “official sources” for the majority of their information. Sigal’s research on Washington journalists and sources found that journalists overwhelmingly rely on “routine channels” for their news—such as official proceedings, press conferences and interviews with “official spokesmen” (Sigal, 1999, p. 225). This reliance on “routine channels” has become a stable part of news routines because of a belief in both the efficiency of the process and the “certified” (or reliable) nature of the news gathered.

While this reliance on official sources is perhaps most pronounced in Washington reporting, it imbues news coverage from both large and small media organisations and is present in international, national, and local news. Gans’s 1979 work on sourcing firmly locates the relationship between sources and journalists according to four related factors: incentives, power, the supply of suitable information, and proximity to journalists (Gans, 1999). Journalistic routines regarding sourcing are then predicated on judgments regarding the “reliability” and “trustworthiness” of sources as well as matters of convenience, for example, is the source articulate and readily available? (pp 246-247). This sourcing criteria can put particular groups of non-officials—such as those of lower socio-economic status, ethnic minorities, and children—at a distinct disadvantage in the struggle for representation in the news. This can become particularly pronounced in the coverage of children—who are not seen as wielding power or influence and are typically not believed to be as reliable or articulate as adult sources. As other studies have shown, while children are often covered in the news, they are rarely quoted (Ponte, 2007). We often hear others speaking for them and about them, but the children themselves often appear to be largely silent.

However, some media scholars have argued that we need to better understand how non-official sources—such as various voluntary and pressure groups—can also influence news content (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1999). In the study of undocumented children this becomes a particularly pertinent question, asking us to

analyse how representatives from advocacy groups appear in news, becoming a voice for the typically voiceless.

## News and the Ideology of Childhood

Journalists become, as Reeves and Campbell (1994) write, “[narrators] of the reported world” (p. 49). Crucial to the narratives that journalists construct are the ideologies that underpin the stories they tell. In his 1984 book *Television Myth and the American Mind*, Himmelstein explores how news media, television in particular, draw on society’s central myths to produce common narrative forms. These frames employ familiar ideological constructs and promote particular values, such as the sanctity of the family and the triumph of the individual. While researchers studying news coverage of undocumented children could locate any number of ideological and narrative constructions, the competing (and, at times, overlapping) ideological presentations of childhood and deviance are the particular concern of this research.

As other studies of news media have shown, the ideology of childhood has become a particularly potent prop in news accounts. As a narrative device, the invoking of childhood provides emotional resonance and accessible news pegs for journalists. Cristina Ponte (2007) writes, “Children and their symbolic value provide ‘eternal stories’ for news” (p. 738). The imagery of the suffering child is a particularly potent ideological construct, suggesting the need for adult protection and intervention. Suffering children, such as those living amidst famines and wars, can become abstracted from their contentious social and political conditions. It is the notion, Karen Wells writes, that “children live outside the nexus of political calculations” (2007, p. 60).

As previous studies have explored, it is the myth of the innocent child with which news audiences have perhaps become most familiar (Ponte, 2007). But their presence in news is often characterised by a high degree of “code-switching”. Symbolic references to childhood are far from static, reflecting the conflicted nature of the ideological construct. There exists, as Ponte (2007) writes, a “deep-rooted ambivalence” about childhood and children. For children in news, there are seemingly two options: victimisation and demonisation. Ponte writes, “...if the innocent and dependent child is the dominant story in modern societies, there is also the black sheep child; the child in conflict with the law, for instance, that does not correspond to the romantic ideal of childhood as a time of innocence and dependence” (p. 738).

As discussed above, a key role of news is status conferral. In both its overall frames and choice of sources, news media enforce social norms and beliefs. In this sense, journalists situate themselves as protectors of the state and the community. In their 1994 study of television news coverage of the drug wars, Reeves and Campbell explain news narrative as a process of “representing authority, visualizing deviance, and publicizing common sense”. Through this, the journalists “[enact] the rites of inclusion and exclusion” (p. 49). Partially because the ideology of childhood is imbued with notions about hope for the future, stories about children are invariably entrenched in explorations of the state and the community. Moeller (2002) writes, “Children are the synecdoche for a country’s future, for the political and social well-being of a culture” (p. 39). This, in turn, can make the ideology of childhood particularly susceptible to discussions of deviance. As seen in the discourse surrounding street children and rapidly expanding Third-World populations, childhood

can also be the centre of discussions about deviance and threat to the community. A Stephens writes:

There is a growing consciousness of children at risk. But the point I want to make here is there is also a growing sense of children themselves as the risk--- and thus of some children as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social ends (1995, p. 13).

It is in news coverage of undocumented children that these seemingly conflicting ideological constructs of innocence and deviance collide. On one level, they are victims of their situation and the traumatic details of their horrific crossings are fodder for sympathetic action. Yet, unlike the victims of terrorist attacks and natural disasters, they are not “the greatest victims, the perfect innocent” (Ponte, 2007, p. 738). Their symbolic value is undeniably marred by their illegal status, contributing to a conflicted ideology of childhood that situates undocumented children as both victims of their situation and threats to the community. Likewise, as previous studies of news have shown, both class and ethnic status strongly influence the portrayal of deviance. For example, Diana Kendall (2005, p. 4) explains that typically the poor and homeless “at best are portrayed as in need of our pity or, at worst, as doomed by their own shortcomings”. At the same time that they represent hope for the future, children are also “an ever-present danger to the moral fabric of contemporary society... a social group in need of control and containment” (Ponte, 2007, p. 736). Whether a group, such as undocumented children, come to be seen as innocent or deviant largely rests in the manner in which they are framed (Kendall, 2005).

## Research Questions and Methodology

Given the crucial role media play in contributing to public opinions and educating the public on social issues, this project examines media coverage of children without legal status in the US. We study specifically the coverage of the issue by five primary immigration and /or border reporters in the state of Arizona who work for three of the state’s largest newspapers, located primarily within the region that corresponds with the U.S. Border Patrol’s Tucson Sector. The nature of existing coverage is considered, as is the need for greater attention to the problems faced by children who suffer the consequences of a decision they cannot make for themselves. Our research questions are: 1) How much of the immigration coverage since 2005 is about issues related to children? 2) What is nature of the coverage related to children? Is it episodic news or thematic news? 3) What are the primary sources for news stories related to children? 4) How do the concepts and ideologies of children and childhood reveal themselves in these news stories?

## Purposeful Sampling

Arizona was chosen as the social locale of analysis for this study because the majority of unauthorised border crossings currently take place in the state’s Tucson Sector. It seemed that thoughtful analysis of the issues affecting undocumented children would likely be found here, in the area currently considered “ground zero” of the immigration debate. Therefore, the primary border and immigration reporters for

Arizona's two largest newspapers were identified: Daniel González of *The Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), and Brady McCombs of *The Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson). Other media professionals in the state who have done extensive work on border and immigration issues were also identified through database searches (including NewsBank, Google, and searches within *The Arizona Republic* and *The Arizona Daily Star*) and through recommendations provided by Gonzalez and McCombs. These additional media professionals included Michel Marizco, independent border reporter and former reporter for *The Arizona Daily Star*; Ernesto Portillo, Jr., current reporter and former columnist for *The Arizona Daily Star*, and Claudine LoMonaco, content producer for NPR affiliate KUAT and former reporter for *The Tucson Citizen*.

A search for all articles about immigration written by each reporter for his or her corresponding newspaper between January 1, 2005 and May 15, 2008 was conducted using the NewsBank database. A total of 706 articles resulted from this search. A new search was then conducted from those original articles, using the key words 'immigration' and 'children' or 'child' or 'minor' and 'author' (name) and 'date' (01/01/2005-05/15/2008). Articles matching the search criteria were examined to weed out any that only made a quick mention of children's issues but focused on other topics. As a result of this search, 52 articles were determined to be focused primarily on children and immigration. These articles were then examined through a content analysis and a textual analysis.

January 2005 is used to denote the beginning of the time frame for this study because it marks the onset of the most recent wave of the U.S. Congress's debate on the immigration policy and some activists' vigorous attempts to use media to inform the public of their feelings about the issue. May 15, 2008 was selected as a logical cut-off point because of the news milieu surrounding the summer and autumn 2008 in the U.S. As the U.S. presidential election approached, the press largely focused its attention on the upcoming Democratic and Republican conventions. Further, the 2008 Olympics and all the surrounding political issues in China occupied a prominent place in press coverage in summer 2008. The immigration issues had scarcely made it into the news, let alone coverage of undocumented children.

## Variables and operationalisations

Content analysis and textual analysis of these 52 news articles were conducted. For content analysis, in addition to the basic information, such as date, title of the article, newspaper name, reporter name, placement of the article, five key variables were coded:

- 1) Type of article: staff editorial, column, news story, other;
- 2) Article Length: total words in the main text of the article (not including headline, bylines, taglines, any photo captions, etc.);
- 3) Episodic vs. Thematic: The article subject matter would be considered episodic if the news reports were "event-oriented," "focusing on concrete acts or live events rather than general contextual material." They focus on "specific events or particular cases". In contrast, thematic news reports often attempt to offer greater explanation of social conditions, causes, attributions of responsibility, etc.

and offer a larger understanding of the social context of an issue. They “place political issues and events in some general context” (Iyengar, 1996, p. 62);

- 4) Sources used: including sources quoted directly and paraphrased. Sources are grouped into nine categories: a) adult illegal immigrants; b) children (under the age of 18)—this encompasses both children who are immigrants (legal or illegal) themselves and/or those who are the children of immigrants (at least one parent was born outside of the United States, but the children themselves were born in the U.S.); c) legal immigrants—this might include immigrants who were formerly illegal and not naturalised; d) elected government officials—Political officials/representatives who are elected to their position and those who are running for office. This category also includes their spokespeople; e) other public officials - officials (federal or local) who are not elected by the public to their positions. This may include police officers, border agents, other immigration officials, government lawyers and school officials; f) representatives of pro-immigrant rights activist/advocacy groups and/or immigration lawyers (not representing the government); g) representatives of children’s rights activist groups; h) representatives of other activist groups not included in the afore-mentioned representatives categories of activist/advocacy groups. This may include anti-immigration groups; public: members of the general public; i) other; and
- 5) Sources quoted directly and the length of the quote. The same nine categories of sources from the last variable are used here and the length is measured by number of words.

## Coder Reliabilities

One author coded all 52 articles. Eleven of the 52 articles (21%) were randomly selected and coded by another author to calculate the inter-coder reliabilities. All but two variables reached a coder-reliability of 1.00. Sources used and sources of direct quotes attained a coder-reliability of 0.91.

## Findings

### Amount and the nature of coverage

As indicated in the sampling section, only 52 out of 706 articles (7.6%) in the defined study period were about children. Episodic reporting dominated these 52 articles both in number and in length. Out of the 52 articles, only ten (19.23 %) were coded as thematic, while 42 articles (80.77%) were episodic. On average, thematic articles were much longer than episode articles. The average length of thematic articles was 1,226.7 words while episodic articles averaged 653.73 words. The total length of all thematic articles was 12,267 words, and 27,457 words for articles coded as episodic.

### Sources quoted

Interestingly yet expectedly, episodic and thematic articles were likely to use different types of sources for both direct and indirect quotes. Thematic articles were much more

likely to quote representatives from various activist groups working in the interests of immigrants or children (80 percent of thematic articles as compared to 42.9 percent of episodic articles). Thematic articles tended to quote children more (30 percent of thematic articles as compared to 19 percent of episodic articles). Thematic articles were more inclined to quote immigrants (both legal and undocumented), with 40 percent of thematic articles featuring quotes from immigrants as opposed to 31 percent of episodic articles.

Further, the thematic articles were much more likely to consult “experts,” such as sources from universities or non-partisan research organisations (60 percent of thematic articles as compared to 4.8 percent episodic articles). However, both thematic and episodic articles were likely to quote “officials” (either elected or appointed): 76.2 percent of episodic articles quoted officials and 80 percent of thematic articles did.

### **The primary sources interviewed**

“Officials” were the most prevalent sources quoted directly or indirectly. Nearly 77 percent of articles quoted officials, 50 percent quoted activist/advocacy groups specifically working in the areas of pro-immigration or children, 32.7 percent quoted immigrants (both legal and undocumented), 21.2 percent quoted children and 15.4 percent quoted experts.

Overall, statements of “officials” appeared in direct quotes the most. Of the total 39,724 words in the 52 articles, 1,653 words were direct quotes from officials, 1,177 words were direct quotes from representatives from pro-immigration and children activist groups, 1,042 words were direct quotes from immigrants (legal and undocumented), 458 words were from experts, and 339 words were from children.

### **Additional observation on sources**

Sources also play another role in reporting. In some cases, the type of sources quoted can help drive the nature of the article (episodic vs. thematic). For example, a short article (477 words) about a symposium highlighting the vital importance of educating children of immigrants (Gonzalez, July 8, 2005, *The Arizona Republic*) uses a specific event as a news peg (a symposium in Tempe organised by the Phoenix-based Children’s Action Alliance), but it still becomes thematic because of the nature of the discussions at the event and how sources focused their comments. The article transcends particularisation and examines the overall plight of children of immigrants and how they are affected by immigration laws.

Furthermore, in some cases, the reporters/newspaper explicitly state that they are attempting to provide “context” through their news reports. For example, one article about the complexity and costliness for families who struggle to live legally in the U.S. (by Brady McCombs, March 14, 2008) from *The Arizona Daily Star* promotes itself as an instalment in a series that “strives to provide context to the immigration debate by analyzing the common rhetoric surrounding illegal immigration”. However, this article examines the “complexity” of the immigration system primarily through the lens of one family’s experience. While this particular family’s story does provide some context to the larger debate, it is primarily using the techniques of “personalisation”

in an episodic manner. While the family's "predicament" is humanised, it is in the "particular person" manner Iyengar describes.

### The images of the undocumented children

A textual analysis of the 52 articles reveals a conflicted sense of undocumented children. They are at times innocents in need of help and, at other times, threats to the safety and stability of the community. The meaning of childhood is far from static. Consistently, however, the idea of childhood is linked to rhetoric about the future and change. Those quoted on all sides of the issues believe that much rests on the fate of the children, but they differ on whether the future is filled with promise or is something to be feared.

For example, a 2006 article in the *Tucson Citizen* situates the children of immigrants as essential to the assimilation of their parents, describing how children serve as translators for their parents, who have yet to become fluent in English. "The children work as a bridge, or 'cultural broker,' between society and their parents," writes reporter Claudine LoMonaco (November 29, 2006, p. 1A). However, at the same time, this article also reflects the conflicted nature of the ideology of childhood as applied to undocumented children. According to the article, in some ways, the children are not truly children at all. While they are "empowered" by their role, they are also required to take on adult responsibilities, such as reading government documents and filling out job applications. This is, LoMonaco writes, reflective of "a power shift," whereby the parents become dependent on their own children (p. 1A). In this sense, children themselves are bringing about the cultural change and switching roles with their parents. They are not fully abstracted from their social condition. They are agents of change instead of victims of their situation because they help their parents assimilate and become included in mainstream American culture.

In one article that ran in *The Arizona Republic*, the Phoenix-based Children's Action Alliance combines the idea of children as the future and links this to the welfare of the community (González, July 8, 2005). However, while anti-immigration groups have successfully employed the ideology of protecting the community as a method of exclusion, this article forwards a notion that maintenance of the community requires protection of undocumented children. The article begins, "At stake is the economic future of Arizona" (p. 5). Throughout the rest of the story, reporter Daniel González quotes members of the organisation, who describe the overall hurdles undocumented children face (poor nutrition and living conditions, lack of health insurance) and argue that the welfare of the state of Arizona is reliant on improving the lives of these children. "'The future of Arizona is 100 percent dependent on our ability' to help the children of immigrants succeed through programs and public policies," González writes, quoting Carol Kamin, president of the organisation (p. 5). The future of the larger community is then intrinsically connected to the protection of the undocumented children, according to the sources in this article. The abstract undocumented children mentioned in this article become moral referents and serve as a call to action, but this call to action is largely grounded not in their suffering, but in a notion of their potential for the future. "These kids and the resources they bring to Arizona are critical to the success of the state for decades to come," says Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard (p. 5).

In another article from *The Arizona Daily Star*, the primary frame constructs undocumented children as a threat to the community and the institution of the family. They are, therefore, a group to be controlled and excluded (McCombs, February 22, 2006). While the article discussed above relied primarily on sources from a children's advocacy group, the primary sources consulted in this article are members of anti-illegal-entrant groups. The story leads with Michelle Dallacroce, who founded the group "Mothers Against Illegal Aliens." The group's goal, according to the article, is to "spread the message to mothers across the country that illegal entrants are making it unsafe to raise children in the United States" (p. A2). "Dallacroce likened the movement to a family and said her group is playing the matriarchal role of supporting the men and protecting the children," writes Brady McCombs, the reporter (p. A2). Throughout the remainder of the article, the reporter provides a platform for exploring the activities of this and other anti-illegal entrant groups and their claims (including contentions that undocumented children threaten other children because they carry disease and put an increasing financial burden on school systems). While McCombs is conscious to attempt to achieve "balance" in the story by quoting sources that disagree with the claims made by these groups, the majority of the article is driven by their contentions. The contrast in framing between these two articles demonstrates the tremendous power that sources hold in determining the tone of the article and the manner in which undocumented children are portrayed.

As discussed previously, a preponderance of episodic stories can lead to individual attributions of responsibility instead of discussions of larger societal forces. Correspondingly, it can also tend to emphasise individual criminal incidents, furthering the depiction of undocumented adults and children as deviants who threaten the mainstream community. However, in many ways, these pieces can also forward a notion of childhood innocence.

The episodic articles in this sample are largely dominated by short news stories focusing on border crossing gone bad—with reports of arrests and extreme injury or death taking precedence. Stories of "recent smuggling cases" are prevalent, which often simultaneously construct the parents as deviant and engender sympathy for the children (González, March 26, 2007, p. A1). When the adults are covered, the focus is primarily on arrests and imprisonment. A 2007 story from *The Arizona Republic* offers bulleted-point list that explains how U.S. citizens or legal residents ("usually a Hispanic woman") participate in the smuggling of children. Additionally, they provide examples of recent smuggling cases, arrests and sentencing. In this article and others, the view of smugglers is mixed—some are seen as desperate people, hoping to reunite families, while others are portrayed as criminals. However, in most cases, the often-unnamed children are portrayed as victims and innocents. A story about the sentencing of three "baby smugglers" quotes Cynthia R. Wood, assistant U.S. attorney, who forwards this distinction: "We have a zero-tolerance policy for non-family members who bring over children. Children are the most vulnerable, and they don't choose to come into the United States" (LoMonaco, August 5, 2006, p. 8A).

It is in the reports of often-horrific stories of border-crossing where children are portrayed in the most sympathetic terms. There are news reports of the 3-year-old boy found dead in the desert, an 18-year-old woman who gave birth to a baby girl and used nail clippers to cut the umbilical cord, and the 16-month-old girl who was left alone in the desert for hours (LoMonaco, May 17, 2006; April 27, 2006; July 7, 2005).

These are emotionally resonant tales and the suffering children, often nameless and faceless, are sympathetic and seemingly innocent victims.

It is after they arrive in the United States, however, that the portrayal of undocumented children becomes more conflicted. Their horrific, emotionally tugging, stories of crossing are fodder for sympathy, but once they cross the border and become dependent on the resources in the country, they often lose their innocence. There is still suffering among undocumented children, as many articles acknowledge, but lack of health care and fear of deportation does not create as dramatic an arc as starving in the desert for days. Additionally, when these undocumented children are at a distance, they seem to be able to be abstracted from their political position, as many scholars note about children in news. However, once they are closer to the community, they become a threat, as discussed above.

While news reporters often contribute in (perhaps unknowing) ways to these portrayals of deviance through their articles, challenges to these perceptions seem to find footing in opinion pieces. For instance, in a November 8, 2007 *Arizona Daily Star* staff editorial, the local police department is criticised for its handling of a drug-possession arrest at a school that led to the deportation of a 17-year-old boy and his family. The editorial staff specifically highlight how the current system further ostracises undocumented families from the mainstream community because they cannot be ensured protection from the police without fear of being deported. The editors highlight how this fear creates “(suspicion) of the police,” “ripples of distrust,” and feelings of not being safe (p. A12). In turn, all of these lead to a more fractured community.

This feeling of fractured community ties in with the rites of inclusion and exclusion. In his columns, Ernesto Portillo Jr. of *The Arizona Daily Star* also attempts to challenge many of the mainstream perceptions of deviance. His columns often feature interviews with undocumented families, and seem to be an attempt to reverse portrayals of undocumented children as deviant. In a November 7, 2007 column, he describes the above arrest and deportation as an example of how “undocumented immigrants, the bulk of whom keep our economy running, are being chased further underground by heavy-handed incidents like this” and likewise quotes a 15-year-old immigrant who says, “we’re students, not criminals” (p. B1).

## Discussion

As the face of immigration into the United States has changed over the past decade and a half with the advent of tougher border protection policies and an increase in crossing-related deaths, the press has seemed unprepared to fully explore the nature of the transitions taking place. Conventional news practices still govern press coverage even on issues as vital as undocumented children, who make up a crucial part of the very future of U.S. society. In the span of three and a half years, 706 articles written by five prominent immigration/border reporters in “ground zero” of the immigration debate, only 52 (7.6%) of them dealt with undocumented children.

Episodic reporting, which provides little or no contextual information about immigration issues, dominated these 52 articles both in number and in length. Nearly

81 percent of the 52 articles are episodic. Therefore, our analysis confirms Iyengar's assertion that episodic frames have become a mainstay of contemporary journalism.

This framing strategy is further reinforced through sourcing. As discussed previously, sourcing plays a critical role in framing and there seems to be a tendency of journalists to follow the trails of power, such as officials and experts, when seeking sources to interview. Such a sourcing approach is a specific concern when studying the press coverage of a particularly powerless group, in this case, the undocumented children. While it is encouraging to see the thematic articles giving the voiceless a chance to speak by quoting children, immigrants and activist groups, the anemic presence of thematic articles render these voices somewhat insignificant, especially considering the most prominent sources for both episodic and thematic reporting are still "officials."

This usage of news conventions in covering undocumented children also extends to the concept of childhood. Our analysis discovered that undocumented children are framed both as innocent and deviant. The horrific accounts of their border-crossings painted children as vulnerable and in need of protection. Yet, once these children cross the border and begin to rely on the resources in the community, they lose their innocence and are seen at times as a threat to the community. This dichotomous depiction, in many ways, is economic-based. This focus, while having its reason, can be limiting. It can be quite marginal when considering the many social and cultural implications of large-scale immigration, precisely the type of contextual information more thematic reporting could have offered.

Overall, framing and sourcing work in concert to determine the image of undocumented children and the perception of issues surrounding them. This incantation of the past news conventions on a current, critical social issue needs revisiting. It has been generally accepted that the press has a somewhat agenda-setting function, though debates abound about the numerous aspects of the press's role in our society (Baigi, 2007). Further, as Habermas (1989) states, media are a channel through which critical-rational discussion can be enhanced. Thus, if immigration-related issues affecting undocumented children are given little consideration through mostly episodic reporting from mostly official perspectives, it is very likely that the national public will not fully understand how this vulnerable, voiceless population is impacted by the effects of current immigration law and policy. It is time the press rethinks its continuous practice of following news conventions so faithfully.

While this is a case study of a U.S. situation, the implications extend far beyond the U.S. border. One predominant impact of globalisation has been a more accessible and freer flow of goods on the international market due to relaxed trade regulations. It is important to consider, however, that simultaneous restrictions of labour flows have created situations of desperation as would-be workers from underdeveloped nations migrate to wealthier nations seeking employment. In recent years, for example, Taiwan and Hong Kong employ a large population of Philippines as housemaids. While these workers enter legally, the numbers of undocumented persons entering those societies have grown at unprecedented rates (Collinwood, 2008). Like the press in the U.S., the media in these countries play an important role in informing and educating the public. As long as the U.S. continues to train many journalists and future journalists internationally, particularly those from Asia, the U.S. news conventions will continue to play an indirect role in how undocumented children are covered around the globe.

Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0478, USA. E-mail: Shu-ling.Berggreen@Colorado.edu

---

Theresa Rose Crapanzano, Doctoral Candidate, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0478, USA. E-mail: Theresa.Crapanzano@Colorado.edu

---

Cari Lee Skogberg Eastman, Ph.D., School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0478, USA. E-mail: Cari.Skogberg@Colorado.edu

---

## References

- Biagi, S. (2007). *Media/Impact: an introduction to mass media*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Collinwood, D. W. (2008). *Global Studies: Japan and the pacific rim*. Dubuque, IA: McGraw Hill.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). *Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm*. *Journal of Communication*, 43: 293-300.
- Gans, H. J. (1999). 'Deciding what's news', In H. Tumber (Ed.), *News: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford UP. (pp. 235-248).
- Gilliam, F. D., & Iyengar, S. (2005). 'Super-predators or victims of societal neglect? Framing effects in juvenile crime coverage', In K. Callaghan, & F. Schnell (Eds.), *Framing of American Politics*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. (pp. 148-166).
- González, D. (2005, July 8). 'Experts report at symposium/educating children of immigrants is vital to economy'. *The Arizona Republic*, p. 5.
- González, D. (2007, March 26). Targeting child smuggling at entry points may backfire-- kids face greater danger, critics warn. *The Arizona Republic*, p. A1.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (translation of the 1962 German edition, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Darmstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand).
- Himmelstein, H. (1984). *Television myth and the American mind*, New York, NY: Praeger.
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, S. (1996). *Framing responsibility for political issues*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546: 59-70.
- Kendall, D. (2005). 'Class action in the media'. In *Framing Class*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. (pp. 1-20).
- LoMonaco, C. (2005, July 7). 'Border agents rescue baby, reunite her with mom- Mexican woman hands the child to a man while she jumps the fence, and he takes off with the infant', *Tucson Citizen*, p. 4A.
- LoMonaco, C. (2006, April 27). 'Border Patrol unit aids mom, newborn'. *Tucson Citizen*, p. 4A.
- LoMonaco, C. (2006, August 5). '3 baby smugglers going to prison'. *Tucson Citizen*, p. 8A.
- LoMonaco, C. (2006, May 17). 'Fax points way to boy's body'. *Tucson Citizen*, p. 8A.
- LoMonaco, C. (2006, November 29). 'Young interpreters act as 'bridge' for parents- 18 percent of Arizonans speak no English, relying on children to guide them through society'. *Tucson Citizen*, p. 1A.

- Matthews, M.A. (1999, Winter). 'The Impact of Federal and State Laws on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence', *Domestic Violence and Children*(9)3. Retrieved June 17, 2008 from [http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=70497](http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=70497)
- McCombs, B. (2007, November 3). 'Record AZ pot seizures', *The Arizona Daily Star*, p.A1.
- McCombs, B. (2006, February 22). 'Group says entrants adversely affect kids', *The Arizona Daily Star*, p. A2.
- Moeller, S. D. (2002). 'A hierarchy of innocence: the media's use of children in the telling of international news', *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7: 36-56.
- NC Latino Health 2003. (2003). Chapter 7: Health insurance and workers' compensation. Retrieved June 17, 2008 from <http://www.nciom.org/projects/latino/latinopub/C7.pdf>
- Ponte, C. (2007). 'Mapping news on children in the mainstream press', *European Societies*, 9: 735-754.
- Portillo, Jr, E. (2007, November 7). Opinion by Ernesto Portillo Jr: 'Deportation stirs backlash', *The Arizona Daily Star*, p. B1.
- Reeves, J., & Campbell, R. (1994). *Visualizing the drug news: journalistic surveillance/spectacle. Cracked coverage: television news, the anti-cocaine crusade and the Reagan legacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University. (pp. 48-72).
- Rotstein, A.H. (2008, September 1). 'Arizona called 'ground zero' in immigration fight', *The Arizona Republic*. Retrieved October 27, 2008 from HYPERLINK "<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2008/09/01/20080901groundzero0901.html>" <http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2008/09/01/20080901groundzero0901.html>
- Rubio-Goldsmith, R.; McCormick, M.M.; Martinez, D. & Magdalena Duarte, I. (2006, October). The "Funnel Effect" & recovered bodies of unauthorized migrants processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2005. *Binational Migration Institute Report to the Pima County Board of Supervisors*. Tucson: University of Arizona Mexican American Studies & Research Center.
- Staff Editorial. (2007, November 8). 'TPD was wrong to involve Border Patrol'. *The Arizona Daily Star*, p. A12.
- Sigal, L.V. (1999). Reporters and officials: the organization and politics of newsmaking. In H. Tumber (Ed.), *News A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford UP. (pp. 224-234).
- Stephens, S. (Ed.). (1995). *Children and the politics of culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
1. It is recognised by the authors that many people entering the United States without official legal papers obtain false documentation and are technically therefore not undocumented. However, for purposes of this article, the term undocumented is used to refer to those children whose status in this country is not legal because they lack proper legal documentation.  
The word "illegal" is used in parenthesis here because of the controversial application of this language to persons who have entered the United States without documentation. Human rights organizations argue that no human being is illegal – they simply have illegal status without the proper documentation. Advocates for tougher immigration policies as well as many media outlets often use the term "illegal immigrant," stating that anyone entering this country without official status is illegal. The term is used here not to advocate or support use of the phrase, but simply to draw attention to the way in which conflicting views, even of language, have shaped the debate about immigration.