

The Evolution of Latino Threat Narrative from 1997 to 2014

Kai Wei and Yu-Ru Lin
University of Pittsburgh

Abstract

This study presents preliminary findings of a project focusing on the evolution of Latino threat narrative, a social process of portraying Latinos with derogatory terms. A total of 440,984 newspaper articles about Latinos across 13 news outlets from 1997 to 2014 were analyzed using text mining. The results of this study demonstrate the potential association between LTN in print news media and significant political and social events, including: September 11, 2001 terror event; passage of restrictive immigration legislation in 2001, 2002, 2005, and 2006; and mass protests against immigration reform in 2006. The study also reveals greater intensity in the use of LTN-related words during the (Republican) Bush administration than the immediately preceding and following (Democratic) administrations. This is the first work that uses text mining techniques to explore Latino threat narrative at a large scale over a long period of time.

Keywords: text mining; Latino threat narrative; news media; temporal events

DOI: 10.9776/16582

Copyright: Copyright is held by the authors.

Contact: kaw153@pitt.edu, yurulin@pitt.edu

1 Introduction

The political debates around immigration has attracted tremendous media attention, especially in the current US presidential election cycle, where campaign discourse has been focusing on issues related to immigrants from Latin American countries, Mexico in particular. One recent example is credited to Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, who described immigrants from Mexico as “problems”, “criminals”, and “rapists” (Kohn, 2015). In this work, we examine the historic context and evolution of media framing on issues related to Latino immigration.

Leo Chavez found that from 1965 to 2000, two thirds of national magazine coverage on immigration described Latinos as a threat to US society (Chavez, 2013). According to Chavez, Latino threat narrative (LTN) uses stigmatizing words and phrases to describe Latinos in media and political discussions, wherein Latinos are depicted being unwilling or incapable of integrating into the US society, and as invaders who have or may destroy the American *status quo*. Following Chavez, other researchers found more evidence of LTN in political indications (Massey & Sánchez, 2010; Massey & Pren, 2012), in news reports (Báez & Castañeda, 2014; Fujioka, 2011; Stewart, Pitts, & Osborne, 2011), and in everyday talking (Carter, 2014). Negative framing, a text analysis technique that pairs words that have negative connotation, such as *illegal*, *threat*, and *invasion*, with *Mexican immigrants*, has been used to measure the intensity of LTN in immigration policies and mass media (Massey & Pren, 2012, p.7). Dr. Monica Stephens et al. (2013) identified several negative connotative terms as hate words describing Latinos on Twitter and mapped these words to over 150,000 tweets and found that (Stephens, 2013). They found that “wetback” was concentrated in tweets originating in the southern and southeastern part of US, such as Texas and Georgia. The word “spick” spread from northern part to central, southern, southeastern, and eastern parts of U.S., such as South Dakota, Kansas, Texas, and the border of Kentucky and West Virginia (Stephens, 2014). Stewart et al. (2011) used “illegal immigrants” as a search term to retrieve local news articles from 1990 to 2006 in southeastern Virginia, and used this as a basis for lexical analysis and discourse analysis. They found that local news media used “illegal immigrant” as a metonym for Latino immigrants.

Our aim is to examine how expressions of LTN in major print news media (selected from those in the top 25 of total circulation) evolved from 1997 to 2014, and specifically how LTN and LTN-related themes in news media might be correlated with political and social events, for example the passage of immigration laws. Our study is the first study that explores the evolution of LTN and LTN-related themes at a large scale over a long time of period.

Theme	Description	No. Chosen Words	LTN Words
illegality and criminality	framing Latinos as illegal aliens and criminals	16	illegal, undocumented, criminals, crimes, crimes, problem, diseased, wetback, alien, influx, latino crime, latino problem, mexican crime, mexican problem, illegal alien, illegal immigrant
culture threat	framing Latinos as a group who are unwilling to learn English and threat American culture	8	incapable, unwilling, English, language, adapt, assimilate, integrate, culture
anchor baby theme	framing Latinos having to many anchor baby	4	anchor babies, anchor baby, fertility, fertile
reconquest theme	framing Latinos (especially, Mexicans) separating the southwest part of US	5	conspire, separate, reconquest, separation, takeover
national security theme	framing Mexico-US border as loophole for terrorism and Latino American immigration as a threat to the US	12	invade, flood, invasion, terrorism, threat, danger, dangerous, border crisis, mexico crisis, mexico flood, mexican invasion, national security

Table 1: LTN Theme Description and Theme-related Words

2 Method

2.1 Data Collection

Data were collected from LexisNexis and Proquest NewsStand using “immigrant OR immigration OR Latino OR Mexican” as a search term. We extracted 440,984 news articles across 13 news outlets from 1997 to 2014: New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Newsday, Orange County Register, Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Globe, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Denver Post, Chicago Tribune, and Tampa Bay Times. This selection of outlets is based on the average circulation at the Top 25 U.S. Daily Newspapers (Alliance for Audited Media, 2013). Their total average circulation as of March 31, 2013 ranged from 231,094 to 2,378,827.

2.2 Defining LTN Themes

We first identified five LTN themes based on Chavez’s study (Chavez, 2013), and then identified 47 LTN-related words from previous studies (Chavez, 2013; Massey & Pren, 2012; Carter, 2014; Báez & Castañeda, 2014; Fujioka, 2011; Stewart et al., 2011). We defined each of the five LTN themes $t \in T$ in terms of LTN-related words $w \in W$ by uniquely assigning each of key word to exactly one theme (see Table 1). Finally, we defined pseudo topic vectors $\vec{t} \in \vec{T}$ for each identified theme, in which \vec{t}_{ij} is assigned to 1 if $w_j \in t_i$, otherwise 0.

2.3 Extracting document-label themes

To determine a theme for news articles, each document is modeled as a vector ($\vec{d} \in \vec{D}$) that represents the term frequency of identified key words. We then applied cosine similarity of \vec{d} with each $\vec{t}_j \in \vec{T}$, and labeled the document with the theme corresponding to the \vec{t}_j having the greatest similarity.

3 Preliminary Results

3.1 Latino issues coverage across news media: 1997-2014

Figure 1 presents the proportion of news articles satisfying the search term among the total news articles (i.e., Latino news volume) from 1997 to 2014. During this period, the total average (across 13 news outlets) of the articles concerning Latino issues was about 3%. Figure 1 (a), (b), and (c) are categorized to show different patterns in their interests in Latino issues over time. Figure 1 (a) shows that New York Times, The Atlanta Journal Constitution, Wall Street Journal and Los Angeles Times had an overall increasing trend occurring over four waves (W1-W4 in the Figures) in 1998-2002, 2004-2006, 2009-2010 and 2012-2013. Los Angeles Times, in particular, showed an increasing interest on reporting Latino issues during this period. Figure 1 (b) also shows that Orange County Register, USA Today, Newsday, Chicago Tribute, and Philadelphia Inquirer

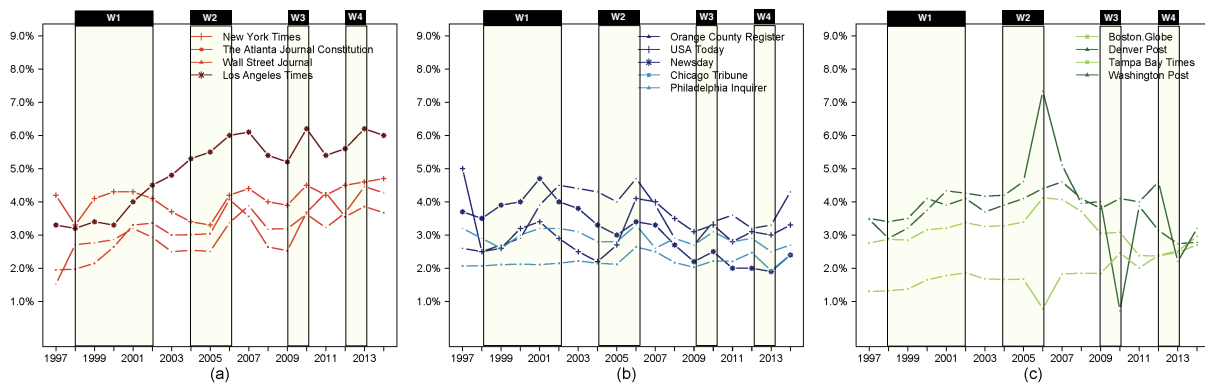


Figure 1: Articles satisfying the search term “immigrant” OR “immigration” OR “Latino” OR “Mexican” across 13 news media: 1997-2014. Darker colors indicate media outlets with higher volume.

exhibited the effects of the first three waves W1-W3 seen in Figure 1 (a), however with a slight *decrease* in interest in Latino issues. Finally, Figure 1 (c) shows that Boston Globe, Denver Post, Tampa Bay Times, and Washington Post exhibited a slight decrease in interest, but did not exhibit the waves as clearly as the other news outlets. For example, Denver Post showed a sharp increase from 2005 to 2006 and a sharp decrease from 2009 to 2010 (other media showed increase within the time frame), while Tampa Bay Times ran counter to other media with a sharp decrease in interest in Latino issues in 2006.

3.2 LTN in news media and external events: 1997-2014

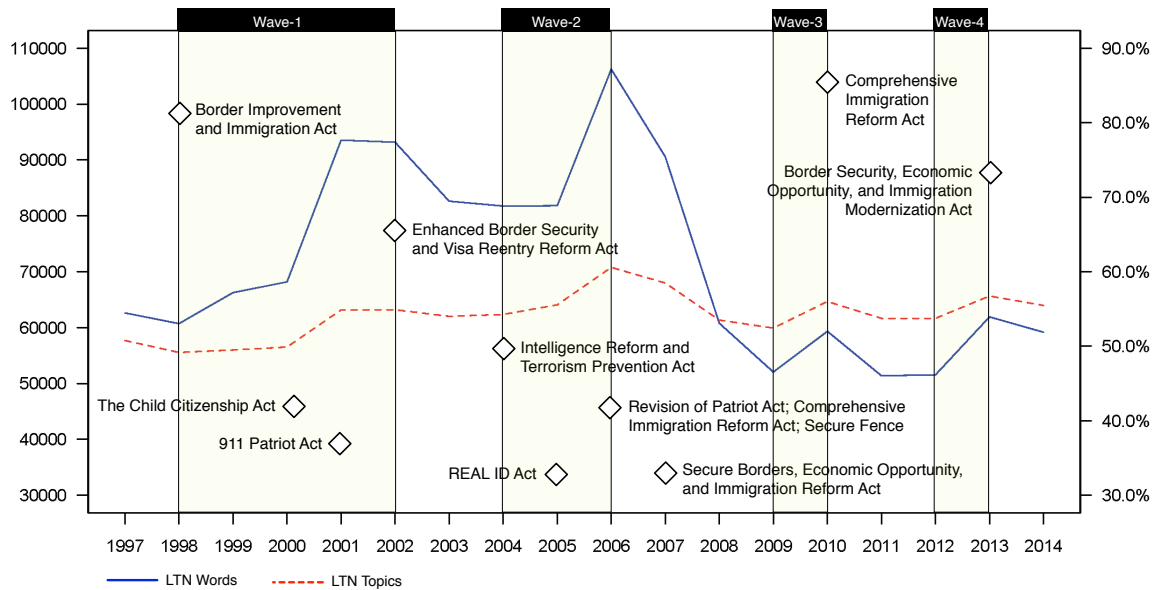


Figure 2: Total LTN Word Frequency (blue line) and LTN Topic Percentage (red dashed line) across 13 news media: 1997-2014. Diamond shapes indicate significant events related to the immigration issue.

Figure 2 presents the change of LTN, indicated by the total term frequencies of LTN words and the total percentage of news articles with LTN themes from 1997 to 2014. The blue line represents the change of the total LTN term frequencies (i.e., LTN words). The red line represents the total percentage of news articles with LTN themes (i.e., LTN topics). LTN words and LTN topics formed similar waves during this

period, which aligned with the news volume waves (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The similar wave pattern could indicate the potential association between the change of LTN and political and social events.

During Wave 1 (1998-2002), four immigration laws were passed, two of which dealt with national security as post-911 responses (see Figure 2). These laws were concerned with Mexico-US border security and terrorism among immigrants. After 911, the concern of Mexico-US border was expanded from undocumented immigration and crime to terrorism (Romero, 2008). During Wave 2 (2004-2006), Congress passed more restrictive immigration laws. The tension between law makers and Latino immigrants was triggered by The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, which increased penalties for undocumented immigration and classified undocumented immigrants and anyone who assisted them in entering or remaining in the US as felons (H. R. 4437, 109th cong, 2005). As a result, millions of people protested the law, attracting a large attention from the news media (Rouse, 2013). Wave 3 (2009-2010) and Wave 4 (2012-2013) appear to reflect the passage of immigration laws.

In addition to the four waves, we found that the LTN words and LTN topics overall were higher during the Bush Administration (2001-2009) and lower during the Clinton (1997-2000) and Obama Administration (2010-2014) (see Figure 2).

3.3 LTN themes related trends by news outlets: 1997-2014

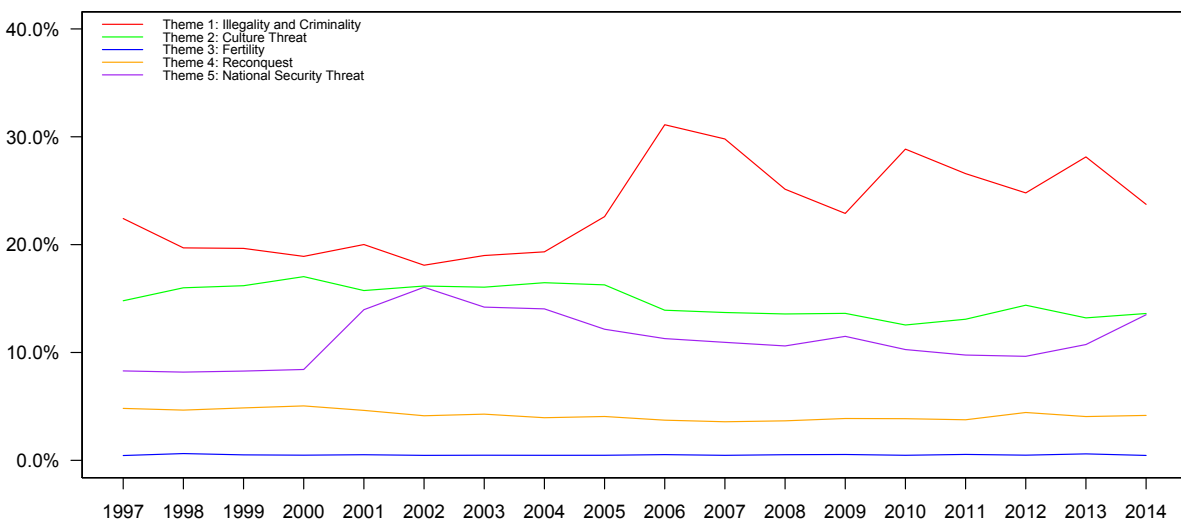


Figure 3: LTN themes related trends: 1997-2014. Lines with different colors indicate the proportion of documents assigned to the corresponding themes.

Figure 3 presents the percentage of news articles containing each of the five LTN themes. Overall, about 54 % of the news articles contained LTN themes. Illegal and criminality theme accounts for the highest proportion (about 23 % on average) in the news articles with LTN themes. In addition to the high proportion, it also presents a steady increase from 1997 to 2014 with peaks in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2013. These peaks indicated that illegality and criminality theme followed the the four wave pattern indicated in Figure 2. Cultural threat accounts for the second highest among the five themes (about 15%). National security theme accounts for about 13%. It also showed slightly increase over the study period with spikes in 2001, 2002, and 2009 during this period. These trends could indicate an increasing concern of Latinos being illegal and criminal, and threatening national security. We also examined each theme by news outlets and found that the majority of the news outlets showed slightly different trend than the aggregated theme percentages. Most news outlets followed the first three waves (see Figure 2) in illegality and criminality and national security

Top 5 Media in Illegality and Criminality (T1) Waves 1-3			# Occurrences in Top-5		
Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	T1 T5		
Denver Post	Denver Post	Atlantic Journal Constitution	Atlantic Journal Constitution	3	2
Atlantic Journal Constitution	Atlantic Journal Constitution	USA Today	USA Today	2	3
LA Times	USA Today	Tampa Bay Times	Wall Street Journal	1	3
Orange County Register	Philadelphia Inquirer	LA Times	LA Times	3	0
Wall Street Journal	LA Times	Newsday	Philadelphia Inquirer	1	2
			Washington Post	0	3
Top 5 Media in National Security (T5) Waves 1-3			Denver Post	2	0
Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Tampa Bay Times	1	1
USA Today	Atlantic Journal Constitution	Philadelphia Inquirer	Orange County Register	1	0
Wall Street Journal	USA Today	Atlantic Journal Constitution	Newsday	1	0
Philadelphia Inquirer	Wall Street Journal	Washington Post	New York Times	0	1
Washington Post	Washington Post	USA Today	Boston Globe	0	0
Tampa Bay Times	New York Times	Wall Street Journal	Chicago Tribune	0	0

Figure 4: Top Five Media Outlets with Illegality and Criminality or National Security Theme by Wave

themes. Thus, we examined the rankings of the top five news media outlets the *Illegal and criminality* theme and *National security* theme, for Wave 1 1998-2002, Wave 2 2004-2006, and Wave 3 2009-2010.

Figure 4 shows the rank of the top five news media outlets based on their proportion of news articles containing illegality and criminality or national security themes at the peaks of the three waves. A total of 11 of 13 news outlets (about 85 %) appeared at least once in the top-5 during at least one of the three waves. However, three outlets appeared significantly more frequently in the top-5 than the rest: American Journal Constitution, USA Today and Wall Street Journal. Overall, Atlanta Journal-Constitution and USA today were more likely to have news articles with illegal and criminality and national security themes about Latinos than the other news media outlets.

4 Discussion and Future Work

The results of this study demonstrate the potential association between LTN in print news media and significant political and social events, including: September 11, 2001 terror event; passage of restrictive immigration legislation in 2001, 2002, 2005, and 2006; and mass protests against immigration reform in 2006. The study also reveals greater intensity in the use of LTN-related words during the (Republican) Bush administration than the immediately preceding and following (Democratic) administrations.

To better understand the evolution of LTN in print news media, our future work will examine changes in LTN intensity in media at finer-grained time intervals, for example weeks or months rather than years. In addition, we will investigate ideological bias in print news media in their framing of immigrants and responses to immigration-related events. Finally, we will also explore media outlets' social networks and examine how similar or different of each media networks express LTN.

5 Acknowledgements

This work is part of the research supported from NSF grant #1423697 and the CRDF at the University of Pittsburgh. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding sources.

References

- Alliance for Audited Media. (2013). *Average circulation at the top 25 us*. Retrieved from: <http://auditedmedia.com/news/blog/top-25-us-newspapers-for-march-2013.aspx>.
- Báez, J., & Castañeda, M. (2014). Two sides of the same story: Media narratives of latinos and the subprime mortgage crisis. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31(1), 27–41.
- Carter, P. M. (2014). National narratives, institutional ideologies, and local talk: The discursive production of spanish in a “new” us latino community. *Language in Society*, 43(02), 209–240.
- Chavez, L. (2013). *The latino threat: Constructing immigrants, citizens, and the nation*. CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fujioka, Y. (2011). Perceived threats and latino immigrant attitudes: How white and african american college students respond to news coverage of latino immigrants. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 22(1), 43–63.
- H. R. 4437, 109th cong. (2005). *Anti-terrorism, and illegal immigration control act of 2005*.
- Kohn, S. (2015). *Trump’s outrageous mexico remarks*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/17/opinions/kohn-donald-trump-announcement>.
- Massey, D. S., & Pren, K. A. (2012). Unintended consequences of us immigration policy: explaining the post-1965 surge from latin america. *Population and Development Review*, 38(1), 1–29.
- Massey, D. S., & Sánchez, M. (2010). *Brokered boundaries: Immigrant identity in anti-immigrant times*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Romero, F. (2008). *Hyperborder: The contemporary us? mexico border and it’s future*. NJ: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Rouse, S. M. (2013). *Latinos in the legislative process: Interests and influence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stephens, M. (2013). *Geotagged hateful tweets in the united states*. Retrieved from: http://users.humboldt.edu/mstephens/hate/hate_map.html.
- Stewart, C. O., Pitts, M. J., & Osborne, H. (2011). Mediated intergroup conflict: The discursive construction of “illegal immigrants” in a regional us newspaper. *Journal of language and social psychology*, 30(1), 8–27.