Migrant or Menace: Media Representations of the Migrant Caravan

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ABSTRACT

In March 2018, the *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* migrant caravan began making their way to the U.S. border, drawing political and media attention from the United States. News coverage of immigrants and migration events have historically been linked to negative topics and framed as threats to the American way of life. These negative themes emerged against the backdrop of the Trump administration's response to the caravan, describing migrants as threats to U.S. border security. To examine how the news media portrayed this event, we conducted a summative content analysis of online news articles from CNN and Fox News covering the 2018 *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* migrant caravan to determine whether variation exists in the representation of the migrant caravan between liberal and conservative mainstream media outlets. Our study reveals that both CNN and Fox participated in agenda setting by framing migrants and the migrant caravan in ways they saw fit.

BACKGROUND

On March 25, 2018, the *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* (People Without Borders) caravan began making their way to the United States border attempting to seek asylum.

The caravan grew to a height of approximately 1,200 members, drawing political attention from the United States, where Attorney General Jeff Sessions called the caravan "a deliberate attempt to undermine our laws and overwhelm our system".

President Trump threatened to deploy the U.S. military to the border, to cut aid to countries allowing the caravan to pass through; and the Justice Department announced that criminal charges would be brought against people crossing the border illegally.

The caravan and political responses to it garnered increased news media attention from various outlets, and the public's understanding of the caravan was arguably shaped by the various frames employed by these outlets.

News media bias based on political leanings can reduce the credibility of journalism and foster distrust among its consumers leading to feelings of isolation, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and inherent bias through the use of false narratives and propaganda, which can further impact voting patterns.

This study examines whether variation exists in the representation of the 2018 *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* caravan between liberal and conservative mainstream media outlets.

METHODOLOGY

Utilizing the concepts of framing and agenda setting, this study performs a content analysis to examine the media's construction of migrants and subsequent policy debates about immigration on Fox News and CNN.

The term "migrant caravan" was used to search Fox News and CNN for articles. A time frame of six months was imposed, when a second migrant caravan began to receive more media attention. Our final sample consists of 77 articles: 37 from CNN and 40 from Fox News.

Articles were then examined for key terms and emergent themes using a content analysis with a summative approach.

WORDS COUNTS OF KEY TERMS

CNN (N=37)	Fox (N=40)
Border 423	Border 348
Asylum 171	Asylum 256
Separate/Separation 92	Illegal 48
Illegal 86	Threat 35
Deport 64	Wall 27
Crime/Criminal 63	Separate/Separation 20
Wall 50	Deport 19
Violence 49	Crime/Criminal 14
Democrat 32	Violence 13
Threat 24	Democrat 13
Fear 23	Fear 13
Republican 13	Drug 11
Rape 10	Rape 11
Victim 9	Republican 5
Drug 9	Victim 4
Sovereign 2	Sovereign 4
Invasion 0	Invasion 2

CNN

FOX NEWS

Opinion Political Op-Eds Social Commentary

Trump's zero-tolerance policy is un-American

BORDER SECURITY · Published April 30, 2018

Members of migrant caravan remain defiant after US again denies border entry

CNN World Africa Americas Asia Australia China Europe India Middle East United Kingdom

Caravan of migrants climbs freight train for the next leg of the journey

This year, the annual US-bound migrant caravan sparked a Trump tweetstorm

WHITE HOUSE · Published April 5, 2018

Trump rails against illegal immigration, says 'women are raped at levels nobody has ever seen before' on journey to US

IMMIGRATION · Published April 4, 2018

President Trump has every right to defend our border and not give in to migrant group's demands

MAIN FINDINGS

Theme 1: Sympathy

The reports of the caravan from CNN portrayed migrants in a sympathetic light. While much of the reports from CNN focused on President Trump's responses to the migrant caravan, they also included information about the intentions of the caravan and featured several human interest stories about the lives of migrants. In fact, almost half (43%) of the articles featured on CNN centered on stories about migrants, information about *Pueblo Sin Fronteras*, and the conditions of the countries the migrants were fleeing.

Fox News reporting was overwhelmingly unsympathetic to migrants in the caravan and primarily focused on reporting President Trump's rhetoric and his administration's plans for addressing the caravan at the border. Fox published no human interest stories about the migrants, instead including very brief responses from migrants about their experiences in about 15% of the Fox article sample. The brief focus on migrants' experiences was significantly overshadowed by Fox's inclusion of rhetorical language from the Trump administration framing migrants as illegal immigrants, criminals, rapists, drug smugglers, coyotes, threats to sovereignty, and an "invasion".

Theme 2: Policy Issues

Primarily focusing on the rhetoric and policies President Trump threatened to implement, CNN took the opportunity to critique these policies and to address fraudulent claims with facts. A salient theme relating to policies in CNN articles was the inhumanity of President Trump's policies. Several articles referred to policies as cruel, unnecessary, and un-American. Overall, CNN's style of reporting on immigration policies echoes their framing of migrants as victims and implores its readers to do the same. This also provided CNN with an opportunity to call for immigration repeal and common-sense foreign policy that more closely aligns itself with American values.

Fox News primarily reported on Republican frustrations with U.S. immigration policies and cited Trump administration rhetoric criticizing Mexico for failing to do more to stop the caravan. Fox also reiterated President Trump's calls for stronger borders and the border wall, stoking fears that a significant amount of illegal immigration would occur should the caravan reach the U.S. border. Overall, it appeared that Fox framed the caravan as a border security issue that fit neatly with the Trump administration's border wall agenda, rather than framing the caravan as a human issue of migrants fleeing extreme violence and exercising their legal rights to claim asylum at the U.S. border.

CONCLUSION

Both CNN and Fox participated in agenda setting, despite promoting differing agendas while using different frames. CNN's agenda was that of anti-Trump or Republican policies regarding immigration and asylum, framed through a sympathetic or humanitarian lens. Fox's agenda was that of pro-Trump or Republican policies such as the border wall, framed through an unsympathetic lens portraying the caravan's actions as criminal and dangerous. The most interesting finding is that ultimately, CNN overtly used more inflammatory language in their reporting than did Fox.

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