



Immigration On-The-Air:

A Scan of Broadcast News and Commentary Programming

January 2009

Overview

In the summer and fall of 2008, The Opportunity Agenda commissioned a report on broadcast news and radio coverage of immigration. This report examines both national and local television news outlets, as well as leading television and radio news commentary programs. It identifies broad trends and how they related to earlier findings in print as well as to ethnic media scans.

Broadcast coverage—from 24-hour news channels to talk radio—has played a central role in shaping the public discourse around immigration. In fact, when immigration legislation died in Congress in 2007, many blamed talk radio. This report examines how the topic was treated by major radio and television news and commentary shows, including those of broadcasters Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, NPR's Michel Martin, CNN's Lou Dobbs, and Fox News's Laura Ingraham and Bill O'Reilly. It also analyzes local television and radio immigration coverage in New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas.

Findings

1. People get their news more from television (where there is less time to uncover the nuances of an issue) than from newspapers, so the American public is getting a skewed picture of the immigration issue.
2. The language used to describe immigrants on popular television and radio shows is often extremely biased.
3. Some speakers who are pro-immigrant or those who are assumed to be objective use words that can dehumanize immigrants.
4. Right-wing talk show hosts inflame anti-immigration fears and sentiments by suggesting that immigrants cause and commit crimes.
5. Most of the coverage on immigration and immigrants focused on Latinos, who make up about half the foreign-born population in the United States. Many stories in the sample focused on the Latino voting bloc and immigration. However, Latino advocates often stated that immigration is not necessarily as important an issue for them as other hot-button issues such as health care and the economy.
6. Regionally, immigration stories spanned a range of issues from crime (the main focus of sample coverage from New York), to enforcement practices (Los Angeles), deportation (Miami), public events (Chicago), and politics and policies (Dallas).
7. More spokespeople were public and government officials (28%) than any other category, with advocates—both pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant—not far behind with 22%. Most of the public and government officials were elected officials (62%).
8. The visuals accompanying local coverage tended toward the negative and reinforced the idea of immigrants as criminals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Television and radio news coverage is crucial in influencing the public discourse around immigration. Although many broadcast hosts and anti-immigrant advocates are propagating misinformation, immigration advocates can take the concrete steps outlined in this analysis to sway policymakers and the public. One of the most important points made in this analysis is that advocates need to use consistent values-based messages to be more effective.

1. When using messages focused on economic opportunity, pro-immigrant spokespeople should talk about the economic system as a whole, including how it functions best when the needs and contributions of all workers are considered, and how it would not function without the services immigrants provide. Stories framed to focus on the system, as opposed to the individual, are more likely to motivate audiences to see policy changes, rather than individual initiative, as the solution to any problem posed. Advocates should be wary of the story of individual immigrants who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps; such stories likely lead viewers and listeners to believe that sheer hard work will allow all immigrants to get ahead, as long as they wait in line and work hard when they get here. This perception ignores the fact that systemic conditions keep some immigrants from accessing opportunities and suppress support for systemic policy solutions.
2. When selecting spokespeople to talk about a more humane and compassionate approach to the immigration issue, advocates might seek out unexpected messengers. For example, immigration advocates might wish to partner more visibly with business leaders who understand that the economic system would not survive without immigrants. In an economic downturn this point can be used to counteract the idea propagated by anti-immigrant groups that immigrants are "stealing" jobs.
3. Messages should emphasize protecting all workers from employer abuse, because this issue may transcend party lines. Research from The Opportunity Agenda shows that 87% of Americans see the right to fair pay for workers, to meet basic needs of food and housing, as a human right. However, it is not clear that the American public would extend this right to *undocumented* immigrants, since 77% of Americans believe health care is a human right, but about half of Americans do not view medical care for undocumented immigrants as a human right. That said, both conservatives and liberals acknowledge that immigrants are often working under terrible conditions, though their proposed solutions might differ. Therefore, discussions of shared values may be a good place to start the conversation, since there is room for agreement. Advocates should step up coverage of this issue and find ways to insert it into news.
4. It is helpful to start conversations with basic American values of fairness and justice, and by asking what kind of a country the United States will become if we do not insist that our policies uphold these ideals. After all, our country has a long history of immigration. Actions such as building walls or fences, terrorizing people who have not committed a violent crime, and generally taking militant and drastic measures against immigrants demean us all. We must ask ourselves, "To what end?" This is not just a question for civil libertarians but for all Americans.
5. Story ideas and studies around immigrant integration, citizenship, and success that show the positive impact of immigrants are helpful to reporters and can increase the likelihood of positive coverage. For example, a study entitled "Inheriting the City"—which was included in several news stories from our sample—focused on how immigrants are assimilating and contributing to New York's culture and economy. Perhaps advocates can release studies in states across the nation that show the positive impact immigrants have. Citywide or nationwide studies are helpful when they present immigrants within a larger context, beyond an individual. These stories should be framed with the idea that immigrants are an integral part of our communities at all levels. They contribute and benefit, as all of us do. Messages should not reinforce the notion that people have to earn the right to be here by being model contributors.

6. Pro-immigrant religious leaders should proactively reach out to reporters covering immigration. The group most frequently quoted in the analysis was public officials; by contrast, religious leaders—who can add an important humanitarian perspective to the immigration debate—were rarely quoted.
7. Immigrants should also do more to reach out to the media, as they were rarely quoted in the sample, despite being the subject of discussion.
8. Immigration advocates can counter dehumanizing language by using language focused on immigrants as people; “immigrant families” or “people who are immigrants” are two phrases that could be used. Shining a spotlight on immigrants as families will further allow viewers and listeners to relate to immigrants. Advocates can also use positive messaging focused on the contributions immigrants make to our nation and on integration.
9. Immigration advocates should focus on values when addressing stories about enforcement. Cases of raids in which undocumented immigrants were denied due process, or in which legal immigrants were mistaken for undocumented immigrants, are clear violations of our national values of fairness and justice. Messages focusing on this, rather than on harm experienced by individual immigrants, are more likely to strike a chord with the public and raise support for fixing a flawed system. This approach can also shift attention away from the notion of immigrants breaking the law. In addition, when it comes to law enforcement topics, it is important to try to expand stories beyond portraying immigrants as either victims or perpetrators, dominant characters in the law enforcement theme, and find ways to include them in other roles.
10. Immigration reform goes beyond economic implications and affects other aspects of life, including hate crimes. It is critical that immigration advocates make their voices heard to emphasize the contributions that immigrants make. While this might not immediately result in a decrease in hate crimes, it will reinforce a positive view of immigrants and is certainly a step in the right direction.
11. Immigration advocates need to use consistent messages about the positive role immigrants play, and they must be careful not to use terminology or language that reinforces the negative stereotypes that anti-immigration advocates offer.
12. Only advocates with ample media training and experience should go on shows with hosts who might be hostile to their point of view (Laura Ingraham or Bill O'Reilly, for example). A pro-immigrant advocate hoping to receive more-objective coverage would do better on an NPR show, since this outlet can offer advocates the opportunity to be heard without having to confront network biases. Advocates should also seek out cable shows where hosts are more objective on the immigration issue (such as Fareed Zakaria and Wolf Blitzer).

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