Study Reveals Shortcomings and Opportunities in U.S. Immigration Coverage

Internews supported a content analysis of more than 4,500 of the most impactful immigration stories from 2017–2020

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BACKGROUND

Migratory Notes launched in 2017 to track rapidly shifting immigration news and policy developments. The newsletter, published for more than four years, grew into an influential resource for nearly 5,000 subscribers in more than 40 states and a dozen countries. Reader evaluations and anecdotal responses demonstrated how the newsletter supported journalists, lawyers, academics, immigration officials and others with informed updates on U.S. immigration developments and context to complicated issues.

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Yet, by its nature, Migratory Notes could only be as effective at informing its audience as the news coverage it curated and highlighted. The newsletter co-founders worked with an independent researcher and two trained assistants to analyze more than 4,500 stories selected for inclusion in the newsletter from January 2017 to August 2020. The results revealed imbalances in U.S. immigration coverage and opportunities for expanding geographic areas of coverage and topics.

KEY FINDINGS

Coverage focused on illegality and storylines where migrants lack agency

Top topics included detention, enforcement, border, and asylum. These reflect the extraordinary restrictive push of the previous administration, but also broader and long-standing tendencies in immigration coverage toward highlighting criminality and exclusion. There were about twice as many stories categorized as "border wall" than as "labor," for example.

U.S. / Mexico border stretches out to the ocean. *BBC World Service / CC BY-NC 2.0*

Reporting overemphasized the southern U.S. border region

Reflecting the focus on enforcement and the border, states like Texas and Arizona received highly disproportionate immigration coverage compared to their share of the nation's foreign-born population. In contrast, some states with big immigrant populations, such as Florida and New Jersey, had a smaller percentage of locally-based stories than their share of the foreign-born population.

A relatively small group of journalists dominated immigration coverage

While the Migratory Notes team aggregated stories from nearly 2,000 authors, they only selected 50 authors for inclusion more than 10 times. The top author, who had by far the highest number, reflecting the newsletter's emphasis on policy developments, was Hamed Aleaziz, an exceptionally well-sourced reporter for BuzzFeed News.

National news outlets based in major media centers dominated

While almost 500 news sources were included in the database, only 10 of those outlets had more than 100 stories selected, all of which were large legacy companies based in Los Angeles, New York or Washington. While this is to be expected since they are the highest funded and national in scope, it points to geographic limitations of perspectives that shape the national conversation.

METHODOLOGY FOR STORY SELECTION

The editors of Migratory Notes or a trained staff writer selected stories for inclusion in a newsletter database updated weekly. To be included a story had to fulfill at least one of the three criteria below:

- Identify or contextualize U.S. immigration policy developments
- Explain trends or shifts in U.S. immigrant and migrant communities
- Present local U.S. immigration stories with national ramifications or resonance

Migratory Notes staff identified stories via search engines, social media, immigration-related newsletters and reader tips primarily from other journalists. Upon selecting a story, the Migratory Notes staff added it to a database, including source, author and topical category.

METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYSIS

Independent researcher Chi Zhang directed an effort to systematically investigate the stories database. After consolidating and standardizing the database, she excluded election coverage to better track coverage trends under the previous administration, which resulted in a total of 4,735

Entrance hall of Ellis Island Immigration Museum. *Christian Reimer / CC BY-SA 2.0*

stories. The team examined which authors and outlets contributed most heavily toward this collection of immigration reporting, as well as the distribution of topical categories.

To identify the geographical focus of the coverage, two trained research assistants coded a randomly selected sample of 721 stories for whether a story had a local focus, and if so, in which U.S. state the story took place. A story was considered to have a local focus — what we called a place-based story — if it centered on specific communities, demographics, policies, legislations, or institutions.

Potential limitations include that stories from the database are curated based upon a combination of algorithms, social media, networks, and individual preferences. In addition, while the data was cleaned, categories were not always consistently marked and not subject to systematic content coding.

Another limitation is that stories tended to be selected from news outlets serving left-leaning and mixed audiences, but not right-leaning (using the definitions of this Pew study). Right-leaning outlets, while not eliminated from selection in the Migratory Notes database, were included less frequently because stories they published often failed to show two sides or honed in on an individual case of criminal behavior from an immigrant without showing context. Indeed, if those stories were included, it would likely point to an even more extreme version of categories emphasizing lawlessness and criminality of immigrants.

Although this database does not constitute a random sampling of the immigration reporting available, it represents the most impactful, visible and accessible stories upholding journalistic values covering immigration. Our preliminary conclusions about the topical focus of immigration reporting should serve as the basis of further analysis. Data from this study is available upon request.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data from our analysis confirmed that the reporting of national relevance during the previous administration overwhelmingly highlighted detention, enforcement, the border and the plight of asylum seekers. While the circumstances may have been unique, the cumulative framing of immigrants as law breakers or lacking agency was not new.

USC professor Roberto Suro, who served as a board member of Migratory Notes, wrote in a 2008 Brookings Institute Report:

> *"Deeply ingrained practices in American journalism have produced a narrative that conditions the public to associate immigration with illegality, crisis, controversy and government failure."*

He predicted then if the pattern did not change, immigration reform would not move forward. And it has not, with the last major reform 35 years ago.

In this pivotal time, as Congress considers immigration reform, the need for nuanced immigration coverage in the U.S. is just as important as it was under the previous administration. Yet, following the inauguration of President Joe Biden, stories on his administration focusing on immigration accounted for a lower proportion of coverage than during the previous administration, according to a Pew Research Center analysis. Meanwhile, with so much attention directed toward the southern border, large areas of the country and immigration topics beyond enforcement are underreported.

Specialty nonprofit national news outlets and organizations have emerged to support reporting on just about every other social issue — health care, education, criminal justice, gun violence, poverty — but not immigration. While there are some grants and fellowships that support immi-

gration coverage — such as from the Pulitzer Center, International Women's Media Foundation, and the GroundTruth Project — there is no organization dedicated to immigration journalism. Likewise, while new nonprofit newsrooms have emerged in big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis, there is no dedicated national news outlet for immigration coverage.

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Our recommendations based upon our research include the following:

Expand Geographic Scope of Immigration Coverage

The research found that fewer than a third of the stories were place-based, meaning reflecting and representing the specific dynamics of a local community. Of those stories, various regions were underreported relative to their immigrant populations. There is an opportunity to invest in these communities, which are generally outside traditional landing places and national media centers, and train local reporters in fundamentals of immigration coverage and provide story grants or other incentives to foster coverage.

U.S. Immigration at Dublin Airport. *Can Pac Swire / CC BY-NC 2.0*

Invest in Partnerships between Mainstream and Immigrant-Serving Media Outlets

In many emerging immigrant communities the most robust coverage of the community is not in English and created with a lens toward community-members needs. While those stories are not targeted for a broader audience, building strong relationships with immigrant-serving outlets and compensating them for collaboration is an import-ant first step for mainstream outlets to consider when developing a local response.

Broaden Scope of Immigration Coverage

While the watchdog coverage which flourished during the previous administration that probes the complicated regulations and agencies of the system is critical, expanding coverage to include more humanizing stories would better reflect and represent the spectrum of the immigrant experience. This should include stories about what it takes for immigration to be an asset — demographic shifts that energize dying communities, immigrants' con-tributions to rebuilding the economy after natural disasters including COVID, integration programs that work.

Create Global Knowledge-Sharing Networks for Immigration Coverage

Immigration journalism should not be limited to the challenges faced in receiving countries, but rather provide context for the complex factors triggering people to uproot themselves from their home countries. Opportunities are growing for news collaborations across borders, which in turn fosters more insightful migration coverage.

This lack of nuanced and robust immigration reporting only hurts U.S. communities. Without better journalism, decision makers won't have access to the narratives needed to inform better local, federal, and international immigration policies. Investing in immigration journalism will benefit U.S. citizens and newcomers alike.■
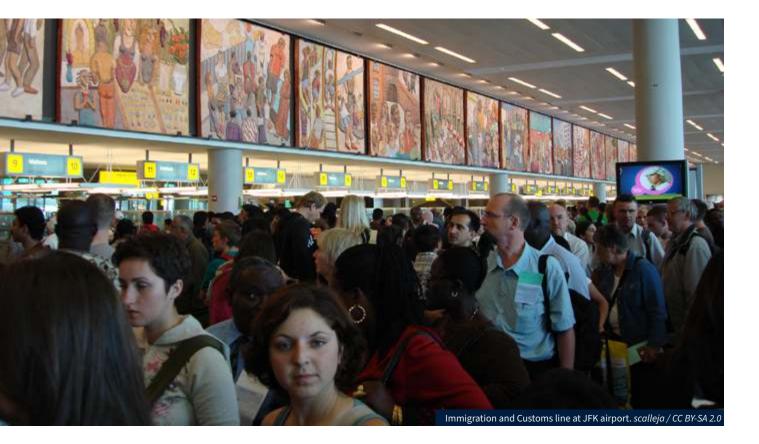

Immigration and Customs line at JFK airport. *scalleja / CC BY-SA 2.0*

Table 1.

TOP TEN CONTRIBUTORS TO IMMIGRATION REPORTING	
Author	**# of stories in database**
Hamed Aleaziz	97
Nick Miroff	78
Miriam Jordan	69
Camilo Montoya-Galvez	63
Adolfo Flores	56
Priscilla Alvarez	53
Zolan Kanno-Youngs	46
Ted Hesson	40
Dara Lind	38
Julia Ainsley	38

Table 2.

TOP TEN SOURCES FOR IMMIGRATION REPORTING		
Outlet	**# of stories in database**	**Percentage**
The New York Times	378	9.1%
The Washington Post	304	7.3%
AP	262	6.3%
BuzzFeed News	178	4.3%
Reuters	148	3.6%
LA Times	146	3.5%
Politico	131	3.2%
CNN	130	3.1%
NBC News	105	2.5%
The Intercept	103	2.5%

Table 3.

Geographical distribution of immigration stories for states with the largest immigrant populations (Source: 2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates)		
State	**Immigrant population (as share of total U.S. immigrant population)**	**% of place-based stories**
California	24.1%	22.3%
Texas	11.2%	20.8%
Florida	10.2%	3.9%
New York	10.1%	9.2%
New Jersey	4.6%	1.8%
Illinois	4.1%	2.1%
Massachusetts	2.7%	2.5%
Washington	2.5%	3.2%
Virginia	2.4%	1.8%
Georgia	2.4%	2.5%
Arizona	2.2%	7.8%

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