Setting the Agenda for a "Crackdown": Framing "Illegal Immigration" in South Carolina Online Newspapers

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In June 2010, a Gallup poll investigating the most important issues facing the country today found that Americans ranked immigration seventh. One month later, Americans ranked illegal immigration as the sixth most serious threat to the United States ("Americans Closely Divided"). In a January 14, 2011 poll, illegal immigration was ranked the 12th most important issue facing the president and Congress ("Americans Want Congress"*).* In the past couple years, illegal immigration has consistently appeared on lists of significant political issues and has remained a polarizing topic in Congress, the media, and public opinion. McCombs and Shaw's agenda setting theory holds that the media guide public perception of an issue's salience (1972); Americans perceive "illegal" or undocumented immigration from the Caribbean, Central and South America to be a critical issue because of the way that it is presented in the media. Indeed, the fact that the issue is denoted as "illegal immigration" indicates how the news media influences the American public.[1]

Agenda Setting Theory can help us understand better how, according to Scheufele and Tewksbury, the media repeatedly characterize or "frame" an issue (2007). Framing involves the repeated usage of certain words, phrases, and images as well as implicit attitudes that, intentionally or not, create a sort of schemata through which readers or viewers perceive an issue (Rill and Davis 2008). Considering the

national and state interest in immigration, especially illegal immigration from Mexico and other Central and South American countries, this study examines how illegal immigrants and immigration are framed by the South Carolina press, how that framing affirms or negates the agenda setting and other relevant theories, and finally whether or not that framing manifests itself in reader opinion as expressed in online commentary. As a foundation for this body of research, the following review of literature examines previous research on and criticisms of agenda setting, priming, and framing in general media and, more specifically, in online media.

Agenda Setting Theory

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw provided the first empirical verification of a significant relationship between the emphases the media place on particular issues and the importance voters place on them. By asking a sample of undecided voters to list the key issues in a presidential campaign and then documenting the content of media stories on those particular issues, McCombs and Shaw concluded that there exists a high correlation between what the voters and media considered important. Today, agenda setting research makes a more ambitious claim, arguing that the media not only tell people what facts to think about, but also how they should think *and feel* about them (Rill and Davis 2008).

In subsequent studies, media scholars have broken down the original agenda setting theory into two levels that more precisely distinguish different types of public agenda. Agenda setting I, or classic agenda setting, assumes a direct link between the media agenda and a rather vaguely defined "public agenda." This level of agenda setting establishes a direct, unmediated connection between the agenda of issues as presented in the media and the importance of issues to their users without considering influential outside factors. Agenda setting II investigates mediating factors in the agenda setting process by either manipulating the media agenda as a stimulus in an experimental setting or by predicting an individually perceived media agenda by considering several mediating usage variables (Huck, Quiring, and Brosius 2009). Second-level agenda setting theory explains more precisely how, by covering relevant factors in either a positive, negative, or neutral tone, the media help the public not only decide on the importance of the

issues being covered, but also how to feel about them (Rill and Davis 2008). At both levels, the core concept in agenda setting is the transfer of issue salience, or "the degree to which an issue is perceived as relatively important" (Coleman and McCombs 2007).

In their 1987 study of media cues presented in the evening news, Iyengar and Kinder identified the importance of priming to agenda setting theory. After having respondents watch four days of evening news coverage, a survey found that they ranked issues in the same order of importance as the broadcasts. They explained this phenomenon by stating that because humans are cognitively limited, we organize concepts thematically, and can thus retain only a finite number of considerations in the forefront of our minds. When queried about our opinions pertaining to certain issues, we draw our response from this hierarchy of information stored in our minds. Therefore, even when an issue is not an immediate concern, constant media attention primes issue awareness by making it more accessible in the mind or by increasing the issue's perceived importance (Redlawsk 2001; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

Entman explains that framing, similar to priming, involves selecting a subject of news coverage and making it salient in the public mind. Framing, however, further organizes the facts of a story and, crucially, conveys a particular attitude toward them (Rill and Davis 2008; also see Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). According to Moeller, for example, the Bush administration and compliant media outlets used the comfortable and familiar concept of "democracy" to garner support for U.S. political objectives in the aftermath of September 11.

Both the media and the audience consolidate and process information on a particular issue--in the case of this study, illegal immigration—based on the information already grouped and stored in their memories. Confronted with a new event, say an illegal immigrant arrested for trafficking drugs in Charleston County, the reporter, who is usually limited by print deadline and word count, refers to previous similar stories in order to quickly and efficiently establish a set foundation on which to report the new story. According to the research of Entman, Scheufele and Tewksbury, the reporter would thus reaffirm certain pre-existing rhetoric and frames developed by his or her media organization (or perhaps media organizations in general).

Whether intentionally or not, the media's frames contribute to the audience's schemata and ultimately its opinion on any particular issue.

Framing of Immigration

In 2007, Dunaway, Abrajano and Branton conducted an agenda setting analysis to determine how the news media frame issues pertaining to immigration reform and how this framing affects the way immigrants, legally residing in the United States or not, are perceived by the public, voters, and legislators. Their research suggests that the heightened news coverage of immigration issues increases their importance in the perception of the public. The three researchers point out the similarities between how the media frame non-white immigrants and other non-white groups. Their work shows that news outlets routinely associate non-whites with violence, the abuse of government programs, and social pollution (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000).

Cisneros further researched this framing of non-white minorities as social pollutants, focusing specifically on media images of immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America (2008). According to his research, the news media tend to frame immigration issues with metaphors that represent immigrants as "problems." Specifically, he compares the visual framing of "immigrant as pollutant" to the news coverage of the Love Canal toxic waste spill of the late 1970s. The images used in the coverage of the toxic waste spill showed pools of dangerous-looking sludge seeping into areas where people exercise and children play. The images of yellow-taped off puddles and protestors holding signs reading "We've got better things to do than sit around and be contaminated!" clearly communicate that the waste is dangerous and unwelcome in the community. Cisneros found striking similarities between these images and the images used to illustrate immigration stories in the news media. According to his research, the news media will often accompany a story about an immigration reform bill or another generic immigration issue with images of faceless, non-white Hispanics, seemingly idle and waiting for work or a ride, congregating in clusters. Visually, they appear to be an undifferentiated mass, taking up physical space in an American community. Accompanied with a news story emphasizing an "immigration problem," they appear threatening, much like toxic waste seeping into communities (2008).

In a more recent study of framing of immigration, Lakoff and

Ferguson note the impact of indirect messages the news media sends through the usage of specific terms or frame-words such as "illegal immigrants," "illegal aliens," "border security," and "amnesty" (2006). According to their study, by marrying the word "immigration" to the word "illegal," the news media frame immigrants as criminal, as if they were inherently bad or dangerous people. In the study, Lakoff and Ferguson call to attention the fact that these common terms are neither neutral nor unbiased. As a point of comparison, they note that businessmen who once cheated on their taxes are not called "illegal businessmen," nor are drivers ticketed once for speeding called "illegal drivers."

In addition, Lakoff and Ferguson argue that the word "illegal" becomes especially pejorative when paired with the word "alien." "Alien" denotes a sense of otherness. In reference to popular culture, an "alien" is a being who invades earth with the event of taking over by gradually insinuating themselves among us. Thus, framing the immigrant as an "alien," not only dehumanizes them, but, as Cisneros suggested, also presents them as an invasive threat to society. Thirdly, the frequent usage of the word "amnesty" in issues pertaining to illegal immigration further skews the topic . By definition, "amnesty" is a pardoning of an illegal action, a show of either benevolence or mercy by a supreme power. When paired with immigration issues, this word implies that the fault inevitably lies with the immigrant, as opposed to border officials, businesses, inefficiency of the legalization system, or other parties involved. Fourthly, there exists the "undocumented worker" frame. Lakoff and Ferguson note that while this frame is perhaps intended to have a less accusatory effect than say, the word "illegal," a closer look reveals that it too is a pejorative frame. The word "undocumented" indicates that the immigrant should be documented, and the fact that he or she is not implies that there is something inherently negative about his or her presence in the United States. The word "worker" also limits the immigrant to work, suggesting that his or her function in America is not to earn a fair wage, care for a family, obtain an education, or otherwise (2006).

Online Media

In this study, the framing of immigration by the South Carolina press is examined exclusively through online media, specifically

the online newspaper editions of Charleston's *Post and Courier* and Columbia's *The State*. Since the late 1990s, the online format for news has developed from a secondary adjunct to print publications to a dominant news outlet. Prior to the Internet, traditional journalism was defined by the space limitations that dictate gatekeeping. According to Janowitz's 1975 study, it was the responsibility of the journalist to "detect, emphasize and disseminate that which is important." Today, however, the online format has introduced a very different attitude, as the space to cover news stories has become nearly boundless (Janowitz 1975; Tsfati 2010).

The online format also challenges the hierarchy that has governed the selection of important news. Whereas the front page of a newspaper has allowed news organizations to highlight what the editors perceive to be the most significant stories of the day, online news consumers now have the ability to click on stories that they find important (Tsfati 2010). On a website, news organizations tend to give relatively equal prominence to a larger variety of stories, presenting consumers with more ability to shape news flow. Thus, it is not only editors who deem certain issues or stories important, but also consumers (Tewksbury and Althus 2000; Tsfati 2010).

In addition, online news media presents the opportunity for connectivity, interactivity, and diversity. The web makes it much easier for consumers to connect with and verify sources for themselves. Via online commentary, a phenomenon that this study will examine further, consumers are also able to interact with the news organization itself, journalists, and, most frequently, with other readers.

Consumer commentary provides certain readers with the opportunity to express skepticism. However, the present study questions whether or not reader skepticism is shaped by the frame words used in the online article. According to Tsfati, media skepticism is a subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream news media based on the belief that journalists and news organizations are not fair, thorough, or objective. Today, those who are mistrusting of certain news organizations often have the option of denouncing them by posting their opinions to the online commentary. According to both Tsfati and Thorson, et.al., this interactive forum for reader commentary has important implications for journalistic authority. For

the first time, readers are able to post right next to the text of a story: "This is inaccurate information. I know someone involved and this is not what happened." Such comments might be seen to erode the authority of the news organization.

Why, then, do news organizations welcome online commentary on their websites? Interestingly, Thorson et al., found in their online commentary research that informed and reasonable readers tend to denounce unfounded, uncivil, and extremely opinionated comments. Uncivil comments can also function to highlight the relative credibility of the article at hand (2010). In general, the interchange of opinions generally increased interest in the news story.

Hypotheses

While scholars have conducted significant studies of agenda setting and framing in traditional print media formats, few have applied these foundational theories to current technology. This study will advance this new area of communication research by adopting agenda setting theory and the tools of framing analysis to online media in the context of debates over immigrations in S. C. This study seeks especially to explore the relationship between the immigration frame-words and phrases used by the South Carolina press and the opinions expressed by readers in the relevant online commentary. The existence of a correlation could offer insight into the agenda setting function of online news media. This study has tested the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis #1: The South Carolina press sets the agenda for reader opinion on issues pertaining to illegal immigration by consistently using set frame words and phrases.

Hypothesis #2: On the websites of South Carolina's *Post and Courier* and *The State,* commentators on articles pertaining to illegal immigration will repeat the frame words and phrases used in the article.

Method

This study considers the article content of the two most widely circulating newspapers in the state, and both newspapers are among the top 100 daily newspapers in the country ("Top 100"). Columbia's *The State* circulates 119,000 copies per day in its print edition, while Charleston's *Post and Courier* circulates 105,000 copies. According to their web sites, *TheState.com* averages 12.5 million page views per month

and *PostandCourier.com* averages 8.5 million.

This study analyzes the articles and online commentary of these two news organizations, focusing particularly on stories pertaining to illegal immigration as data sources for evaluating the two stated hypotheses. Both news sources were tracked for seven months, from September 2010 to March 2011. Considering that the online content is nearly identical to the print content, in addition to being more easily archived and searched, this study used exclusively the online edition of the respective newspapers. To gather articles pertaining to illegal immigration, online archives were searched monthly using the following search terms: "illegal immigration," "immigrant," "Hispanic," and "state immigration." Because this study seeks to analyze the relationship between the article content and public opinion, the few articles pertaining to illegal immigration that had no online comments were rejected. When a single article had a large number of comments, only the first web page of commentary was considered (approximately the first 10-15 comments). In addition, articles written by both staff reporters and Associated Press reporters were considered, given that both were considered the property of the news source and generated online commentary.

Once the relevant articles and online commentaries were collected, they were printed out and ordered chronologically. Each article was thoroughly scanned for frame words and phrases pertaining to immigration and immigrants, crime references involving immigrants or a specific ethnic group, and other particular sub-issues that seemed to recur. The commentaries were analyzed using a similar procedure. Based on word choice and overall tone, each comment was classified as either sympathetic or unsympathetic to illegal immigrants, and then frame words and phrases were identified.

The data was then organized into five data sets. Data Set 1 and Data Set 2 offer an overview of all collected data from *The Post and Courier* and *The State* respectively, listing the date, headline, summary, frame words, and crime references of each article. Data Sets 3 through 5 offer a more focused look at the specific issues that are framed, exploring how that issue framing is paralleled in online commentary.

Results

Data Set 1: Framing Immigration in the Post and Courier
     From September 2010 to March 2011, the *Post and Courier* yielded 23 articles pertaining to illegal immigration. Two articles had to do with specific local business citations against employers who knowingly hired illegal immigrants, four with Senator Ford's Feb. 8 comments on the work ethic of Mexicans compared to American citizens, and 10 articles pertained to state immigration legislation, particularly the South Carolina Illegal Immigration Reform Act of 2011, which first appeared during the study time period in November and continued to make news into March. While all other articles could be considered hard or current news, one was an in-depth feature on a South Carolina Detention Center that has initiated an electronic illegal immigration flagging system.
     Recurring frame words and phrases in *Post and Courier* articles included references to the Illegal Immigration Reform Act, South Carolina's "illegal immigration crackdown," immigrant status and documentation, and the issue of racial profiling. Other prominent frames included references to an "Arizona-style law" and the recognition of "Spanish-speaking" or "non-English speaking" immigrants. Notably, as the study progressed, the Illegal Immigration Reform Act went from being framed as "a bill that cracks down on illegal immigrants" to "an anti-illegal immigration bill." Of the 23 articles, one pertained to illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe. All others pointed to illegal immigration from Mexico, Central and South America. Seventeen articles made direct reference to some other crime committed by an illegal immigrant or the illegal immigration population aside from merely being of illegal status in the United States. Seven of those crime references pertained to traffic violations, primarily in the context of the Illegal Immigration Reform Act permitting state police to question one's illegal status during a traffic stop. The word "suspicion" or related words appeared multiple times in this context, using frame phrases such as "check the immigration status during routine traffic stops if the officer suspects the person is in the country illegally" (Munday, "Group"). Five of the crime references had to do

with illegal immigrants committing serious crimes such as fraud, drug trafficking, rape, and gang violence. Particular emphasis was placed on the financial burden placed on taxpayers to "house illegal immigrants in prisons and jails" (Wenger, "Crackdown"). Fraud references pertained mostly to the production of counterfeit driver's licenses.

In the online commentary, commentators were overwhelmingly unsympathetic to illegal immigrants. An average of eight comments were considered for each article. The study yielded no articles for which the number of sympathetic commentators exceeded the number of unsympathetic. In unsympathetic comments, illegal immigrants were most often referred to as "illegal aliens," "illegals," "undocumented workers," and "Mexicans." In many cases, the word "criminal" was added to these titles, usually referring to unlawful resident status in the United States rather than another act of crime.

Nearly all frequent commentators were unsympathetic to illegal immigrants and tended to either be the most emotional on the issue or the most activist. The emotional commentators were prone to harsh, aggressive language such as "illegals should be hunted down/rounded up" (qtd. in MacDougall); "America should put a $25 bounty on every illegals head" (qtd. in "S.C. Senate"); and "the US is under Mexican invasion" (qtd. in Monk, "Mexican Woman).[2] Activist commentators posted links to online anti-illegal immigration petitions and encouraged other commentators to join their fight by writing to "those idiots" in the state Senate.

Data Set 2: Framing Immigration in The State

From September 2010 to March 2011, *The State* yielded 20 articles pertaining to illegal immigration. Because the articles were collected in the same time period as the *Post and Courier* articles, the topics were similar. One article had to do with a specific local business citation against employers who knowingly hired illegal immigrants, two with Senator Ford's Feb. 8 comments on the work ethic of Mexicans compared to American citizens, and eight articles pertained to the Illegal Immigration Reform Act. *The State* also ran a similar feature to the one printed in the *Post and Courier* about the South Carolina detention center's use of an electronic illegal immigrant flagging system.

All eight articles pertaining to the Illegal Immigration Reform Act

referenced the similar, controversial illegal immigrant law passed in Arizona in 2010,[3] using frames such as "Arizona-style law" and "adopt a tough/strict immigration law like Arizona's." Another recurring frame has to do with the selective removal of illegal immigrants using phrases such as "illegal immigrant crackdown" (Wenger, "Immigration crackdown"), "weed out illegal immigrants" (Munday, "Summerville"), and "curbing illegal immigration" ("S.C. Senator").

Fourteen of the 20 articles made direct reference to some other crime committed by an illegal immigrant or the illegal immigration population aside from merely being of illegal status in the United States. Similar to the *Post and Courier,* six of those crime references pertained to traffic violations, primarily in the context of the Illegal Immigration Reform Act permitting state police to question one's illegal status during a traffic stop. Seven of the crime references had to do with illegal immigrants committing serious crimes, particularly fraud and murder. In reference to fraud, two articles mentioned how the new South Carolina immigration bill would punish the production of counterfeit driver's licenses and other documents with a $25,000 fine and a prison sentence. The two articles that covered the car accident that killed a Columbia firefighter both identified the responsible driver as an illegal immigrant.

Data Sets 3 and 4: Specific Issue Framing by the Newspapers and Online Commentators

In studying the framing of illegal immigration in *The Post and Courier* and *The State*, seven categories of frame words and phrases emerged. The frame words and phrases were paralleled by those used by commentators.

The first category is the Illegal Immigration Bill, which garnered the most attention from the newspaper, but not as much from commentators. The bill was referred to as an "Arizona law that allows police to check immigration status" eight times. The description of this bill as a "crackdown" or "clampdown" appeared seven times. Three times it was criticized for being a "waste of time and money" and twice dismissed as "feel-good legislation." Commentators used similar frame words and phrases when talking about the bill.

The second category, Federal v. State, focuses on references to which government entity, federal or state, should be responsible

for policing immigration. Three times it was mentioned that illegal immigration could become a "state crime." The newspaper also referenced that the federal government has allowed a "porous border," permitting illegal immigrants to "overwhelm state police, schools, and hospitals," and also that South Carolina "continues to pay unknown amounts to house illegal immigrants in prisons and jails" (Wenger, "Immigration Crackdown"). Commentators paralleled these frames, frequently blaming the federal government for the illegal immigration issue in South Carolina and once even using the phrase "porous border" ("Immigrant Numbers").

The third category, Immigrant Wages/Labor, pertains to frame words and issues that reference the type of work done by illegal immigrants, the wages that they earn, and their significance to the economy. Illegal immigrant jobs were most often noted as "hard labor jobs" in construction, agriculture and "housekeeping." Commentators who were more sympathetic to illegal immigrants acknowledged that "immigrants are exploited with very low wages" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford") and that they fill "jobs that Americans won't do, they are jobs that Americans won't pay a decent wage for" (qtd. in Phillips, "Mexicans Needed"). Several sympathetic commentators referred to the illegal immigrant labor situation as "neo-slavery."

The fourth category, Immigrant Crime, includes crime references from Data Sets 1 and 2. In *The Post and Courier* in particular, the crime-related framing used by commentators was very frequent. As found in Data Sets 1 and 2, crime references in the newspapers referred to both traffic violations and violent crime. Prominent frame words and phrases included "flagging" illegal immigrants for deportation for "rape, robbery, and other serious crimes." Commentators made many references to illegal immigration and drug trafficking: for example, "[illegal immigrants] are trying to monopolize the drugs and money and organize armies of crime" (qtd. in Monk, "Feds") and "drug cartels are stopping anyone but Mexicans from crossing the border" (qtd. in "Murrels Inlet"). In addition, commentators mentioned rape, robbery, and murder many times with frame phrases such as: "[Illegal immigrants] are here to rape, rob and pillage us" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford"); "they engage in illegal activity: murders, rapes, robberies" (qtd. in Adcox, "Bill"); and "illegals get away with murder, robbery,

and rape, while citizens go to jail" (qtd. in Monk, "Mexican Woman).

The fifth category, Immigrant Documentation, pertains to frame words and phrases relating to work authorization, documentation, and citizenship status. Commentators often associated immigrant documentation with taxation, implying several times that lack of "citizenship," "papers," "visa," or "social security card" indicated that an immigrant was not paying taxes.

The sixth category, Role of Employers, encompasses all frame words and phrases that have to do with the issue of Americans employing illegal immigrants. Interestingly, *The State* made no reference to the role of employers in any of its articles. However, commentators to both newspapers made reference to it frequently, insinuating that American employers are very much a part of illegal immigration problems. Commentators also questioned the profits that such employers "rake in" and, again, the burden it places on the taxpayers.

The final category focuses on frame words and phrases pertaining to Discrimination/Racism, particularly "racial profiling," an issue raised frequently by the opposition to the Illegal Immigration Reform Act. Both newspapers gave more attention to discrimination and racial profiling than their respective commentators.

Data Set 5: Other Frames Frequently Used by Online Commentators
Data Set 5 was organized in order to include the many other frequent frames used by online commentators that did not parallel those used in the articles. The following six categories emerged: Taxpayer Money, God/Church, Questions of Rhetoric, History of Immigration, Language Barrier, and Race/Ethnicity/Culture.

The largest category was Taxpayer Money, with many references to the burden illegal immigrants place on American taxpayers.

The category of God/Church did not yield as many results as other categories. Nevertheless, a number of commentators used such framing to justify their animosity for illegal immigrants. One commentator commented, in all capital letters, that she would not want to "stand in the shoes of electeds on judgment day" (qtd. in "S.C. Senator").

The Questions of Rhetoric category refers specifically to mostly critical questions of what illegal immigration means and the words that are used to define it. The question of the meaning of the word "illegal"

as in illegal immigrant surfaced five times in the online commentaries.

The History of Immigration category contains comments relating the history of immigration in America to illegal immigration today. Several unsympathetic commentators claimed that although it is true that their ancestors were also immigrants, they came to the United States legally. Two sympathetic commentators referenced Native Americans, one stating, "Hispanics were originally Native Americans" and the other remarking "as a Native American, I take offense" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford").

The fourth category, Language Barrier, pertained to comments about illegal immigrants not speaking English. Several commentators claimed that English is the official language of the United States, and that all immigrants should learn to speak it.

The final category, Race/Ethnicity/Culture, contained all comments pertaining to the racial and cultural identity of illegal immigrants. Most derogatory terms and racial slurs were included in this category, such as "send Pablo and his little ninos back to Guadeloupe!" (qtd. in "S.C. Senators"). Several references to a "Mexican invasion" and the supposedly eminent "Mexican-American War" were included in this category.

Discussion

For this study it was hypothesized that 1.) the South Carolina press sets the agenda for reader opinion on issues pertaining to illegal immigration by consistently resorting to set frame words and phrases and that 2.) commentators on the websites of *The Post and Courier* and *The State* repeat in their comments the same frame words and phrases used in the relevant article. Data collected from the duration of this study, from September 2010 to March 2011, supports both of these hypotheses.

Agenda-Setting in the South Carolina Press

The issue of agenda setting in the South Carolina press clearly manifests itself in the collected articles pertaining to illegal immigration. Already considered among the top 10 issues facing the United States today, the frequency of news coverage in *The Post and Courier* and *The State* implies that it is also a highly salient issue in South Carolina. McCombs and Shaw's 1972 agenda setting theory and Rill and Davis'

subsequent research in 2008 on second-level agenda setting hold that there is a direct link between the agenda of issues presented in the media and the importance of those issues to media consumers, thus indicating not only the importance of certain issues, but also how consumers are to feel about them.

One particular illegal immigration issue that illustrates agenda setting is the news coverage of the South Carolina Illegal Immigration Reform Act. The frequent description of the bill as a "crackdown" on illegal immigrants implies that severe measures are needed to control an unlawful group of people. By framing the bill as such within articles and headlines, the media set the agenda for public suspicion of immigrants, not only for their presence in the United States, but also for their unlawfulness. This attitude is reflected in the online commentary with the frequent references to "criminal illegal aliens." Interestingly, the newspapers shifted from calling the bill a "crackdown on illegal immigration" to calling it an "anti-illegal immigration bill." Both phrases indicate an illegal immigrant-negative agenda set by the South Carolina press, supporting hypothesis 1.

The two newspapers also set the agenda for the immigration bill by referring to it over and over again as an "Arizona-style law." Given the national controversy over Arizona's tough immigration law of 2010, the South Carolina press set the agenda for a similarly tough, controversial law in South Carolina. While this description may have been used to facilitate reader understanding, using Arizona as a point of reference also promotes a strong agenda: the South Carolina government sees necessity to "crackdown" on illegal immigrants, despite national scrutiny.

On the other hand, frequent quotation of politicians in opposition to the bill who criticized it as "feel-good legislation" and a "waste of time and money," gave readers a foundation on which to oppose the bill. The idea of "feel-good legislation" also suggests that the government might be attempting to burden the public with extraneous legislation. Several online commentators mirrored this phrasing, using it to express dissatisfaction with the bill with comments such as: "nothing but a feel-good bill" (qtd. in Phillips, "Many at"), "wasting time on a non-issue 'feel-good' bill" and "just another 'feel like we did something' law" (qtd. in Adcox, "Senate Approves"). This reciprocation of wording

supports both hypotheses. Though it is likely that outside factors also played a role in forming the commentator's opinion, the reader's word choice illustrates a clear link between the agenda set by the newspaper and his or her opinion.

Similarly, the newspaper's coverage of Senator Ford's February 2011 comments about "Mexicans" working harder than "brothers" in reference to his opposition to the Illegal Immigration Reform Act, sets an ethnic agenda for the coverage of illegal immigration. Senator Ford frames the issue of illegal immigration, first as having to do solely with Mexicans, and second as a question of how hard one ethnic minority group works compared to another. While the statement was indeed made by Senator Ford, not the news sources per se, the fact that *The State* ran two articles about it and *The Post and Courier* ran four indicates that the press deemed it an important issue. Consequently, the issue also yielded more comments in both newspapers combined than any other issues handled in this study. Many commentators, both sympathetic and unsympathetic to illegal immigrants, praised Ford for "telling it like it is." Agreeing that Mexicans do work harder than black Americans, several commentators stated examples from their own personal experience of hiring workers from the two ethnic groups. It seems as though these commentators were already somewhat in agreement with Senator Ford, but the wording of his statement, compounded by heavy attention from the press, further validated their opinion and solidified their perception of illegal immigration as an ethnic issue.

Priming in the South Carolina Press

Iyengar and Kinder identified the importance of priming to agenda setting research in 1987 after having respondents watch four days of news coverage and then rank issues in order of importance. They found that the news consumers ranked issues nearly the same as they were ranked by the news source. In this sense, priming is also worthy of consideration in this study. Although the two newspapers did not explicitly rank the importance of issues pertaining to illegal immigration, one could ascertain the implied significance of an issue by the amount of attention it received. For example, coverage of the Illegal Immigration Reform Act in both *The State* and *The Post and Courier* primed two questions as important opposing factors to the bill:

the first, whether the bill infringed on federal immigration law and, the second, whether the bill encouraged racial profiling.

In terms of the bill overstepping state boundaries, both news sources affirmed in nearly every other relevant article that illegal immigration is indeed a state issue. It is clear that illegal immigration is primed as a state issue as illustrated in phrases such as "illegal immigrants overwhelm State police" (Adcox, "State Senate"); "State provides social services and schooling to their children" (Phillips, "Lexington"); and "the State continues to pay unknown amounts to house illegal immigrants in prisons and jails" (Wenger, "Immigration crackdown"). However, given national scrutiny for a similar law passed in Arizona, to which the Illegal Immigration Reform Act was constantly compared, the press must also prime the question of federal vs. state immigration law as a possible obstruction to the bill. Consequently, commentators picked up on this priming, leaving a relatively high number of comments questioning the Obama administration, the federal border control, and whether the federal government is enforcing its current immigration laws. Comments such as "We cannot depend on the Kenyan-born village idiot" (qtd. in Phillips, "Many at"), "[illegal immigrants] stampede toward Obama's open border," and "Obama's agenda to facilitate illegal aliens" (qtd. in Munday, "Group") point to a general mistrust in the federal government, particularly in President Obama, and reflecting the sense that the issue must be handled by the state.

The second issue opposing the Illegal Immigration Reform Act that the two newspapers primed as important was that of racial profiling. Variations in wording ranging from "Arizona-style bill *encourages* racial profiling" (Phillips, "Ford") to "Bill *legalizes* racial profiling" (Adcox, "State Senate") to "[Bill] *promotes* racial profiling" (Adcox, "Bill Targeting") to "[Bill] *could lead to* racial profiling" (Munday, "Group Takes") illustrate different perceptions of the bill perhaps pertaining to different writers (my italics). However, all these phrases prime racial profiling as an important issue. Interestingly, commentators in favor of the bill respond to this concern by stating that profiling is not necessarily a negative thing: "We need a law that actually PROFILES" (qtd. in Munday, "Group Takes"), "Profiling is a necessary tool in law enforcement" (qtd. in Phillips, "Ford"), and "Racial profiling is not the same as criminal profiling" (qtd. in Adcox, "Bill Targeting").

This connection also supports the second hypothesis. Because racial profiling is primed as an important issue opposing the immigration bill, mentioned in nearly every article, the commentators also consider it an important issue. Those in favor of the bill attempted to counter the issue of racial profiling in their comments, thus acknowledging it as an important opinion-shaping factor.

Framing in the South Carolina Press

The issues of agenda setting and priming are both inherently linked to framing in this study. According to Rill and Davis, framing involves the usage of specific rhetoric to tell a certain type of story (2008). While priming tells news consumers how important a news item is, framing tells them how to understand and interpret it (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). The framing of illegal immigration and illegal immigrants in the South Carolina press involves the use of recurring frame words and phrases that reappear in reader commentary. For example, what was initially framed as an "Arizona-style" immigration law, was soon framed as a "crackdown on illegal immigration," and finally as an "anti-illegal immigration bill." Another example comes with the issue of federal vs. state immigration law. Initially, it was stated that state immigration laws could "conflict with federal immigration laws" (Wenger, "Immigration Crackdown") and later stated that the state is "trampling the U.S. Constitution in the name of immigration reform" (Phillips, "Bill").

A similar progression is found in the online commentary, but in some cases it is more pronounced. Certain commentators seemed to fuel each other's fire, sometimes trying to outdo each other with their arguments. In one case, the online commentary turned into a sort of debate about deportation. One commentator stated, "Sorry but all illegals need to be kicked out of the country." A few comments later another stated, "Send their illegal butts home," and a third commentator stated "Arrest his butt and deport him!" (qtd. in Smith, "546"). First of all, we see that the removal of illegal immigrants is framed by commentators as a forceful ousting of illegal, implicitly criminal, people. Secondly, we see a progression in severity of frame words, beginning with "kicked out of the country"(qtd. in Rosen) to "illegal butts" (qtd. in Adcox, "Vote") finally to "arrest his butt and deport" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford").

Other interesting examples of framing involve words and phrases used to denote an illegal immigrant. *The Post and Courier* and *The State* both use the same collection of phrases: illegal immigrant, illegal workers, criminal aliens / undocumented criminals, undocumented immigrants, foreign-born offenders, illegal aliens, and illegals. As Lakoff and Ferguson noted in their 2006 study, these frame words carry powerful indirect messages about the issue of illegal immigration in the United States and are neither inherently neutral nor unbiased. Firstly, the marriage of the adjective "illegal" to other nouns such as "immigrant," "worker," and "alien" implies that such immigrants are inherently bad or dangerous people, something that re-manifests itself in the volume of references to illegal immigrant crime. Lakoff and Ferguson also noted how the word "alien" inherently denotes a sense of otherness. While the South Carolina press certainly did not instigate the term "illegal alien," it perpetuates it, and effectively. Online commentators made multiple comments about the current "Mexican invasion" and supposedly imminent "Mexican-American War."

Although the press generally makes a careful distinction between the "illegal immigrant" and the "criminal alien," the latter being guilty of a crime other than residing in the United States illegally, online commentators do not. The adjective "illegal" is so closely linked to "criminal" in terms of rhetoric that most commentators made no distinction. For example, one commentator stated, "illegal immigrants are criminals and should be deported" (qtd. in Smith, "546"). Another commented, "Anybody who is here illegally needs to be hunted down, put in jail, then deported" (qtd. in Munday, "Group Takes"). If the relevant article made reference to an illegal immigrant committing a serious crime, commentators generally lashed out against all "criminal illegals" in the country, indicating that if illegal immigrants did not exist in the United States, the crime would not have been committed.

Commentators used all of the frame words for "illegal immigrant" found in the newspaper articles in the online commentary. In addition to the previously stated terms, other more severe words used by commentators for "illegal immigrant" included "scumbags" (qtd. in Phillips, "Mexican"), "cucarachas" (qtd. in Adcox, "Bill targeting"), "roaches" (qtd in "S.C. Senate"), and "squat little Mexican" (qtd. in Monk, "Mexican woman"). These words indicate a clear animosity

for illegal immigration, marked by the perception that they are dirty, parasitic, and comical. Although none of these harsh words are found in *The Post and Courier* and *The State,* they could possibly be derived from the words evoking criminality, otherness, and invasion that the newspapers use to frame illegal immigration.

The number of references to illegal immigrant crime found in this study was impressive and revealing of how the press sets the agenda for illegal immigration. Crime references in both *The Post and Courier* and *The State* ranged from traffic violations to more serious crimes, particularly rape, robbery, gang violence, and counterfeiting. These consistent references to illegal immigrant crime reflect the agenda set by the South Carolina press that illegal immigrants are in fact criminals, potentially dangerous to American society. This framing is mirrored in the online commentary and in many cases taken to an extreme, illustrated by comments such as "Many illegals are also violent criminals" (qtd. in Wenger, "Sen. Ford") and "Illegal immigration is NOT a victimless crime" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford"), an association with "drug infiltration from Mexico," and the exaggerated claim that "[Illegal immigrants are] trying to monopolize the drugs and money and organize armies of crime" (qtd. in Monk, "Feds").

Both newspapers made reference to immigrants (notably not *illegal* immigrants) being needed for their labor. *The State* observed, "Immigrants have done the labor that have built the United States" (Phillips, "Many"), while *The Post and Courier* stated, "Immigrants have carried out the hard labor that built America" (Adcox, "Bill Targeting") and "Immigrants are needed to do manual labor that citizens won't do" (Wenger, "Ford"). Unsympathetic commentators counter this frame by saying that on the contrary, illegal immigrants are "cheating South Carolina workers out of a job" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford") and that because their labor is so cheap, they are driving down the hourly wage for American citizens. Clearly, the South Carolina press sets the agenda for illegal immigration by framing it as an issue of employment, labor, and wages and, moreover, the frame is detected by online commentators and paralleled in their commentary.

The Taxpayer Money frame, which encompassed any commentator framing pertaining to the financial burden that illegal immigrants place on taxpayers, revealed that this is perhaps the issue of greatest

concern to readers. Interesting verbs included "stealing," as in "illegal immigrants are stealing from the taxpayers," and "raping," as in "illegals are raping the taxpayers." Both of these frames suggest the result of the tendency of the South Carolina press to relate illegal immigrants to violent criminal activity. Also, a trinity of commonly cited burdens emerged in the online commentary: the burden on the education system, on the healthcare system, and on the prison system. These three burdens were also among the grievances most commonly cited by online commentators. Several commentators even listed two to three of them in a single comment as a package of problems caused by illegal immigration. For example: "[Illegal immigrants are] a HUGE drain on our educational system and hospitals" (qtd. in "S.C. Senate"), "[Stopping illegal immigration would] save money on schools, hospitals, and other free services" (qtd. in Phillips, "Many") and "[Illegal immigrants are] burdens on government services, schools, roads, and emergency rooms" (qtd. in Munday, "Group Takes").

In the Questions of Rhetoric category, an interesting trend occurred as commentators questioned the meaning of words pertaining to illegal immigration, emphasizing over and over again the word 'illegal,' in order to justify their reasoning. Five times a question similar to "What don't you understand about the word 'illegal'?!" was recorded in this study. Twice, commentators spoke against the usage of the word "undocumented workers," stating that illegal immigrants are in fact, "criminals." One said, "They [illegal immigrants] are NOT undocumented workers, they are ILLEGAL aliens" (qtd. in MacDougall). This statement reveals that in his or her opinion, "undocumented" is not the same as "illegal" and that illegal immigrants should be identified more clearly for their crime(s).

Another commentator said, "Undocumented workers? Oh the political phrasing makes me puke!" (qtd. in Wenger, "Sen. Ford"). In this case, commentators are rejecting the frame words and phrases used by the South Carolina press, preferring harsher, more clearly negative words, insisting on harsher terms that would further incriminate illegal immigrants and perhaps sway even more American opinions against them. The commentator's disdain for "political phrasing" suggests a deeper resentment for fair or "politically correct" terms that seek to avoid marginalizing minority groups.

The final online commentator frame to be discussed is Race/Ethnicity/Culture. Two commentators spoke against the fact that illegal immigrants "won't assimilate" and that "they have zero respect for our laws and culture" (qtd. in Wenger, "Ford"). These comments imply resentment for ethnic cultures outside of what could be considered mainstream American culture and a desire for people of different cultural origins to reject their old traditions and assimilate to new. The comment that illegal immigrants have "zero respect for our laws and culture," also supports the notion that commentators perceive illegal immigrants as criminals, not only residing in the country illegally, but also respecting no laws. The comment "send Pablo and his ninos back to Guadeloupe" (qtd. in "S.C. Senators") was also classified in this category. Given that Pablo is a common Hispanic name, the commentator was obviously speaking out against Hispanic illegal immigrants in general, also expressing disdain for their children. This also alludes to a deep resentment for birthright citizenship, granting citizenship to any person born in the United States regardless of their parent's nationality or legal status.

Commentators who use extremely negative words and phrases to describe all illegal immigrants reflect an attitude that does not care to understand the human beings themselves, know about their culture, or improve their welfare. They simply want them gone. While *The Post and Courier* and *The State* do not use such ignorant or harsh words, it is possible that their framing of illegal immigration supports this attitude. By constantly framing illegal immigrants as unlawful, regularly tying them to crime and financial burdens on the State, the press also implies that illegal immigrants are not people to try to understand, but rather people who need to simply go away.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

The intention of this study was to determine how *The Post and Courier* and *The State* frames illegal immigration and how or if that framing is manifested in online commentary. Had the *Greenville News*, the third most widely circulated newspaper in the state, been more easily accessible to the researcher, it could have been incorporated as another relevant data source.

In reference to online commentators, this study faced several limitations. First, the online commentary offered no demographic

information about the commentators, i.e. city, sex, religion, political party, education, etc. This information would have allowed the researcher to make more in-depth conclusions as to how or if the commentators reflect public opinion. This study cannot claim that that the online commentators represent or reflect public opinion without any information on their identity. However, this restriction also offered a certain advantage: because the identity of commentators was concealed it is likely that they were more open about their opinions and less inhibited by social scrutiny. An additional topic of further study would be an assessment of whether the commentators influence each other's opinions.

Another major restriction to this study is the fact that consumers of *The Post and Courier* and *The State* probably receive their news about illegal immigration from other sources. In a further study, readers could be surveyed on the other news media they consume. It would also be beneficial to know what kind of political slant their news sources carry and whether that also affects the frame words used for illegal immigration. In this study, it was suspected that the majority of unsympathetic commentators also supported a conservative political agenda, however this cannot be verified with the data collected. A future study could compare the rhetoric of online commentators to that used in overtly conservative media to see if there is a correlation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the data collected in this study supports the two initial hypotheses. In reference to hypothesis 1, which predicted that the South Carolina press sets the agenda for reader opinion on issues pertaining to illegal immigration by consistently resorting to set frame words and phrases, this study found that both *The Post and Courier* and *The State* frame the issue negatively, setting the agenda for a negative opinion among readers.

In reference to hypothesis 2, which predicted that online commentators on articles pertaining to illegal immigration would repeat the frame words and phrases used in the relevant article, this study found that commentators to both newspapers used both the article's frame words and also their own. For example, commentators picked up on the newspapers' framing of the Illegal Immigration Reform Act as an illegal immigrant "crackdown," and then took that

word further with implications that all illegal immigrants should be deported.

The breadth of this study greatly exceeded the researcher's initial expectation. The diverse and widespread frames found in the online commentaries suggest that on a national level, press framing has pervaded public opinion to a higher degree. In analyzing online commentary, this study yielded multiple interesting and significant factors that require further study, e.g. public exposure to multiple media outlets and the demographic of commentators.

Although it cannot be determined whether *The Post and Courier* and *The State* have shaped the reader's opinion of illegal immigration, there is strong evidence provided by the online commentators that the frame words and phrases used by the press are salient in reader's minds, thus supporting this study's hypotheses.

Notes

1. In their 2006 study, Lakoff and Ferguson discuss the implications of the term "illegal immigration" and other negative frame words attached to the topic. However, since the term "illegal immigration" is so frequently used in mainstream media, it will also be used in this study to denote undocumented immigrants.

2. All comments from online commentaries are cited as indirect quotations to the online article. In some few cases, the comments quoted have since been removed by site monitors for offensive language.

3. Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, SB. 1070, State of Arizona Senate, 49th Legislature, 2nd Regular Session, 2010.

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