

The Language of Immigration Reporting:

# Normalizing vs. Watchdogging in a Nativist Age

2019

Emily B. Ndulue • Fernando Bermejo • Kristian Ramos  
Sarah E. Lowe • Nathaniel Hoffman • Ethan Zuckerman

# Abstract

This study harnesses journalism collections at Media Cloud, a project of the Center for Civic Media at the MIT Media Lab and Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, to test if the language used in immigration reporting at four of the nation's largest newspapers has changed over the course of the Trump campaign and administration. We looked at the frequency of offensive and inaccurate terminology in news reporting, primarily the use of the term "illegal immigrant," from 2014 to 2018. We also examined the use of extreme anti-immigrant groups as sources in mainstream reporting on immigration during the same period. In addition, we looked at social media sharing of a segment of the articles in our Dataset.

Our findings show an increase in the use of denigrating terms in reporting and growth in the citation of extreme anti-immigrant groups. Critically, we also found that a large proportion of the growth in denigrating language across media sources studied can be found within quotation marks, raising interesting ethical questions for news outlets faced with harsh, denigrating language coming directly from newsmakers, including the president of the United States.

We offer recommendations to reporters for maintaining humanizing language in the face of denigrating rhetoric and harsh policy pronouncements in an age of increasing nativism, hatred and violence in the United States.



# Introduction

Journalists help educate the public on the most important stories facing our nation. They also strongly influence the news agenda in the way that they frame political and social narratives to their audiences<sup>1</sup>. The watchdog role of the press goes back over a century, but since the 1960s, Americans have relied on news outlets, primarily print newspapers, and more recently, their online editions, to be the “watchdogs” of the government, providing factual and unbiased accounts of policy decisions being made in the capitol.

In 2013, Define American and partner advocacy organizations petitioned the Associated Press (AP) to change its authoritative “Stylebook” to stop using the term “illegal immigrant.” The campaign was based on the fact that while actions can be “illegal,” people cannot be illegal, and that the media should use the most accurate and humane terms to refer to people. The Associated Press agreed. Following that style guide change, many media outlets across the U.S. moved toward more accurate and humane language to describe immigrants.

<sup>1</sup> McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public opinion quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187; Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of communication*, 43(4), 51-58.



However, we have recently noted a trend in the other direction: a vast increase in the coverage of immigration-related issues since the 2016 U.S. presidential election has coincided with an increase in the use of dehumanizing language — whether within the body of articles or in quotations by government leaders and pundits — in trusted news outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today*.



John Tanton was an American ophthalmologist, white nationalist and anti-immigration activist.

The Trump administration openly uses derogatory terminology – including the terms “illegal immigrant” and “alien” – and models its immigration policies and talking points on the language used by organizations which all have a known history of using extremist, anti-immigrant advocacy as a method of promoting population control and social engineering. These organizations include the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Numbers USA, which were founded and funded by the late eugenicist John Tanton, an ophthalmologist who was an open white nationalist and anti-immigration catalyst.



When presented with denigrating language from the most powerful politicians in the nation, newsrooms face a difficult decision. They can adopt the language as their own, incorporating it into all aspects of their reporting. They can reject the language in the body of the story, but highlight the use of the derogatory rhetoric in direct quotes. Or they can shun the use of the language by paraphrasing and relying on quotes that do not perpetuate the negative rhetoric.



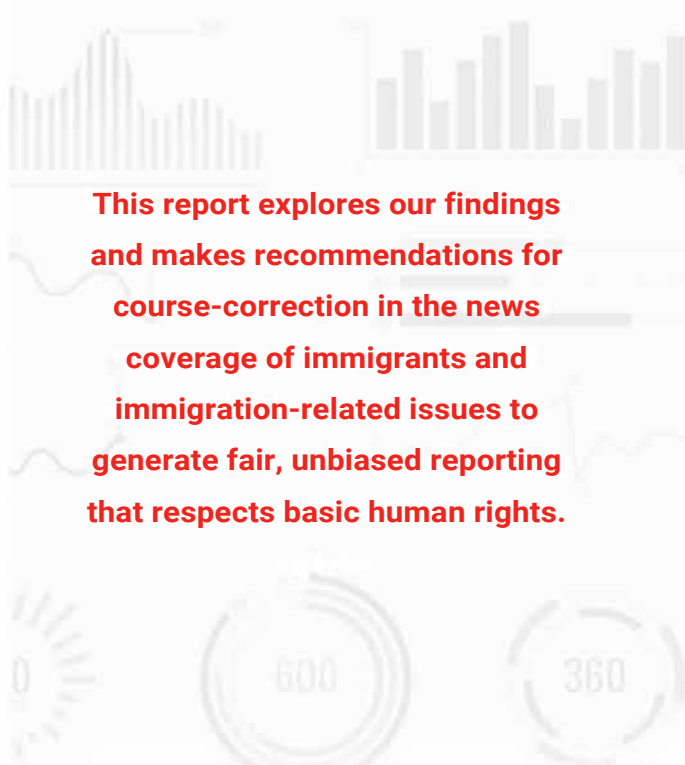
Our study looks at the language used to discuss immigration in influential U.S. newspapers from 2014 through 2018. To investigate the observed trend, Define American partnered with Media Cloud, a project of the Center for Civic Media at the MIT Media Lab and Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. Media Cloud took on the work as part of its newly launched International Hate Observatory project, which uses its news and social media database to study the origins and spread of denigrating and dangerous speech in digital ecosystems. With Define American's expertise in identifying denigrating language around immigration and Media Cloud's experience analyzing very large text-based data sets, we were able to identify major shifts in journalistic language between 2014 and 2018.

We saw an overall increase in coverage of immigration between 2014 and 2018 that likely reflects the centrality of the topic to Donald Trump's candidacy and policy initiatives as president. We also saw a significant increase in the use of denigrating terms to refer to immigrants, with significant differences between the policies of individual publications, and an overall tendency for right-leaning publications to feature denigrating language. Moreover, we found evidence that anti-immigration groups, most notably CIS, were widely cited in discussions about immigration – without important context about the groups' origins and political positions.



While there were some encouraging results, including indications that news stories with denigrating language are not necessarily any more viral than those without, our study reveals a difficult conundrum for journalists: When public figures use dehumanizing language, how should the media respond?

We found evidence that journalists are using quotation marks to distance themselves from denigrating language, suggesting that the language used reflects the opinion of the speaker and not of the journalist. While this may be less damaging than having journalists directly adopt the denigrating language used by the president and other politicians and activists, it still contributes to the overall rise in this language and its increased normalization.



**This report explores our findings and makes recommendations for course-correction in the news coverage of immigrants and immigration-related issues to generate fair, unbiased reporting that respects basic human rights.**

# Methods



We tested two hypotheses in this work. The first hypothesis was that mainstream legacy media outlets have increased their use of denigrating terms around immigration over the last five years. The second hypothesis was that these legacy media outlets have also increased their citation of specific political pressure groups that are known to purport extremist anti-immigrant policies without including context on the nature of these groups.

To test these hypotheses, the Media Cloud team employed its suite of open source web applications that provide big data on news media coverage. Media Cloud collects stories via RSS feeds, ingesting over 60,000 sources worldwide each day. Since its inception in 2011, the system has collected and processed over one billion stories. To gather data, the tools require the selection of search dates, a media source or collection and a Boolean query.

- We searched articles from 01/01/2014 through 12/31/2018. Data was pulled at an annual level.
- We examined articles from: *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*. We identified these media outlets as widely read news organizations that set the tone for immigration coverage. These publications have large circulations and further disseminate their news through wire services for thousands of smaller publications across the country.

- We also pulled data for comparison purposes from several collections of diverse sources in Media Cloud’s database that represent hundreds of news outlets:

- ■ ■ The United States - National collection, comprised of 227 media sources from the U.S. publishing news at a national level.
- ■ ■ Left and Center Left partisanship collections, comprised of 176 and 123 media sources, respectively, from Media Cloud’s quintile-based U.S. partisanship collections. These collections were derived based on Twitter user retweets of candidates Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, and retweets of news media sources in previous work conducted by Yochai Benkler and team.
- ■ ■ Right and Center Right partisanship collections, comprised of 499 and 105 sources, respectively, from Media Cloud’s quintile-based U.S. partisanship collections.

- For denigrating terminology, we searched for: illegal immigrant(s), illegal alien(s), illegals, chain migration, anchor baby(s), criminal alien(s), alien migrant(s), alien entrant(s), family unit alien(s), immigrant parasite(s), flood of immigrants/migrants, surge of immigrants/migrants, wave of immigrants/migrants, immigrant/migrant invasion/invading, invading Europe, invading the US/America, and catch and release.
- For organizations, we searched for: the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), NumbersUSA and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

Media Cloud’s tools return the number of stories matching the parameters, a full list of URLs and metadata for matching stories and several other analysis widgets in the dimensions of attention, language, top entities and influence. Our analysis focuses primarily on volume of attention, as well as shares of these URLs on Facebook.

We tested our first hypothesis by searching the selected media sources and collections for stories that contained the denigrating terms, and reviewing normalized percentage of coverage over time. In our work, it became clear that denigrating terms often appeared in quotes, frequently quotes from public figures.



As the Media Cloud system is presently unable to automatically determine whether a term is being used inside of a quote in a story, we employed manual coding on a random sample of articles from each publication (95% confidence level, confidence interval of 10) from 2014 and from 2018 to determine the percentage of instances that were inside of a quotation.

We tested our second hypothesis by searching the selected media sources and collections for the names of the anti-immigrant groups and then coding a random sample (95% confidence level, confidence interval of 10) of the articles returned to note if context was provided on the nature of the group and the sentiment of the mention (positive, neutral or negative).

# Findings

## Key Finding

- All four legacy media outlets showed an increase from 2014 to 2018 in percentage of articles published that contained one or more of the denigrating terms. However, this was accompanied by an increase in overall immigration coverage, and an increase in the proportion of times the denigrating term was inside quotation marks (i.e., reporting on someone else's use of the term rather than used directly by the publication).
- All four publications showed an increase in the percentage of stories that contained at least one of the "illegal" terms: "illegal immigrant(s)," "illegal alien(s)" or "illegals."
- Right & Center Right media sources had the highest percentage of stories with denigrating terms for all years.
- In comparisons of individual media outlets, *The Washington Post* consistently used denigrating terms more often than *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* or *USA Today*. Both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* had a higher percentage of stories with denigrating terms than the broad collections of U.S. - National sources or Left and Center Left sources.
- *The Los Angeles Times* consistently had fewer stories with denigrating terms than a broad collection of news outlets (the U.S. - National sources collection), and in all years but 2017, had fewer stories with denigrating terms than a collection of Left and Center Left publications.

For all years in question, *USA Today* had a lower percentage of stories containing denigrating terms than the Left and Center Left sources, the lowest of the benchmarking collections.

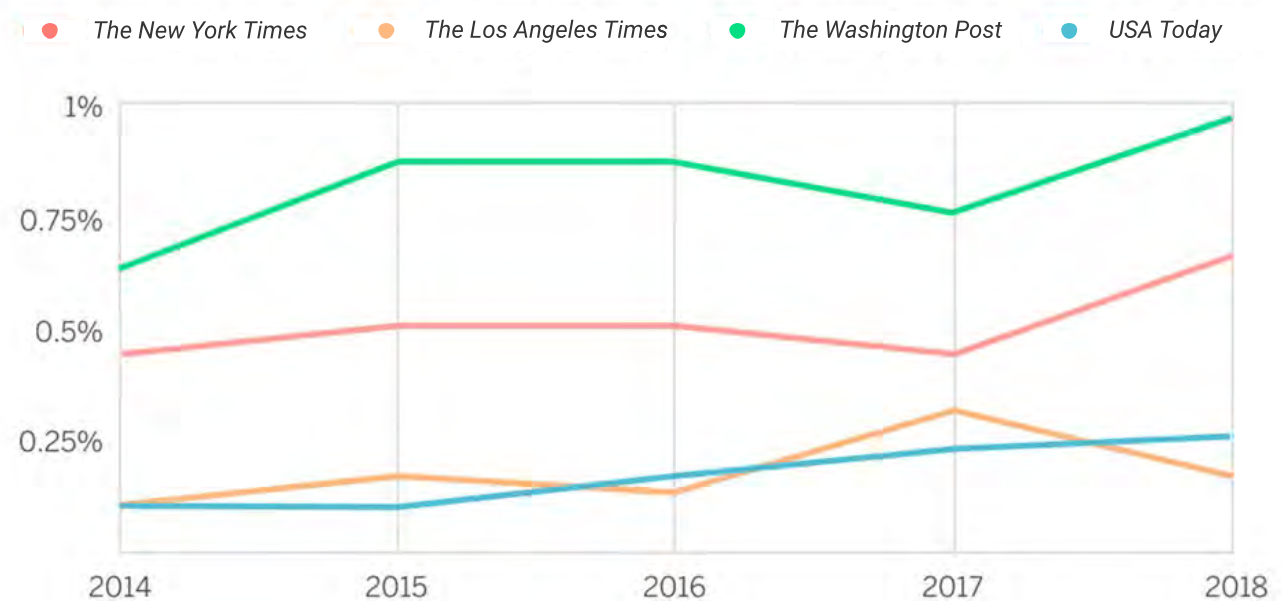
- 14% of the top 100 shared articles on Facebook pertaining to immigration contained denigrating terms. We did not find evidence that stories with denigrating terms were more likely to be widely shared on Facebook.

- The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) was mentioned in all four publications each year, and mentions increased in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*. Over 90% of the time that CIS was mentioned, it was without contextual information as to the nature of the group or its ties to the Trump administration.

## Denigrating Terms

All four legacy media outlets showed an increase from 2014 to 2018 in percentage of all articles published that contained one or more of the denigrating terms.

**Percent of stories with any denigrating terms (fig.1)**



At the same time, all four publications also increased coverage related to immigration, as evidenced by a search for any stories containing words stemming from *immigra\** (i.e., immigration, immigrant, immigrants). This important contextual factor may influence the observed increase in denigrating terms. The bar graph below shows the overall increase in immigration coverage compared with the increase in the denigrating terms from 2014 to 2018:

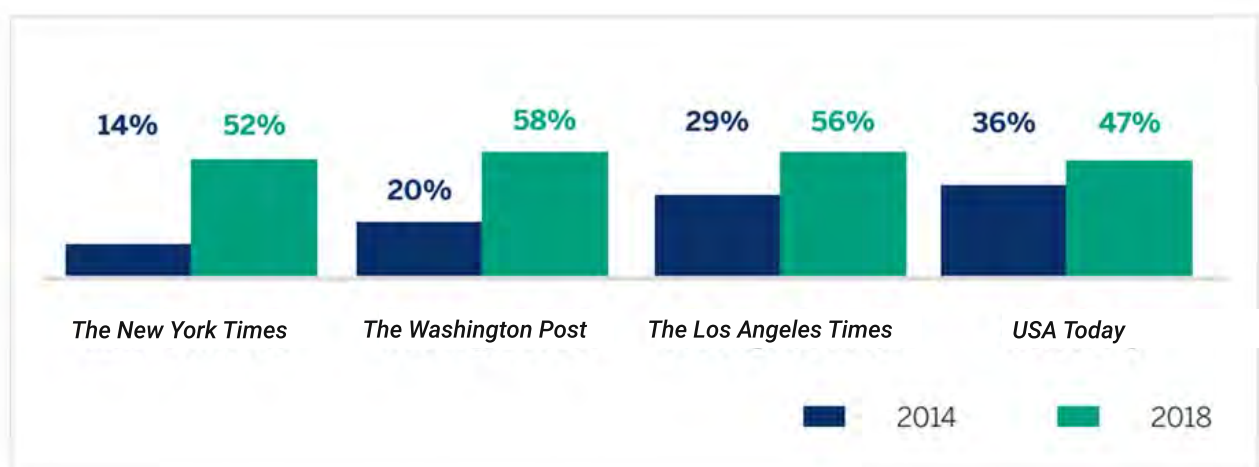


## Change in immigration coverage and change in use of denigrating language (2014 to 2018) (fig.2)

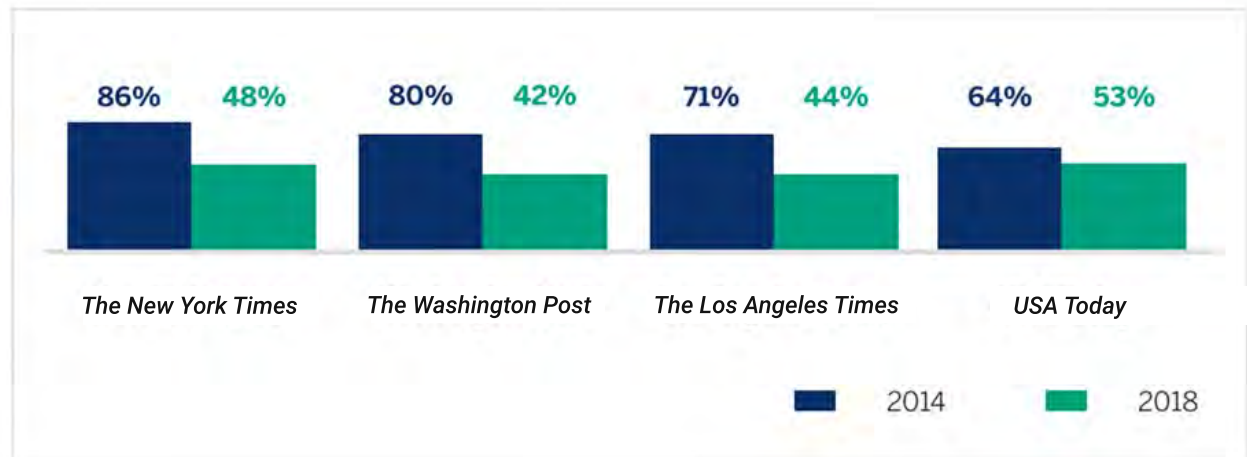


Similarly, all four publications also had an increase in the proportion of times the denigrating terms appeared inside quotation marks (versus without quotation marks) from 2014 to 2018. This contextual factor indicates that, although the terms are showing up more frequently, it is not simply attributable to normalizing use of these terms. The use of terms in quotations was both to accurately report on influential people's remarks (namely, President Trump and his political allies) and also to refer to policy terms such as "chain migration" or "catch and release," that are also denigrating. The phrases "wave/flood/surge of immigrants/migrants" accounted for the majority of terms found outside quotes.

## Proportion of denigrating term usage found **inside** quotation marks (fig.3)



Proportion of denigrating term usage found **outside** quotation marks (fig.4)



*USA Today* had the greatest increase in denigrating terms of 150%, although it started and ended with the second lowest percentage of stories with the denigrating terms (0.10% in 2014 to 0.25% in 2018). *The New York Times* had the second highest increase in denigrating terms, 73%, but increased overall immigration coverage at a rate almost double that: 139%. *The Los Angeles Times* had an increase in denigrating terms of 56% over the four years, but its starting and ending percentage of stories with the denigrating terms was the lowest of all four publications (0.9% in 2014 to 0.14% in 2018), and its increase in immigration coverage was the highest overall (160%).

*The Washington Post* had the lowest overall increase in denigrating terms at 53%, but the greatest percentage of stories with the denigrating terms for each year examined (0.64% in 2014, and ultimately 0.98% in 2018), and the smallest difference between overall increase in immigration coverage and increase in denigrating terms. One possible explanation for these findings is *The Washington Post's* strong focus on U.S. government and politics – if we are experiencing a sharp increase in use of denigrating language to discuss immigration within political circles, we would expect to see those discussions most directly reflected in the government-focused *The Washington Post*. The raw number of stories containing denigrating terms and the raw number of stories matching the search “immigra\*” for the starting and ending years for each publication is provided for context in the table below:

Table 1

Publication	2014			2018		
	Stories with denigrating terms	Stories matching immigra*	% of immigra* stories with denigrating terms	Stories with denigrating terms	Stories matching immigra*	% of immigra* stories with denigrating terms
<i>The Washington Post</i>	746	5,008	14.90%	1,451	11,832	12.26%
<i>The New York Times</i>	528	4,281	12.33%	531	5,985	8.87%
<i>USA Today</i>	126	1,433	8.79%	390	3,342	11.67%
<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	171	2,428	7.04%	102	2,315	4.41%

(NB: Due to changes in overall volume of stories published from year to year, the raw numbers are a less meaningful indicator of change than the normalized percentages presented above.)

The following terms appeared in each of the sources less than 0.01% of the time throughout the time period, meaning that for each publication, fewer than five stories contained the terms; in most cases, no stories were found:

- ■ ■ Alien migrant(s)
- ■ ■ Alien entrant(s)
- ■ ■ Family unit alien(s)
- ■ ■ Immigrant parasite(s)
- ■ ■ Invading Europe
- ■ ■ Invading the US/America



All of the sources had at least 0.01% of content across all stories published, containing the following terms during the time period:

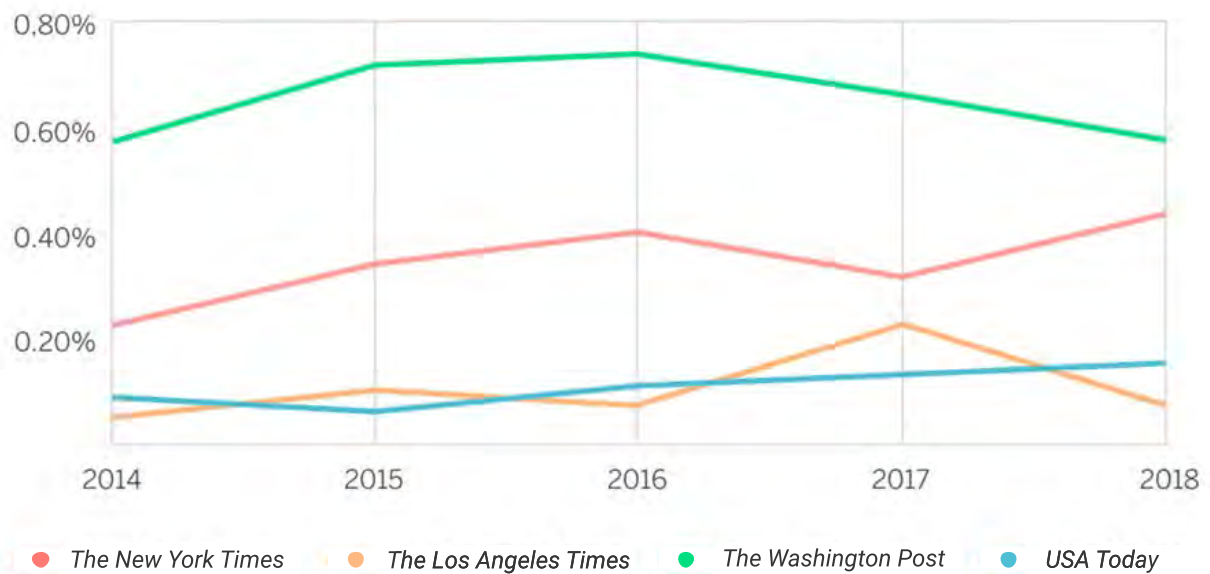
- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| ■ ■ ■ Illegal immigrant(s) | ■ ■ ■ Flood of immigrants/migrants        |
| ■ ■ ■ Illegal alien(s)     | ■ ■ ■ Surge of immigrants/migrants        |
| ■ ■ ■ Illegals             | ■ ■ ■ Wave of immigrants/migrants         |
| ■ ■ ■ Chain migration      | ■ ■ ■ Immigrant/migrant invasion/invasion |
| ■ ■ ■ Anchor baby(s)       | ■ ■ ■ Catch and release                   |
| ■ ■ ■ Criminal alien(s)    |   |

Additionally, all sources other than *The Los Angeles Times* had at least 0.01% of stories containing the keywords “immigrant/migrant invasion/invasion.” The range was from 0.01% (seven stories in a publication) to 0.66% (1135 stories in a publication).

### Terms with increasing usage

All four publications showed an increase in percentage of stories that contained at least one of the “illegal” terms: “illegal immigrant(s)”, “illegal alien(s)” or “illegals.” *The Los Angeles Times* had the greatest increase at 60%, but had the lowest starting and ending percentages of all publications (0.05% in 2014, 0.08% in 2018). *The New York Times* and *USA Today* both showed a 50% increase, but *The New York Times* had the second highest start and end points from 0.28% in 2014 to 0.42% in 2018, while *USA Today* had the second lowest from 0.07% in 2014 to 0.14% in 2018. *The Washington Post* had a total increase of just 1.7%, from 0.58% in 2014 to 0.59% in 2018; however, *The Washington Post* had the highest percentage of articles with “illegal” terms by nearly a factor of two over *The New York Times*, the next highest publication. Moreover, *The Washington Post* had a spike in 2016 to 0.74% before returning to a lower level by 2018.

Percent of stories with “illegal” terms (fig.5)



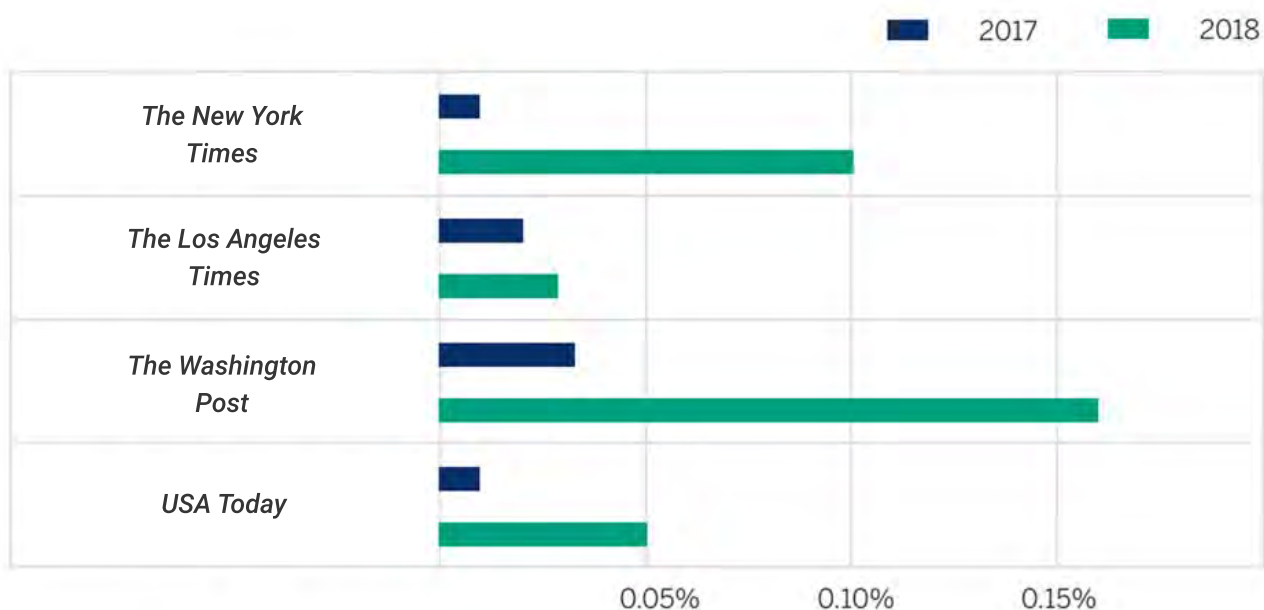
The table below provides a breakdown by publication for each of the specific “illegal” terms found as a percentage of total immigration stories:

Table 2

Publication	Stories with “illegal immigrants”		Stories with “illegal aliens”		Stories with “illegals”	
	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018
The Washington Post	12.06%	4.59%	0.70%	1.55%	0.58%	1.07%
The New York Times	6.77%	3.51%	0.56%	0.77%	0.49%	0.67%
USA Today	4.05%	3.90%	1.26%	1.05%	0.42%	0.96%
The Los Angeles Times	2.96%	0.90%	0.41%	0.69%	0.37%	0.47%

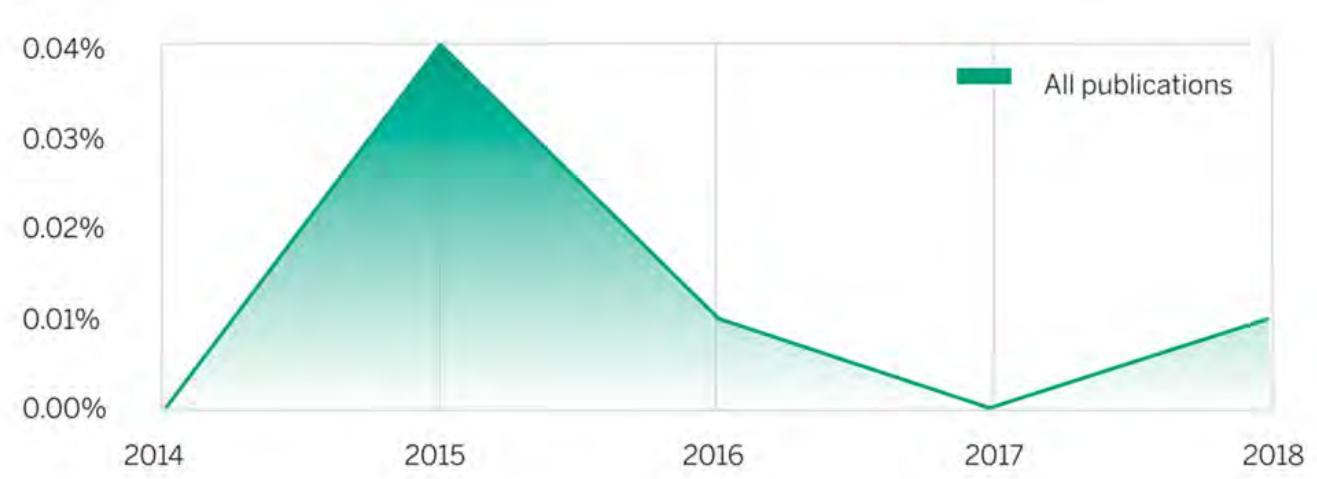
The terms “chain migration” and “catch and release” also both showed a clear increase over time across the publications. As the Trump administration uses these terms when discussing immigration policy, their increase over time is not particularly surprising. “Chain migration” appeared in less than 0.01% of stories from these publications from 2014 to 2016, at a level greater than 0.01% in all of them in 2017, and increased in all from 2017 to 2018. “Catch and release” appeared in less than 0.01% of stories in 2014 and 2015 in *USA Today*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*; by 2018, the term was present in all publications and therefore increased over time. *The Washington Post* has used it since 2014, increasing from 0.01% in 2014 to 0.09% in 2018.

**Percent of stories with “chain migration,” 2017-2018 (fig.6)**



Finally, the term “anchor baby(s)” had a clear episodic increase across all publications in 2015 that returned to baseline low levels by 2017. This seems to be due to the discourse around the term that emerged during the Republican presidential primaries in 2015.

**Percent of stories containing “anchor baby” or “anchor babies” (fig.7)**

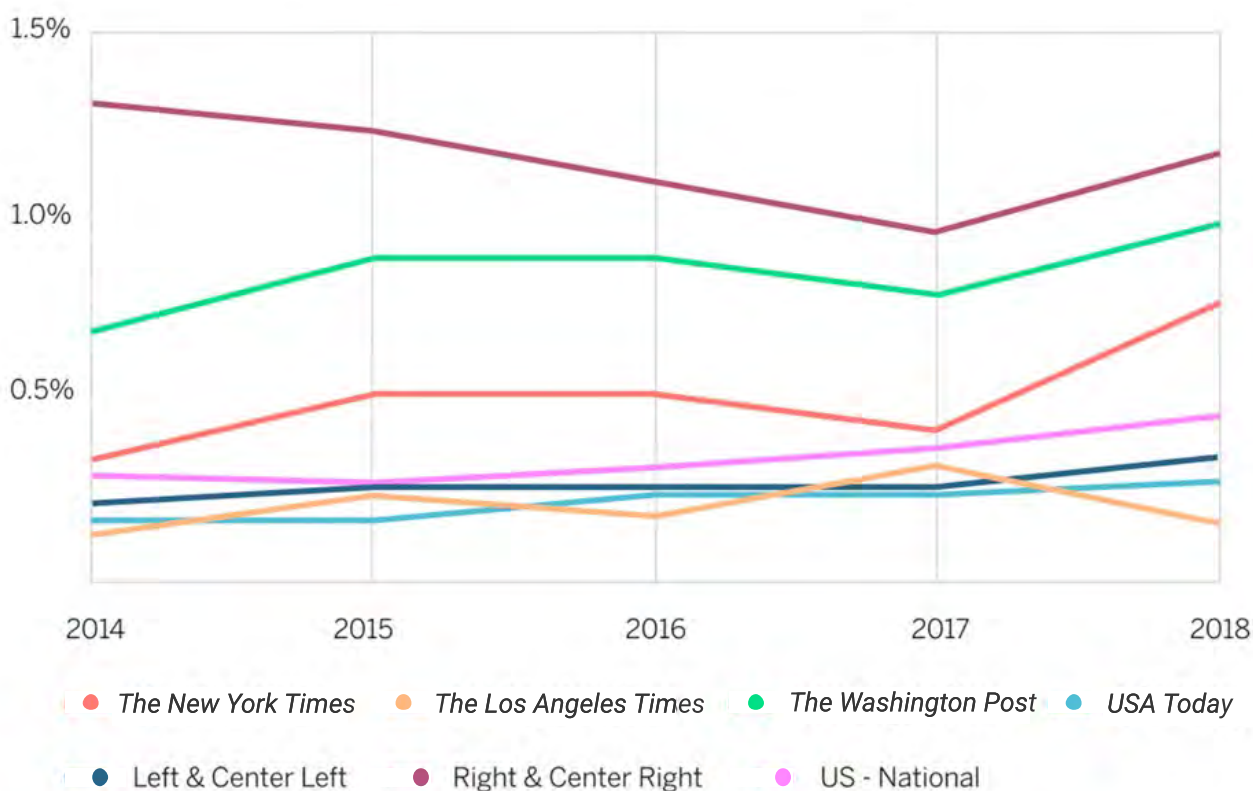




## Benchmarking with national and partisanship collections

To gain a deeper understanding of how these four legacy media outlets benchmark with the wider U.S. media landscape in terms of their usage of denigrating terms, we pulled comparison data from several of Media Cloud's larger media collections: United States - National, comprised of 227 media sources from the U.S. publishing news at the national level; Left and Center Left partisanship collections, comprised of 176 and 123 media sources, respectively; and Right and Center Right, comprised of 499 and 105 sources, respectively (methodology derived from Harvard Berkman 2016 election study).

### Percent of stories with any denigrating terms (fig.8)



Right and Center Right media sources had the highest percentage of stories with denigrating terms for all years, with *The Washington Post* consistently in second and *The New York Times* consistently in third.

Both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* had a higher percentage of stories with denigrating terms than the U.S. - National sources or Left and Center Left sources, which tracked closely with one another after 2014.

*The Los Angeles Times* was consistently less likely to have stories with denigrating terms than the U.S. - National sources, and in all years but 2017 fell below Left and Center Left as well. For all years in question, *USA Today* had a lower percentage of stories containing denigrating terms than the Left and Center Left sources, the lowest of the benchmarking collections.

## Sharing on social media

Our researchers also assessed whether stories about immigration issues that contained denigrating terms were shared more or less frequently on social media. To do so, we pulled all stories from the selected publications from 2014 to 2018 that contained any word off of the stem “immigra” (i.e., immigrant, immigrants, immigration, immigrating), and selected the top 100 most shared stories on Facebook from that set. We then compared that list against a list of all stories from any of the publications in the same timeframe that contained any of the denigrating terms.

We found that 14 (14%) of the top 100 immigration stories by Facebook shares contained denigrating terms. None of the top 10 shared stories contained denigrating terms; two of the top 20 did, but in both instances, the term was in quotations:

■ #12, “Trump eyeing executive order to end birthright citizenship, a move most legal experts and top House Republican say runs afoul of the Constitution,” *The Washington Post*, 10/30/2018. Excerpt: “Trump, who has long decried ‘anchor babies,’ said he has discussed ending birthright citizenship with his legal counsel and believes it can be accomplished with executive action, a view at odds with the opinions of most legal scholars.”

■ #13, “‘These children are barefoot. In diapers. Choking on tear gas.’” *The Washington Post*, 11/26/2018. Excerpt: “‘This is yet another of several Trump attempts to change what he disparagingly calls the policy of ‘catch and release’ without or against legal authority,’ said Yale Law School’s Harold Hongju Koh, legal adviser to the State Department during the Obama administration.”

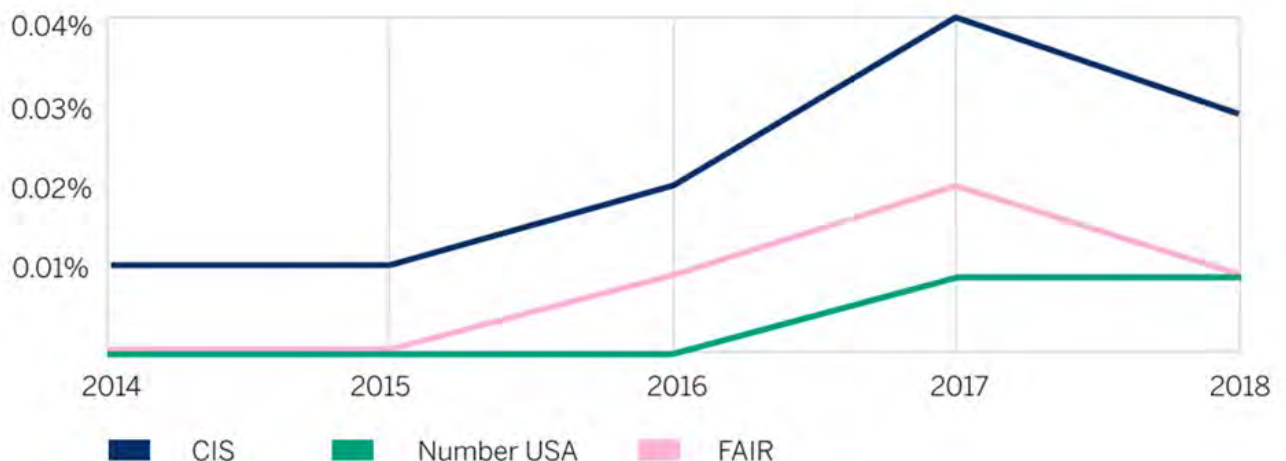
While we need to investigate more deeply and compare the sets of stories with and without denigrating speech more closely, it does not initially appear that stories with denigrating terms were more likely to be widely shared on Facebook.

## Citing of extreme anti-immigrant groups

Define American identified the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), NumbersUSA and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) as three extreme anti-immigrant groups that seemed to have an increased profile in mainstream media reports in recent years. We are particularly concerned that these groups are being cited without providing context as to the nature of their organizational missions, nor to their growing ties to officials within the immigration agencies. For example, all three organizations were founded by John Tanton, who decried a perceived decline of the power of white people and took funding from a pro-eugenics foundation. For many years, CIS and FAIR were seen as extremist sources by most of the mainstream media. To test this hypothesis, Media Cloud researchers searched for stories from the four selected media outlets that included the names of these groups from 2014 to 2018.

The Center for Immigration Studies was mentioned in all four publications each year from 2014 to 2018, and mentions increased in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* over the study period (mentions were stable in *The Los Angeles Times* between the start and end dates). NumbersUSA was mentioned in fewer than 0.01% of stories in the four publications from 2014 to 2016. It appeared in all four publications in 2017 at a level of 0.01-0.02% and remained steady or decreased in 2018. FAIR appeared in *USA Today* in 2014 at a level of 0.01%, but in less than 0.01% in the other publications until 2015. From 2015 to 2018, it appeared at a level of 0.01-0.02% and remained steady or decreased throughout the period.

**Percent of stories with anti-immigrant groups, all four publications (fig.9)**





To test whether the inclusion of a group in stories was with or without context, and the sentiment of the inclusion, the Media Cloud team coded a random sample of stories mentioning CIS for each year of the time period. The coding found that for the years 2014 to 2017, over 90% of the time CIS was mentioned, it was without context as to either the extremist nature of the group or its ties with the Trump administration. **Over 90% of the time when CIS was mentioned, it was with neutral sentiment as an information authority, often for expert opinion or data.** In 2018, this improved slightly, with context missing only 82% of the time, and with a negative sentiment up to 13%.

# Discussion and recommendations for media

In August 2019, after a white nationalist killed at least 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, the media quickly linked language in the shooter's manifesto to President Trump's anti-immigrant language, particularly his use of the concept of "invasion" in speeches and tweets, and to his general disdain for migrants. Media outlets including *The New York Times* have reported on frequent use of "invasion" narratives in conservative media sources like Fox News, but few pundits have made the connection to increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric in mainstream news sources as well.

**This study shows that four of the largest newspapers in the U.S. have moved toward more inhumane language through use of denigrating terms through more frequent quoting of anti-immigrant newsmakers and extreme anti-immigrant groups, and possibly through the sheer increase in volume of immigration reporting driven by a deeply restrictionist policy agenda.**

In April 2013, when the Associated Press (AP) informed AP Stylebook users that it no longer sanctioned the terms "illegal immigrant" or "illegal" to refer to people, we hoped that much of the reporting across trusted news sources would follow.

Although it has not yet prompted a sweeping change of news outlets' in-house stylebooks, we did notice a clear shift to "undocumented" across mainstream media usage. Now we see evidence that this change may be reversing, that language referring to immigrants who lack certain paperwork as "illegal" is on the rise again.

By analyzing a large set of data over the course of five years, we see trends that are difficult to detect from the perspective of a single newsroom. Readers of newspapers are encountering denigrating speech about immigrants in greater volume than in past years. This increase may be attributed in part to politicians' increasing use of denigrating terms. We saw a sharp increase in denigrating terms appearing in quotes, in particular. If the language around immigration used by public figures has shifted — and there are many indicators that President Trump is more apt to use denigrating language than his predecessors — this presents a distinct challenge for news organizations. Do they adopt terms used by public figures and use them throughout their coverage? Do they acknowledge denigrating terminology but parrot the language, separating themselves by using quotation marks to make clear they do not endorse the framing?

Journalists have a choice in which quotes they include in their reporting and the data from *The Los Angeles Times* suggests that newsrooms can make a conscious choice not to use these terms.

Or do they resist denigrating language by simply avoiding it, choosing instead to omit or rephrase?

Our research suggests that news organizations are often choosing the middle path. While there is a rise in the absolute number of times denigrating terms are used in stories about immigration, there is a dramatic change in the context for these terms. They are far more likely to appear in quotes in 2018 than they were five years earlier. Journalists have a choice in which quotes they include in their reporting and the data from *The Los Angeles Times* suggests that newsrooms can make a conscious choice not to use these terms. The use of these terms in *The Los Angeles Times* – a company with similar style guide restrictions to the AP – has decreased from 2014 to 2018, even as there's been an increase in immigration coverage. Similarly, *USA Today* has maintained more of a steady pace in its word choices.

Our work suggests that news organizations could monitor their own language usage patterns and have more internal conversations about how to handle changes in language.

We recommend a larger conversation about immigration coverage, questioning whether groups that would be traditionally characterized as “extreme” are being normalized as representative conservative voices. At this moment of shifting media and policy strategies, we call on scholars and journalists alike to challenge these observed trends and to continue to define what we consider the widely accepted standards for sharing information.

**Ethical standards of reporting, at minimum, include the following:**

- 1 Focus on the people most affected by policy prescriptions.
- 2 Avoid denigrating terms, which only serve to inaccurately label and perpetuate the dehumanization of people.
- 3 Set high standards for when it's necessary to quote newsmakers using denigrating terms as well. While the general public does understand the difference between quoted and unquoted language, news media should not use their platforms to promote hateful speech.
- 4 Do not quote extreme anti-immigrant, nativist and white supremacist groups without providing context as to their history, mission, funding and ties to government officials and agencies.
- 5 Continue to work towards diversifying newsrooms so that all communities are covered with depth and nuance, with linguistic fluency and with cultural knowledge.
- 6 Establish these standards in style guides and share them with the public.



# Further research

Define American and Media Cloud plan to expand on this research in collaboration with the Dangerous Speech Project – an investigation of the way that certain online speech may catalyze intergroup violence, based at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard. Next steps for this research will include:

- Labeling of terms by the Dangerous Speech Project's classification of dangerous speech and comparison of changes in frequency of denigrating versus dangerous terms.
- Detailed modeling of the sharing of immigrant stories, considering the presence of denigrating speech as an independent variable.
- Analysis of language associated with immigrant/immigration stories that use denigrating terms in quotes, stories that use terms unquoted and those that do not use denigrating terms.
- Tracking of new terms and hashtags that are based in social media discourse, building on work done at Harvard's Shorenstein Center.
- Comparison of patterns in non-news speech during similar time periods, comparing journalistic coverage of immigration to discussions on public forums like Reddit.
- Inclusion of major television news organizations and wire services.
- Inclusion of additional extremist, anti-immigrant organizations
- Analysis of sourcing and language use by news organizations that have improved their style guides compared to those that have not.