



The First 100 Days

A 'surge' in negative language around the border

We analyzed 12 news organizations' immigration coverage during President Biden's first 100 days, tracking negative and neutral terms.

Our research

In March 2020, migrants were crossing parts of the southern border in record numbers. But did that really constitute a surge or a crisis? The leading media outlets made it seem so. Their headlines dominated President Biden's first 100 days.

But calling the increase in migrants arriving from Central America a surge, wave, or flood actually dehumanized individuals seeking asylum. Water metaphors showed people as a dangerous force of nature to be feared. These words belong to a nativist lexicon intended to incite fear of the other.

Define American analyzed 12 news organizations' immigration coverage during a particularly intense period at the border: March 14 to April 4, 2021. We tracked **negative** emotion-provoking terms, as well as **neutral** terms that simply described what was happening.

Define American used Nexis/Lexis combined with the search engines from specific newspapers. Research by Ethan Corey, in consultation with Liz Robbins, Director of Journalism Partnerships.

Terms analyzed

Negative terms

- crisis
- flood
- surge
- wave

Neutral terms

- arrival
- crossing
- increase
- situation

Outlets analyzed

National broadcast

- CBS News
- CNN
- FOX News
- PBS NewsHour

National print/digital

- AP
- Los Angeles Times
- New York Times
- The Wall Street Journal
- The Washington Post

Border publications

- The Arizona Republic
- El Paso Times
- San Antonio Express-News
- The San Diego Union-Tribune



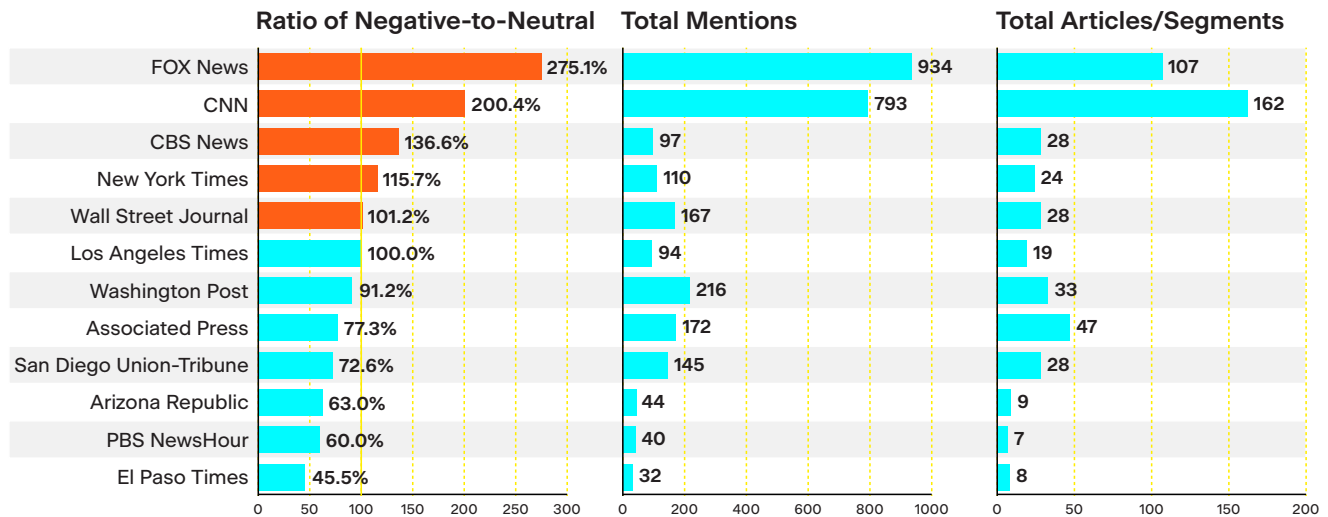
Key findings

- TV news was far more likely to use negative terminology than newspapers, using negative terms 2.5 times as frequently.
- FOX News, closely followed by CNN, had the highest percentage of negative word usage of all 12 outlets. The New York Times had the highest negative percentage among 8 newspapers.
- Overall, negative terms appeared over 1.5 times more often than neutral terms.
- Negative words were far more common than neutral ones in headlines.
- Newspapers in communities close to the border in Texas, Arizona and California used neutral language about 1.25 times more than national newspapers.

We produced [a TikTok](#) to summarize our findings. Here is an expanded look.

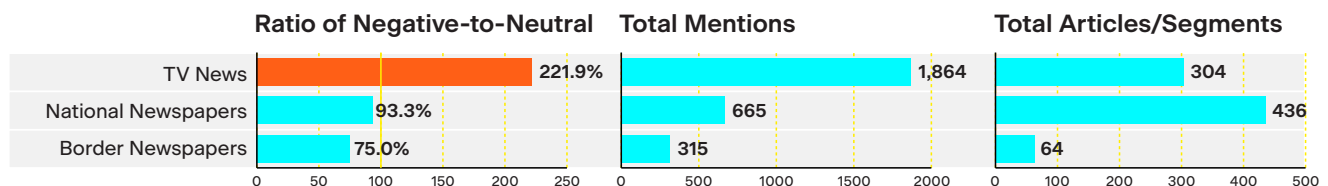
Most negative outlets

Among the 12 outlets included in our sample, FOX News had the highest ratio of negative-to-neutral terms, and *El Paso Times* had the lowest:



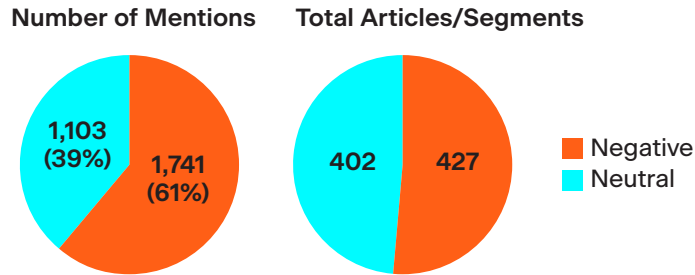
Border vs. national

By geography, national newspapers used negative terms 25 percent more frequently than local papers near the border.

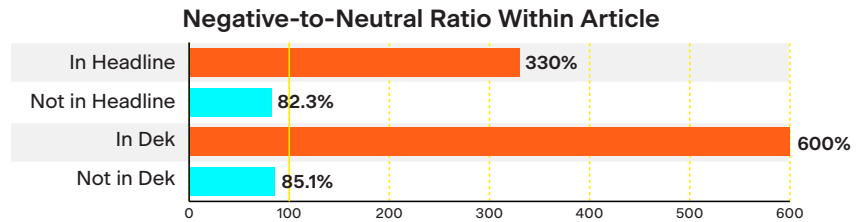


Negative terms dominated

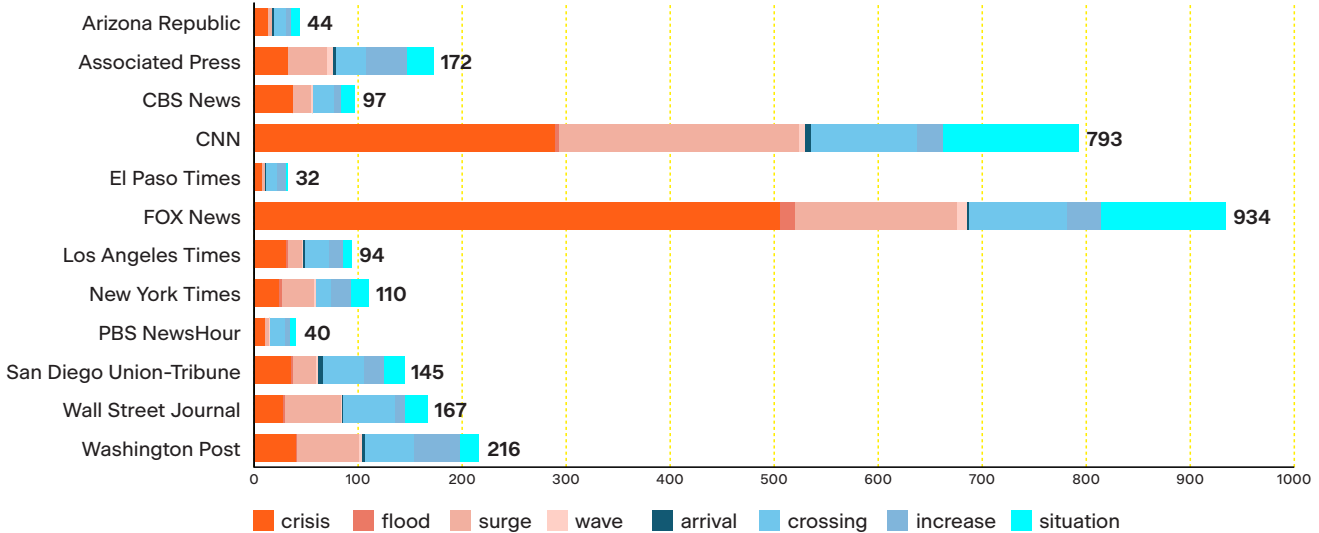
In terms of broad category of words, negative terms (crisis, surge, flood, wave) predominated over neutral terms (increase, crossing, arrival, situation).



Negative words were three times more common than neutral ones in headlines. In deks (article summaries), negative words were six times as frequent as neutral ones.



Most Frequently Used Word by Outlet



Improving immigration coverage

We hope this snapshot research will make journalists more aware of the dehumanizing effect of words for future coverage. Patterns of migration are cyclical — but the language we use to describe them does not have to repeat.

To learn more about our Journalism Partnerships work, visit defineamerican.com/journalism-partnerships.