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Undocumented, Not Illegal: Beyond the Rhetoric of Immigration Coverage

By Angelica Rubio

IN JUNE, PULITZER PRIZE WINNER JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS came out as an undocumented person. Many advocates were inspired by his story because it put a face on the millions of undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of U.S. society. Unfortunately, rather than participate in the discussion, the mainstream media ignited a firestorm. As *Colorlines*'s Mónica Novoa carefully explained the following day, Vargas's story drew "enormous media attention and drove 'undocumented immigrant' up to a top-trending term on Twitter. . . . But it's a shame that in the dissection and retelling of his story, a fine point has been lost on many of Vargas' colleagues: He came out specifically as an undocumented immigrant and not as 'illegal.'"¹

The Vargas story is a telling example of the media coverage of the immigration debate in the United States in recent years—inaccurate, incomplete, and insufficient. Vargas himself wrote several months later that after interviewing journalists, politicians, policy experts, and media analysts, there was an "undeniable" consensus that the media framing around illegal immigration was "stuck in a simplistic, us-versus-them, black-or-white, conflict-driven narrative, often featuring the same voices making familiar arguments."²

Who are these voices? Where is the overheated rhetoric coming from? Over the last decade, anti-immigrant groups have been on the rise across

the country. According to a 2008 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups rose from 602 in 2000 to 888 in 2007—a 48% increase. In 2007, the SPLC added the 250,000-member Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) to its "list of hate group" for the organization's baseless anti-immigrant "theories, coupled with a history of ties to white supremacist groups."³ FAIR is largely funded by wealthy racists, such as John Tanton, who also helped to found the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and Numbers USA, creating a veritable anti-immigrant empire in the mid-1990s. According to *The New York Times* these groups were influential in the congressional defeat of the Dream Act in 2010, and the drafting of Arizona's notorious SB 1070 legislation.⁴ State legislatures in Alabama and Georgia have followed suite, passing legislation, which, like Arizona's SB 1070, essentially legalizes racial profiling against suspected undocumented immigrants.⁵

Along with the growth of these anti-immigrant groups, and the draconian laws they have helped to pass, is a rise in the anti-immigrant rhetoric. The message from FAIR, CIS, and Numbers USA is one of intolerance, carrying a highly charged racial discourse, which provides ammunition to media conglomerates that capitalize on the negative narrative of immigration, fueling an already fearful citizenry.

In May 2008, Media Matters, a web-based, progressive research center, released *Fear and Loathing*

Angelica Rubio is a freelance writer and blogger at *RubioDispatch.com*. A longtime advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, she recently returned to her home state of New Mexico to organize rural communities in immigration advocacy and civic engagement.

in *Prime Time*, a report that analyzed the immigration rhetoric heard on cable news. The report focused on commentators who often discussed the issue of illegal immigration on their programs, such as CNN's Lou Dobbs and Fox's Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck. The report found that these hosts provided an extremely high amount of misinformation. For example, despite studies that show that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes, O'Reilly and Beck particularly promoted the idea that "illegal aliens" were responsible for a crime wave sweeping the country.

"Number one, the illegal aliens shouldn't be here. And number two, the culture from which they come is a lot more violent than the USA," O'Reilly told viewers in January 2007.

"America's border crisis. Rape, drugs, kidnapping, even murder. It is beginning to look a lot more like a border war," said Beck on November 8, 2007.

Dobbs pushed the popular *reconquista* myth, that immigrants are planning to retake Aztlán—portions of the American Southwest, which the United States took from Mexico in the 1840s. Although these myths are false, they are portrayed as fact on prime-time television, and millions of viewers believe them. They make the term "illegal" scary and violent, and the debate for comprehensive immigration reform much less likely.

"I also know our country is on fire, and the fuel is illegal immigration," Beck told viewers in January 2007. "There are about 12 to 15 million illegals in this country, and that number is growing by 500,000 every year. Recent investigations showed that in Los Angeles 95 percent of all warrants for homicide targeted illegal aliens. They put a strain on our Social Security, our education, our health care and, yes, national security."

This rhetoric—particularly the use of the term "illegal"—has become

part of the regular media vocabulary. The term dehumanizes undocumented immigrants, depicting them all as criminals.

"Using the word [illegal] . . . crosses the line by criminalizing the person, not the action they are purported to have committed," said a September 2010 press release from the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, a Washington-based organization with 2,300 members. The NAHJ also denounced "the use of the degrading terms 'alien' and 'illegal alien' to describe undocumented immigrants because it casts them as adverse, strange beings, inhuman outsiders who come to the U.S. with questionable motivations."

More recently, the Society of Professional Journalists, a century-old organization with a membership of nearly 10,000, rallied against the term illegal, passing a resolution that "immigrants are undocumented, not illegal." They later presented the resolution to its members at their national convention in September.⁶

The Applied Research Center and its daily news site, Colorlines.com, have even launched the public education campaign, Drop the I-Word. According to the campaign, the I-word opens the door to racial profiling and violence, and prevents truthful, respectful debate on immigration. "No human being is illegal," says their website.

These public declarations are important, despite the fact that mainstream media does not appear to be listening. But how about other, more independent media? In a September article for *New America Media*, reporter Elena Shore interviewed editors from several "ethnic" media outlets, about the term they use to describe an immigrant who is in the United States illegally. "Before publishing a story on immigration, every editor faces [this] question," wrote Shore. Their conclusions are varied.

Alfredo Carbajal, chief editor of the Dallas Spanish-language daily, *Al Día*, says that they use the term "undocumented" and have done so since the paper's founding in 2003. However, he says that readers, even among the Hispanic community, write in saying that "by not calling illegal immigration 'illegal,' you're already taking a side." Janna Sundeyeva, editor of San Francisco's Russian-language newspaper, *Kstati*, would agree.

"The direct and honest word is 'illegal' because it is actually illegal to cross the border of any country without proper documents," said Sundeyeva. However, Korean media, Shore discovered, often uses the term "overstay" and the Punjabi media frequently uses the term "living in hiding," instead of the words "undocumented" or "illegal."⁷

In politics, however, the "I-word" appears to have become the word of choice, especially among Republicans. On October 18, Herman Cain, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, and Texas governor Rick Perry participated in the CNN-televised Republican presidential debate in Las Vegas. Aside from duking it out over Romney's alleged "illegal" lawn maintenance worker, Perry and Romney used the term "illegal" 28 times within a 15-minute argument over immigration. It was apparent that not one candidate on that stage was in touch with the plight of the undocumented immigrant. Then again, neither was the audience. Cain's idea of building an electrified fence between the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent illegal immigration and Perry's solution of utilizing predator drones along the border provided more laughter and applause from the audience than when Congressman Ron Paul suggested that a man die because he couldn't afford health care in an earlier debate. But to be fair, the GOP candidates are not solely to blame for the use of the term "illegal."

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CNN moderator Anderson Cooper used it during the debate, and President Obama has used the term himself, especially early in his presidency, to appease those on the right.

AS OF MARCH, 16 STATE LEGISLATURES had introduced legislation mirroring Arizona's SB 1070, which essentially legalized racial profiling against undocumented immigrants.⁸ In Arizona, journalists have asked Governor Jan Brewer the million-dollar question: What does an illegal immigrant look like? They have yet to get an answer, but for many, he or she is Latino. As the "illegal" rhetoric dehumanizes millions of U.S. residents, anti-immigrant sentiment continues to rise, and Latinos are the primary focus of the immigration backlash.

"[A]nti-Latino hate crimes rose disproportionately to other hate crimes between 2004 and 2008," wrote Cristina Costantini, the Associate Editor of *The Huffington Post's* LatinoVoices, in October. She cited a congressionally mandated National Institute of Justice study, which estimated that hate crimes against Latinos rose from 426 in 2003, to 595 in 2007. "According to the same study, California and Texas saw the most anti-Latino hate crimes, as well as more dramatic increases of such incidents than any other state," she wrote.⁹

The reality is even more disturbing. According to Mark Potok, a spokesperson for the SPLC: "Latinos, and in particular undocumented immigrants, are among the least likely to report hate crimes because they fear deportation."¹⁰

Not all immigrant groups are quite so vulnerable. Although the Irish once suffered tremendously at the hands of those who believed they too were not entitled to their basic human rights in the United States, their status has now improved. In New York City, where thousands of undocumented Irish im-

migrants continue to settle, it appears that the illegal immigration rhetoric does little to affect the success or failure of the Irish today.

Irish Central, the largest Irish-American media site in the United States, recently found that undocumented Irish, unlike many of their Latino counterparts, actually have little trouble adjusting to their new lives in New York City.

"It is so good for many Irish in New York City that in some cases, many find jobs without having to prove the worker has a visa!" wrote Irish Central contributor Ines Novacic in early October. "Several said it's far easier for them to work illegally in New York City than other nationalities."¹¹ According to James O'Malley, an immigration lawyer from Ireland and the head of the Manhattan-based O'Malley and Associates firm, overall immigration from Ireland in the first half of 2011 was up 12% compared to last year.

This reality simply highlights the racist undertones of the immigration debate, where undocumented white Europeans are embraced by society, and Latinos are criminalized, detained, deported, and shunned. In the past few years, there have been successful campaigns against those who ignite racially charged and bigoted statements against the immigrant population. A few years ago, several national advocacy organizations, like the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—a civil rights group representing 300 affiliates nation wide—launched the successful Drop Dobbs campaign against CNN host Lou Dobbs. This effort focused on encouraging advertisers to no longer support *The Lou Dobbs Show*. Dobbs hosted a nightly program with a focus on U.S. immigration. On top of his own anti-immigrant rhetoric, he allowed guests with similar views to publicly make statements that ignited, what the NCLR, Media Matters, and the SPLC called, "a toxic climate in our

communities." If this was not enough to provoke a response from these advocacy groups, Dobbs later broadcasted his radio show from Capitol Hill as part of FAIR's anti-immigrant "Hold Their Feet to the Fire" lobbying conference and rally.¹² The Drop Dobbs campaign was so successful that in 2009 CNN released him from his duties as a primetime host and his show was canceled.

To some, the term "illegal" is not a big deal. For many the use of the term "undocumented" and other similar words is just a way of being politically correct, tip-toeing around the issue. But the use of the term "illegal" in the U.S. media is biased and racist, preventing any progress in the discussion of immigration reform. It is a rallying cry for hate groups who see undocumented immigrants as parasites on the fabric of the country. As the debate on immigration increases, so will anti-immigrant legislation and anti-Latino rhetoric. While undocumented immigrants are representative in every group in the United States, Latinos are increasingly affected. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the Latino population accounted for 56% of the nation's growth, from 2000 to 2010.¹³ The only way to have a constructive discussion about the issue of immigration, and to find a solution to our broken system, is through a massive restructuring of our way of thinking, in particular the language we use to define a human being. In this process, the media—like it or not—has a significant role to play.

"Elevating our country's conversation on immigration means focusing less on the often angry, overheated rhetoric coming from groups such as the Minuteman Project," wrote Vargas in late September, and instead telling the stories of those "who are aiding undocumented immigrants . . . to address an issue that the federal government has not."¹⁴ ■

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