

Report from the Media Standards Project

by Joe Guzzardi

In June 2000, I was asked by NumbersUSA.com to begin an ongoing project of tracking newspaper stories about immigration and immigration-related issues. This study, called the Media Standards Project, evaluates immigration stories for their level of professionalism. The objective of the project is, when appropriate, to help reporters and editors serve their readers more effectively by writing the most professional stories possible.

NumbersUSA.com is not a disinterested party. The goals of this Washington, D.C.-based public policy group are to carry out the recommendations of the Barbara Jordan Commission on Immigration Reform as well as those of President Clinton's Council on Sustainable Development for Economic Justice.

NumbersUSA.com also advocates returning legal immigration to its traditional level of 200,000 annually.

The opinions of any one organization or of any individual did not influence the findings of this project. The Media Standards Project is about journalistic professionalism and is not about immigration.

Defining Professionalism

To define journalistic professionalism, the Media Standards Project uses guidelines developed by journalists themselves. Sources include the following:

- The Code of Ethics of the Society for Professional Journalists (www.spj.org). The Code calls for journalists to "support open exchange of views, even views you find repugnant," to "test the

accuracy from all sources and avoid inadvertent error," and to "avoid advocacy."

- The American Society for Newspaper Editors (www.asne.org) whose statement of principles includes Article I: "The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time," and Article IV: "Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly."
- The Committee for Concerned Journalists (www.journalism.org), of which over 1,200 of America's most prominent journalists are members. In the CCJ's "Statement of Concerns" is Item 4: "While editorialists and commentators are not neutral, the source of their credibility is still their accuracy, intellectual fairness, and ability to inform – not their devotion to a certain group or outcome. In our independence, however, we must avoid any tendency to stray into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism."
- *News Reporting and Writing*, the basic journalism textbook used at the Columbia School of Journalism and other prominent universities. Author Marvin Mencher reminds would-be journalists that when covering important political issues, the reporter should not act as a "stenographer."
- A *Washington Post* column by former *Post* ombudsman E. R. Shipp, "In Pursuit of Fairness." Shipp states, "No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. No story is fair if it includes essentially irrelevant information at the expense of significant facts. No story is fair if it consciously or unconsciously misleads or even deceives the reader." Fair stories, concludes Shipp, are complete, honest, and relevant.
- Katharine Graham's *Personal History*. In her

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autobiography, Ms. Graham recalls the lessons she learned about journalism at her father's knee including the mandate to "tell ALL the truth. (Emphasis placed by Ms. Graham.)

From these sources evolved a definition of what a fair and balanced story should be.

Two other important considerations were made in each of the stories read. First, no two people read the same story through the same eyes. Allowances were made for the different interpretations of the same text. Second, immigration is a complex and highly emotional topic. Accordingly, reporters were given some slack regarding the fairness of their stories.

Why Stories About Immigration?

Why is it so important that reporters writing about immigration should be so diligent regarding their subject matter?

Many argue that the renewal of mass immigration at the end of this past century is the biggest domestic story of the nation. Census 2000 confirms that the demographic shift caused by immigration has created huge changes in America. Occupations, industries, wage structures, public schools, graduate schools, and urban development all have been impacted by immigration.

But the American news media have paid next to no attention to immigration's role. Newspapers have allowed prevailing assumptions to become truisms. Among them are:

- population growth is inevitable,
- Americans refuse to perform low-paying jobs,
- American children are not interested in math and science, and
- we must go overseas to find our future nurses, technicians, and software workers.

Too few stories we examined went on to ask the most important question in journalism: why? If reporters had asked why our population was growing at unsustainable rates, why Americans could no longer do jobs they once did with pride, why software workers were imported instead of being trained out of local high schools, their stories would have had an entirely different perspective.

All too frequently reporters failed to ask the hard questions and were willing to accept the easy answers. Reporters have failed to see (or possibly refused to see) the link between immigration numbers and the social

issue on which they were reporting.

At the Beginning

Since mid-summer, immigration has been a dominant news story. The White House announcement in July that President Bush was weighing plans to grant amnesty to more than three million Mexicans living illegally in the United States marked the first in a series of events that kept immigration on the front pages.

In July, August, and through Mexican President Vicente Fox's state visit to Washington, D.C. in September, story after story asked questions about a variety of immigration issues. Should the U.S. grant amnesty to Mexican illegals? If amnesty is given to Mexicans, should it also be extended to illegal immigrants from other countries? Does the U.S. need a guest worker program? Is the U.S. dependent on cheap overseas labor?

Other questions were addressed: Should illegal immigrants be given driver's licenses? Are high school graduates illegally in the United States entitled to in-state tuition fees at their area colleges?

The tough subject matter raised in these stories requires reporters to be at their professional best, and had

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the reporters followed the guidelines established by their profession, they would have been able to produce solid stories. Unfortunately, despite the high-stakes topics, many reporters have done an indifferent job at writing professional, fair, and balanced stories about immigration.

In his August 29 *Denver Post* column, "Immigration: the Untold Story," Al Knight notes, "For years, press outlets have been doing a mediocre job reporting on stories that touch either on legal immigration rates or the collective impact of illegal immigration." Concludes Knight, "This record of failure is now so clear as to be beyond dispute. The patterns of commission and omission are very nearly constant."

Out of nearly two-thousand stories about immigration which I read, nearly all lacked balance. Three mandates of the Code of Ethics were consistently disregarded,

namely:

Support the open exchange of views, even views

you find repugnant,

Test the accuracy of information from all

sources and avoid inadvertent error, and

Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.

Factual errors were too frequent. Often the reporter made the error, but just as often the errors were contained in quotes that were not checked for accuracy. Despite claims and counter claims made by opposing sides in a debate, a reporter trying to convey factual information can usually find it.

Balance was an even larger problem. Only a very few stories could be considered balanced. Nearly all were unbalanced to the same side of the debate — the side promoting higher levels of immigration.

My measure for balance was simple: was there a relatively equal amount of space or number of proponents devoted to each side? In most stories the count was not even close. Many accounts failed to mention any single opposing argument or viewpoint.

Front Page Stories

Front page stories, those that must be “signed off” on by three or four editors, routinely told only the pro-immigration side of the story. Here are some examples.

“Mexican Guest Workers:

A Project Worth a Try?”

by Ginger Rogers in the *New York Times*

April 3, 2001

SYNOPSIS: Is now the time for a guest worker program?

COMMENT: According to those cited, the answer is “Yes.” The cited are: Mexican President Vicente Fox, the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project, the National Council of Agricultural Employees, U.S. Representatives Howard Berman and Gordon Smith and U.S. Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX). No opposing opinion is presented.

“Border Pact to Target Safety”

by James Smith and Ken Ellingwood

Los Angeles Times, June 23, 2001

SYNOPSIS: Mexican and American officials announce a program to improve safety for Mexicans crossing illegally into the U.S.

COMMENT: This is arguably the most remarkable story

in the history of journalism. In the first paragraph, reporters Smith and Ellingwood write that the U.S. government is in negotiations with the government of Mexico to make it easier for Mexicans to break the laws of the United States. While a reader might expect an analysis of this shocking development, that is not what follows. Only those who think it a good idea for the U.S. to assist illegal border crossers are quoted. Those in favor include Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda, Mexican Deputy Foreign Minister Enrique Berruga, San Diego Border Patrol Chief William Veal, Mexican migration official Carlos Feliz, John Hunter from the Roman Catholic Church, Rev. Robin Hoover, and Border Patrol agent Manuel Figueroa. The total on the pro side is seven. The number who favor upholding existing law or finding other solutions is zero.

“USA Just Wouldn’t Work without Immigrant Labor”

by Laura Parker

USA Today, July 22, 2001

SYNOPSIS: The U.S. economy is dependent on immigrant labor and would not function at the same level of efficiency without it.

COMMENT: The story quotes five sources that agree with the headline. Each source profits from increased levels of immigration. The sources are an immigration lawyer, the past-president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, a lobbyist for the American Hotel and Lodging Association, a representative from the business-supported Essential Workers Coalition, and the director of the Western Tennessee Associated Builders and Contractors. Not one opposing argument is cited, even though many reputable research organizations and scholars have a different point of view.

Jobs Americans Won’t Do

In stories about immigrant labor’s role in the U.S. economy, one phrase is included over and over again: immigrants do jobs “Americans won’t do” or jobs that “Americans can’t do.”

Reporters never asked makers of these comments to verify their claims. Nor do the stories let the reader know that many other experts have done research that leads to different conclusions.

Returning to the *USA Today* article, “USA just wouldn’t work without immigrant labor,” reporter Laura

Parker wrote:

Most of the nation's 17.7 million immigrant workers toil, like those who preceded them, in jobs that native-born Americans refuse to do. They work as meatpackers, hotel maids, hamburger flippers, waiters gardeners, seamstresses, fruit and vegetable pickers, and construction hands.

But reporter Parker's claim does not stand up to historical analysis. Jobs in meatpacking, poultry processing, textile manufacturing, and construction were once coveted, decent-paying, union jobs in this country. Years ago, however, employers broke the unions with specific intent to hire illegal immigrants to replace union workers. The immigrants were willing to work for substantially lower wages. Any analysis of labor practices in those industries is incomplete without a paragraph on union busting.

And any statement that Americans won't do those jobs must be followed by a section in the story that asks why jobs once held by Americans are no longer attractive to the native-born workforce. Ten million adult Americans do not have high school diplomas. Many, if not most, of those would be candidates for the lower-paying jobs. Why don't they hold them? Reporters would not have to look too far to find the answer: employers prefer cheap immigrant labor. For the last several months, the book *Fast Food Nation* has been on the *New York Times*' best seller list. Investigative reporter Eric Schlosser's book, widely and favorably reviewed, has an extensive section on the shameful labor practices in the food industry. Asked in a December 2000 interview about labor practices at meatpacking plants, Schlosser commented,

Until the late 1970s, meatpacking was one of the highest-paid industrial jobs in the United States. And then the Reagan and Bush administrations stood aside and allowed the meatpacking industry to bust the unions, to hire strikebreakers and scabs, not only to hire illegal immigrants for these jobs but to transport them here from Mexico in company

buses. Now meatpacking is one of the nation's lowest-paying industrial jobs, as well as the most dangerous.

As for the other professions Parker lists – hotel employee, construction hand, textile manufacturer– the same answer applies: employers prefer cheap illegal immigrant workers.

Often reporters have compounded errors by including two fallacies in one story.

“Immigrants redefine an Iowa city”

by Tatsha Robertson, *Boston Globe*

June 18, 2001

SYNOPSIS: The tiny town of Postville, Iowa, needs immigrants

to survive. According to state officials, Iowa is doomed if it cannot attract workers. As a bonus, of course, these immigrants are willing to do “jobs Americans won't do.”

COMMENT: Why the *Boston Globe* would publish a story about an Iowa town of 2,200 residents located nearly 1,500 miles away from New England is not clear. But assuming that Boston readers might have an interest in Postville, reporter Robertson should have followed through with a more diligent story. Her first clue that things are amiss should have come in the discovery that slaughterhouse wages are \$6 an hour. Why are the wages so low? Who performed those jobs a decade ago? Robertson reports as fact that states like Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska must recruit immigrants to replace dwindling population. In truth, this claim is mere theory. On June 11, one week before the *Globe* published Robertson's story, Professor Peter Fisher of the University of Iowa released “The State of Working Iowa.” According to Professor Fisher, recruiting immigrants is not necessary and may actually be harmful to the local worker. In his findings, Fisher wrote, “We want to avoid ... attracting immigrants that are going to drive down wages at the low end of the spectrum,” The report is online at www.iowapolicyproject.org/Working-Iowa/default.htm.

Education Stories – Half Truths and Omissions

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city you live in, your school district is likely overwhelmed. Student test scores are low, many pupils are not reading at grade level, infrastructure is falling apart, and the teacher shortage is acute. Since education is of paramount importance to everyone, reporters should be thorough in their fact-finding and as complete as possible in their stories. Unfortunately, I rarely found balance and fairness in a story about education.

First, the impact of immigrant student enrollment on K-12 schools in America is rarely emphasized. The surging number of foreign students was assigned a minor role, if any role at all, in most education stories.

**“U.S. school enrollment grows to nearly
49 million students”**

Associated Press, *Houston Chronicle*
March 23, 2001

SYNOPSIS: School enrollment in 1999 hit a record at 49 million. The record won't last long, however. The Education Department predicts that total elementary and secondary school enrollment will rise to 53.2 million this fall and peak in 2005 at 53.5 million.

COMMENT: In the opening paragraph, the reporter notes that according to the Census Bureau the children of baby boomers are entering schools in record numbers. Actually, the report is titled “Children of ‘Baby Boomers’ and Immigrants Boost School Enrollment to Equal All-Time High, Census Bureau Reports.” Even though the reporter omitted the reference to immigration in his opening paragraph, the story makes it clear that one of the major hurdles for school administrators is coping with the increases in immigration. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, only ten percent of the district's 723,000 students are English-speaking, non-Hispanic whites. More than half of California's school population is either foreign-born or first-generation American. Other findings include the fact that in Dearborn, Michigan, *halal* food must be served; in Kentucky's Jefferson County School District fifteen foreign-born students are enrolled weekly. They arrive from Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia, Cuba, and Mexico.

Since the reporter had all the facts at his disposal, a story on immigrant enrollment's being the main source of overall enrollment increases was just a mathematical calculation or two away. If, as the Census Bureau reports, at least one in five enrolled in K-12 in 1999 had a foreign-born parent, then 20 percent of the 49 million

amounts to 9.8 million students. If you deduct those 9.8 million immigrant students, the total enrollment would have been 39.2 million, and not the record-breaking 49 million. In other words, immigration is solely and exclusively the driving force behind soaring school enrollments. [*Editor's note: See Linda Thom's articles on these statistics in The Social Contract, Vol. VII, No. 1, p.28; Vol. VIII, No. 1, p.47; Vol. XI, No. 3, p.205.*]

As a by-product of pronounced increases in school enrollment, school districts throughout the nation face a serious shortage of teachers. Administrators are heading off to such faraway places as India, China, and the Philippines to find able bodies to fill empty slots in the classroom.

Of the several dozen stories I have read about recruiting teachers from overseas, none mentions the obvious Catch-22 of hiring immigrants to work in public schools that have been overwhelmed by unchecked immigration. Neither does any story discuss other possible solutions such as hiring a recently-retired teacher back into the system and allowing the drawing of both salary and retirement. No story cites the opinions of parents who might be skeptical about a recently-arrived, inexperienced immigrant teaching his child's class. Other teachers, experienced in the pressures of life in the classroom, were not interviewed. No reporter talked to any school administrator who had hired from abroad in recent years. What were their experiences? The stories, as written, were celebrations of ever more immigration. The theme was immigrants coming to rescue immigrants. In short, no probing questions were asked. Here is an example:

“Latest Hub import: Teachers from Philippines”

by Ed Hayward, *Boston Herald*
March 19, 2001

SYNOPSIS: Boston needs teachers. The shortage is worst in math, science, and special education. The Philippines has a “gold mine of competent educators” eager to head to the United States.

COMMENT: Who says the Philippines has a gold mine of trained teachers? The Universal Agency, a recruitment firm that is paid for every teacher it places in the Boston school system, that's who! Obviously, the placement firm is not in a position to evaluate the idea's merit since it stands to benefit financially. The story is weighted down by sugary references to how wonderful the potential teachers are. Their students give them gifts of coconuts and mangos. Missing entirely is an analysis of the

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challenges facing teachers "from a little mountain top in the jungle" when they enter an American urban classroom. Also, the reporter did not pick up on the most obvious: teachers in the Philippines can earn between \$2,100 and \$3,600 annually, versus the \$37,000 to \$44,000 salaries in the U.S.

This spring various states considered allowing illegal immigrants to attend college and pay in-state fees. Texas, in fact, enacted such legislation. Certain restrictions would apply: students had to be of good character and have good attendance records and grades. California and Illinois considered passing a law similar to that in Texas.

Scores of stories favoring in-state tuition for illegal immigrants appeared this spring and summer without a whimper of dissent. Rarely does a story examine the public policy implications such as tax cost, how many might participate, or whether American students might be denied admission or government grants because illegal immigrants would move ahead of them in line.

The majority of stories rely on an overly sympathetic – bordering on maudlin – style which has no place in serious journalism. Here are two:

"Illegal immigrants face barrier in pursuit of college education"

by Teresa Puente, *Chicago Tribune*

June 5, 2001

"Student seeks her salvation in Immigration Bill"

by Hang Nguyen, *Los Angeles Times*

June 28, 2001

SYNOPSIS: High school graduates who have performed well and are good young community members should be able to get college scholarships or pay in-state tuition fees even though they are illegal aliens. To deny them is unfair and un-American.

COMMENT: The question of financial aid for good kids who are also illegal immigrants is a complex, emotional subject. Thoughtful reporting is needed. What we get instead is a litany of complaints about the "unfairness" of it all. The reporters dutifully note all the kudos from the teachers, the counselors, and the parents. But this tough issue deserves better. Here are some questions that would have produced outstanding stories instead of the predictable ones that were written.

"You say that America is not the land of the free. But under the law you should be deported. Instead, you have had a K-12 education paid for in full by California/Illinois taxpayers. How do you feel about that?"

"Have you thought about attending the University of Mexico, a highly regarded institution in a country where you hold citizenship?"

"While it is true that your illegal status in the U.S. prevents you from getting scholarship funds, you can still work and pay for your own education. Millions of successful people have taken this path. What is wrong with paying your way through school?"

Noteworthy also is the fact that neither reporter discussed the financial implications to taxpayers of scholarships for illegal immigrants.

The Anecdotal Story

The trend toward mixing personal history with news reporting has resulted in some very unprofessional stories. The stories are written by formula with an easily identifiable cast of characters and a familiar plot. The protagonist is usually someone who has been inordinately successful or the victim of a tragic turn of events. In the former case, that person is usually about to be deported. Hence the U.S. will lose a valuable contributor. Or in the latter, if the cold hearted bureaucrats at the INS carry out the law, the victim's precarious lot will worsen immediately.

These stories are routinely timed to coincide with

major immigration legislation. The advocacy position of the newspaper is inescapable.

The first story I analyzed for the Media Standards Project appeared just a few days before Congress would vote on increasing the H-1B visa cap from 115,000 annually to 195,000. An increase in the H-1B cap would be another blow to American software workers who had already suffered a series of defeats on visa legislation. An in-depth story detailing both sides of the argument would have been appropriate. Instead, the *Washington Post*, on the front page, published:

“A Worn-Out Welcome Mat”
by Hanna Rosin, *Washington Post*
September 16, 2000

SYNOPSIS: Mr. Sanjay Singh must leave the U.S. His H-1B visa has expired. In this hackneyed story, we learn that Mr. Singh is inconvenienced by this turn of events. He will have to pack up personal items like his children’s Pooh bears. The kids are going to miss the Halloween party, too. Mr. Singh gets a few jabs in at the U.S.: “Liberty, equality, pursuit of justice... yeah, sure,” he says. Ms. Rosin does not challenge any element of Singh’s rambling complaints against the system.

COMMENT: The thesis of the story is absurd. Mr. Singh signed a federal document stating that he would leave when his visa expired. That hour has come and he is full of anti-American carping. Ms. Rosin tells only Mr. Singh’s story. No other side is presented. The story is full of trivial details. Most ironically, Ms. Rosen’s *Washington Post* story violates all of the elements of professionalism outlined by Ombudsman Shipp in her “In Pursuit of Fairness” column. Nor did Ms. Rosin’s story meet the standards outlined by Katherine Graham in *Personal History*.

Kickers

In a professionally written story, the reader should come away with both sides of the argument but without any idea as to where the reporter stands. Unfortunately, in immigration stories, the reporter makes sure that you know how he feels about his topic by writing a kicker (the final paragraph or two) to summarize his feelings. Although the kickers obviously advocate more immigration, the reporters and editors are clearly content to sacrifice standards in exchange for driving home the message the paper wishes to convey.

Here follow the “kickers” in the stories recounted

above. My interpretation appears in parentheses.

“Mexican ‘Guest Workers’: A Project Worth a Try?”

New York Times

“When asked how long a break they usually took for lunch, the workers looked puzzled. Renato Garcia Rivera, 23, a native of the central Mexican state of Morelos, said, “We may stop our work for a few minutes to eat a taco, but there is no real time for breaks.” (Immigrants are tireless workers. We need more of them.)

“Border Pact to target safety”

Los Angeles Times

“The Reverend Robin Hoover, a Tucson clergyman, urged a broader campaign to reform U.S. border enforcement, blamed by many for pushing migrants into high-risk areas. Border Patrol officials in Imperial County say the (water) stations might help though it is unclear how many migrants use them. Eight migrants have died of heat there since October. ‘If that is going to save one person, then we’re for that,’ said agent Manuel Figueroa.” (Not so many people would die if Border Patrol policies weren’t so unfair.)

“USA just wouldn’t work without immigrant labor”

USA Today

“He (Carlos Neito) is somewhat puzzled by all the analysis that this latest wave of immigrants is receiving from statisticians and demographers. To him, it’s all pretty simple, kind of like that slogan from the baseball movie *Field of Dreams*: Build it and they will come. ‘The people are coming for work,’ he explains. ‘If they cannot find it here, they’ll find other places to go.’” (Immigrants come because jobs await them)

“Illegal immigrants face barrier in pursuit of college education”

Chicago Tribune

“‘If I were to go back to Mexico City,’ he (Miguel Parra) said, ‘there’s nothing left for me over there. Everything is here.’” (America owes me because I don’t like my homeland.)

“Student Seeks Her Salvation in Immigration Bill”

Los Angeles Times

“As she (‘Sara’) sat on the soiled couch she so often sleeps on, she closed her eyes, took a long deep breath

and said: 'I want to be optimistic and I really am. There's no other way.'" (The bill should pass because Sara has no future without it.)

"A Worn Out Welcome Mat"

Washington Post

"It's moving day and Sanjay loads up the last of the stuff in the minivan. They take with them precious few things – some toys for Shraya, the car seat, some technical books, plus that piece of paper (H-1B visa), the cause of his grief. 'I don't know why I keep it,' he says. 'I should burn it.' But then that's no way to push off. So he adds: 'Just kidding,' in his studied American cool, before driving away." (Sanjay has been betrayed.)

The Role of the Ombudsman

The ombudsman, a staff position created to hold the newspaper more accountable to its readers, could play an important role in how immigration is reported in newspapers. About thirty dailies have ombudsmen.

On its website, the Organization of News Ombudsmen (www.ono.org) states that its purpose is to promote "fairness and balance" in news stories. Responsible journalists, according to the ONO, should be willing to engage readers in conversation, acknowledge that they may have missed a key point in their story, and work toward gaining insight into how their future stories might be more professional.

In her August 6, 2000, column "Please Complain" *Washington Post* Ombudsman E.R. Shipp encouraged readers to "pick up the telephone and call – not just the ombudsman but the reporters and editors, too." Ms. Shipp urged us not to accept brush-offs. But if the ombudsman's job is to interact with readers, why should there be a brush-off.

Taking Ms. Shipp's advice, I have frequently called ombudsmen, reporters, and editors. I have been disappointed that so many failed to return calls. My disappointment was compounded when, on occasions that calls were returned, intelligent exchanges ensued. Editors and reporters should show more interest in learning about other approaches to immigration stories. Even when reminded that the majority of Americans (and therefore the majority of readers) favor immigration reform and that a more complete story would be more representative of the readership, too many reporters and editors seemed detached. Vigorous and repeated follow-up with the same reporters and editors would likely have

a greater impact.

As Ms. Shipp pointed out, the real enforcement for professionalism must come from the higher authorities at the newspaper: the publishers, executive editors and managing editors who establish the rules. But the ombudsman could and should act as a go-between for the readers and the senior editors.

After September 11

I have cited only a few of the stories that I have read over the last eighteen months. Unfortunately they represent the typical rather than the exceptional. One story after another lacks balance, does not support the open exchange of views, or fails to verify facts.

Despite the fact that myriad immigration experts are readily available to any reporter,¹ they are rarely cited. When quoted, their statements often appear deep into the story and are the single source representing the immigration reform position.

Immigration stories are told from one side only. Because of the way the stories are structured, nearly all, in the end, advocate. I can think of no other issue wherein reporters so consistently advocate. In a democracy, journalism's role is to encourage open and honest debate about important social issues. That is what the Society for Professional Journalists, the Committee for Concerned Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and every journalism school in America promote.

Reporters are obviously trying to do a solid job of writing balanced stories about campaign finance reform, patient's bill of rights, social security reform, the budget, and even Gary Condit-Chandra Levy. But in what many think is the most important social issue facing America – immigration – professionalism is almost totally lacking.

In a scenario in which only one point of view is represented, anyone who holds the opposite view is marginalized, at best, or dismissed, at worst. More importantly, readers are left in the dark. Interested parties can easily check the findings of this report. Go to the website of any major newspaper and do a search for immigration stories. Download ten and read them for yourself.

After the September 11 attacks, I revisited the January 25, 2000, congressional testimony of terrorist expert and investigator Steven Emerson. In his testimony, Emerson listed the reasons so many militant Islamic fundamentalists had entered the U.S. and were operating below the radar screen. How did the terrorists move

about with the ease of diplomats and avoid scrutiny from public officials and law enforcement? Emerson's list is by now painfully familiar: loopholes in immigration procedures, ease of penetration of borders, and ease of visa fraud.

But Emerson also lists "absence of a vigilant media" among his causes. As we have seen, immigration is covered from only one perspective – that immigration is good and that the only thing better would be more immigration. Would reporters have been open-minded enough to consider an investigative story on the threat Islamic fundamentalists poses to our society? If Emerson had approached a reporter to suggest a story about student visa fraud, would the reporter have been receptive? Based on my findings, I would sadly but firmly answer "no."

Remember that one of the tools used by terrorists to enter the mainstream was a driver's license. The debate about drivers' licenses for illegal aliens was one of the big issues of the summer. Across the nation, newspaper stories dealing with whether illegal aliens should be entitled to drivers' licenses were predominantly unbalanced in favor of the idea.

Conclusions

Immigration stories appear to be written with an advocacy slant because major newspapers have adopted and embraced the principles of globalism and multiculturalism without reservation. Many biased stories about immigration are really editorials.

Writing about the *New York Times* in his July 2001 essay for the Biocentric Institute, Louisiana State Journalism Professor William B. Dickinson observes:

Today, the newspaper's long commitment to unbridled immigration has blurred the lines between opinion and news. Stories and features are almost always written from the viewpoint of the immigrants, not the long-time residents who have been displaced. Weepy anecdotal leads are one device by which journalists can induce readers to generalize from the specific, and the Times is a master of the genre.

Based on my Media Standards Project research, Dickerson's conclusions about the *Times* apply to most major dailies.

In addition to embracing multiculturalism, another

newsroom phenomenon interferes with professionalism. *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* columnist Robert J. Samuelson in his August column, "A Liberal Bias?" provides important insights. According to Samuelson,

Some groups and ideas are treated well in coverage because they seem "praiseworthy" and right. Others are disdained because they seem questionable, undesirable or "fringe" Among journalists, pressures to social conformity mean that challenges to what "everyone believes" are rare.

Continuing Samuelson writes,

Polls consistently show declining trust in the media. This has many causes, some not easily remedied. But one is the perception of bias and the feeling that the press often violates its own professional standards of behavior. We aren't as tough on ourselves as we are on others.

Samuelson strikes at the heart of the matter. Immigration stories are written from pre-conceived notions. Journalists find certain ideas (increased immigration), certain spokesmen (pro-immigration advocates), and certain groups attractive while other ideas, spokesmen and groups (anyone who might argue for immigration reform) are suspect.

Apparently, most journalists writing about immigration feel those who favor reform are suspect. But to use that as an excuse for unbalanced reporting violates professionalism.

The irony is that professionalism is an easily obtainable goal. Returning to Ms. Shipp's "In Pursuit of Fairness" column, she writes that fairness is an easily obtainable goal if reporters "even in the heat of the chase, in the excitement of the moment, under the stress of the looming deadline have handy their own little check lists." Editors need check lists, too, adds Ms. Shipp. By remembering the *Post's* own commitment to fairness, Shipp writes, "the concept of fairness is something that editors and reporters can easily pursue."

Is Samuelson Right?

At the beginning of this paper, I stated that the Media Standards Project used the media's own watchdog groups to evaluate professionalism in immigration stories. All of these groups, the Society for Professional Journalists, the Committee for Concerned Journalists and the American Society of Newspaper Editors have

websites which declare their dedication to the highest principles of journalism.

The Society for Professional Journalists publishes an in-house magazine, *Quill*, ten times a year. The magazine is also reprinted in part on the website.

The Committee for Concerned Journalists lists among its members 1,200 prominent journalists from across the U.S. The Chairman of the CCJ, Bill Kovach, travels throughout the country presenting seminars in working newsrooms about the importance of writing professional stories that adhere to the well-established principles of journalism. These sessions are called “The Project for Excellence in Journalism: An initiative by journalists concerned about standards in the news media.” Case studies are reviewed. Kovach’s book, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople should know and the public should expect*, states in the introduction that journalism’s first obligation is to the citizens. Like the SPJ and the CCJ, the American Society for Newspaper Editors has lofty standards. The group claims a long-standing commitment to fairness and balance.

I have contacted all three groups and had various levels of discussions and personal meetings. None denied the findings of the report. But none at this time is willing to tackle the systemic causes of the nearly universal unprofessionalism of immigration coverage. It appears that even professional watchdog groups are fearful that if they specifically point out the need for balance in immigration stories, they may be accused of favoring those who support more restrained flows of immigration. Is it possible that even after September 11, the media still treats immigration as an “untouchable” subject?

Despite the indifference shown to the Media Standards Project by the watchdog groups, the project has had successes when reporters and editors are open-minded enough to admit that coverage can be better. For maximum effect, the reporters’ stories have to be tracked and read on a regular basis to look for improvement. In the coming months, as new immigration legislation is debated, the arguments will intensify. The public deserves a full accounting in the thousands of stories to come out of both sides of the immigration debate.

And the need for improvement in immigration stories is becoming a larger issue in the campaigns by well-publicized critics of the news media. The goal of

each story should be to reflect the “Journalist’s Creed” as written by the first dean of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, Walter Williams:

I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are in full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is a betrayal of this trust. •

NOTE

1. Reporters and other writers would be able to check figures and policy positions on immigration with any number of organizations including the following:

NumbersUSA.com at www.NumbersUSA.com.

Center for Immigration Studies at www.cis.org.

Federation for American Immigration Reform at www.fairus.org.

Carrying Capacity Network at www.carryingcapacity.org.

Migration News at www.migration.ucdavis.edu.

Professor Norman Matloff at www.heather.cs.ucdavis.edu/pub/Immigration/Index.html.

Limits to Growth at www.LimitsToGrowth.org.

ProjectUSA at www.projectusa.org.