**Media and U.S. Immigration Politics**

**By David E. Toohey, Ph.D.**

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be invited here to give this lecture on immigration and the media. These are two very important topics which work together to create politics in the United States and other countries, as I shall mention. I have researched these topics for my dissertation at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Department of Political Science, a forthcoming book, and other current projects. Immigration is the act of crossing a border. It covers a range of activities such as attending an international academic conference or going to a University, to seeking employment, to seeking asylum from oppressive governments. Many of us have been immigrants through our educational activities.

Borders and immigrants have recently been portrayed as a source of anxiety for nation-states and their citizens. This has led to increased militarization and surveillance along borders as well as to various negative practices directed against immigrants. There have been extremely negative consequences for this increased border monitoring along the U.S.-Mexico border that leads to undocumented immigration through remote desert areas. Hundreds of undocumented immigrants annually are found dead from heat exposure in remote parts of the U.S. desert near Mexico and the U.S. government Border Patrol likely underestimates these figures (Nevins 2008, 21-22).

Much of the increased policing of the border been heavily influenced by the mass-media, which often portrays borders and immigration in a negative light, or, provides positive portrayals that do cannot be linked together in a useful way. Yet, two questions remain. First how is the notion of the border changing from something that is located on the land to something that is more abstract? Secondly, how can media lead to better concepts of immigration that are less a source of conflict, and more a source of peace?

Before explaining how media can challenge negative views of immigrants it is important to learn about the problems that media creates for understanding borders and immigration. It is also important to understand negative processes of media in related issues such as U.S. foreign policy. After learning some of these processes, the opportunities presented by cinema and literature will be more clear.

**The Changing Concept of the Border**

One development in international relations theory is a new concept of what borders are. This had been occurring in other fields—such as Chicana/o studies (the study of people of Mexican decent in America. It also describes something that happened independently in the world, outside of academia. The border used to be considered an actual place. This place, existing in land and earth, was located at the meeting point between two nation-states. For example, there are lines between the United States and Mexico, the United States and Canada, France and Germany, The Peoples’ Republic of China and Mongolia, etc… These are places that people can actually go to, though they usually cannot cross these lines without permission from these governments. However, I.R. scholars such as Sassia Sasken (2006) have argued that these “borders” may actually extend into countries. This is not a matter of a line being drawn from the point between Mexico and the United States into the interior of the United States. This means that what happens in the border does not just happen in the actual land where the border is, it can happen hundreds or thousands of kilometers away from the border. Media speeds this up.

The idea of the border not being fixed to an actual place that people can visit may be more readily understandable in the Asia Pacific region. There are two types of borders in the Asia-Pacific region that are different from typical land borders. Some Asian-Pacific borders are marked in Oceans where countries are not necessarily next to each-other. It is impossible for human beings to walk across these borders. They are accessible through a human invention, such as a boat or an airplane only. For example, The People’s Republic of China and Japan are separate nation-states. They are located in lands separated by Oceans. Yet, they have border disputes—the Senkaku Islands for example. However, there is not a land border between the two countries as there is between the United States and Mexico or China and Vietnam. A recent incident in 2010, where a Chinese fishing boat ran into a Japanese Coast Guard vessel was shown on Japanese national T.V. (without official authorization) as well as internationally by way of YouTube videos posted on the Internet. In this situation, the news media quickly brought consciousness of abstract borders (and disputes thereof) to the people of Japan and the Peoples’ Republic of China, perhaps at a faster rate than the Japanese government would have preferred. This has led to tense relations between the two countries.

A second type of border is a demilitarized zone. Thus, there are two countries, with a border, but they technically are not located exactly next to each other. This is the case with South Korea and North Korea. Rather than a line that could be walked across, there is a demilitarized zone (The DMZ) between the two countries. This is a space that people do not cross, except under controlled situations. This does not prevent border disputes between the two countries. It also does not prevent immigration from North Korea to South Korea. There are North Korean refugees living in South Korea.

But the question remains of why do we think about these spaces? People do not think about places they cannot go all the time. There are millions of places that we will never visit. We rarely think about these places. There are of course exceptions. In the United States it is common for people to read magazines such as *National Geographic* and think about remote places such as Peruvian ruins or the Himalaya Mountains. It is less common for people from the United States to visit these places. The rate of tourism is not important. What is important is that our interest and acknowledgment of these places often comes from the media, rather than actual experience going to these places, or even talking to someone from these places.

Similarly, most people will not visit the DMZ or the oceanic borders between The Peoples’ Republic of China and Japan, but they will have knowledge of these places through media coverage of the conflicts. Similarly, many Americans will not visit the U.S.-Mexico border, but they will often think about immigrants crossing these borders. This thought about borders is not necessarily destructive. It is also sometimes neutral or even positive. Yet it does have consequences such as increased tensions and conflicts between U.S.-born populations and immigrants.

**Dangers of Media and Borders**

In my research, one of the things that I found was that when we learn about borders and foreign countries through the media, there is a danger and opportunity. The danger and the opportunity are actually about the exact same thing: borders and foreign countries are transformed through media. The danger has already been explained by a variety of scholars with different intellectual and political viewpoints. As early as 1922, Walter Lippmann explained that the media turns our encounters with distant reality into stereotypes. Stereotypes are images of reality in our mind that have worn out and no longer match what we saw. Hence, the human mind makes simple images of different people—the standard negative stereotype of an immigrant in the United States is someone that does not learn English and is potentially a criminal. Most immigrants, in real-life, do not match this stereotype. Most immigrants work hard and learn English. Yet, newspapers in the United States often focus on undocumented immigration—calling it “illegal immigration”—and many mainstream movies have portrayed immigrants as criminals. Thus the media interacts with stereotypes in peoples’ minds to harm large populations.

Another danger is that powerful political and business groups will influence our view of foreign countries in ways that harm populations. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (2008) modified Walter Lippmann’s (1922) ideas to show how the mass-media alters viewpoints about U.S. foreign policy to fit the interests of the U.S. government and corporations, rather than average citizens. Thus, the mass-media did not provide accurate coverage of atrocities being committed by U.S.-funded governments in Central America as well as U.S. violence committed during the Vietnam War. This not only benefited U.S. governments and corporations but misled Americans away from their interests.

Another related danger, is that the mass media will provide a distorted view of reality by getting its information from official sources only. W. Lance Benne (1990) t refers to this as “indexing.” If there is a confrontation between police and protestors, the police will be the only source of information. The police are part of a government (an official source); the protestors are not part of a government (a non-official source). If there is a labor dispute management will be the only source of information, rather than the trade union. If there is a foreign war—such as the Iraq war—the government and government sponsored think tanks become the only source of information (Arsenault & Castells 2006; Altheide & Grimes 2005). Anti-war groups, people living in invaded countries, and academics are often not interviewed when the mass media writes news stories. There is an obvious danger of one-sided bias in this technique and it is common. The mass-media also is often the only source of information about foreign countries that most people have. Yet, what might this preference for official sources have to do with borders and immigration?

In Japan, relations between Japanese citizens and immigrants are influenced by the media. According to Apichai W. Shipper (2005) in Japan many major news outlets have often relied mostly on the Japanese police for information about immigrants and crime. The Japanese police, according to Shipper, have often been very biased against immigrants. Hence, this bias is transmitted to the Japanese public without looking at alternative viewpoints. The impact is as follows. Immigrant communities are stereotyped into different criminal categories by nationality. Thai female immigrants are associated with prostitution, Chinese immigrants are associated with violent crime, Iranian immigrants are associated with illegal drug related crimes (Shipper 2005, 319). This stereotyping does not happen in Japan only.

This portrayal of different immigrant communities as threats also occurs in the United States and Europe. In the United States and Europe, the mass media often focuses on Islamic, extremist terrorism. As I have mentioned elsewhere, the U.S. view of the Middle East was distorted through politicized religion to promote the violent invasion of Iraq (Toohey 2007). This has led some to falsely associate immigrants from Islamic countries with terrorism and assume that they are dangers to U.S. society and security. The United States government has often kept remembrance of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and internment of Japanese Americans from being adequately remembered (Toohey & Inoue 2011) which shows a lack of regard for Japanese American immigrant and diaspora communities. The mass-media portrayed Chicana/o (Mexican decent immigrants) as threats to the U.S. nation-states when they organized civil rights movements (Ontiveros 2010).

**The Potential for the Media to Help Provide Useful Images of the Border**

My research has uncovered some negative aspects of the media portrayals of the border, as well as some positive aspects. I next want to focus on positive aspects and practices for the media when portraying the border. There are a few things that cinema adds to our analysis of the border. These come through more experiential and open ended readings that are available in cinema and, to some extent, literature. Two important practices are: 1) synesthesia, and 2) semiotics. Synesthesia provides a chance for people to look at the border not just as a distant place to be visited, but also as something that affects them. Semiotics provides a chance for people to think on their own about borders.

The division in academic discussions on symbolism is over whether there is one meaning to symbols, or whether there is multiple meaning to symbols. The psychologist Sigmund Freud decided that dreams were not only symbolic, but symbolic of trauma and sex only. Thus, symbols in dreams could mean one thing only. Applied to film and literature, symbols could mean one thing only. Hence, there is only one interpretation of what a book or movie will mean. In some situations this can become like viewing Totalitarian propaganda films from Nazi Germany of the Soviet Union. This leads toward interactions with books and movies that are not democratic. The reader and viewer’s interpretation is largely irrelevant. This may lead people, perhaps, to prioritize the role of corrupt, violent leaders over democratic interaction through visual media (Deleuze 1989).

In contrast to this interpretation there are other theorists that believe that symbols can have multiple meanings. Gilles Deleuze (1989) believes that film creates a space where reality is open for interpretation. If done the right way, film can make us think, rather than accept predetermined symbols and messages. Hence, films such as *Touch of Evil* and *El Norte* do not exactly tell us what to think about immigration, but instead provide us with symbols that we can interpret. Other scholars of open ended symbolism, such as Umberto Eco (1976), have argued that people reading books have their own collection of thoughts and experience that shape the meaning of the book. Hence, someone watching American police violently confronting Mexicans in Orson Welles’ film *Touch of Evil* (the re-edited version) may bring their own experiences to this. Someone who attends protests frequently may have experienced ethically, and even legally questionable, treatment from police. They may therefore bring this experience to understand that the police violence against immigrants in *Touch of Evil* is not an isolated incident and was done to politically control people. Of course, there is a limitation too. Someone who watches *Touch of Evil* and has only received racist messages about immigrants and believes that police always follow the law may believe that what happened in *Touch of Evil* is a distortion of reality made by a film-maker with questionable ethics. Hence, there is a need for more than symbolism, though open-ended symbolism is important.

To perfect open-ended symbolism, we need to have a media that creates empathy and shared experience. As I mentioned, shared experience leads to an understanding of *Touch of Evil* (2000) as a politically accurate portrayal of how foreign nationals are sometimes treated in the United States, rather than a distortion of reality. But, how do we achieve empathy? One way is synesthesia. According to Martine Beugnet (2007) synesthesia is the sharing of experience. One example of synesthesia is scratching a chalk board with fingernails. When a person scratches a chalkboard with their fingernails, two things happen. First, a terrible sound is emitted. Secondly, both the person scratching the chalkboard and people nearby feel an uncomfortable shocking sensation in their hands and arms. In short, people who are not involved in scratching a chalkboard feel a similar physical feeling to the person scratching the chalkboard. Film has the power to do this. People watching films where immigrants are undergoing violence may feel sensations, such as fear, or a light sickness. Hence in films like Gregory Nava’s *El Norte* immigrants come into the United States by way of an abandoned sewer tunnel and are attacked by rats. There is a slight shared revulsion and possibly a fear of rats. Jill Bennet (2005) refers to this as “empathy,” but warns against taking this too far. It is not a complete shared pain. We do not get sick and die from seeing rats attacking immigrants. We are not feeling the same pain as Central American immigrants immigrating through sewer tunnels. For most of us, it would be inappropriate and insensitive to say we did. But, as Bennett clarifies, we are getting a simulation of what it might be like. A simulation is not real, but it provides a limited version of what something might be like that helps us think of a different reality. This simulation can help us think about how horrible the experience could be and why it is wrong. This may create activism under the right conditions that helps immigrants. Therefore, film and literature, under the right conditions, can create situations that are not as negative as typical media portrayals of immigrants, and instead lead us to be more considerate to immigrants and people from foreign countries.

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