

Breaking Down the Wall: An Analysis of How Journalists Interview Children Impacted by Immigration Policies

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Abstract

Journalists have interviewed children and teenagers for stories such as school shootings, child abuse cases, and issues related to immigration. There are few ethical guidelines regarding how minors should be interviewed by journalists, or if they should be interviewed at all. This study examines how journalists covered immigration-related issues between November 2016 to October 2019 and how children were interviewed for those stories. Based on this examination, ethical guidelines for journalists approaching migrant children, or children of migrants, will be suggested to ensure their safety and privacy, while still allowing for their perspectives in news stories.

I. Introduction

The Society of Professional Journalists created a set of guidelines in 1909 about the ethics of practicing honest and accurate journalism. The major components of the SPJ Code of Ethics are to seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (SPJ, 2014).

“Minimizing harm” is the only subhead that mentions dealing with juveniles. The code of ethics has seen several revisions, most recently in 2014. Revisions include the mention of taking special care when dealing with juveniles and sources who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Journalism professor Karen Slattery (2016) noted that the code moves away from the terminology of a “journalist with ethics” to “ethical journalism,” which she sees as problematic in the sense that it can shift the weight of the issue away from a specific journalist to journalism as a medium overall (p. 7). Journalists must be held accountable, Slattery maintains, and keep their sources safe.

Immigration policy in the United States is a major issue affecting migrant children or the children of migrants. Migrant children are those that came to the United States with their parents, while children of migrants are those that were born in the United States to parents who immigrated here. President Donald Trump and his administration’s anti-immigration rhetoric has caused a great deal of fear and anxiety among many Latinx youth (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Throughout his first term, Trump noted that he wants to build a southern border wall to prevent more people from coming into the United States illegally. There has been wide news coverage of his policies as well as raids conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). One study found that many Latinx youth pay attention to what is happening in the world around them,

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despite a notion that youth in general are uninterested in the news (Andrade, 2017).

This study was inspired by a young 11-year-old girl whose nationality is unknown, Magdalena Gomez Gregorio, who sobbed as she was interviewed by a CBS News reporter following a large raid in 2019 by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Mississippi. Magdalena begged on camera for her father to be freed and said that he was not a criminal (CBS News, 2019). This study analyzes immigration coverage and how journalists conduct interviews with victims of tragedy who suffer from trauma, followed by suggested guidelines for ethical interviewing of minors.

II. Literature Review

This literature review will discuss research on the impact news has on various parties: the journalist, the audience, and the persons being interviewed. There is little research on the impact on children of migrants or migrant children being interviewed by reporters. Therefore, this literature review will examine other instances of tragedy in which children and teenagers have been used as sources. It will also analyze psychological impacts that may follow an interview.

Tragedy has always been widely covered in the news media, and with tragedy comes trauma. Trauma is anything that a reporter may find “emotionally difficult” to cover as it can deal with tragic injury or loss of any sort (Maxson, 2000, p. 81). There is research available on how journalists covering these tragic and traumatizing events have an impact on journalists themselves, as they become susceptible to secondary traumatic stress disorder. This means that journalists can suffer traumatic stress as they are often the first eyewitnesses of death and injury (Ochberg, 1996). As tragedy is a daily occurrence, it will always be covered in the news, especially since surveys have demonstrated that news about crime is the second most popular topic for people who watch local news (Dworznic, 2007).

Agenda setting theory states that news organizations do not tell people what to think, but they tell them what to think about through selection and prominence of stories (Rosenberry and Vicker, 2017). Therefore, when local newspapers or television news stations give special attention to crime stories, people become more concerned about the topic. Audiences care more about crime news because it grabs their attention with elements of conflict and tension (Yanich, 2004).

Communities are often affected by local news coverage. When the news media covered the death of 16-year-old Shanna Poissant from a small town on the Quebec-U.S. border, researchers noted that the impact was detrimental as residents felt anger, intrusion of processing grief, and triggered old feelings of loss (Kay et al., 2010). Journalists must take into consideration the implications their extensive coverage can have on communities.

After traumatic events, the voices of children and teenagers matter, especially when they are the victims. A reporter noted in a documentary about the 1999 Columbine school shooting in Colorado that he would rather cover a war zone than a school shooting. Romaine Smith Fullerton (2004) discussed the importance of interviewing minors with various anecdotes, such as the story of a child living with cystic fibrosis. When Fullerton addressed the importance of talking about how cystic fibrosis affected this child, and how the journalist spoke to the child directly, it had a larger impact because the journalist took the time to observe the child and ask him questions. Mackay (2008) raises ethical concerns about using children and teenagers as sources for stories, primarily when it comes to their privacy and the inability to recognize the ramifications of having their name attached to a story and the potential consequences. If a child is quoted about something negative or is misquoted, then he or she risks being bullied and called out in school.

Revictimization follows when victims may feel like they are being victimized a second time by the news media. Children who were victims of a tragic event may be asked to speak about the event to a reporter. Whether or not they agree to the interview, simply being asked about the situation can bring back emotions and memories of the event. When they see themselves on the news, they may feel vulnerable to being seen as a victim once more, or even for being a hero in some cases for their willingness to speak about the topic (Haravouri et al., 2011). The idea of being a hero can be detrimental to the person, who may begin to feel pressure regarding the heroic act, which then reminds the person again of the traumatic event.

Many journalism industry publications incorporate trauma training or guidelines on covering tragedy (Rentschler, 2010). There are efforts being made by universities and colleges that teach journalism to

integrate trauma training by introducing simulations (Maxson, 2000). However, very few address situations involving children in either process. Many journalists that go through trauma training note that while the training can be useful, no amount of preparation ultimately helps once they are actually covering a tragic event.

Fullerton (2004) wants to ensure the privacy and wellbeing of children are at the forefront, and that children fully grasp that a journalist is going to write a story on them, and they are able to withdraw from the interview at any point. Most research points to the privacy and protection of children in order to ultimately minimize harm, which is one of the most essential aspects of journalism. There is also a case being made for sending in journalists that have more experience to cover tragedy and talk to children. Many news organizations tend to send their less experienced journalists to cover local stories involving children but having a more experienced and sympathetic reporter can lend to a better story that will minimize harm (Maxson, 2000).

Immigration Policies and their Effects on Children/Teenagers

Wendy Cervantes, Rebecca Ullrich, and Hannah Matthews (2018) conducted interviews with 150 educators and parents in six states: California, Georgia, Illinois, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. They noticed reports on President Trump's immigration policies were affecting children under the age of eight. Their key findings noted that children were in constant fear that their parents would be taken away from them, even those with parents who had legal status were concerned since they were not fully aware of whether their parents would also be affected by the policies.

The Trump administration has also threatened to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for El Salvadorians who have been living in the United States for more than two decades (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was established under former President Barack Obama's administration in 2012, and it allows eligible undocumented youth to be granted a two-year reprieve from deportation, and it also grants work authorization. However, it does not provide a path to citizenship, it can be taken away at any time, and a recipient must reapply every two years (Patler and Cabrera, 2015). Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is provided by the Secretary of Homeland Security to nationals from countries where the conditions of said country may prevent them from returning, or in certain circumstances where the country cannot adequately handle the return of nationals. Some examples of those conditions are ongoing armed conflict or an environmental disaster. El Salvador and Honduras are two of the countries under TPS (USCIS, 2015).

Following both of these policies, Latinx activists took it upon themselves to defend both the DACA program and TPS policy. Andrade (2017) interviewed undocumented college students, most of whom identified as Latinx, and many said they feared for themselves and family. They turned to activism and protest to feel like they were doing something and to cope with their emotions. Another study interviewed 562 teenagers from Southern California and found that of the 224 who gave a response related to immigration, 96% were critical of Trump's rhetoric about immigration. Many said they experienced anxiety, anger, recognized and experienced racism, and increased their civic engagement (Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

The policies have an effect on families who have mixed status, meaning some are documented and others are not, as well as completely undocumented families (Dreby, 2012). Lauren Gulbas and Luis Zayas (2017) developed a framework to conceptualize the factors that children who are citizens experience when facing the possibility of a parent's deportation. They found that the children's mental and emotional status, levels of stress, social and material well-being, sense of identity and belonging, as well as academic performance were all impacted by the threat of deportation and separation of their family. News reports on these and related policies – such as repeated calls to build a wall on the United States and Mexico border – is likely to have effects on children and teenagers as they become sources or are subjected to witnessing the news of families being separated.

Reporters sometimes play a role in traumatizing children with their repeated coverage on the issue of immigration and by interviewing them. Therefore, a review and expansion of existing ethical guidelines by the Dart Center and Poynter Institute will be the basis of this study and tied to the immigration crisis and its impact on children.

RQ1: In what ways are reporters disregarding established ethical codes from institutions such as the Dart Center and Poynter Institute, and how should they go about adhering to the codes when interviewing immigrant children?

III. Methods

The following research examined two broadcast news outlets – CNN and the Latinx show *Primer Impacto*. CNN content was located using Nexis Uni, a database that provides a way to search for various news publications and narrow a search through keywords, timeframe, geographic location, and other factors. The timeframe ranged from November 1, 2016 to October 1, 2019, spanning the timeframe since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The keywords used to narrow the results were “children,” “immigration,” and “deportation.” For the Latinx show *Primer Impacto*, a different method was used since there were no records of the show on Nexis Uni. Using the show’s YouTube channel, three videos were randomly chosen that featured children being interviewed or spoken about during the same timeframe. A Spanish-speaking broadcast was selected to see if there was any difference in the way children were interviewed.

IV. Findings

Once three transcripts and videos were selected for each news organization, they were analyzed for the following: identification by name, age, location; if their parents or other guardians were nearby; and if they were spoken to directly or simply shown and mentioned in the video. The context of each story was analyzed, and if there were any signs of the journalist comforting sources or showing empathy, that was also noted. The names of journalists were identified. Following the discussion, this research will offer an expansion on existing guidelines and new guidelines on how journalists should handle interviewing children and teenagers when reporting stories of immigration issues.

CNN

CNN had 45 results in the indicated time frame for stories regarding immigration, children and deportation. The reason for using NexisUni was to find CNN stories that featured the keywords to narrow the search, even though a child was not always interviewed in the story. Then, from there, the searches were scanned to see which not only mentioned how children are impacted by immigration, but if they were interviewed by the reporter.

The first story transcript chosen was from March 7, 2017. A video of the interview was posted to CNN’s YouTube channel. The video on YouTube was titled, “Mom faces expulsion after 18 years in US” (CNN, 2019). The mom in question was identified as Francisca Lino, and she had four children who all were born in the United States. She had initially arrived in the United States using a fake visa, when she went to apply for a green card, it was discovered that her visa was phony, and she was detained. She was released after 28 days under the condition that she “check in with ICE regularly.”

The journalist on the story was Rosa Flores, and she interviewed one of the daughters, Britzy Lino, whose age is not given but she appears to be 12 to 14 years old. During one of Lino’s routine visits to ICE, Flores accompanied the family in the car to downtown Chicago. Initially, Francisca exited her visit with ICE to announce on camera that she was allowed to stay another year. Then, she is called in again and is told she has to leave back to Mexico by July and that she needs to bring proof of a one-way plane ticket to the next meeting. Britzy is interviewed by Flores after hearing the news, and she looks at Flores directly and sniffles and answers her questions while Flores has a hand on her back and maintains eye contact with her. All identification factors except the age of the interviewed child are present.

The second story details ICE raids in Morton, Mississippi. The journalist was Diane Gallagher. The transcript was posted on August 8, 2019 and the video was posted to CNN’s YouTube channel the following day, titled: “Their first day of school turned into a nightmare after record immigration raids” (CNN, 2019). The video begins with a clip of a young girl whose face is out of focus intentionally, and is saying, “Please, can I just see my mother please?” Someone else mentions that the girl’s mother is her only guardian.

Diane Gallagher interviews someone – only the back of the head can be seen – and the subject is not identified by name or age, although the person may identify as a girl and seems to sound of high school age. She has purple and blue hair saying that she was told that there was a website where they could find people who were detained, but she has not found anyone from her family. The rest of the clip features another interview with a woman whose identity is also protected, and she speaks of her 5-year-old son who keeps

asking for his father, but he is not seen. The remainder of the video gives more details about the raid and how it had been planned for months.

The third CNN transcript and video chosen were posted on June 29, 2018. The video is titled “Watch separated mom and son reunite,” and the reporter is Polo Sandoval (CNN, 2018). The video shows the reunion of a 25-year-old El Salvadoran woman with her 7-year-old son who she had not seen in a month, and they are at Dulles International Airport in Virginia. They crossed the border illegally together, and the mother was detained and taken to Colorado and then to the Washington, DC area, while the boy was detained and taken to Florida. Sandoval tells the context of what happened and then they allow viewers to witness the two hug and interact. The video showed their reunion, and Sandoval spoke about how rare it is that reunification with family happens, according to immigration lawyers. The child was shown and can be heard speaking in Spanish to his mother, but he is not interviewed, and was identified by age and location, but his name was not mentioned.

Primer Impacto

Primer Impacto, which is part of Univision, was analyzed since it is a Spanish-speaking broadcast, and immigration coverage occurs more often. Its YouTube channel has a playlist with more than 500 videos about immigration. Three were chosen from August and September of 2019.

The first video selected was posted on September 17, 2019 and was titled, “Vive refugiada en una iglesia y acaba de recibir una multa de ICE de más de 300,000 dólares,” which roughly translates to, “She lives in refuge in a church and she just received a fine from ICE of more than 300,000 dollars” (Primer Impacto, 2019). The story follows a mother identified as Hilda Ramirez, and her 12-year-old son, Ivan, as they sought sanctuary to escape the violence and poverty of Guatemala. They were fined by ICE for entering the country illegally, and the document they received was shown on screen with their address blurred, but the location was San Antonio, Texas.

Ivan Ramirez was interviewed, and he said he was scared and was wondering if they were going to send him back to Guatemala. He said he understood what the fine meant and knew that there would be consequences for not paying it. Towards the end, he sat next to his mother as he said that his mother means everything to him, and how much she has taught him to value what they have. The video shows Ivan playing soccer, attending school and he explains he has aspirations to be a medic to help people who cannot afford help. The journalist was Martha Flores.

The next video from *Primer Impacto* was titled, “‘Quiero a mamá’: tres hermanos se quedaron solos tras arresto de su madre en redada de Mississippi,” which means, “I want my mom; three siblings are left alone following the arrest of their mother in the Mississippi raids” (Primer Impacto, 2019). The video was posted on August 9, 2019. The three siblings are all identified with their names and ages: Esau, 5; Diego, 6; and Cynthia, 9. Their mom, Angelica Sarat, was among those arrested in the mass ICE raid in Mississippi. The children were shown sleeping in a bed together. Diego was the child that was interviewed after he woke up from a nap, and the first words he said were, “I want my mom.” The journalist asks him if he has not seen her, to which he responds that she went to jail. He is being held by his aunt, Nery Josue, whose husband was also arrested by ICE and has six children of her own.

Cynthia was said to have suffered the most from her mother being arrested as the camera shows her hiding under the covers which she had been doing all day along with crying. The journalist can then be heard asking Diego, “What happened to your mom?” and he responds with “They stole her.” The journalist was Salvador Duran.

The third video from *Primer Impacto* was titled, “La redada de ICE en Mississippi dejó a decenas de niños sin sus padres,” which means that the ICE raid in Mississippi left dozens of children without their parents (Primer Impacto, 2019). The video was posted on August 8, 2019. The journalist, Salvador Duran, began by saying that he was in a church and talking about the raids, where he then said he wanted the audience to see the faces of the victims of these raids. The camera pans down to a woman holding a small girl who appears to be asleep. The video then shifts to another family, with three siblings holding onto one another, Genesis, which seems to be the name of the oldest girl but there were no lower thirds clarifying how to spell her name, and her two brothers, Edward (2) and Esteban (13) embraced. Their mom, Esmeralda, had been arrested. Genesis was interviewed and said she could not believe it and did not want to, and she started to cry. She said she needed to be strong for her siblings and did not want them to see her cry because she is

the oldest. Genesis was told her mother would return. She talked about seeing her get off a bus and begins to say she felt, and the clip continues with Esteban finishing the sentence saying he felt joy.

The journalist repeated his statement back to him and asked him if he hugged her. He replied saying yes and the rest was unintelligible as he mumbled. Esmeralda was reunited with her children, but she did not send them to school the next day out of fear. She said that if it were just her by herself, then she would have left back to her country, but she had to think about her kids. The reporter, in a voice over, talks about how this ICE raid affected many children, and it continues to show clips of children whose parents had been arrested. This interview contrasts to others, where the same clips of the children at school are shown, but *Primer Impacto* blurred the children's faces. The story ends with the same girl from the beginning in the arms of a family friend, her first name is given, and they still do not know what will be happening to her mother.

Guidelines and Suggestions

Based on the interviews selected for this research, the following suggestions are offered to guide journalists when they feel that interviewing a child for a story on immigration has value and will advance the story. Each suggestion is based on different tactics and language observed throughout the various interviews with explanations. The purpose is to overall minimize harm as well as avoid revictimization of those traumatized in these situations. Many of the guidelines are inspired by John Woodrow Cox of the Dart Center's "Essential Tips for Interviewing Children," but are provided in the specific context of immigration and children (Cox, 2018).

Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute states that the journalist's obligation first and foremost is to their audience and the truth. The subject comes second, but they must also be taken care of, so when a child is interviewed, patience is needed as well as being on their level physically and asking them open ended questions (K. McBride, personal communication, October 25, 2019).

1. Establish comfort and familiarity for the interview (Cox, 2018).
 - a. The child may have just experienced something traumatizing or had a family member go through a traumatizing event, so they need to feel comfortable talking about what happened. They need to also be briefed on what the job of the journalist entails, and the journalist should be very clear with their intentions of what the story is about.
2. Ensure that privacy and protection is rewarded when necessary or move on (Cox, 2018)
 - a. Immigrant children or children of immigrants require much more protection than any other child because they could be put into a risky situation, which could result in deportation. If children are willing to speak about their situation regarding immigration, then the question of whether they would like aspects of their identity to be protected must be asked.
3. Allow subjects time to process their feelings and respect their privacy (Cox, 2018)
 - a. This guideline goes along the lines of establishing comfort, but it adds the extra step of allowing children the time to process their feelings throughout the interview. In a moment of reunification or when emotions become overwhelming, ask the child if they would appreciate some privacy and to meet you in another room when they are ready to speak again.
4. A person should not be called illegal unless it is an attributed quote
 - a. The AP Stylebook 2019's "immigration" entry states: "Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use *illegal* only to refer to an action, not a person: *illegal immigration*, but not *illegal immigrant*." It also notes: "Do not use the terms *alien*, *an illegal*, *illegals*, or *undocumented* (except when quoting people or government documents that use these terms." If needed, it is best to just specify how it is that the person is currently in the country illegally, whether it be by overstaying a visa or crossing the border, and where they came from to provide clear context (Froke et al., 2019, p. 144).

5. Get consent and assent (Cox, 2018)
 - a. A child, by the age of five, may be able to start to grasp the concept of consent and be able to give it. It is important to make sure the adult that is responsible for them also understands the implications of sharing their story with a news organization. They must also give consent for the child to be interviewed.
6. Allow children to be children. Let them know they can stop the interview if needed.
 - a. Children have varying personalities, so it is important to understand the specific child that is being interviewed and allow them to act however they need to and let their parent(s) address any out of control situations. If the interview needs to be stopped and picked up at another time, and the deadline is flexible, then come back another time. If not, it may be worth it to stick around and wait until any situation is handled.
7. Keep questions simple, but open-ended. Avoid yes or no questions.
 - a. Ask children simple questions, and make sure to pay attention to the types of questions the children themselves, such as if they ask about the possibility of deportation and what it means.
8. Allow children to be vulnerable, but do not take advantage of their tears.
 - a. Avoid asking children questions when they are crying or are too shocked to speak. If a child is crying, but willing to be interviewed and can still articulate themselves through their tears, it can make for a powerful story.

V. Conclusion

Clarity, nuance, and empathy drive storytelling. Readers need to be able to understand the story and it allows them to hear other people's stories to connect with them somehow (McBride et al., 2014). Allowing children and teenagers input in stories is valuable because they offer a different perspective. Immigration as an issue is something that all journalists should be willing and able to cover. Latinx journalists are a minority in the newsroom, but that does not mean they are required to cover such topics. A Latino reporter made note that he had covered immigration before, but that he always remembers that he is there to do a job and report the facts (Nishikawa et al., 2009).

The topic of immigration is often hard to cover, but journalists must be aware that they are dealing with children who live in constant fear that they may be taken away from the only home they know or that their parents may be taken away from them. It can be difficult when an interview is done on the spot, so journalists must decide for themselves whether the ethical dilemmas and causing harm to one person may be in the interest of the general public (Amend et al., 2012).

This research had limitations such as timeframe, and it is encouraged that vigilance concerning the ethics of interviewing in instances of trauma and tragedy, specifically within immigration issues, remain strong. For both CNN and *Primer Impacto*, only three interviews were analyzed for each. The interviews inspired the guidelines and served the purpose of the research which was to analyze how journalists interact with youth impacted by immigration and if they were ethical throughout the process. These interviews had an element of each guideline, whether it was followed well or not. This research can be expanded by diving deeper into other news outlets to analyze how they interview children, such as Fox News and MSNBC. The inclusion of online and print media is also encouraged. The research can also be expanded to include a wider timeframe before the election of President Donald Trump. Finally, expansion and further suggestions and examples for the guidelines would be welcome as others review the topic in the future.

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