

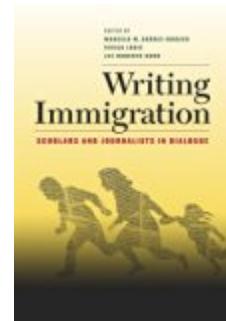
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Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, Vivian S. Louie, Roberto Suro, eds. *Writing Immigration: Scholars and Journalists in Dialogue*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xxvi + 264 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-26717-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-26718-3.

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Writing Immigration: Scholars and Journalists in Dialogue

During the Republican presidential debates in 2011-12, immigration questions and answers generated the strongest responses from live television audiences, despite the decline in immigrants and in border apprehensions due to the recession. While there are many explanations, journalists have also kept immigration on the front pages through reporting on the passage of anti-immigrant laws in Arizona and Alabama. The book under review here seeks to place scholars and journalists in dialogue over the issue of immigration. According to the editors, *Writing Immigration* has no political agenda. However, the editors argue that journalists and academics tend to downplay the extent that the economy depends on immigration. Journalists and scholars emphasize a “narrative of illegality” as the overriding issue, according to journalism professor Robert Suro (p. 6). The crisis coverage of illegal immigration overwhelms the fact that immigrants respond to economic demand from U.S. employers and consumers and that immigration has corresponded to national economic growth.

Scholars and journalists constantly interact with each other as sources. After a half-hour telephone interview with a journalist, a few words might be heard in a radio report or appear in a newspaper article. Many academics refuse to do interviews, knowing that their views often receive short shrift. Several authors in this anthology note that journalists work under severe time pressure (“deadlines”), yet seek expert knowledge to support their reporting. In return, academics use journalists to

publicize new studies to a wider audience, especially researchers associated with think tanks, who seek to shape public policy. This volume seeks to bridge the gap between the two communities by publishing their views on various topics related to immigration in the same book.

In part 1 on immigration and the law, Nina Bernstein of the *New York Times* expresses her awareness of how her stories might increase the vulnerability of the illegal immigrants she writes about, especially children. The article by legal scholar Peter Schuck is of particular relevance to journalism scholars. Schuck notes that “only a small fraction of (Americans) favor an increase in immigration levels, while the vast majority want fewer immigrants or no change” (p. 79). The laws on the books are much easier on undocumented immigrants because enforcement is difficult. However, laws have become harsher for those immigrants committing crimes and now more are deported. The number of immigrants in federal prisons has increased substantially, though immigrants are much less likely to commit crimes than non-immigrants. While immigration law is a mass justice system, the law allows individualized hearings and due process. Three goals for good immigration law must be deterrence, swift justice, and minimizing fraud. Schuck concludes that journalists do a good job of publicizing cases of immigrants suffering within the current immigration system, though they cover less well the “invisible victims” of the current system, primarily those waiting to come legally to the United States.

Patrick J. McDonnell of *Los Angeles Times* struggled to get editors to run immigrant stories, make complex stories understandable for readers, and avoid being perceived as an immigration advocate. Newspaper coverage too often responds to crises, particularly regarding illegal immigration. Editors seemed more concerned with elephants in the Los Angeles zoo than with immigrants being run down trying to cross a freeway. He believes the “immigrants as victims” stories obscured the many immigrants successfully rising into the middle class. He notes that immigrants drew the ire of those seeking quick explanations for declining schools and other services, traffic, and air pollution—all blamed on immigrants.

Part 2 covers the impact of immigration on the U.S. economy. The academic and *Washington Post* columnist Edward Schumacher-Matos concludes that in the short term immigrants have a net negative economic impact (especially at the local level through use of schools and health care), but in the long run they benefit the country economically through paying taxes and using fewer services. Americans benefit from cheap labor and lower-cost consumer goods. Immigrants create patents at twice the rate of non-immigrants. The author notes that immigrants force native workers to work harder and become more educated to move up the economic ladder, a form of competition that conservatives should rightly value. He suggests a need for more skilled and unskilled temporary and permanent work visas. Economist Barry Chiswick disagrees, arguing that the economy does not depend on immigrants, that low-wage immigrants with children utilize more services than they pay for, and that they can have a negative impact on native wages.

George de Lama, formerly an editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, agrees that too much coverage of immigration focuses on the crises of illegality and he criticizes pro- and anti-immigrant bloggers who influence the media coverage. He claims that the Spanish-language media take a one-sided pro-immigrant position. Americans’ shortened attention span has led to sensational and truncated sound bites.

Part 3 focuses on issues of education. While psychology professor Carola Suárez-Orozco analyzes immigrant student achievement, Tyche Hendricks of the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes that immigrants stay connected to ethnic culture through food, sharing news, and membership in unions. Reporters hired to cover one group now cover many and cannot travel as much due to newspaper budget cuts. Hendricks notes the heavy emphasis of journalists on immediate breaking news and individual

personal stories. Journalists depend on academics to explain “how we got to where we are and how it compares to other periods in history” (p. 210).

Ginger Thompson of the *New York Times* meanwhile argues that an under-covered story is the segregation of non-English speaking immigrant children within American schools and in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Separation of immigrant students helped accentuate friction between native and non-native students and parents. Sociologist Mary C. Waters notes that the public mistakenly believes that immigrants are failing to learn English, primarily because the constant flow of new arrivals obscures the ongoing assimilation process of second-generation Americans. She suggests more study of European immigration and citizenship policies to understand issues of college admission and immigrant children’s education.

All the essays succeed in presenting useful information on current immigration realities. Amongst the many volumes on immigration, this one purports to break new ground by placing journalists and research scholars/academics in dialogue. That goal is not achieved in any significant way. Instead, the essays are individually authored and reflect the author’s views with little consideration of the different methods employed by journalists and academics. There are hints at but little follow-up on issues such as the ethics of investigative journalism or of academics who personally benefit by revealing the lives of those who might prefer to be left alone.

More critically, the book is big-metropolis-centric. The journalists and academics come from the two coasts, and Chicago and Dallas, which makes the book more marketable, but there is much to be learned from studying how scholars and journalists interact in other parts of the country. There is no discussion of immigration to the Midwest or South, or to rural areas or small towns. Today, the most interesting immigration stories occur in places like Wisconsin, where the growing Hmong and Latino populations have transformed the state’s economy and culture. Moreover, there is no representation of journalists or academics critical of current immigration levels (e.g., from the *Washington Times* or the economist George J. Borjas).

Another shortcoming is the lack of discussion of whether or how the media influences public opinion. There is also little discussion of the new media or immigrant media sources. The book provides little information about what Americans actually believe about immigration. Finally, the policy suggestions lack imagination.

We as a nation are in dire need of creative policy reforms, such as reforming visas to accommodate temporary Mexican seasonal migration. Despite these criticisms, this is a useful volume that begins an important discussion on the co-dependent relationship between journalists and academics.

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