

Scientists examine reporters' portrayal of US border under Trump

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Social scientists analyzed journalistic stories over the course of three years in the run-up and during the Trump campaign. The researchers found that the long-held implicit beliefs that tend to shape American thought about others, sovereignty and immigration seeped into the national news narratives that reporters reproduced.

According to UTSA's researchers, it wasn't until much later into the Trump administration that reporters developed stories to reflect a broader view of the Texas border as more than just a nefarious zone.

"I don't think the problem is necessarily journalism as an industry but rather the assumptions that are built into how most Americans think about the U.S.-Mexico border, including journalists," said Jill Fleuriet, an associate professor in UTSA's Department of Anthropology and lead author of the study. "What we saw—whether it was MSNBC or Breitbart, outlets with different political messages—is that they said the same thing about the border: It's remote. It's far away. It's dangerous and corrupt. And that picture of the border is incomplete and simplistic."

The researchers analyzed close to 800 [news articles](#) published in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The data was pulled from 11 national outlets ranging from The New York Times, Fox News Network and National Public Radio. In effect, reporters circulated Trump's limited definition of the U.S. border as alarmingly porous to people, including the majority of Central American asylum seekers, and drugs as well as being overly susceptible to corruption. Specifically, the Texas borderlands, which

spans 1,240 miles and forms about only 16% of the entire U.S. land mass border, became the epicenter of a perceived gateway to economic and social disruption.

"Our work contributes to scholarship that connects discursive regimes and statecraft with life in borderlands to lay bare underlying [social tensions](#) and potential violence," added Fleuriet.

The south Texas borderlands, according to Fleuriet and former student and co-author Mari Castellano, fall under a bigger American idea of "the border." The authors argue that "the border" is what's known as a concept-metaphor—a cognitive and linguistic device used across cultures to reference a shared idea so people can talk about it, but it's not very good at reflecting reality. The UTSA authors argue that "the border" is an American concept-metaphor used by the Trump political platform and by national [news](#) media to communicate insecurity and lawlessness that must be controlled, rather than a reference to a geopolitical borderline with complex, nuanced communities.

"Why is it that we don't think of New York City as the border? It's because we are socialized to think of the U.S.-Mexico area as the only "the border" and a threat. Reporters tend to walk into these stories with the same unquestioned assumptions. I would love if those that read this article or the upcoming book walked away thinking more critically about ideas that are used to shape our beliefs about who is different and who is not. Who belongs and who doesn't. Critically questioning our assumptions about the world, especially in times of surging nationalism, is one thing that makes anthropology relevant to all of us," said Fleuriet.

"Media, place-making, and concept-metaphors: the US-Mexico border during the rise of Donald Trump" was published in the latest edition of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*.

Fleuriet has a forthcoming book that further examines news framing and the transformation of concept-metaphors in a process known as "bordering-debordering-rebordering." The book features four years' worth of interviews, focus groups and observations in South Texas border communities, including activists and longtime civic leaders to reveal a broader view of the [border](#) than merely a gateway into the feared "Global South." She also includes local journalistic stories that generally are very different than the national news depictions.

More information: K. Jill Fleuriet et al, Media, place-making, and concept-metaphors: the US-Mexico border during the rise of Donald Trump, *Media, Culture & Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0163443719890539](#)

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