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#WakeUpAmerica, #IllegalsAreCriminals: the role of the cyber public sphere in the perpetuation of the Latino cyber-moral panic in the US

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the influence of discursive interactions on driving moral panics by drawing on the theoretical strands of the public sphere and the white racial frame. We apply the framework of the Latino cyber-moral panic to understand online public discourse surrounding the criminalization of undocumented immigrants in the United States. With an ethnographic approach, we find the Internet becomes a cyber public sphere where user's interactions reinforce and are reinforced by a white racial frame; this then contributes to the spread of a moral panic, and ultimately reinforces systemic racism. We argue that social media sites and their discursive tools, such as hashtags, comments, and 'likes,' help to efficiently and continuously target Latino and undocumented immigrants. By weaving communication literature and critical race scholarship, we conceptualize the Internet as a powerful mechanism for the spread of white supremacy and systemic racism.

The plague of misinformation and racial scripts

A caveat of the rise of social media and access to vast amounts of information has been the fierce spread of misinformation, a 'plague' that insulates people from the truth (Stelter, 2016). A study done by BuzzFeed found that between 20% and 38% of the information published by right and left-wing Facebook groups is false (Silverman et al., 2016). Scholars have theorized about communication and its effects on society. Habermas (1991) defines the public sphere as a shared space in which individuals can exchange information. With increased access to the Internet, a public sphere can also take place online as social media platforms allow people to express and exchange ideas and through this participate in the online public sphere (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). Given the emergence of 'alternative facts,' a White-House-endorsed distrust in journalism, and an increasingly polarized political landscape, online interactions are increasingly an important part of American lives.

How do people interact online? In what ways does the dissemination of information influence or reflect larger social narratives about groups of people? Specifically, how does the public use online technology to spread moral panics? We explore these questions through a conceptual lens that draws on the public sphere and the white racial frame to trace the criminalization of immigrants online.

Here we draw on Cohen's (1972) definition of a 'moral panic' as a process where groups are framed as an eminent threat when the core values of the overall society seem challenged. A group of people is portrayed as a threat to society's moral fabric and framed as 'folk devils' by moral entrepreneurs, such as political pundits, media hosts, and other people of power through mass media (Cohen, 1972). Then, socially accepted experts evaluate and propose solutions on how to deal with the 'folk devils.' Some solutions can result in legislation against the targeted group. However, given the more recent advances in technology since the original concept of the moral panic was created, a further re-evaluation is needed (Critcher, 2008; Hier, 2008; Rohloff & Right, 2010). Scholars ague that missing from the moral panic case studies and from the concept itself is an exploration into whether the public is an active or passive participant (Critcher, 2008; Rohloff & Right, 2010). Flores-Yeffal, Vidales, and Plemons (2011) extend Cohen's analysis to include a civil action stage, when the public becomes an active participant in the moral panic process through protests and political lobbying against folk devils.

Moral panics come and go and can be embedded with racist, classist, gendered, and homophobic themes. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants are at the intersection of various layers of oppression. Here we discuss how immigrants are targeted by using frames of racism, criminality, and immorality. First, a moral panic can be fueled by a white racial frame (Feagin, 2013), which is a dominant frame that influences the minds of whites and other groups with stereotypes, racist sentiments, images and through this systemic racism is perpetuated (Feagin, 2006). Daniels (2013) refers to systemic as a process that 'includes the many exploitative and discriminatory practices of whites, the unjustly gained resources and the power for whites demonstrated in the hierarchy linking "race" and material well-being … ' (p. 711). The idea that immigrants represent a threat to the nation in the US has its roots in the nineteenth century, but different groups of immigrants have been targeted throughout the years by using the exact same racial scripts. Specifically, Molina (2014) describes how these scripts imply they were of Indian origin, biologically inferior, hybrids, had high reproduction rates, and a burden to the nation. She also shows how Mexican immigrants specifically are depicted as the folk devils through racial scripts several times since the 1800s (Molina, 2014). Nowadays, Mexican immigrants continue to be targeted as a threat to the US as when President Donald Trump called immigrants from Mexico 'criminals' and 'rapists'[1] during his presidential campaign. Thus, we aim to trace the connection between the white racial frame and the role of the public using the Internet to spread a moral panic against undocumented Mexican immigrants.

Specifically, criminalization has shaped the lived experiences of immigrants throughout US history. Framing immigrants as dangerous to provoke fear is illustrated by the use of the word 'illegal' to criminalize undocumented immigrants (Chavez, 2008; Hagan, Levi, & Dinovitzer, 2008; Santa Ana, 2012). Coupled with racism and poverty, criminalization through images of 'illegality' has a perpetuating effect of inequality for immigrant communities. Lack of access to resources caused by 'illegality' lead a large portion of young adults to feel detached and drop out of school (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015; Dreby, 2015; Gonzales,

2016). Furthermore, immigrants are not granted rights and benefits as US citizens; they cannot legally work, vote, drive, nor are they protected by federal or state laws (Gonzales, 2011).

Today an unauthorized status has both material and felt consequences in that they are framed not only as criminals, but perhaps more damagingly, as devoid of morality. Symbolically, in describing the in-between, elusive space occupied by undocumented immigrants, Mae Ngai refers to those forced to live invisible lives as 'impossible subjects' who in the twentieth century constituted a 'person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved' (2014, pp. 3–4). The criminalization of immigrants, and specifically undocumented immigrants, is fueled by racist attitudes and has the concrete consequence of dehumanizing people even outside the targeted group. Hagan et al. (2008) conceptualize this as a 'symbolic violence' described as

> the conceptual linking of immigrants with crime and suspicion and, in turn, to the set of mental, legal, political, and social associations that are made and which come to stigmatize immigrants and to delineate their place within the social hierarchy (p. 99).

According to Santa Ana (2012), when immigrants are conceptualized as lawbreakers for crossing national borders without permission, their contributions to the nation's social fabric are erased and forgotten, such as working, raising a family, and going to school. The manipulation of language can become dangerous as it can foster certain emotions that can lead to violence against others (Scheff, 1998).

This same phenomenon has happened with other members of the Latino community. For example, in the mid-1970s, the imagery of Chicano youth as members of violent gangs far surpassed actual crime rates. However, this imagery converged with the racist imagery of Mexican and Chicanos as 'different' in order to frame young Chicano men as a threat (Zatz, 1987). Gutiérrez (1995) finds the relationship between Mexican Americans (Chicanos) and immigrants from Mexico had been fluid and conflicting at times during the twentieth century. For example, during their fight to end the Bracero Program, Mexican Americans called immigrants 'wetbacks' and argued 'Mexican labor guaranteed that the majority of working-class Mexican Americans would continue to live in poverty, because foreign laborers tended to depress wages, undercut unionization efforts, and posed serious health risks to the communities in which they settled' (1995, p. 145). Then after Mexican Americans also became victims of the anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation, their organizations switched from restrictionist views on immigration into fighting against anti-immigration policy and the scapegoating of immigrants. Therefore, it is important to study the role of the public in the spread of moral panics because in doing so we learn about the impact on immigrant communities and those conceptually linked to them.

Thus, online anti-immigrant discourse is explicitly a moral panic influenced by white racial frames because it poses immigrants as criminals devoid of morality. We draw on the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), the white racial frame (Feagin, 2006, 2013), and on the Latino cyber-moral panic (LCMP; Flores-Yeffal et al., 2011) to explore the moral panic against undocumented Mexican immigrants. Using ethnographic methods, we perform a content analysis of social media to analyze public discourse criminalizing immigrants. First, we find the public is able to contribute to a moral panic through their participation in the cyber public sphere (CPS). Second, the CPS helps to reinforce and re-distribute white racial frames (the pro-white frame of morality and an anti-other

subframe of criminality). Third, the effect of this process leads to the spread of the moral panic, thus perpetuating systemic racism. This project adds to our understanding of social media platforms as outlets through which systemic racism is perpetuated via the public sphere. In what follows, we present our theoretical framework and explain our methodology, before delving into our findings, and to conclude, we describe the potential impacts of this online rhetoric and outline directions for future research.

Undocumented immigrants as the 'Folk Devils'

We adopt the LCMP to refer to the moral panic in which Latino immigrants are the 'folk devils' of the narrative. Moral entrepreneurs who are the drivers of moral panics, can be anyone at the highest levels of power, such as politicians, CEO's, media hosts, pundits, who utilize immigrants as scapegoats to gain votes by framing immigrants as a threat to the nation (Massey, Durand & Pren, 2016). The framing of immigrants as a moral threat in social media may reproduce and articulate fears that extend beyond a reasonable concern for safety and peace. When there is a discrepancy 'between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what this is a perception of' we witness an 'ideological displacement,' a moral panic grounded in perceived threat separate from reality (Hagan et al., 2008, p. 16). Criminalization, in its material and symbolic consequences, is a powerful discursive tool. Online interactions observed in this project thus transcend the CPS, and have impacts on the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants and brown people in general.

The white racial frame

The strategies used to 'other' immigrants have roots in systemic racism. In understanding the rhetoric used by online users, we draw parallels between the explicit and implicit message repeated by users and the idea of framing. We can understand the unified message across several platforms and among different users as an example of a white racial frame (Feagin, 2013). We adopt frame and framing as both a belief system and a social action, where a frame is a way of understanding the world that 'structures the thinking process and shapes what people see or do not see' (Feagin, 2013, p. 26). Conversely, framing here is understood as a 'way of being, a broad perspective on life … that provides the language and interpretations' which help people structure and normalize the world around them (Benford & Snow, 2000; Feagin, 2013, p. 28). Specifically, we can theorize about the nature of racism as a way of viewing the world, a frame, but also as a framing strategy aimed at linking certain physical features to culture, and in turn using these to 'differentiate socially "superior" and "inferior" groups in a social hierarchy' (p. 28). A white racial frame then is a collective denial of racism by whites, it is centrally located in white minds and made up of several subframes, linked to the central subframe that sees 'white' as 'superior, virtuous, moral goodness and action' (p. 28).

Furthermore, a characteristic of a white racial frame is its anti-other stance, as it encloses 'a strong negative orientation to racial "others" who are exploited and oppressed' (Feagin, 2013, p. 10). These narratives connect 'frame elements into historically oriented stories … that are fiction-laden interpretations that [whites] claim as meaningful from these common mythological narratives' (Feagin, 2013, p. 13). This frame has deep roots in our social structures, gets passed down through generations, and has become the country's dominant

frame of mind. It is resistant to change, it suppresses counter-frames, and it ignores inconvenient facts. Therefore, a white racial frame organizes cognitions, affects, and behaviors in specific ways for specific purposes to justify and maintain systemic racism.

Discrimination becomes part of everyday lives, a white habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar & Embrick 2006). Whites reinterpret and reconstruct this frame through shared knowledge or images depending on the groups they interact with. Constant exposure to racialized information is essential for its successful reproduction and distribution across social networks, time, and place (Feagin, 2013, p. 16). We can use this process to theorize about the CPS as a space in which whites, or those which align with the white racial frame, can share and become exposed to racial frames, express individual racist frames and sub frames, and form a 'collective denial' of racism. Essential to this process is time. A moral panic in the public sphere is contingent upon continuous framing of folk devils, if it is expressed only a handful of times and fails to resonate with the larger culture, then it fails to be mentioned over time and fizzles out.

It is important to note that xenophobia and racism are intimately tied experiences and concepts. To speak of the criminalization of immigrants requires one to also unpack centuries of racial oppression. While much critical race scholarship helps us understand this phenomenon in different and important ways, here we are dealing with micro social process of discourse in interaction. However, Omi and Winant's concept of racial formation and racial projects is an important foundation for the social phenomenon observed here. They conceptualize race as a 'master category' that is embodied and socially constructed. This view understands racism as a linking of racial conditions to overall social structure that is historically situated and constantly changing. However, framing and frames help us better get at the nuance of in situ communication that characterizes online interactions and can also help us understand that racism is systemic and foundational to any nation. A white racial frame is especially useful lens to understand micro racial discourse.

The cyber public sphere

Public media via the Internet is an important vehicle for sharing news, giving the public power to participate in the public sphere (i.e., Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). The public sphere allows for people to talk about issues that concern them, reproduces public opinion, and becomes concrete via surveys and polls, which can be manipulated for a specific agenda (Habermas, 1991). Technological advances allow for creation of an online public sphere via social media outlets (i.e., blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube). For example, through Facebook people can share and discuss information instantly and continuously. These conversations are disseminated and transcend across multiple social media platforms. While the discussions may be of a different nature once disseminated, the opinions of prior initiating network of contacts are ultimately still shared. In fact, two different networks can even talk to each other and become one within and among social media platforms. Particularly, homogeneous networks[2] allow the rapid sharing of opinions and information. Castells (2007) in explaining power acquired through media claims that the information is received so fast that the public cannot systematically investigate it and so they believe it. Castells argues the absence of information is more important than what is being shared:

> What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind … Therefore, a political message is necessarily a media message. And whenever a politically related message is conveyed through the media, it must be couched in the specific language of the media. (p. 241)

Therefore, if online media is denigrating immigrants, their economic[3] contributions and the fact that immigrants are not criminals (i.e., Romero, 2014; Sampson, 2008; Waters & Gerstein Pineau, 2015) become absent from people's minds. Thus, denigrating information is shared via the CPS and has the power of influencing public opinion. Though the digital divide has narrowed due to massive use of cell phones by people of color (Daniels, 2013) and immigrants who use the internet to reach transnational spaces (i.e., Flores-Yeffal, 2013), we still find that most information is shared using social media through homogeneous 'white spaces' on the internet (Anderson, 2015). This is compounded by various algorithms applied by social media platform creators to curate information presented to users. For instance, according to Pariser (2011) the creation of 'filter bubbles' by algorithms that recommend certain kinds of information to an individual with certain preferences, limits people's cyber exposure, therefore, increasing the segregation exposure of individuals. Therefore, the Internet perpetuates systemic racism in society (Daniels, 2013).

Methodology

This projects draws on online ethnography (netnography), which is the study of cultures and communities in computer-mediated communications through immersion in online communities, forums, and blogs (Kozinets, 1998, 2010).[4] This method provides continuous and instant information on symbols and meanings of online communities. Data for this study were collected in the 2.0 Web from online social media sites understood as 'public spaces' where people can observe, become 'friends,' and share a responsibility in creation and accumulation of knowledge through posting, commenting, sharing, and tagging content (Beer & Burrows, 2007), described as an online 'participatory culture.'[5]

Data are part of an eight-year-long project. To understand how the public sphere functions online, we identified online sites where people participate and interact, ultimately focusing on comment sections in news sites, YouTube videos, Facebook groups, and Twitter posts. Data also included participant observation in anti-immigrant forums beginning in 2012 to present. The author tasked with this interacted by expressing their personal views on immigrants and presenting counter evidence. To capture conversations on both sides of the spectrum, we collected comments from people reacting to pro and anti-immigrant headlines. Profiles can be manipulated to display identities that do not necessarily correspond to lived-identities, yet participants described themselves as people of all ages, with most identifying as white people living in the US. Public groups are joined by 'liking' pages and allows one access to all content. We did not request membership into closed groups.

We collected headlines, videos, and discussions criminalizing or presenting facts against the criminalization of Mexican and Latino undocumented immigrants to identify rhetoric, tactics, or strategies of users responding to those headlines. Conversations were coded by emerging themes, such as 'denial of facts,' 'discursive tactics,' and 'emotional posts' and searched for patterns within and across each. Next, we analyzed content and

membership statistics of groups with anti-immigrant conversations. Lastly, we searched different platforms for groups utilizing hashtags such as '#IllegalsAreCriminals' and others like it, regardless of political orientation of the group.

Findings

We find that a CPS takes place in several online outlets where participants are allowed to interact and discuss headlines, blog comments, op-eds, etc. Depending on the outlet, users often visit certain forums, participate in long conversations, and become familiar with each other through time. In addition, as discussions develop the direction of the conversations often depends on who participates and what the arguments are. Mainly, conversations leaders are users with the most liked or replied to comments. In what follows, we argue that these particular features of social media sites allow for: (1) easy identification and elevation of the most derogatory arguments against 'folk devils' in the CPS, (2) contribute to the effectiveness and reaffirmation of the white racial frame, and (3) result in an efficient spread of an anti-immigrant moral panic.

We find moral panics can be attributed to a reaction founded in fear. As the nation becomes more diverse and the Latino population continues to grow, this triggers a reaction by white and conservative-leaning Americans, described as a 'whitelash' after a dramatic racial progress (Blake, 2016). Dramatic racial progress, in this case in the form of diversity and an increase in civic engagement by large pro-immigrant social movements, has historically been met by harsh attitudes and oppressive laws (Omi & Winant, 2014). This is exemplified in a YouTube[6] in which the Univision's Journalist Jorge Ramos cites that 'in 2044 non-Hispanic whites will become the minority,' and white supremacist Jared Taylor replies, 'The majority right now is white and you want to systematically take away the white majorities' power?' Taylor explained that a homogeneous country is healthier and that racial diversity brings conflict. This illustrates how white racial frames can be driven by fear of losing domination.

Hashtags as a function that rapidly associates 'folk devils'

Hashtags allow for people to access specific information through keywords. Users gain immediate access to anti-immigrant and criminalizing information. Among the most used hashtags that helped to criminalize undocumented immigrants included but were not limited to:

> #IllegalsAreCriminals, #illegalimmigrants, #Deportation, #ImmigrationOverhaul #detention, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, #CloseTheBorder, #NoAmnesty, #WakeUpAmerica, #SecureOur-Borders, #latino, #mexicans, #Foreigners

Use of hashtags rapidly reinforce the white racial frame and the LCMP against undocumented immigrants in important ways. First, these hashtags portray immigrants as an imminent danger through alarmist language such as, 'illegals,' and 'criminals,' to frame immigrants as dangerous others. Second, words such as 'overhaul', 'wake up', and 'latino' can provoke fear by creating a narrative of America sleeping while Latino (read: brown) bodies flood across the border. Third, phrases such as 'secure our borders,' 'deportation,' and 'make America great again' send a message that eminent action is needed and reflect

an anti-other frame as solvency to imply that America should do some cleaning to get rid of the 'others.'

Searching for hashtags, one can participate in anti-immigrant conversations quickly and efficiently. In sharing posts within and across homogenous networks, users are less likely to include actors who would challenge information shared which facilitates the unchecked spreading of racist rhetoric. The hashtag '#sendthemback' on Twitter populates xenophobic messages as exemplified by a post by @TeamTrump who describe themselves as the 'Official Team Trump Verified' dated 11:37am on 29 October 2016:

> We will end illegal immigration, deport all criminal aliens, & save American lives – We need a new foreign policy that puts America First!

When collected, this post had 758 re-tweets and 1667 likes. Comments by online readers are shown on Figure 1.

Twitter does not restrict user generated content, no matter how problematic it may be (Meyer, 2016). The problem is not easy to fix; as of today there is no algorithm that exists which can detect racist comments. Specifically, baseless anti-immigrant rhetoric as shown on Figure 1 is difficult to control. Figure 1 reflects manipulation of language such as use of capital letters, and desperate language to suggest immediate danger. Such language used in the CPS combines patriotism, generalizations, sensationalism, misinformation to incite anger, fear, or moral righteousness among participants (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), which are values embedded in the white racial frame. Posters like Pr and AmericanPride are combining pro-white subframes with anti-other subframes in their posts by emphasizing patriotism, implying they will 'defend' and 'protect' America while at the same time criminalizing the 'other.' This emphasizes the immediate threat that folk devils represent. Jay criminalized the folk devils, and then Carol, a second generation Mexican American also adopts a pro-white subframe, criminalizing the folk devils by supporting legal and not 'illegal' immigration. As these posts show, anti-immigrant rhetoric drives the white racial frame online, inciting a moral panic that includes other non-whites. We can describe these small but impactful online interactions as tied to a deeply rooted racism. These posts, and millions like it, reflect a broader cultural narrative of non-white bodies as both an economic and moral burden. Through this we see how the internet becomes a sort of public forum, where those aggrieved can express racist frames and interact with like-minded people.

- **Pr brooks** @paila @TeamTrump hell yes deport these people who spawn hate all over! We don't need to be paying for these people who hate America #sendthemback
- **Jay Dillon** @vtology_ @TeamTrump @LindaSuhler All illegal aliens are criminal aliens.
- **AmericanPride** @Americanspirit16 @TeamTrump WE THE PEOPLE WILL RISE AND PROTECT OUR COUNTRY FROM LIES, DECEIT, CHEATS & CORRUPTION = NO TOLERANCE 4 THIS BEHAVIOR
- **CAROL** @9285542612t @TeamTrump IM MEXICAN AMERICAN! 2ND GENERATION CITIZEN! AND I WANT TRUMP FOR LEGAL IMMIGRATION NOT ILLEGAL MIGRATION!

Figure 1. Replies to Trump's Tweet on 29 October 2016.

Table 1. Facebook pages data about number of likes or group membership and increase or decrease on participation from 14 December 2015 to 26 October 2016.

Facebook page name	No. of likes as of 14 December 2015	No. of likes as of 17 August 2016	No. of likes as of 26 October 2016	Increase or decrease	Close or open group	No. of members as of 14 December 2015	No. of members as of 08/17/16	No. of members as of 26 October 2016	Increase or decrease
Americas Freedom Fighters	199,041	372,267	421,916	**222,875**					**0**
Citizens for Safe Cities: The Santuary Cities Kills	485	506	506	**21**					**0**
Christians Against Illegal Immigration	3330	3519	3532	**202**					**0**
Hancock Patriots	509	512	512	**3**					**0**
Extremelypissedofrightwingers2	163,124	287,526	312,676	**149,552**					**0**
Illegal Immigration Must Be Stopped and Reversed	23,900	41,232	40,977	**17,077**					**0**
Long Islanders Against Illegal Immigrants	1465	1459	1471	**6**					**0**
Nation in Distress	605,744	1,504,980	1,810,532	**1,204,788**					**0**
Not giving welfare to illegal immigrants	85,232	83,396	83,020	**−2212**					**0**
NumbersUSA	1582,089	5,330,596	6,086,763	**4,504,674**					**0**
OverpassesForAmerica	110,911	207,224	235,648	**124,737**					**0**
Stand With Arizona (and Against Illegal Immigration)	794,358	792,647	791,225	**−3133**					**0**
Stand with Delaware Against the Illegal Alien Invasion	1129	1184	1185	**56**					**0**
Stop Amnesty	1,598,456	1,586,923	1,582,499	**−15,957**					**0**
Stop Illegal Immigration	54,904	54,158	53,955	**−949**					**0**
Stop Utah's Amnesty for Illegal Aliens	778	1469	808	**30**					**0**
The Remembrance Project	2237	2690	3749	**1512**					**0**
ALIPAC Americans for Legal Immigration	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	closed group	4422	4461	4468	**46**
Citizens Against Illegal Alien Immigration & Admnesty	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	closed group	12,737	12,349	12,247	**−490**
Conservative Hispanic Society	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	closed group	6915	7357	7486	**442**
ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION GETTING IT UNDER CONTROL	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	closed group	6519	6671	6663	**144**
SIIN (Stop Illegal Immigration Now!)	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	public group	1931	2421	2468	**537**
Stop Illegal Immigration & Secure Our Borders Now	n/a	n/a	n/a	**0**	closed group	54,165	55,267	54,926	**761**
Totals	5,227,692	10,272,288	11,430,974	**5,980,184**					**1440**

Spread of the LCMP via the 'Cyber Public Sphere'

To understand the pervasiveness of a white racial frame in the CPS, we can examine the membership of online anti-immigrant groups. Table 1 shows 23 Facebook websites connected to the hashtag '#IllegalsAreCriminals' whose membership was recorded three separate times. Most of these sites displayed similar or exact messaging posted by a small and select number of moderators. This suggests messages are recycled across networks and social media platforms by a select few that craft salient hashtags informed by anti-immigrant white racial frames. Posters engaged in anti-other and pro-white conversations share posts with their networks, who then do the same, and so on. As anti-immigrant messages spread in the CPS, more and more people are exposed to both xenophobia and the white racial frame.

Table 1 shows the change in membership (number of likes) since December 2015. While membership fluctuated in some groups, in less than a year, all 23 websites experienced an increase of more than six million members combined. This increase suggests the power of white racial frames. Membership increase is not surprising as attacks against Mexican immigrants have been non-stop during the turn of the twenty-first Century (i.e., Chavez, 2008; Massey et al., 2016), but particularly since 2016 when Donald Trump strategically targeted them in his bid for presidency. This is particularly true if we consider that we began data collection from before he was a presidential candidate until after he became President.

Contesting and ignoring accurate information

Castells (2007) claims the distribution of information via the CPS happens so rapidly that fact-checking becomes difficult. Conceptualize as a 'Recycling Factory in Cyberspace' Flores-Yeffal et al. (2011), describe how information is manipulated, distributed and redistributed via other anti-immigrant alarmist websites. Information about immigration distributed on the Internet can be fabricated and recycled by particular interest groups via think tanks. While Facebook and Twitter were not as widely used when their study took place, today various social media sites facilitate re-distribution of information. In addition, the use of hashtags facilitates the search for and spread of this information. This is consistent with the idea of white racial frames as resistant to challenge. Because white racial frames and subframes are deeply ingrained in our social structures, these findings reflect the process of othering people through racial frames not only predates modernity but colors our experience of technology, seeping into every aspect of our modern lives.

This is exemplified on social media sites and as people respond to reports and news articles. Often, actors used information published by biased anti-immigrant think tanks as facts when rejecting counter-frames. As, He Lee (2015)[7] notes:

> Trump's repeated statements about immigrants and crime underscore a common public perception that crime is correlated with immigration, especially illegal immigration. But that is a misperception; no solid data support it, and the data that do exist negate it.

Among the over 200 public comments were the following:

> By Pat McLaughlin

What you seem to forget or actually dismiss, 'Fact Check' is the FACT that EVERY SINGLE one that crosses that border illegally, which is about 99% of them ARE criminals by the very act of crossing it. WHY is that so difficult for you people to understand? It is because you simply REFUSE to accept it. The truth is NEVER altered by your ability to stomach it!

By lacebra

ARTICLE THAT EXAMINES YOUR FACT CHECKER AND DISAGREES:
It's time to fact-check the fact-checkers. The Washington Post's Michelle Yee Hee Lee gave Donald Trump four Pinocchios for saying, 'They're bringing crime' across the border from Mexico. The Post scribe added, 'Trump clarified that he was referring to cases where undocumented immigrants commit violent crimes or smuggle drugs.'

By lacebra

MS LEE, you are the one misleading people. The concern is the record of criminal charges and convictions of those crossing the border illegally that have been CAUGHT. Many don't get caught. Are these figures an adequate representation of the entire residing population of illegals? These figures are so negative, why take the chance? Who needs the baggage? Rate of incarceration is totally irrelevant as is the total illegal immigrant population. http://cis.org/ICE-Document-Details-36000-Criminal …

http://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics

Posters exemplify white racial frame moral values as objective and correct, while 'others' are criminal and emotional. A characteristic of the white racial frame is countering information that does not align with their expressed opinion. The utilization of derogatory language and capital letters are attempts to pose their message as important and imminent. This counteracting and manipulation of text and language is aimed to convince others that indeed, their claims are correct and justified which is possible thorough the CPS.

A contemporary example of inciting of a moral panic criminalizing immigrants is the false claim by then Presidential Candidate Donald Trump that Mexican immigrants are criminals and rapists.[8] The spreading of misinformation criminalizing immigrant's blurs, redraws, and widens moral boundaries between whites and Mexican and Latino immigrants. Coupled with fear imbedded within the LCMP, this strengthens images of 'the other.' In using the CPS to spread the LCMP, users adopt white racial frames to tap into fear, morality, and racism. We also find the sources of information and social networks were homogenous. This is a characteristic of both liberal and conservative media. Therefore, if conservative media spread misinformation and fuel the LCMP, this helps to justify the denial of resources or support of racist polices against Mexican immigrants allowing for systematic racism to take place.

An article cited a poll asking whether undocumented immigrants from Mexico are undesirable criminals or honest people trying to get ahead. Seventy-three per cent of respondents said they believed immigrants were mainly honest people and 16% believed they were undesirable. However, poll results reflecting public attitudes depend on the sources of information. The same article claimed a Fox News poll found between 62% and 79% of Americans are 'at least somewhat concerned that "illegal" immigrants' lead to an increase in crime, terrorism, take jobs from US citizens, and overburden government programs. Therefore, those exposed mostly to Fox News would have a different set of opinions than those who are not regarding

the folk devils. Thus, the white racial frame is reinforced by exposure to information that aligns with their pro-white and anti-other subframes' values and views.

Those who carry anti-other subframes can be resistant to any argument or information challenging their claims. For example, a comment displaying a reaction to the newspaper article mentioned above by, 'Just Another Anne' states:

> The Washington Post must be as corrupt a newspaper as Washington DC is one of the most corrupt cities in the USA.OF COURSE Illegal Aliens are CRIMINALS !!! They crossed our US Border ILLEGALLY, sought help to remain in the US ILLEGALLY (and aiding and abetting ILLEGAL ALIENS is a FELONY … but Obama doesn't think that he will ever need to worry about being prosecuted), and CONTINUE to expect and DEMAND financial support for lawyers, housing, food, medical treatment, IRS tax refunds, etc … . that is only paid by STEALING TRILLIONS (and counting) of dollars of US taxpayer funds to get that SUPREMELY racist and favoritism type support OVER AND ABOVE legal US CITIZENS. Keep lying, Washington Post … being a Liberal news source, NO ONE in America expects you to tell or report the truth.

Again consistent with functions of a white racial frame, this actor denies facts in the article. Our findings show responses as such are a 'recycling' of information obtained from their participation in other networks. Drawing on a larger cultural white racial frame this poster sees immigrants as a societal burden and dehumanizes immigrants by calling them 'Illegal Aliens.' Implicitly, this post's use of language and writing style serves as a window into themes that exemplify a white racial frame and drive a moral panic. The racist undertone of this reply can be seen with framing of President Obama as a criminal who thinks himself above the law. Second, in exemplifying various subframes in the white racial frame, this user draws on 'racism' and unfair 'favoritism' to describe immigrants as criminals who benefit from a 'racist' advantage. On a deeper level, this framing underlines a social hierarchy, where the user seems to view the world through a lens that favors laws, morality, and self-reliance with 'legal US citizens' at the top of the food chain. This resonates with aspects of the white racial frame and help to promote a culture of criminality and immorality linked to immigrants.

Criminalization of undocumented immigrants happens across social media platforms, in sites run by smaller conservative organizations. Here are two comments in reaction to an article titled, 'TRUMP WAS RIGHT: 20% of illegal immigrants caught at the border have criminal record.'[9] This post was made by 'Morderer' who stated:

> Wrong. 100% have a criminal record being that, the mere act of crossing the border illegally IS criminal in itself. Google what will happen to you if you try to cross illegally into China, Mexico, Germany (or any EU state), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, even Canada. Years in a hard labor camp if you're lucky.

'Blues' replies:

> Well, criminal record means they have been convicted of a crime and sentenced. Obama opens the borders, they enter openly, but he doesn't prosecute anyone. Thus, these illegals don't have a criminal record from crossing the border. It's Obama's fault.

These posts exemplify how immigrants are criminalized for having crossed the border without proper documentation through exaggerated language. Participants challenge information that counters their opinions and try to rationalize and problematize the issue. A common scapegoat in resisting and reinforcing the white racial frame is the Obama administration. This tactic reflects a racial bias and frames their fears as not

only as local or national but as international problems. Reflecting Ngai's framework, this interaction reflects the tension and liminal space occupied by immigrants. While one user concretely understands immigrants as 'criminals' the other understands them as people outside of the law, yet both still draw from the same white racial frame that dehumanizes undocumented immigrants.

Patriotism is an important tool for the criminalization of immigrants and the white racial frame. As shown on Figure 2 an image on 19 March 2016 by a Facebook page titled, 'Illegal Immigration Must be Stopped and Reversed.' was circulated stating: 'Illegals aren't immigrants, they are criminals.'[10] By 28 October 2016, the post received 933 likes, 4204 shares and 66 comments. The image makes use of American flag colors, a tactic often used on images across networks, strategically linked to anti-immigrant claims. This can be interpreted as an attempt to patriotically align with a white racial frame, linking white-ness and white morality as it emphasizes a pro-white racial subframe, and these ideas are drawn upon in spreading of the LCMP.

Also, the top comments posted under the picture appear on the right of the picture on Figure 2. There are differing opinions and issues exchanged through discourse related to this picture. 'Donovan' uses curse words using 'illegals,' 'shit,' 'or get the fuck out.' 'Jason' replies with the criminalization argument, ignoring the fact that for the majority of unskilled undocumented immigrants, it is almost impossible to migrate legally to the US (i.e., Massey et al., 2016). Posters then continued the conversation by providing historical examples (just like Sandra) and making jokes about ironic realities of history and myths embedded in the white racial frame. We found the strategy of denying historical realities to be common while actors maintain their original positions for or against the folk devils. The interaction shown on Figure 2 is important for two main reasons. First, the back and forth between users exemplifies the use of online sites as public spheres and a form of continuity, where even after posters express opinions, they continue to be involved in interactions with others. Second, economic burden and moral frames are intricately tied. Immigrants are framed as a burden on our social structures and as 'invaders' that wreak havoc.

YouTube is also used to spread the white racial frame in the CPS to magnify the LCMP. Videos can be disseminated to millions of users across the globe using YouTube videos which lack any monitoring regarding content. For example, 'The Illegal Invasion of America'

Sandra Chris Garcia People are just ignorant! "illegals" as you like to call them are the ones doing the jobs that nobody wants to do. I'd like to see you spoiled white people and wanna be white people in fields doing hard labor like they do instead of in your air conditioned offices and cubicles. And how do you figure your tax money supports them when they can't get government assistance and they can't even file taxes on their earnings. So really that money goes to the government
Replies:
Illegal Immigration Must Be Stopped and Reversed Americans have always done these jobs just fine before 20 million illegal aliens invaded our nation.
Sandra Chris Garcia These are the jobs no one else wants to do. I'm not saying people haven't done them, no one wants to do them. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be in a crop field harvesting the fruits and vegetables that you eat.
Donovan Donley Like construction workers or mechanics lmao I went to school to become a mechanic and because of illegals I can't find a gig that pays more then 10 per hour stop bringing up the Indians shit is so outdated in all for immgration just do it legally like my family and my wife did or get the fuck out
Jason Hilton Could they not do the job to earn money after legally immigrating? Claiming they do jobs we won't is a moot point. All we are asking is to immigrate legally. That would help them and the everyone else.

Figure 2. The top comments under the image on the left.

posted a videos.[11] The video, a compilation of small video excerpts, is edited footage taken out of context to show extreme examples that immigrants steal money from the government, abuse the system, and kill innocent American people. 'Renegade Broadcasting' has published 72 videos with white supremacists views.[12] Lastly, posters attempted to create distance between their Latino background and Latino undocumented immigrants. For instance, one user stated, 'I am a White Mexican' in an attempt to disassociate from the brown race. This reflects adoption of anti-other subframing to cope and resist with racial oppression.

Frequently, posters replied with nuanced comments, suggesting they had invested in and researched evidence to support their views. It seemed though that they relied on information recycled in the CPS because posters in white spaces cited right-wing think tanks or right-wing media sources. Information floating in their network, regardless of whether it was true or false, was recycled and reinforced the set of cognitions, perceptions, emotions, and narratives of the white racial frame and mythical historical facts.

Effects of the 'Cyber Public Sphere' on the LCMP and public opinion

Racial oppression in everyday discourse is so systemic that our findings indicate it seeps into our cyber interactions. Technological advances help us better understand connection between larger cultural frames and how they influence micro interactions. While we know much about how racial oppression seeps into lived experiences of individuals and is perpetuated by racists and their allies, we know little about how this influences our cyber interactions. In a world that is increasingly technology driven, scholars must consider not only grand world systems theories but also aim to understand how historical frames are perpetuated by technology.

Here we set out to understand the relationship between a public sphere, white racial framing, and moral panics. In using the Internet at a site of inquiry, we found online interactions perpetuate racism against undocumented immigrants. These online interactions draw upon cultural frames of morality and criminality to spark fear of the 'other' and create a moral panic. Habermas (1991) argues public opinion resulting from the public sphere, and in this case the CPS, can be measured via surveys and polls. We found consistent evidence that those who expressed claims against the folk devils tended to also express conservative values reflected in the white racial frame. Therefore, if the LCMP is taking place within the CPS, one would expect to find evidence of the following two assertions.

First, conservatives are more likely than liberals to expose themselves to anti-immigrant social media groups. A 2014 Pew study revealed those expressing conservative views reported different online experiences and behaviors in comparison to those with liberal views[13] with 47% of the conservative respondents reporting seeing posts on Facebook that aligned with their views compared to 32% of Liberal users. However, those that reported liberal views reported de-friending, hiding, or blocking someone because they posted political content 44% of the time, in comparison to 31% of conservatives. Therefore, conservatives are more likely to pay attention to political posts on Facebook and they are less likely to de-friend or block someone with political posts. Conservatives like to engage with political content to reassert their anti-immigrant views. Even when they are confronted with counter information, they dispute the information by engaging with others who share the anti-other subframe. This process reinforces their own anti-other subframe and helps spread the LCMP by using discourse that is inherently anti-other.

Second, one would expect an increase of the number of conservatives with a negative view of immigrants and a decrease of the number of liberals who do so. The Pew found the number of liberals thinking positively about immigrants has increased and the number of conservatives sharing this same view has decreased and/or stayed the same.[14] Jones concludes that between 1994 and 2005, republicans and democrats shared positive views of immigrants in similar rates. However, these views diverged in October of 2006 by 15% with fewer republicans reporting positive views of immigrants. Since then, democrats and democratic-leaning independent respondents reported a view of immigrants as an asset to the country jumped from 49% to 78%. In contrast, republican and republican-leaning independent respondents continuously shared this positive view of immigrants at low rates, remaining between 34% and 35%.

Furthermore, the Pew[15] found 27% of republican respondents saw immigrants as making a positive contribution to the country, in comparison to 63% who reported immigrants as a burden on jobs, housing, and healthcare. The negative views of immigrants by republicans have continued to rise. The share of republican who report immigrants as strength to the country in 2015 declined to 42% from 2014. Conservatives, therefore, seem to strongly spread their white racially framed and anti-immigrant views in the cyber public sphere, increasing the Latino cyber-moral threat.

Conclusion

We have explored the role of the public in spreading moral panics online. Our findings suggest the LCMP can be influenced by white racial frames within the CPS, leading to reinforcement of systemic racism. Moral entrepreneurs who in most cases are white people in positions of power (i.e., Trump & think tank funders) set in motion a moral panic, this is then effectively disseminated and recycled through people's online participation. The power of the Internet is significant in allowing a CPS and in facilitating dissemination of ideologies. A report found American white nationalist's movements have experienced an increase in Twitter followers by 600% since 2012.[16] The Internet thus becomes a platform where comments, images, videos, filter bubbles, and use of hashtags facilitate and speed up social communication. Whether this is inherently 'bad' or 'good' lies outside of this project's scope. Rather, what we argue is that when users discuss criminalization of immigrants through homogeneous networks, they draw on manipulated information to reinforce pro-white and anti-other sub-frames. Values, patriotism, resistance to factual evidence, and reinforcement of historical mythologies of the white racial frame persist in the CPS. Users who report not being white but express sympathy for anti-immigrant ideals can adopt these frames to avoid being part of oppressed groups. The online context in which the white racial frame is reproduced allows moral panics against Latinos to flourish, increasing the number of people exposed to anti-immigrant narratives. This may have the effect of increasing anti-immigrant legislation. Using social media to engage in online community building has been shown to be positively associated with civic and political participation (Shah & Gil de Zúñiga, 2008) and these policy implications can lead to concrete consequences. At the time of writing this article, President Trump had already signed a number of anti-immigrant executive actions[17] ordering building of a wall at the southern border and began a crackdown on 'illegals' with massive deportations, and ordered a ban on Muslims.[18] As a 'cruel' recent attempt, he placed

800,000 young lives in danger by rescinding DACA.[19] Therefore, one cannot ignore the Internet's power in making possible a far-reaching cyber public sphere that allows for efficient moral panics and perpetuates unchecked systemic racism in the United States.

Notes

1. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_us_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b.
2. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/technology/how-the-internet-is-loosening-our-grip-on-the-truth.html?_r=0.
3. http://www.texasmonthly.com/burka-blog/data-from-2006-comptroller-study/.
4. http://iris2016.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IRIS2016_paper_21-2.pdf.
5. http://www.digitallearning.macfound.org.
6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0T4jssO9t-0.
7. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/.
8. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_us_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b.
9. http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2015/09/trump-was-right-20-of-illegal-immigrants-caught-at-the-border-have-criminal-record/.
10. https://www.facebook.com/386287982528/photos/a.396571917528.165387.386287982528/10153832098432529/?type=3&theater.
11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B65pLsah3XE.
12. https://www.youtube.com/user/renegadesinamerica/videos.
13. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/12/liberal-democrats-most-likely-to-have-learned-about-election-from-facebook/.
14. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/15/americans-views-of-immigrants-marked-by-widening-partisan-generational-divides/.
15. http://www.people-press.org/2015/06/04/broad-public-support-for-legal-status-for-undocumented-immigrants/#views-of-immigrants-impact-on-the-u-s.
16. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/white-nationalist-movement-twitter-faster-growth-isis-islamic-state-study-a7223671.html.
17. http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/26/politics/executive-orders-presidents-actions-presidential-memoranda/.
18. Who may have already become the next targeted group.
19. http://www.npr.org/2017/09/05/546423550/trump-signals-end-to-daca-calls-on-congress-to-act.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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