

Imagining Transnationalism in the Spanish-Language Media

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In December 2003, Joaquin Avila compared the situation of California's 4.6 million non-citizen immigrants to "apartheid" and recommended that legislators allow them to vote in local elections (Avila 2003). Many readers disagreed because the US news media has constructed a different concept of national belonging. The English-language media present competing constructions of Mexican immigrants to the United States as inside and outside of the US national community, but are particularly reluctant to offer civic rights to immigrants. They present transnationalism, the idea that immigrants preserve ties to their communities of origin, as a threat to the US national community (Chavez 50).

Scholars like Leo Chavez have investigated the role the US English-language media play in constructing national imagined communities and transnational imagined communities, but have given less attention to the Spanish-language media. I pick up where they have left off and examine how the Spanish-language media, both in the US and Mexico, construct transnationalism. This study analyzes *El Excelsior*, a Mexico City newspaper, and *La Opinión*, a Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper, and codes articles for references to national membership. I use these codes to identify articles as "Transnational" or "non-Transnational" and find that *El Excelsior* (MX) includes a higher percentage of transnational articles. In both papers, transnational articles are more likely to include each type of reference to national belonging, except that that *La Opinión* (US) limits references to US political participation in its

transnational articles. By doing so, they may reinforce shared narratives which deny civic rights to transnational migrants.

I begin by presenting the basics of “imagined communities” and “shared narratives” as a theoretical background. I explain how my methods compare to those used previously by other researchers and describe my selection and coding of articles. I share my findings with the help of two charts in the “Analysis” section and offer implications in the conclusion.

Theoretical Background

Lomnitz (2001) summarizes Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities: we do not know most of the people with whom we share a country, so a national community cannot possibly exist. Instead, we imagine a national community based on shared news media. How we narrate nationality, especially in the news, shapes important questions about whom we allow to share national rights. Anderson explained how nationalism motivated soldiers to sacrifice their lives (Lomnitz 2001:3), but I want to explain how imagined communities prompt us to deliver or deny rights to migrants. Like Anderson, though, I look at the role of print media in imagining national membership.

The print media contain both “denotative” and “connotative” meanings (Chavez 2001: 38). Denotative meanings are clear in the text while we must read connotative meanings in relation to outside themes, narratives, and mythologies (37-39). These connotative meanings help reshape our shared narratives (39), forming a feedback loop. I analyze news articles in reference to shared narratives of national membership.

Methods

Like Chavez, I identified repeated “elements” in the print media which tap into shared narratives (80-81). Unlike Chavez, I analyzed text instead of images and I looked for references instead of tropes. I coded references to migrant involvement in the US and Mexican communities as qualitative binary variables. The averages of these variables, equal to the fraction of articles making the references, reveal underlying narrative patterns. Branton and Dunaway (2008), who consider 48 newspapers, use regression analysis to analyze statistically the qualitative variables. Since I analyze only two newspapers, I simply compared the percentage of transnational and non-transnational articles that mention each type of national involvement.

After coding references to migrant involvement in national communities, I computed a dummy variable for “Transnationalism.” I used Levitt’s definition of “simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society” (Levitt 2007:131), although researchers have offered other definitions over the last fifteen years. Transnationalism is not simply an alternative to assimilation (Smith 2006:279), but in part a result of it, as many immigrants retain ties to home communities during the process of assimilation. Transnational ties can be economic, political, sociocultural, or religious (Levitt 137). I used several types of ties, mostly economic and political, to compute transnationalism and I then compared references to these ties in transnational and non-transnational articles.

I selected two papers for this study: a US Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinión*, and a Mexican newspaper, *El Excelsior*. *La Opinión*, based in Los Angeles, was founded in 1926 and has a circulation of 125,000. Although historically a Mexican-American newspaper, its stated goal is now to be an American newspaper that happens to be published in Spanish (*La Opinión*,

2008). However, its mostly-immigrant audience does not represent the entire US population. It has bureaus in both Washington, DC and Mexico City and leans liberal.

El Excélsior, founded in 1917 in Mexico City, has a smaller circulation of 60,000. The limited circulation of *El Excélsior* offers an advantage: the newspaper is less likely than larger papers to target an audience in the US, and thus offers a greater contrast to US papers. At the same time, a circulation of 60,000 marks it as a mainstream newspaper in the fragmented Mexico City media market. *El Excélsior* used to be a respected government-leaning paper, but Olegario Vázquez Raña bought the paper in 2004 and it has since lost prestige (Werbowski 2007). Both papers distinguish themselves by offering searchable online archives.

I analyzed articles published between May 1, 2008 and July 31, 2008 (inclusive). This time period includes both Democratic and Republican national conventions in the US and the beginnings of an economic recession in the US, prompting stories on the economy's effect on migrants and migrants' effects on the election. These events increase the volume of articles but may also bias articles: the time period included no major Mexican election and no slowdown in the Mexican economy. Future studies should include a longer or more representative time period and eliminate this bias.

I searched within these dates for any news articles containing the string “migrante”—including the Spanish equivalents of “migrant,” “immigrant,” “emigrant,” and their plurals. In order to simplify my results, I included only news articles from the main section of the paper, ignoring style, business, sports, or entertainment articles, regular columns, editorials, or letters to the editor. I accepted only articles which discussed Mexican migrants to the US in order to control for national origin, although I did take articles with no mention of nationality if they

clearly referred to Hispanic migrants. I included articles in which migrant names or proximities to the Mexican border indicated likely Mexican migrants.

I coded these articles according to three groups of variables: demonym, migrant actions and roles, and migrant rights and entitlements. Each category contains a variety of binary “dummy” variables associated with either the US or Mexico. They take a value of “1” for each article which mentions the characteristic and “0” for articles which do not.

Demonym, which refers to place name, includes two variables. “Mexican Demonym” marks articles that refer to migrants with an adjective formed from a Mexican place name (e.g. “mexicano” or “defeño”, references to natives of Mexico and Mexico City respectively). “US Demonym” marks article that refer to migrants by “Americans” or another US demonym. “Donym,” unlike the other variables, is not a type of involvement, but articles use it to denote national alignment. Omitting “Donym” would bias my measurements of representations of migrants.

Migrant actions and roles include six variables: “US Political Participation”, “MX Political Participation,” “Entrepreneurship,” “Family,” “Work,” and “Remittances.” Political participation, divided by the nation of participation, includes civic actions such as naturalization, voting, marching, lobbying, and community organizing. “Entrepreneurship” includes any reference to migrants taking risks of any sort to advance themselves. “Family” includes any references to migrants’ families. “Work” and “Remittances” refer respectively to migrants who work in the US and migrants who send money home to Mexico. Most articles make reference to several of these traits.

The third category, rights and entitlements, includes only two variables: “US Rights and Entitlements” and “MX Rights and Entitlements.” These variables indicate articles which

mention the benefits of new programs or policies, report requests for new programs or policy changes, or mention shortcomings of current policies and programs; references to programs or policies of each government are coded in the corresponding variable. Examples range from reports of migrant deaths to descriptions of migrant political action demanding better legal treatment.

Each of these dummy variables has a national alignment. Some names clearly indicate alignment: “US Rights and Entitlements,” “MX Rights and Entitlements,” “US Political Participation,” “MX Political Participation,” “US Demonym,” and “Mexican Demonym.” Others do not: “Work” identifies articles which refer to migrants as economic contributors to the US, while “Remittances” identifies articles which refer to migrants as contributors to the Mexican economy. “Entrepreneurship” identifies articles which frame migrants in terms of US ideals and refer to migrants as investing in their future in the US, while “Family” identifies articles which refer to migrants’ home communities in Mexico. In this study, I am interested not in the positive tone of “family” which Chavez identifies (73) but rather in its reference to migrants’ origins. I operationalized transnationalism as membership in both communities, so “Transnationalism” equals “1” for all articles which include at least one variable aligned with each nation. I considered all other articles “non-Transnational.”

Of the 133 articles considered for this paper, 70 come from the Mexican paper *El Excelsior* and 63 from the US paper *La Opinión*. All variables are binary “dummy” variables and equal “1” for each article which mentions the association or has the characteristic and zero otherwise. Table 1 summarizes variable descriptions:

Table 1: Variable Names and Descriptions

Variable Name	Variable Description
Mexican Demonym	Article refers to migrants as “Mexicans” or another term derived from the name of a place in Mexico
US Demonym	Article refers to migrants as “Americans” or another term derived from the name of a place in the United States
Entrepreneur	Article mentions migrants as taking risks to advance themselves
Family	Article mentions migrant families
US Political Participation	Article mentions migrants naturalizing, voting, lobbying, protesting, or community organizing in US politics
MX Political Participation	Article mentions migrants voting, lobbying, or protesting in Mexican politics
Remittances	Article mentions migrants sending money to Mexico
Work	Article mentions migrants working in the US or mentions migrants’ professions
MX Rights and Entitlements	Article mentions the benefits of new Mexican programs or policies, reports requests for new Mexican programs or Mexican policy changes, or mentions shortcomings of current Mexican policies or programs
US Rights and Entitlements	Article mentions the benefits of new US programs or policies, reports requests for new US programs or US policy changes, or mentions shortcomings of current US policies or programs
Transnational	Article mentions at least one type of US involvement (US Demonym, Entrepreneur, US political participation, Work, US Rights and Entitlements) and at least one type of Mexican involvement (Mexican Demonym, Family, MX Political Participation, Remittances, MX Rights and Entitlements).

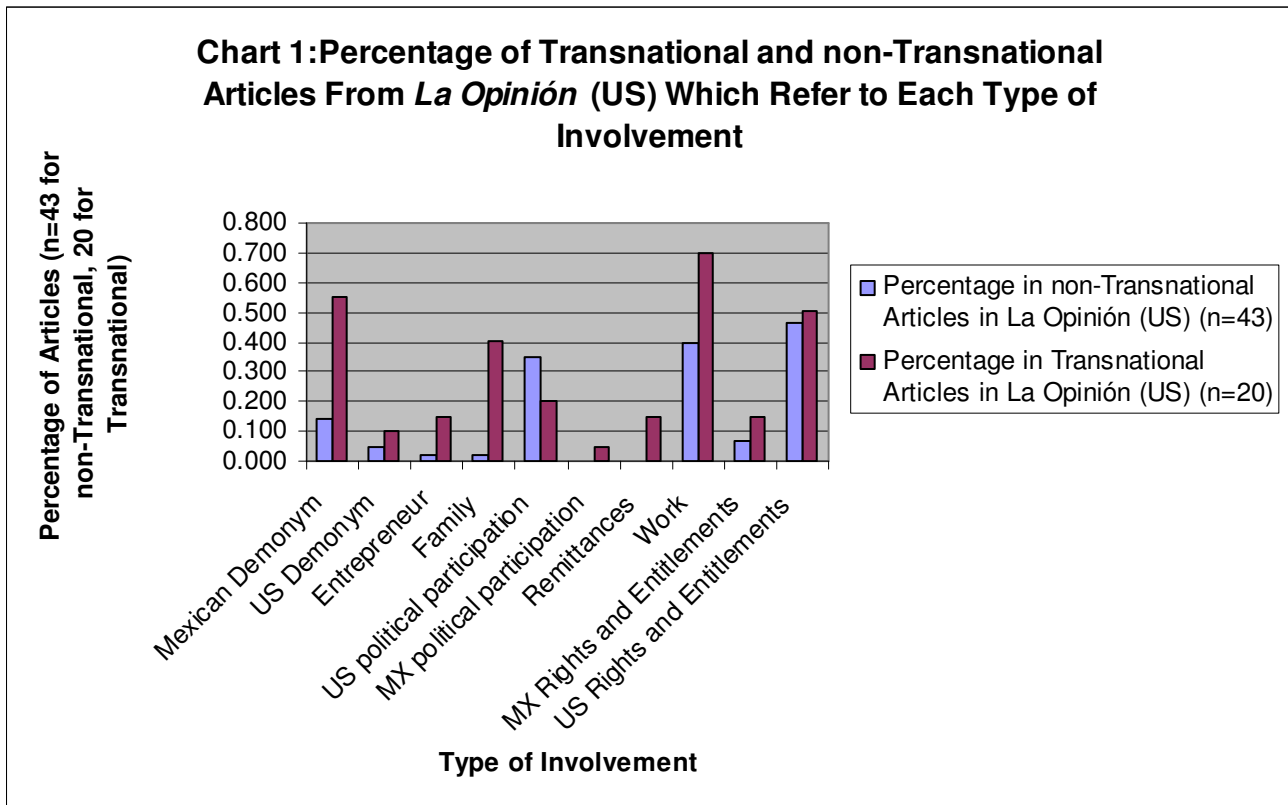
Analysis

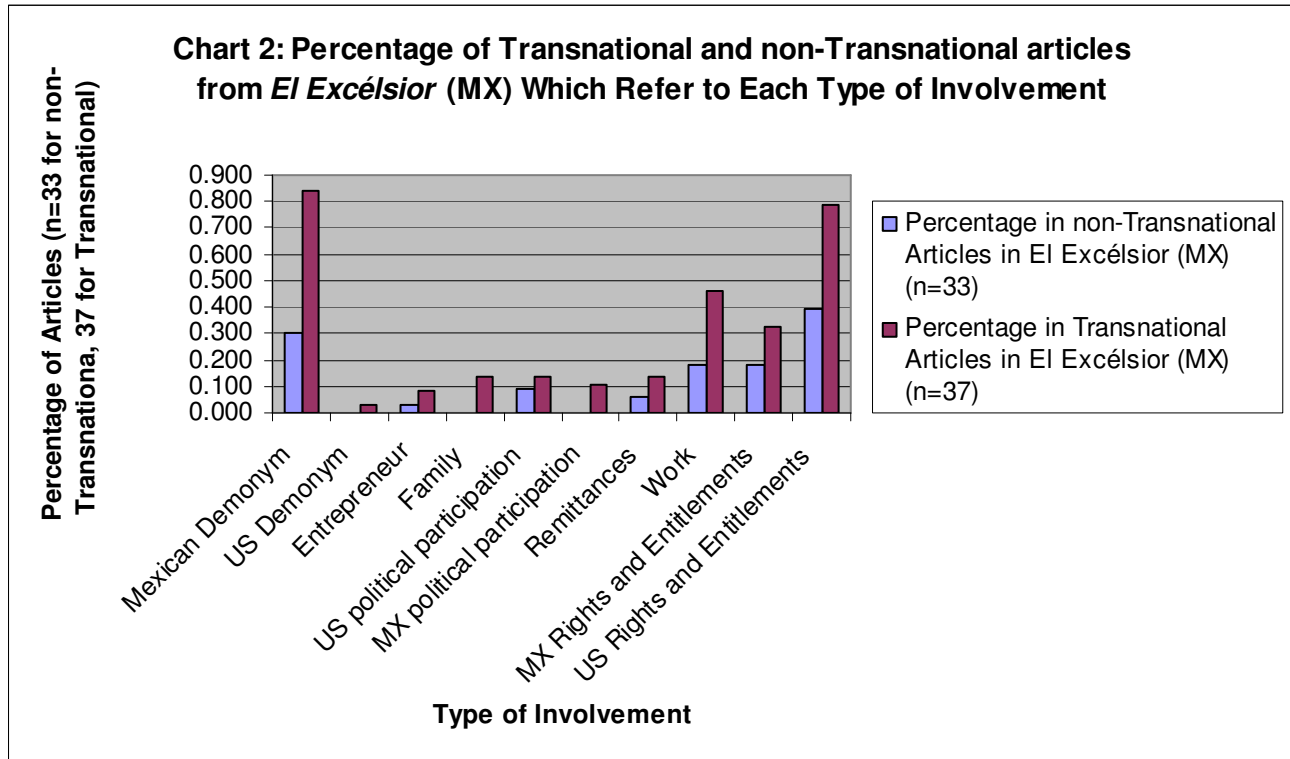
42.9% of articles describe migrants as transnational. 52.9% of articles from *El Excélsior* (MX) are transnational, compared to 31.7% from *La Opinión* (US). This difference is statistically significant at the 5% level (using the unpaired t-test for unequal variances), meaning that it is not due to random fluctuations.

Why might *El Excélsior* (MX) show more transnationalism? For-profit companies publish both of these newspapers and design their projections of migrants to increase readership. They want readers to identify with the migrants in their stories. *La Opinión* (US), which markets itself to all US Spanish-speakers, not just migrants from Mexico, projects a unified group of US Latinos who participate in the US community. *El Excélsior* (MX) projects migrants as members

of the Mexican community (Fox 1996; Subervi 2008). At the same time, neither paper can avoid making some references to participation in the US community and occasionally the Mexican community while reporting the news. *El Excelsior* (MX) combines this obligatory focus on the US with a profit-driven focus on Mexico and yields more transnational articles. *La Opinión* also presents transnational articles, but to a lesser extent.

Articles which mention participation in both communities reflect specific shared narratives. They offer distinct connotative meanings which shape their readers' constructions of transnationalism. Charts 1 and 2 show how the frequency of each type of membership compares for Transnational and non-Transnational articles in each paper:





I expected all references to national involvement to occur more often in the transnational articles. I define “Transnationalism” as belonging to both communities simultaneously, so all transnational articles have at least two references to involvement, one for each nation. In fact, references to most types of belonging do occur more often in Transnational articles than in non-Transnational articles. The difference is statistically significant at the 5% level for “Mexican Demonym,” “Family,” “MX Political Participation,” “Work,” “US Rights and Entitlements,” and “MX Rights and Entitlements” in *El Excelsior* (MX) and for “Mexican Demonym,” “Family,” and “Work” in *La Opinión* (US). An unpaired t-test for difference of means shows that random fluctuations alone cannot explain these differences.

However, one variable breaks this pattern. “US Political Participation” appears in 34.9% of *La Opinión*’s (US) non-transnational articles but only 20% of *La Opinión*’s (US) transnational

articles. The difference is not statistically significant at the 5% level, but nonetheless suggests that *La Opinión* (US) excludes US civic rights from transnational migrants.

Why might “US Political Participation” fail to show a statistically significant increase between non-transnational and transnational articles? *La Opinión* (US) may simply be repeating a bias already present in the editors’, and perhaps even the nation’s shared narratives. Chavez (2001) divides magazine covers according to a small list of repeated metaphors and visual allusions, and Coutin and Chock (1997) describe how reporters negotiate identity by manipulating pre-existing shared narratives. Similarly, production in the US Spanish-language media relies heavily on pre-existing narratives. Perhaps narratives describing migrant assimilation heavily feature US political participation but not involvement in the Mexican community, while US narratives of transnational migration focus less on political integration in the US, leading to a lack of transnational articles alluding to US political participation. The “transnational narratives” underlying *La Opinión’s* (US) articles appear to include rights and entitlements in both countries, work and remittances, Mexican demonym and Family, but specifically exclude US political participation. *La Opinión* (US) reinforces shared narratives denying civic rights to transnational migrants.

Conclusion

In a political campaign, the media repeat narratives like the story of “Joe the Plumber” until they enter the national consciousness. US Spanish-language papers also repeat narratives. They tell stories about migrants who make important contributions about US politics and about migrants who deserve rights and entitlements from the US government and community. These narratives, if they to enter into the public consciousness beyond the readership of Spanish-language newspapers, could increase migrants’ rights. If, though, as this paper suggests, these

narratives specifically avoid describing the political participation of migrants who remain connected to the Mexican community, these narratives may have sinister side effects. They may reinforce readers' views that only migrants who have severed ties to home should receive civic rights in the US.

This topic merits further investigation. Researches could improve this study by applying similar methods to a larger, more representative time span, possibly focusing on the year 2000 when both countries experienced both economic growth and a presidential election. They could examine other newspapers to generalize this study to all Spanish-language US newspapers and even to English-language papers, which may rely on a different set of shared narratives. Researchers could control coding and article selection by comparing results with one another, and could further analyze data to identify additional details of articles mentioning political participation and rights and entitlements to produce a more sophisticated understanding of newspaper prejudices. By further studying media constructions of national and transnational identity, researchers will better understand why the United States sometimes includes and sometimes excludes immigrants from participation in the national imagined community.

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