

THE FRAMING OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING
IN TRADITIONAL MEDIA

By

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ABSTRACT

Traditional media is a centuries old form of spreading news and even with the technological age of consuming news daily, it is still a prominent conduit of information. However, world issues can often become common tropes in daily news, or even direct agendas for political or interest groups. Issues like human trafficking, where misinformation is being spread and stereotypes are being reinforced daily. Within this research, there is a breakdown of language surrounding the term “human trafficking” and how framing can create certain implications around the issue. Taking a look at three major newspapers in Texas: the Austin-American Statesman, The Dallas Morning News, and The Houston Chronicle, I took a random sampling of articles from all three papers, starting in the year 2015 to the year 2020. I sampled 4 articles from each year and collected 24 articles from each paper, with a total of 72. By analyzing the articles, I highlighted words, themes, patterns that are surrounding the term “human trafficking,” to better understand how this issue is being presented to readers in a global context.

Introduction

Language is a vital source for human existence, and in particular, for spreading and understanding crucial information. As of the twenty-first century, media is the main vessel for distributing this crucial information to a large-scale audience, as “US adults spend more than 11 hours a day connected to media” (Marvin 2018). The Media Insight Project details that most Americans, around 63 percent, reported they intentionally go looking for news and information daily (The Media Insight Project). News is the main avenue to understand current events all across the globe, and the language behind media is a necessary tool in articulating events to the public. These events can range from daily weather reports to presidential elections to human trafficking. Of the latter, it is of particular consequence with its relation to language and the news, because of the intensity and stigma surrounding the subject. Gretchen Soderlund, a researcher in sex trafficking rhetoric, describes the problems that have muddied or worsen the understanding of human trafficking in media:

“For over a century the print media, in particular, have produced and disseminated victims’ stories, intermingled with statistics about the ubiquity of sex trafficking, and these stories have helped to generate a belief that arguing over minute facts and details is irrelevant in the face of such a horrific form of abuse” (Soderlund 2014, p. 196).

The conversation around human trafficking has derailed to heighten extremes, and often loses the initial attention it received because of the presented “horrors.” The sensationalism creates a narrow understanding of the issue, and causes real information, like scholarly research or relevant statistics, to lose their authority. Even with all the best efforts, the severity of the issue is significantly undermined. This continues to remain true for the misread of information as well.

Human trafficking is a longstanding, worldwide issue, yet there is a lot of misinformation being formed by word of mouth or through the internet. One idea is that labor trafficking only occurs in undeveloped countries; however, data shows that it occurs in the United States as well as other developed countries, but at lower rates than sex trafficking (Global Trafficking). Often people conflate sex trafficking as human trafficking, however human trafficking isn't specifically highlighting commercial sex, but forced labor as well. It's not as much a sex issue, as a human rights issue. Another perpetuated fabrication is that human trafficking doesn't exist in the United States; however, statistically each year around 14,500 to 17,500 victims are trafficked into the United States, and the total amount of victims currently is not conclusive but estimated around 200,000 (Human Trafficking). This misinformation is not only present through word of mouth or social media, but also continues to be perpetuated throughout notable newspapers and news sites. This research details how sustained narratives and common tropes appear in daily news articles and contribute to the general understanding of human trafficking.

Aims and Goals

As I briefly introduced in my previous paragraph, my aim for this research was to unpack the narrative composed by mass media surrounding human trafficking. I wanted to understand better if there is a difference in portrayal of sex vs. human trafficking, and whether the language of the newspapers diminishes or changes the perception of either. The main objective was to create a content analysis of human trafficking by using a case study of Texas and focusing on how the media frames the narrative around it. I focused on three major newspapers in Texas that provided a wide range of news reporting, editorials, and various other articles. The goal was to find themes or ideas underlying the particular language. Specifically, highlight certain frames and subframes that channel the understanding of human trafficking for the readers. From there, I

wanted to discuss the implications of my analysis and how that affects the general knowledge around the phenomenon.

As I mentioned in the introduction, my main research question is focusing on the language around human trafficking. How does media use rhetoric to frame human trafficking and what can be concluded from those specific words, phrases, or themes? Are there repeated phrases or a certain rhetoric to garner readership? What are the implications of these framings? These are all questions I will answer through the research.

Background and Significance

Victims or those being affected by human trafficking average around 40.3 million, either enslaved by forced labor or forced marriage (Forced Labor). The illegal business makes about \$150 billion a year for traffickers, which is a considerable amount and puts it in one of the most profitable businesses in the world (11 Facts).

The history of human trafficking is significant to understanding the relationship between media and language. Tabithia Bonilla and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo published research discussing how human trafficking was originally perceived and the evolution of the conversation in the United States. It was originally considered a “white slavery” issue, focusing on the white women and girls being moved across borders (Bonilla & Mo 2018). Also, the authors detailed how “Trafficking” was initially introduced to describe the moving of individuals across borders for sexual exploitation (Bonilla & Mo 2018). However, by the 1920’s, the term expanded beyond the white slave trade and recognized the victims varied by race, sex, and age (Bonilla & Mo 2018). Eventually, by 2000, the idea behind human trafficking was officially expanded to include the same definition as slavery, not just focusing on the sex industry as the main purpose for enslaved individuals. (Bonilla & Mo 2018).

A brief unpacking of the history allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between human trafficking and rhetoric, and how media plays into this relationship. “Framing the Problem of Sex Trafficking,” by Anne Johnson, Barbara Friedman and Autumn Shafer (2012), explores how media plays a role in framing sex trafficking to the general public. Another similar research “Trafficking in Truth: Media, Sexuality, and Human Rights Evidence” by Jamie Small (2012) highlights the broader portrayal of human rights in the film industry to the average consumer. I built off of these analysis by focusing on the broader discussion surrounding human trafficking by media’s usage of rhetoric and language in more recent years.

Other literature and research explore similar topics within human rights and trafficking; however, they highlight the varying agendas behind the language, whether they are, for example, economic or political. Barbara Barnett explores this scope of media’s conversation with trafficked individuals in the medium of magazines, “Dividing Women: The Framing of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation in Magazines.” Part of Barnett’s analysis was uncovering media’s simplification of human trafficking and negating the nuances of the issue, particularly given how politics and society have effects on the victims (Barnett 2015). Research by Anne Bunting and Joel Quirk (2017) analyzes related research of media projecting human trafficking as an “everything and nothing” issue, and the anti-trafficking movement as “[having] shallow roots within both political practice and popular consciousness” (Bunting & Quirk 2017, p. 70).

Besides my focus of media’s rhetoric towards human trafficking, the case study of Texas was an interesting choice given the location and size of the state. As I previously mentioned, the amount of people trafficked in Texas is 300,000+, whether dealing with labor or sex trafficking (Human Trafficking). The population of Texas is around 29 million, making it one of the largest states by population (U.S. Census). Another notable reason to use Texas as a case study is

Interstate 10, a highly populated toll-free highway running across the state of Texas through three major cities: El Paso, San Antonio, and Houston (Burchett et al. 2011, p. 4). It is known for being a major point of transit for traffickers with the easy access and connection from Louisiana to New Mexico (Burchett et al. 2011, p. 4). The location is also an interesting study for this research because of its proximity to Mexico. The southern border has created a lot of issues in regard to immigration, and often leads to misinformed statements of immigrants smuggling drugs or trafficking individuals. Because of these reasons, I chose the range of newspapers to collect a broader amount of knowledge, and a well-rounded understanding of how trafficking is expressed in Texas.

Methodology

My methodology for this research is a qualitative content analysis by using a case study of newspapers in Texas to examine the language framing human trafficking. I discussed the definitions of human trafficking and framing because I think it is important to understand the language behind these definitions and how subjective they are as ideas or themes. I included two definitions of human trafficking to compare and contrast how the definitions describe the issue. Both definitions portray human trafficking in a similar fashion, yet there are minute differences that continue to create inconsistencies with the understanding of what actually constitutes human trafficking.

The International Labour Organization definition of human trafficking is:

“Trafficking in persons, or human trafficking, involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person (a woman, man or a child), often over international borders but also frequently within the boundaries of a single country, for the purpose of exploitation. It is a widespread abuse, affecting developing countries,

countries in transition and industrialized market economies alike” (Human Trafficking and Business).

The U.S. Department of State defines human trafficking a bit more in-depth:

“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (2019 Trafficking).

I also wanted to include a definition of framing, and I specifically chose one from similar research into the rhetoric of human trafficking. Anne Johnston et al explain in their research that, “Framing has been defined as ‘the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences’ (Reese 2001, 7)” (Johnston et al. 2012, p. 422). By this definition, I analyzed the data I found of human trafficking and the most consistent frames presented.

To understand how human trafficking is framed in media, I chose newspapers specifically because most other media platforms use newspapers as their source (Pews Research Center). Also, they have been the main form of communication longer than television or social media, so I felt unpacking newspaper’s framing would be a better understanding of the history of the language towards human trafficking. I plan to start by highlighting three major papers produced in Texas: *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Austin American-Statesman*, and *Houston*

Chronicle. I chose these three specifically, because as I mentioned, they are some of the most popular newspapers in Texas and they also cover a wide expanse of Texas. I focused on the years from 2015-2020, because I wanted to study the most recent articles, but I didn't want to be overloaded with information, so I kept it to 5 years.

I generated a random sampling of the phrase "human trafficking" and collected 20 articles from each newspaper that includes those words together. Of the 20 articles from each paper, I chose four randomly from each year. I chose this phrasing instead of sex trafficking to understand whether the articles use human trafficking as a synonym of sex trafficking or only discuss sex trafficking, as that may create more incentive for readers. I included all forms of articles: news reports, editorials, reviews, and various others. I used a form of coding within my research, by going through each story and highlighting any patterns emerging from the writings by identifying if certain words, phrases, themes, or ideas appeared often. After that, I created categories of frames and subframes, from the most prominent themes and patterns presented in the collected articles. I decided to only include two major frames in this research, political and emotional, because I wanted a more in-depth and extensive study of these patterns. From the two main frames, I also included different subframes within the political and emotional lens, acting as extensions of the overarching themes. After the analysis of the articles, I included two implication sections to discuss the ramifications of these patterns on a broader scale.

Ethics

I do not see any ethical issues arising from this kind of research. I mainly focused on the words and phrases that appeared, and how they framed the narrative of human trafficking. I did not conduct interviews or surveys or take an ethnographic approach. I believe in those instances, I would have found trouble with the ethics of respecting people's experiences and maintaining

anonymity within the project. However, I respected the sources I came across, and I didn't take any articles out of context, to my understanding. My intent was not to add my own framing of human trafficking to the conversation, but rather objectively analyze how the issue is narrated from traditional media sources. I stayed true to my aims and goals and attempted to maintain an objective examination of the articles collected.

Frames

Political Frame

One of the more frequent patterns I noticed was a political framing. This appeared in different forms, sometimes used as a means to leverage one's political standing, a target of debate between Republicans and Democrats, or even as a badge of honor for different governmental officials. Throughout these and other examples, human trafficking is framed as a political agenda, and used to highlight the issues or achievements of governmental work. I also noticed a framing of human trafficking as a policy/legislative issue, narrating trafficking as a bill to fund, or conflated with the border discussion as a way to promote party interest.

Human trafficking as a political agenda showed up in numerous ways. An article by Patrick Svitek from the *Austin American-Statesman* reports on the sheriff running for a congressional position in the Houston-area. However, the sheriff is particularly targeted for his lack of commitment to human trafficking as a cause. The sheriff later in the piece responds, “As a sheriff, I've jailed sex traffickers, I've established a local 24/7 human trafficking hotline, I've closed down numerous illicit massage parlors, which are known to be a hub for sex trafficking, and I've requested and received funding for two additional detectives who specialize in human trafficking investigations,’ he wrote” (Svitek 2020). As illustrated in the quote, the article frames human trafficking as not just a political position to be had, but a means to gain honor and respect.

By the listing of all the sheriff's work, human trafficking becomes a form of leveraging his political position. He's able to gain public approval, with his work in a humanitarian issue like trafficking. He is also maintaining a safe platform, given the issue usually remains bipartisan. The self-seeking involvement with human trafficking isn't apparent with single political actors, but also with parties and state interests as well.

Another example of political agenda is pushing the interest of the state by protecting the image of Texas as a Republican state. An article titled "Texas has a plan to fight human trafficking with 68,345 front-line workers" from the *Dallas Morning News* reports on health-care workers being conditioned to recognize trafficked victims. Throughout the piece, the desired affect from this training is to make "Texas less attractive" to traffickers, "The more Texans who know how to spot warning signs of human trafficking, the safer our state will be" (News Editorial, D.M. 2020). There is an emphasis on protecting the interests of the state and lessening the amount of trafficking just within Texas. It frames trafficking as an issue affecting the image of the state, rather than an issue affecting the citizens of the state.

Many articles narrated human trafficking as an immigration and border issue. I chose to group these together because of the articles I read, immigration was often linked to a discussion of the border. A contested issue between the Democrats and Republicans, the border crisis remains more a point of political debate than a nation-wide issue. An article by Ciara O'Rourke illustrates this point, where she discusses a tweet posted by Trump about the immigration affecting America and its relation to the border. The Republican interest is expressed through the dialogue of President Trump and his understanding of trafficking, "Human trafficking - where they grab women, put tape over their mouth, come through our border, and sell them" (O'Rourke 2019). However, the main argument of the article isn't to report on President Trump's

belief, but rather to rectify a misunderstanding of the statement made by Trump that “human trafficking has been happening for thousands of years” within the United States (O’Rourke 2019). By the authors attempts to clarify the mistake, the reader is lead to assume Trump’s remarks on human trafficking stand correct. From this understanding, human trafficking is a channel to promote political interest by narrating it as an immigration issue. The Republican party continues to promote their own political agenda, and present human trafficking as a valid argument for the immigration/border issue.

This pattern continues within the discussion of policy and appears as a form of debate between the Republican and Democratic party. An article titled “Greg Abbott defends sanctuary cities law at Texas sheriffs’ meeting” in the *Dallas Morning News* details how Governor Abbott attempts to curb human trafficking with new sanctuary cities laws (Jeffers Jr. 2017). Within the piece, human trafficking is used to promote a specific agenda, “He called human trafficking a byproduct of broken borders and said the sanctuary cities law that he signed this year would help fix the problem” (Jeffers Jr. 2017). However, the article highlights the opposition from the Democratic party, “But Democrats see the law as a discriminatory attack against immigrant communities, particularly Hispanics” (Jeffers Jr. 2017). The subject of human trafficking becomes a policy issue debated by both parties and illustrates a means for either party to promote their own agendas. Human trafficking becomes less of a humanitarian issue and more a means for politicians to leverage their own self interests.

Implications of Political Frame:

There are numerous implications that arise from the framings detailed in the above passages. The framing of human trafficking to achieve a political agenda dehumanizes the issue, where the issue is exploited for the purposes of leveraging someone's political position. This not only hinders the discussion around the subject, but also implies the value of the issue lies in the hands of political leaders. Human trafficking isn't an issue to dialogue, but a way to combat the opposing politician's belief, and gain power and influence for their own platform. And this focus on the political standing even occurs when both parties are in agreement, "This type of 'universal' global consensus is only possible because most of the actors and institutions involved have calculated that the political and economic stakes are relatively low and that there are likely to be reputational benefits and other advantages to offering rhetorical support to [human trafficking]" (Bunting & Quirk 2018, p. 8). Both the Republican and Democratic party have very little to lose and much to gain from promoting their group's interest in combating the issue, with often shallow attempts at solutions to maintain reputation and avoid high-risk interventions (Bunting & Quirk 2018, p. 7). By the "all talk and no walk" type of rhetoric and inaction, the reader has a misconstrued perception of human trafficking, which tends to dehumanize and diminish the severity of the problem.

Also, narrating human trafficking as a border/immigration problem not only singles out the agenda of the Republican party, but also perpetuates the stigmatization of immigrants and the demands for a completed wall. Though there is an estimate of about 14,500 to 17,500 people trafficked into the United States each year, it does not mean traffickers are coming in; rather, they are bringing in victims (ACLU). To perpetuate the stereotype that "criminals" are entering our country and harming our women is a tired and ignorant statement; women are already being

harmful by the traffickers present in the country. Also, there is a habit of “gendering” victims, particularly in the U.S, which reinforces the narrative that human trafficking is mainly composed of the sexual exploitation of young women (Misconceptions). Readers are given a biased understanding of human trafficking that is framed to promote a party’s interest. It’s damaging to the actual anti-trafficking efforts, “For the moment, we would emphasize that this brand of activism has resulted in a situation where the cause of fighting contemporary slavery and trafficking now enjoys a high level of popularity and political support, yet the underlying issues continue to be very poorly understood” (Bunting & Quirk 2018, p.7). The actual issue remains to be seen and loses its significance within a political war of garnering the most public approval.

Emotional Frame:

Another prominent pattern of framing I observed was an emotional appeal to the viewership through the use of human trafficking. The emotional frame is embedded in articles often discussing survivor’s stories, which usually led to a promotion of their own organizations and efforts towards anti-trafficking. Also, there were articles reviewing local artists and their works depicting human trafficking, which, within this lens, can inspire feelings of passion and ardor towards the humanitarian issue. Within the emotional framework, I noticed different sub-framings of sensationalism and religion using language to evoke strong emotions from the readers.

One of the first articles I collected by Nicole Villalpando in the *Austin American-Statesman* discusses a woman’s experience with human trafficking and her efforts to provide a space for women like her. The piece creates emotional appeal for the average reader by introducing Holly Hayes and her story, “She kept getting into dangerous situations and choosing

bad relationships, looking for someone who would take care of her” (Villalpando 2020). The language used in the quote, and throughout the piece illustrates the sympathy expected towards her story. Also, the article introduces the religious sub-frame, when the woman discusses her breakthrough moment, “She cried out for God to help her, even though at the time she didn’t consider herself ‘a God person’” (Villalpando 2020). Introducing a religious belief in the piece also fosters a sentimental draw towards her situation and human trafficking overall.

Another article that falls within the same overlap of emotional draw and religious agenda is a piece titled “Good Friday service takes aim at human trafficking in Austin” (Barragán 2016). Already by the title, there’s a religious appeal to combating trafficking, leading the viewer to a certain lens of reading. This is also reiterated in the last paragraph of the piece, “‘Whether you’re a believer in Jesus or not, you likely love your community,’ saint Phillips. ‘If you love your community, you will be broken-hearted because Austin, Texas has an issue that we have to stand up against, and that’s human trafficking’” (Barragán 2016). The quote frames human trafficking in an sentimental lens, using language and religious themes to create an emotional attraction towards the issue.

I also noticed an emotional framing of human trafficking in articles reviewing art exhibitions with local artist’s work depicting an aspect of trafficking. An article by Lomi Kriel in the Houston Chronicle reviews an artist, born in Houston, who creates art dedicated for people to “question themselves” (Kriel 2015). The article describes her work on the Red Sand Project and its efforts to recognize victims, “The Red Sand Project aims to draw attention to human trafficking victims who have fallen through the cracks” (Kriel 2015). This kind of rhetoric like “fallen through the cracks” tends to stimulate an emotional reaction, and can often lead the reader to fictionalize the realities of human trafficking.

Sensationalism also plays into the idea of fictionalizing human trafficking, and a technique to garner readership and sympathy. An article by Gabrielle Banks in the *Houston Chronicle* talks about a large presence of brothels and sex trafficking rings that “lured undocumented women into prostitution with false promises of restaurant jobs” (Banks 2018). The wording within the piece is evident of how sensationalized language can be around human trafficking, “When trafficking victims escaped their clutches, gang members crossed borders to hunt them down and force them back into service” (Banks 2018). The title as well captures the reader's attention and can elicit a strong emotional reaction, “We Have More Brothels Than We Have Starbucks In Our City” (Banks 2018). The language within the title, whether true or not, sensationalizes human trafficking and frames the reader’s understanding of the issue as a emotional heightened phenomenon.

Implications of Emotional Frame:

Emotional appeal can be a positive and a negative for garnering awareness for a phenomenon like human trafficking. It draws attention to the human aspect that is often lost in articles or news reports, and emotion, as well as art, can move people to action. The framing of human trafficking in this case is an advantage to anti-trafficking purposes. Also, using stories to contextualize trafficking is often more attractive to an average reader whereas statistics and numbers can lose their effect if overwhelming for a viewer. Stories are historically known for their longevity in the human psyche, and in the beginning of humanity, the only way of continuing civilization.

However, as I mentioned above, this can also inspire fantasies of human trafficking, perpetuating hyperboles of the issue that negate to identify the realities of the situation, “(1) there are more ‘slaves now than at any point in human history’; (2) human trafficking is ‘the world’s

fastest growing criminal industry’; and (3) trafficking has become the third largest global criminal industry, following behind guns and drugs and generating ‘Us \$32 billion annually’” (Bunting & Quirk 2018, p. 2). These are some of the popular “facts and figures” that Bunting and Quirk, researchers in the field of contemporary slavery and the language around it, discuss in one of their pieces, and highlights how false narratives can create emotional appeal.

This also highlights how these perpetuated “facts and figures” can often diminish the severity of an issue like human trafficking. In one way, readers are too overwhelmed by the horrors of the actual issue, that nothing is taken seriously, and no action is seen. In another way, if there is action, it’s channeled towards goals based on wrong assumptions or statistics, like the attempts to combat trafficking heightened from the Super Bowl due to the belief it is the “biggest event for human trafficking” (Guilbert 2021). Regardless of the myth considered debunked by academic research, the news coverage and advertisement directed by anti-trafficking efforts is massive and illustrates the lack of knowledge and research to incite effective action.

Also, considering the religious framing, the emotional appeal may render ineffective if shaped by a faith-based lens, given the tension of mixing state and church. There is a lot of mistrust about the Christian efforts to combat trafficking, because of how entangled the evangelical activism is with the issue of human trafficking, “So powerfully did the earlier movement to end religious persecution frame evangelicals’ antitrafficking activism that many of its constituents perceived human trafficking, like Christian persecution, to be a religious issue (Campbell & Zimmerman 2014). This idea of human trafficking portrayed as a religious concern was so embedded in the United States rhetoric that it defined the understanding of human trafficking for the entire country, “During the years of the Bush administration, for example, it was the U.S.’s official position that human trafficking consisted primarily in the forced

prostitution and sexual enslavement of women and children” (Zimmerman 2011, p. 572). The religious agenda, whether intentional or not, has fostered mistrust from the conflated idea of human trafficking as sex trafficking, and so attempts to appeal to the emotional state of a reader from this lens may cause more inaction than action

Conclusion

After collecting all 72 articles and analyzing the content, I have attempted to answer the question of how media frames human trafficking and what the implications of this are. Through this process and by my own research and analysis, I have concluded that the most prominent pattern illustrated is an agenda-based rhetoric. Both of my sections on framing, political and emotional, highlighted how agendas have formed and shaped each article I discussed. From a political lens, these agendas appeared in promoting political party interest, debating between Democratic and Republican views, or gaining public approval for an actor’s platform. For the emotional framing, the agenda wasn’t as discernable, but emerged from the articles which used survivor’s stories to promote their organizations or integrated sensationalized language to garner readership. If this is a continual pattern for the conversation around human trafficking, it will only increase the spread of misinformation of the issue and continue the existence of the phenomenon. Newspapers, of all media, should be taking their content more seriously and be considerate of the ramifications of their influence if misinformation should be spread. Without a well-informed public, the potential of taking ineffective action or no action at all is probable and will determine whether the process of eradicating human trafficking can improve.

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