Reporting on immigration? Choose your sources responsibly

Chloe Reichel

Define American is a nonprofit media and culture organization working to change the narrative about immigration in the United States. The organization was founded by Jose Antonio Vargas, a former *Washington Post* reporter who, seven years ago, revealed his status as an undocumented citizen in a *New York Times Magazine* essay. Its latest campaign is #SourcesMatter, launching Sept. 22, which pushes the news media to reconsider the ways they achieve balance in stories on immigration. The main message of the campaign: Choose your sources responsibly.

"We started looking at the media as sort of a conduit for mainstreaming and legitimizing some ideas that have traditionally been rooted in hate groups," said Kristian Ramos, the organization's communication director, in a recent call with *Journalist's Resource*. "Once we started looking at that, we sort of took a step back and started looking at sourcing and the language used."

Ramos and his colleagues looked at the number of times the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today* and the *Los Angeles Times* quoted the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA, three anti-immigrant organizations categorized as "hate groups" by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Comparing these citations between the first six months of 2016 with the first six months of 2018, they saw a drastic jump – from 16 times to 102.

The Southern Poverty Law Center defines a hate group as "an organization that – based on its official statements or principles, the statements of its leaders, or its activities – has beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics." The SPLC was founded in 1971 to protect civil rights through the law. As part of their efforts they monitor the activities of over 1,600 extremist groups across the country.

"We've seen a real shift in the quoting of these organizations, and in particular an embrace and uncritical use of a lot of terminology that was once considered the language of hate groups," Ramos said.

Ramos offered the concept of "self-deportation" as an example. "Self-deportation is an idea that comes from the Tanton Network of FAIR, CIS and NumbersUSA," he said. "It basically means you make the lives of immigrants so awful that they leave the country." In 2012, when Mitt Romney advanced the policy during a presidential debate, the media "really pounced" on him for using the language, Ramos said. For example, the editorial board of the *Washington Post* published an op-ed headlined "The 'self-deportation' fantasy."

"Fast forward to 2018, the government of the United States is currently employing a policy of self-deportation and it's treated as a serious policy — it's treated as something that is a legitimate

policy for the United States, and that includes separating children at the border, that includes a lot of these raids," Ramos continued.

What changed? "Well, a lot of these groups … a lot of their staff ended up going into the administration," Ramos said. "And so you have reporters now reporting on the policy of the government, the immigration policy, without being critical or providing analysis of where the policy came from."

Ramos offered a few tips for reporters on how they can balance their stories with opposing viewpoints – and do so responsibly:

- If you're looking to balance the viewpoints in your immigration stories, seek quotes from both conservative and liberal organizations – but avoid citing organizations that have been classified as hate groups by the SPLC, Ramos said. For example, he recommended the Cato Institute, the LIBRE Initiative and the Heritage Foundation as organizations with conservative viewpoints that don't promulgate hate.

- If you must get a comment from someone affiliated with an organization the SPLC characterizes as a hate group, disclose their affiliation in your story, Ramos said.

- If the source also has connections to the White House administration or Congress, make that disclosure, too. At the very minimum, Ramos said, if you can't disclose that they're affiliated with a group on SPLC's list, you should disclose their political connections.

- Consider the origins of terms like "self-deportation" and "chain migration" and what they might be dog whistling (chain migration is a euphemism for family-based migration). "This is sort of a semantics thing, but it's important for people to know that this language is rooted in hate groups and policies that are designed to keep immigrants from entering the country legally," Ramos said.

"I think absolutely you should have opposing views and views that are for a policy," Ramos said. "But I think it's incumbent upon journalists to do their due diligence and make sure they're not quoting hate groups in the process, or disclose that they're a hate group, or disclose that they have ties to the administration, or find another source that has not been labeled a hate group. If you're going to get a source for a story, the advice would be to do the research on their background in immigration to provide that context for the story."