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I write about how technology shapes society

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Language, Politics, and Journalistic Objectivity

Reader jasmr left the following thoughtful comment in response to my [last post](#) about a recommendation that reporters stop using the phrase “illegal immigrant.” “Save us from having ‘professionals’ redefine the language we all understand,” the reader writes. “Such a move is blatantly political. Worse, you make no suggestion whatsoever about terminology to replace that which is now disfavored by the power-elite (in their own minds, anyway) of the media.”

Conscientious journalists have no choice but to think about this kind of question. There are many different ways to describe the same situation, and we owe it to our readers to think carefully about the words we choose. This isn’t a matter of words being “disfavored by the power-elite,” it’s a matter of holding ourselves to high ethical standards.

Here’s an extreme but illustrative example. In August 9, 1954, the *Miami Daily News* [ran a story](#) with the headline “Pervert Colony Uncovered In Simpson Slaying Probe.” The “perverts” in question were “some 500 male homosexuals.” This kind of language was [ubiquitous](#) in the 1950s.

This wouldn’t have raised any alarm among the readers of the day because calling gay men “perverts” was just part of the vernacular. It was the “language we all understand” of its day. At some point, probably in the 1980s, the “power-elite of the media” decided that it was no longer appropriate to use the word “pervert” to describe homosexuals. And this

was, in some sense, a political decision, since it was a conscious decision to stop using language that privileged a particular viewpoint on the morality of homosexuality. But it was also just good journalism to discontinue the use of a needless pejorative term.

And this is hardly an isolated example. In my writing about technology policy, I'm frequently faced with vocabulary choices. When someone downloads a movie from Bittorrent without the permission of the copyright holder, is he engaged in "file sharing" or "piracy?" Is a firm like Intellectual Ventures a "technology company," a "non-practicing entity," or a "patent troll?"

If I were writing news stories at a traditional newspaper, I would avoid using pejorative terms like "piracy" and "patent troll." Because these terms bias the story against the activity and firm (respectively) being described. The job of a straight news reporter is to describe the world accurately and in neutral language, allowing the reader to make up his own mind rather than trying to pre-judge political issues on the reader's behalf.



So it is in the immigration debate. There are a number of adjectives for women like Nadia Habib and her mother. If you want to bias your reader against them, you can describe them as "illegal." If you want to use neutral language and let the reader decide for himself, you can call them "undocumented." *Reason's* Mike Riggs went with the second option, and I think that was the right call.

Now, I'll freely admit to believing that being an undocumented immigrant is a victimless crime. I think we should change the law to make it easier for otherwise law-abiding Americans like Habib to get their green cards. And so I feel particularly strongly that we shouldn't use pejorative language to describe them. But I also think the use of neutral terminology is required by traditional journalistic ethics. Straight news reporters owe it to their readers to choose neutral language and let the facts speak for themselves.