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Agricultural Workers in the Nebraska Press: Blog post

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Agricultural Workers in the Nebraska Press

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Agricultural Workers in the Nebraska Press

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As part of our analysis on the access to legal aid by agricultural workers in the state of Nebraska, we wanted to observe how these workers were perceived or represented in the local newspapers. Representations in the press are important because, as [Moscovici](#) argues, they make the strange become familiar and the invisible, perceptible. Using the keywords “agricultural workers” and “migrant workers”, we collected and analyzed 39 articles that appeared in nine of Nebraska’s newspapers between January of 2016 and August of 2018.

Of these 39 articles, 26 referred to “agricultural workers” and 16 “migrant workers”. Two-thirds of the articles presented both categories in a positive light. There are, however, some differences. Only about one fifth of the articles related to agricultural workers had a neutral or negative slant, while almost half the migrant workers’ articles were neutral or negative. The main themes present in the news articles are about Social and Health Issues experienced by workers (thirteen articles). Product description (seven articles), Agriculture Labor and Economy (six articles), and Business

and Economic Issues (six articles) are the other themes in order of relevance. It is interesting that Migration related issues are present as the main theme in only four of the articles and all of them in connection to migrant workers and not agricultural workers. The three remaining articles main theme are policy—broadly defined—related issues. Our analysis allowed us to place the articles within four frames. These frames are forms of organizing experiences, as [Goffman](#) stated. In this analysis, frames serve as tools to group the articles on sets defined by the researchers based on themes within the articles. The distribution of the articles within each frame can be observed in the following table.

Table: Frames and keywords.

Frame of the Article	Keyword		Total
	Agricultural Workers	Migrant Workers	
Community	5	6	11
Economy	7	1	8
Labor	6	3	9
Social	5	6	11
Total	23	16	39

Within the community frame, we can observe the impact of agricultural and migrant workers in the cities, towns, and villages of the state as presented in the newspapers. At the same time, these articles show the concerns and challenges of communities confronted to rapid social, demographic and economic change. These communities, in partnership with organizations of the civil society, are active in advancing opportunities for agricultural and migrant workers. Among them, we can mention actions to prevent homelessness and human trafficking, the hiring of a new attorney to work on legal access, the celebration of Latino leaders, and the development of workshops for Latino farmers. These actions respond to massive demographic changes in the state, that the newspapers exemplify using the case of Schuyler, as it reads in one of the articles: “What you’ve been reading on the national level, Schuyler is a microcosm of that” (Omaha World Herald July 8, 2018; Page 1A). In this town, the Hispanic population has changed from 4% in 1990 to close to 70%. This percentage is even higher in school age children. Schuyler has also received refugee-resettled populations from East Africa. Not all the articles are positive towards change and migrant workers. Some groups criticized the possible installation of chicken processing plants in the eastern region of the state, even if for many this represented a large economic opportunity. Although one of these plants was approved by the community, some worried it meant, “noise, pollution, traffic, and an influx of what they said could be migrant workers” (The Columbus Telegram, April 6, 2016).

The economy frame stands on the repeated statement that the agricultural sector drives the economy of the state. Thus, most articles center on salaries, produce production, and the current process of land concentration by large farming groups. This last theme expresses the challenges that are brought with changes in land ownership. Challenges that are highlighted by the possible

economic effects of the trade policies of the current administration. Another economic challenge present in these articles is the economic effects that changes toward a more restrictive migration policy might bring to migrant workers. The conclusion here is that there is some economic uncertainty in the agricultural sector that can have effects in other areas of society life, as we will see below.

We observed two themes within the labor frame. The first theme—with five articles—referred to safety issues in agricultural work. The second, to H2A workers and the impacts of migration policy in this category of agricultural workers. The articles on agricultural work safety focus on this activity being the most dangerous of any type of labor in the United States, while not making any reference to migrant workers. The second theme, describes migrant workers sometimes as a novelty, making clear differences between those that come from Mexico and Central America and those who come from Australia, South Africa, or other “Global North” countries. The first group is described as people in need of jobs to secure their family’s wellbeing. Young people gaining experience or earning enough to have leisure time back in their countries of origin comprise the second group. All the articles in this theme position migrant workers, and specifically H2A workers, as a needed labor force as well as consistently better and more reliable workers than their local counterparts. Due to this, those interviewed expressed concern that giving preference to highly skilled migration would negatively affect agricultural production by possibly reducing the number of available H2A visas. .

The last frame comprises news articles that deal with a larger breadth of social issues related to agricultural and migrant workers. As we mentioned above, there are not only economic impacts of current changes to agricultural related programs; there are also social impacts. Articles mention a possible reduction in the state farmer’s support of the current administration, as well as concern about how uncertainty around some agricultural related programs, such as SNAP, and migration policies may affect agricultural production. Farmers also reject the current application of the Waters of the United States program—developed in the previous administration—due to its lack of connection to reality. At the same time, the only editorial of this period uses the O’Neill raids of 2018 to back the work of ICE while it criticizes Congress for its lack of action regarding migration policy. There are positive mentions of migration as a central component of the state, particularly through the presentation of the possible social impacts of the current administration’s migration laws and the history of Mexican migration to Scottsbluff.

Our analysis shows that the representation of agricultural workers and migrant workers is done mostly from a macro perspective. The newspaper articles present these actors from a policy perspective, from its economic impacts, from their participation in the production process. Rarely the articles present the workers from a personal perspective. In fact, of all the articles analyzed only four use the names of the workers and presents them to the readers. This lack of representation at the individual level dehumanizes agricultural workers, reducing them to a mean of production, a nationality, or a visa category. There are a few cases where the opposite happens. The articles on the young South Africans or the e on independent farming workshops for

migrant workers, are two examples where the stories of these workers are positively represented using their own stories to place their relevance in the state into context. The importance of agricultural and migrant workers in the state requires individual level positive representations of their lives and working conditions.

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