

The case for journalists to drop the i-word, “illegal” today

Journalists strive for professional and responsible language out of respect for their craft and the people they report about. Using the i-word, “illegal” to describe immigrants is incompatible with journalistic standards. The normalization of the i-word undermines efforts of journalists to explain the complexities of migration and its ties to labor, economy and foreign policy issues.

The three major arguments against using the i-word are that the descriptor is

- 1) legally inaccurate and misleading
- 2) politically loaded and anti-immigrant and
- 3) experienced as racially biased and dehumanizing by the people it is used to describe

There are accurate terms available to explain a person’s migratory status or experience, such as “unauthorized,” “aspiring citizen” “entered without inspection,” etc. [1] The United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) uses “undocumented migrants,” “unauthorized migrants” or “irregular migrants.”

Journalists and editors are dropping the i-word:

- The 7,800-member Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) passed a resolution in 2011 to discontinue use of the term “illegal alien” based on the idea that describing someone as “illegal” is unconstitutional. They recommended that members re-evaluate the implications of the use of “illegal immigrant.”
- Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas published his moving essay, “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* in 2011, modeling respectful language for millions and making “undocumented” a trending topic on Twitter. He founded Define American to promote respectful public discourse on immigration and a year later he appeared with 35 other undocumented young people on the cover of *TIME* magazine. The cover described them as American.
- The campaign to Drop the I-Word was endorsed by the national UNITY alliance of over 10,000 members comprised of the Asian American Journalists Association, National Association of Hispanic Journalists, Native American Journalists Association and most recently, the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association.
- *The San Antonio-Express News*, *The Miami Herald*, *New Haven Register*, *Middletown Press* and *Register Citizen* no longer use the i-word.

Source

[1] Colorlines.com’s Immigration Stylebook. <http://bit.ly/dtiwJtoolkit>

How the i-word undermines professional reporting standards

Describing people as “illegal” denies due process

- Using the i-word is equivalent to referring to defendants awaiting trial as “convicted criminals.” The law doesn’t define “illegal alien” and “illegal immigrant.” [1]
- The Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), the highest administrative body for interpreting and applying immigration laws does not use the i-word.
- Justice Kennedy omitted the terms “illegal immigrants” and “illegal aliens,” from the SCOTUS SB 1070 decision, except when quoting other sources. [2] He said, “foreign nationals residing unlawfully in the U.S. are not and never have been criminals” ... “it was not a crime to seek or engage in unauthorized employment.”
- In *Chamber of Commerce v. Whiting*, Chief Justice Roberts didn’t use the i-word he used “unauthorized worker” and “unauthorized alien.” [3]

Immigration status is fluid, it’s not as simple as “legal” vs. “illegal”

- Under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), there are all kinds of non-citizens, many of whom may temporarily be out of status, but may eventually be able to stay in the U.S. [4]
- For example, in some instances, victims of labor abuse or of trafficking are eligible for immigration relief and, if that were the case, then that same person might go from authorized, to unauthorized, to authorized again.

The i-word conflates immigrants with criminality

- Using the term “illegal,” a person takes a side of the issue by labeling the person whom they are describing as a “criminal.” This brings the taint of criminality to a non-criminal process, as immigration cases go through civil proceedings.

The i-word was normalized through anti-immigrant strategy

- The use of the i-word along with misinformation about immigration has been led by anti-immigrant advocacy organizations like Numbers USA, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). They are all tied to eugenicist John Tanton. [5]
- Frank Luntz, a GOP strategist, promoted use of the term “illegal immigrants” in a 2005 memo explaining that it would encourage an understanding of immigrants as criminals and create politically useful division among voters.

Sources

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