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US and Them

Representing the United States-Mexico borderlands between drama and fear

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Photo by Gabriele Dellisanti

Abstract

An in-between region, characterised by a distinctively rich culture, where Spanglish is spoken daily and Dollars are exchanged for Pesos; where driving to "the south side of town" implies crossing a border, where traditions blend and combine; and where decades of territorial disputes gave birth to a transnational and hybrid 'connecting membrane'[1] between the United States and Mexico.

But also a region notoriously known for its dangerous drug wars, for the myriad apprehensions of attempting border crossers and for the interminable disputes on the construction of a Border Wall.

The description of a dangerous and risky US-Mexico border might in fact sound more familiar. Given the remoteness of the region, the news media brings the southern borderlands in the homes of millions of Americans, all too often through pervasively negative narratives, portraying the region as a cartel-dominated war zone, characterised by constant shootouts and apprehensions.

Through an analysis of a comprehensive report recently published by the USA Today newspaper entitled *The Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences*, and through conducted fieldwork in the city of Brownsville in southern Texas, this dissertation explores the elements that shape the narratives on the US-Mexico borderlands by comparing and contrasting selected news articles with the perspectives of native border-dwellers.

The obtained results demonstrate how the USA Today constructs and conveys images on the US-Mexico borderlands based on narratives that distinguish "us" from "them", that place Latinos within a discourse of illegality, that are based on highly personalised and dramatised stories characterised by a powerful language of fear. Eventually, it unveils how such narrative choices lead to a failure in transmitting the aspects of hybridity and transnationalism, unique to the United States-Mexico borderlands.

[1] Term used by Michael Dear, 2013

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Caption: The end of the current border fence, located East of Brownsville, TX (Photo: Gabriele Dellisanti)

“The US-Mexico borderlands are among the most misunderstood places on earth […]. They are staunchly independent and composed of many cultures with hybrid loyalties.”

(Michael Dear, 2013: 1)

Introduction

The 600-kilometre-long bus trip from Houston to Brownsville took about ten hours, interrupted by constant engine failures and snack breaks. The bus driver made every announcement in Spanish first and English second, and the more we drove south, the less English was used as the primary means of communication - not surprising given that Texas was part of Mexico until 1845 and over 99 percent of the current population living in borderland *colonias* is Hispanic.

Later that night, I made it to Brownsville, a town of just under 200-thousand people located in the Rio Grande Valley, situated in the southernmost tip of Texas. It lies along the northern bank of the Rio Grande river, which officially delineates the border between the United States and Mexico. Brownsville is connected to its Mexican counterpart and twin city, Matamoros, which for many is just considered as "the south side of town"[2], where family lunches take place on Sundays and where food served in restaurants is no longer Tex Mex.

As soon as I stepped off the Greyhound bus, nothing quite resembled what I imagined. I was instantly struck by the quietness, cleanliness and tidiness of the place. The bus station was brand new, air conditioned and resembling nothing like Houston's bus terminal where my journey started earlier that day. Where is the military? And border patrol? And what about the repeated gunshots I was supposed to witness as part of my experience at the US-Mexico border?

As I had never travelled to the United States' southern borderlands before, I realised that my expectations were entirely based on the countless articles I had read prior to my trip. In no time, I came to terms with how the pervasive negativity of the media coverage on borderlands had barely any resemblance with the way I perceived reality, from the very moment I stepped off the Greyhound bus to when I left Brownsville ten days later.

Context

Among the most relevant, controversial and discussed political promises Mr. Trump outlined during his presidential announcement speech in June 2015, was the construction of a border wall between the US and Mexico, which would allegedly help secure the United States from a number of issues

[2] Quote taken from the transcript of one of the interviews conducted for this work [Lucas, 66]

ranging from drug violence to undocumented immigration and what Mr.Trump described as "bad hombres" and "rapists" (Trump, 2015).

Trump's words reflected a recurring image of borderlands, narrowly portrayed as dangerous, risky, cartel-dominated areas, generally non-compliant to a national standard of safety and security. However, while it is arguable that Mr. Trump's language was purposely strong to achieve political gains, the portrayal of borderlands in other instances presents close similarities.
"More immigrants desperate to cross Mexico border", reads a Washington Post headline, "Donald Trump Calls for Military to Guard Southern Border", reports the Wall Street Journal, "Drug-slinging catapult seized on US-Mexico border", writes CNN. And the list goes on.

A rather limited number of studies has so far researched the portrayal of the US Southern border by the United States' national media. Reece Jones (2014) argues that "borderlands are defined as a dangerous place where every trail is a smuggling route" (Jones, 2014: 547) and Fleuriet and Castaneda conclude that the reality at the US southern border is nothing like the narrow-visioned portrayal constructed by the media (Fleuriet and Castaneda, 2014).

Aims and Objectives

This research aims at exploring the power and effects of the news media's formats, frames and narratives in shaping perceptions on the reality of the United States' southern borderlands.
By looking at the existing findings on how news media outlets portray the 'distant other', specifically in relations to Latinos (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016), this work will go through the theories surrounding the ever-growing entertainment format of news media, with a focus on the human-interest frame and the dramatisation of narratives, and how such stories favour the element of fear in their coverage of the borderlands (Silverstone, 2007; Franks, 2013; Chavez, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Bennett, 2012; Altheide, 1997). Finally, the last section aims at analysing how such choices in formats, frames and narratives overlook the aspect of hybridity and transnationalism of cultural identity at the border (Dear, 2013; Alvarez, 1997).

Given the vast number of articles published by the United States' national news media on the US-Mexico borderland regions, this research narrows down its analysis to a report recently published by the *USA Today*, entitled T*he Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences*. It showcases

the “examination of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border” (USA Today, 2017) through on-the-ground reporting conducted by a network of over 30 journalists and contains a vast array of material, ranging from videos to podcasts and articles. The latter, which are published in the form of long-reads, will be read and analysed in this work. Earlier this year, the *USA Today* was attributed a prestigious Pulitzer Prize for its in-depth and explanatory coverage of the US-Mexico border. (USA Today, 2017).

Choosing to analyse the coverage of the *USA Today* was not casual. It stems from two reasons: first, the paper is the most read in the United States, with a readership which reaches 7 million people daily (Agility, 2017); and second, the outlet is reportedly the least biased in a media landscape characterised by a significant lack of bias-free news sources (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018). The methodology chapter and the analysis will explain these choices more in depth.

The main core will offer a reflective analysis, comparing and contrasting the data gathered from the USA Today’s articles and from the field work conducted in Brownsville Texas. It follows an analytical process aimed at understanding the “hows” rather than the “whys”, and will primarily address the following two research questions:

1. How do the formats, frames and narratives employed by the USA Today’s network of journalists portray the United States’ southern border?
2. How is the hybridity and transnationalism between the USA and Mexico conveyed by ‘The Wall’ report?

The following chapter will go through the theoretical framework and existing research on the topic, which will serve as a structure for the analysis. Then, a chapter concerning the methods employed for this work will guide the reader though the stages of the analysis: from data gathering through a qualitative media analysis and ethnographic research at the border, to an analytical and reflective combination of both.

The main chapter of this dissertation will then be presenting the findings of the qualitative media analysis of the USA Today’s long reads contained in The Wall report, contextualising it with the thesis’ theoretical framework and reflectively analysing it with the ethnographic research conducted in Brownsville, Texas.

Caption: Road crossing the current border fence while still in US territory (Photo: Gabriele Dellisanti)

Caption: Residential home in East Bronwville located by the border fence (Photo: Gabriele Dellisanti)

Caption: Location where the current border fence comes to an end, miles before the state's western coast (Photo: Gabriele Dellisanti)

Caption: Primary school in West Brownsville, where the border fence delineates the end of the playground (Photo: Gabriele Dellisanti)

Contextualising the theories

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the qualitative media analysis and fieldwork conducted for this research, it is important to first focus on the theories which will serve as a backbone and theoretical framework to this dissertation. The aim of this chapter is to give the reader a complete and thorough understanding of the context in which this work is placed and how it will add to the existing research in the field.

In brief, the following Literature Review will explore the elements of 'otherism' in the coverage of faraway lands, the evolution of the news media into an ever-growing entertainment format, through personalisation and dramatisation, and the alleged use of fear-mongering to increase audience engagement and retainment; it will then discuss the little yet significant literature which observes the patterns of reporting by the US national media on the southern borderlands and eventually, to connect the theories and understand what the reporting potentially misses out on, the last paragraph will look into the existing research concerning border studies, identity and culture.

The 'distant other' in the news media

In the field of media studies, a robust amount of literature focuses on the representation of the faraway 'distant other', what Silverstone (2007) defines as "someone else, some otherness otherwise beyond reach", by analysing the patterns of portrayal which confront audiences with events that happen in faraway regions. (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Brons, 2015; Franks, 2013; Benthall, 2014; Robins, 1994; Tester, 2001)

In his work *Media and Morality,* Roger Silverstone (2007) reflects on the element of 'distance' as a factor that influences and shapes news reporting, arguing that "communication and mediation are both means to transcend [it]" (Silverstone, 2007: 119) and adhering to Tomlinson's (1999) perception of mediation as a means to ''overcoming distance in communication" (Tomlinson, 1999: 154). In this discourse, Silverstone (2007) emphasises the importance of the news media in relation to how constructed images influence our approach to the world "and how we might position ourselves both in relation to the representations and the realities which emerge in that mediation" (Silverstone, 2007: 119).

An increased observation in the field on how 'distance' affects news media reporting is a consequence of recent technological advancements, which have led us to be closer and increasingly connected with 'distant others' and faraway events (Chouliaraki, 2006), making "our relationship with the distant other possible" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 3) and delivering immediacy in the portrayal of the faraway other (Tomlinson, 1999).

However, while this relationship with the 'distant other' is made possible in a highly meditated society, scholars have focussed on how such images of distant events are portrayed and conveyed to worldwide audiences (Silverstone, 2007; Franks, 2013; Chavez, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999). It is recognised that specific choices in framing, narration and wording are crucial in shaping the way in which journalists "show the world to the world" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 4) (Silverstone, 2007), and how "through their routine choices of image and word, [journalists] help us imagine what we cannot experience" (Chouliaraki, 2006:4).

In reflecting on the importance of the choice of formats, frames and narratives in constructing the distant other, Silverstone emphasises how "the challenge of proper distance begins in the preparation the images for their appearance on the screen or page, and their manifestation in the world of the mediapolis" (Silverstone, 2007: 123), underlining the lack of a "single position from which the world can be seen and represented" (Silverstone, 2007: 123), meaning that the news media is ultimately responsible for determining such positions in each case (Silverstone, 2007).

Scholars who have analysed the relationship between media portrayals and the construction of experiences and images from faraway places, argue that the conveyed images are often characterised by a significant 'othering' (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Franks, 2013). The term refers to a general identification and subsequent distanciation of who "we" are and who "we" are not (Brons, 2015; Crang, 1998), giving place to an unequal relationship between identities (Crang, 2998). In the case of news stories, 'otherism' refers to the development of a narrative characterised by an intrinsic self-other distanciation between the audience, and the subjects and/or events being portrayed.

Findings on the topic relate to the representation of the 'distant other' as a result of how journalists reporting on foreign situations establish "the other", whether its a country, a society or a person, which differs from "us" (Eide, 1996). Benthall (1993) argues that the 'other' is commonly

characterised by negativity, helplessness and as inferior, and Chouliaraki (2006) and Boltanski (1999) draw similar conclusions. The first describes how the 'other' enters news media narratives in a variety of forms, in some cases with no specifications in regards to their identity (Chouliaraki, 2006); The latter, instead refers to the concept of 'othering' as characterised by an "observation of the unfortunate by those who do not share their suffering [and] who do not experience it directly" (Boltanski, 1999:3), pointing out that 'otherism' is responsible for portraying the 'distant other' as an unfortunate victim, yet without providing a proper justification that backs such claims (Boltanski, 1999).

In relation to this last point, it is argued that one of the main byproducts of 'otherism' in the media, is "an absence of context [and] a collusive oversimplification of the complexity of the event" (Silverstone, 2007: 120). Media scholar Suzanne Franks (2013) describes an oversimplification in the reporting process in the coverage of the 'distant other', by arguing that the Western media's portrayal of faraway events often fails to take account of the larger social, economic and political circumstances. She highlights that journalists often rely on a number of familiar stereotypes that are recognisable by their audiences and that reporting is often simplistic and that it draws minimal attention to the possible solutions to the issues it describes (Franks, 2013).

Ethnic minorities in the news media and the 'Latino Threat Narrative'

An analysis of the portrayal of the 'distant other' by the American national news media is an important constituent of this work's theoretical framework, given the focus on the construction of images in the reporting on the US-Mexico border and the communities that live alongside it. In moving forward, it is relevant to contextualise how 'othering' in the media relates to a general representation of ethnic minorities, and specifically of Latinos.

Simon Cottle (2000) explains how in defining nations' borders, boundaries mark the limits of a social space (Cottle, 2000); and how the news media is responsible in the creation of imaginations of the communities who live alongside it, leading audiences to be "variously invited to construct a sense of who 'we' are in relation to who 'we' are not, whether as 'us' and 'them', 'insider' and 'outsider'" (Cottle, 2000: 2). Cottle (2000) argues that recent evolution in the media sphere, specifically concerning recent digital advances that allow audiences to be connected with and

informed of the 'distant other' like never before (Chouliaraki, 2006), has also shaped the creation, circulation and consumption of news stories that represent ethnic minorities by allowing new opportunities to communicate (Cottle, 2000). The scholar emphasises how the current ethnic minority media scene is characterised by a strong fight for representation and by a continuous dissatisfaction with news media portrayals, which way too often resort to the use of recurring stereotypes and 'othering'-loaded narratives (Cottle, 2000). The author outlines that research on the topic discovered how the news media's portrayal of ethnic minorities is marked by "under-representation and stereotypical characterization within entertainment genres and negative problem-oriented portrayal within factuality and news forms". (Cottle: 2000: 8).

Scholars who have narrowed down the research concerning the representation of ethnic minorities in the media, by focussing specifically on the constructed images of Latinos (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016), present similar findings and conclusions.
Particularly relevant for this analysis is Chavez's concept of the "Latino Threat Narrative" (2008). In his work *The Latino threat: constructing immigrants, citizens, and the nation*, the American anthropologist provides an interesting reflection on the representation of Latinos in the American media, exploring how such renderings contribute to the construction of the ethnic group as a threat to the American economy and security (Chavez, 2008).
The author reflects on the power of media spectacles in everyday life, which construct our knowledge about subjects in this world (Chavez, 2008). In relation to Latinos specifically, Chavez (2008) emphasises how the most common picture of the ethnic group conveyed by media narratives is of a risky immigrant group who is incapable of properly integrating in the American society and becoming an integral component of the national community (Chavez, 2008). The scholar describes how such a recurring portrayal sees Latinos "as part of an invading force coming from the south", and blames media representation for building over the years an "alarmist discourse about [Latino] immigrants and their perceived negative impacts on society" (Chavez, 2008:4)

Similarly, Reny and Manzano (2016) have conducted an extensive study on the portrayal of Latinos in the American national media, and observe that "by now, it is common to see media coverage of Latinos [...] that is negative in tone, full of stereotypes, and highly sensational" (Reny and Manzano, 2016: 195) and how constructions portray the ethnic group "as both undesirable and an affront to strong American traditions of law and order" (Reny and Manzano, 2016: 196). The researchers, through an attentive analysis of the US national news media landscape, identified the

recurring stereotypes in the representation of Latinos, which range from portraying the group as "welfare recipients", to "less educated", "refuse to learn english" (Reny and Manzano, 2016). Reny and Manzano's (2016) research also produced an interesting finding: the negativity of the portrayal of Latinos as undocumented immigrants.

The 'discourse of illegality' and Latinos

In their work, Reny and Manzano (2016) refer to how the media tend to represent Latinos within the topic of immigration which in turn portrays the group through recurring negative stereotypes (Reny and Manzano, 2016). The authors refer specifically to a 2008 study conducted by The Brooks Institute on the media's coverage of immigration, which 70,737 news stories published in 48 different outlets and concludes that the coverage of Latinos as an ethnic group is recurrently placed within discourses on immigration, focussing on undocumented migrants, lacking context and framing immigration as a crisis (Akdenizli et al. cited in Reny and Manzano, 2016). Their conclusion reads:

"Coverage [of Latinos] is very clearly dominated by various forms of illegality: unauthorised entry to the U.S. and efforts by the government to control it; criminal behaviour by immigrants; and malfeasance or incompetence by immigrations officials." (Akdenizli et al., 2012: 24).

Chavez (2008) also dedicates part of his research to analysing how terminology shapes the representation of Latinos as the different and dangerous 'other', focussing on how terms such as "illegal" and "aliens" are inherent in the narrative of 'otherism' and likely produce dehumanising images. The authors argues that such categorisation excludes Latino immigrants from the constructed idea of the US nation's body (Chavez, 2008).

Similarly, scholar Edwin Ackerman, who has studied the US media's use of the adjective "illegal" in referring to immigrants, argues that "there is no obvious reason why we should frame the debate over unauthorised immigration as fundamentally an issue of lawfulness" (Ackerman, 2013: 74).

From 'otherism' to entertainment

The understanding of the reporting of the distant 'other' as overly simplistic, non contextualised and with a tendency to perpetuate familiar stereotypes (Silverstone, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2006 Chavez,

2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016), follows the the theory that the development of news reporting in recent years increasingly turned to an “entertainment” format (Snow, 1983; Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012), meaning that media reporting is particularly geared to provide amusement and voyeurism, rather than depicting events by contextualising them into the broader social, economic and political context. This fits into the view that “the news has become a mass-produced consumer product bearing little resemblance to history book images” (Bennett, 2012: 36).

The entertainment news format characterises a post-journalism era, American Sociologist David Altheide argues, where entertainment functions as a bridge between the news and non-news, thus blurring the line that distinguishes the two (Altheide, 1997). It is primarily aimed at grabbing the attention of as wide of an audience as possible (Bennett, 2012), nevertheless entering a “media logic” which is hard to break out of and that leaves out important elements of information and contextualisation (Altheide, 1997).

In outlining the most prominent features of entertainment-focussed news stories, Robert Snow (1983) refers to an absence of the ordinary, a focus on adventure which takes place outside an ordinary routine behaviour, and a likely development of feelings of disbelief among the audience. (Snow, 1983). News coverage that follows the entertainment format often includes brief, dramatic and action-oriented reporting, mixed with an array of highly visual material (Snow, 1983; Bennett, 2012; Altheide, 1997).

‘Personalisation’ and ‘Dramatisation’

Two of the most common and prominent aspects of the ‘entertainment’ format of news are the personalisation and dramatisation of stories, both employed to attract, entertain and retain audiences, without paying much attention to important details that provide context (Bennett, 2012; Altheide, 1997).

One one hand, ‘personalisation’ refers to the tendency to generally downplay the big economic, political and social picture in favour of the human tragedies and crises that emerge from the events being covered (Bennett, 2012; Figenschou et al., 2015). Using human-interest angles is among the most common practices employed by journalists to personalise news stories which highly promote audience engagement, identifications and reactions through strong characters and personalities.

Bennett (2012) defines this practice as an “information bias” (Bennett, 2012: 45) and regards it as one of the biggest flaws in the American news media landscape, holding that the personalisation of stories carries the “overwhelming tendency to downplay the big social, economic or political picture in favour of the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events” (Bennett, 2012: 45). The author believes it stems from the journalist’s fear that a well-examined analysis will turn audiences away, while drawing to the human-interest side of the story will engage and retain readers (Bennett, 2012).

The dramatisation of news, on the other hand, is intertwined with the personalisation aspect as they both draw the main actors to the centre of the story. In fact, news dramas often feature big personalities at their centre in emphasising the crisis being covered. Bennett (2012) believes that dramatisation is not necessarily a negative aspect of news coverage, as it often leads to higher audience engagement. However, in highlighting drama by solely focusing on human crises and conflict to evoke emotional feelings, the larger significance of events often gets lost (Bennett, 2012; Altheide, 1997).

In summing up this specific aspect of news coverage, Paletz and Entman conclude that ”drama is a defining characteristic of news. An event is particularly newsworthy if it has some elements of a dramatic narrative.” (Paletz and Entman, 1981: 17).

The media teaches us “what to worry about”

Among all scholars who have dug into the topic, American Sociologist David Altheide offers an excellent and thorough analysis of the link between the evolution of news stories into “infotainment” (the above-described entertainment format) and the use of dramatisation and personalisation to create dramatic yet engaging coverage. With a specific focus on the media’s role in generating sentiments of fear among its audience, Altheide’s (1997) theory will result particularly interesting and useful in the analysis conducted in this work.

The author (1997) starts his study by analysing the relationship between the media and fear mongering by emphasising the prominence of how “every society teaches its members many things, including what to worry about” (Altheide, 1997: 660) and how the coverage of “problems” often goes hand in hand with the ever growing entertainment-format of news outlined above. The author

defines media reporting as a "problem-generating machine" where danger and risk are central in their coverage, which focuses primarily on entertainment and voyeurism.

He defines this practice as "problem framing" (Altheide, 1997), which sees the use of fear as a dominant feature in news coverage to produce reporting which is deemed both interesting and entertaining. This, according to the media scholar, works to attract a larger audience that can make sense of the issues being reported (Altheide, 1997).

In this context, it is important to bare in mind that framing is a very prominent aspect of any news coverage, as it deliberately focuses on certain aspects of the issue it presents and leaves out others, in the same way in which a picture frame decides what the viewer sees and what their attention is drawn to. As Robert Entman (1993) explains in his essay Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm how the practice involves "selection and salience" (Entman, 1993: 52). Entman (1993) outlines that the act of framing as follow:

"To select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described"" (Entman, 1993: 52)

The consequences of fear-inducing coverage

In his analysis, Altheide (1997) emphasises how the recurring use of fear by the media modifies our perception on and perspective of events in the long run. (Altheide, 1997) As the author outlines: "Over time, with repeated use [of fear in the media], nuances blend, connotations become denotations, fringes mix with kernels, and we have a different perspective on the world" (Altheide, 1997: 29). In this discourse, the author highlights two important consequences of the use of the "problem frame" for mere entertainment that have to be taken into account.

The first one is linked to how the media and public perception of issues are deeply and inexorably linked. Studies have in fact suggested that a constant exposure to violent content in the news can lead to viewers perceiving life as dangerous and fearful, fuelling their anxieties (Altheide, 1997; Shaw, 1973; Bennett, 2012; Cap, 2006). In the US context, some studies go as far as suggesting that the American society is "the most anxious and frightened in history" (Shaw, 1973: 1).

In relation to Altheide's argument, David Shaw (1973) reflects on how media's role in fear creation leads people to be scared of the wrong things. He argues that media outlets focus way too often on problems and issues that scare their audiences, mainly aiming at higher audience engagement. Similarly, in their work *Mass Media and Fear of Crim*e, Linda Heath and Kevil Gilbert (1996) discuss that "because the media often distort crime by over-representing more severe, intentional and gruesome incidents, the public overestimates its frequency and often misperceives reality" (Heath and Gilbert, 1996: 371).

As Jonathan Bethnall (2014), Professor in Anthropology at UCL in London and author of Disasters, Relief and the Media, underlines: while it is essential that the media cover and raise awareness of crises from around the world, it is nevertheless important that the reporting does not generate a crisis of its own (Bethnall, 2014).

The second problem Altheide links to fear creation by the media is its political implications. The author discusses how news coverage that provide a distorted perception of reality and a poor understanding of the issues it presents, can lead those in power to make ineffective and, in some cases, counterproductive decisions (Altheide, 1997). As the author writes:

"The driving force of the news coverage can distort understanding of the issues, leading politicians […] who actually deal with the alleged problems to make adjustments that are counterproductive and make matters much worse" (Altheide, 1997: 655)

Entertainment and fear in covering the US-Mexico borderlands

Outlining the above theories ranging from the reporting of the 'distant other', to the news media adapting to an entertainment format, and Altheide's concept of "problem frame", underpins the understanding of the coverage on the US-Mexico border by the US national media, which this work will primarily focus on.

However, there is a relative dearth of literature that looks into the media representation of the US-Mexico border and the communities that live along it.
Among the few, Kathryn Feluriet and Heide Castaneda (2017) look into the media and health landscape along the border, and Reece Jones (2014) studies the portrayal of the US southern

borderlands in the TV series *Border Wars* produced by National Geographic. Nevertheless, both works serve as an important starting point in this analysis as they present interesting findings.

In their research article *A Risky Place: Media and the Health Landscape in the (In)secure US-Mexico Borderlands*, Kathryn Feluret and Heide Castaneda (2017) focus on the media portrayal of the Rio Grande Valley, located in southern Texas. They reveal how the region is framed by the media as "insecure, corrupt, broken and defined by immigration alone" (Fleuret and Castaneda, 2017: 32) and how this coverage perpetuates a narrow vision of the region, inhabited by people who are dangerous and do not comply with American ideals and standards of security, prosperity and citizenship (Fleuret and Castaneda, 2017).

The authors reflect on how the negative framing of the US-Mexico borderlands, and the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in the specific, are relevant because of the political implications of the perception of security at the southern border (Fleuret and Castaneda, 2017). As they explain, "dominant media representations of places and people can be weathervanes for political discourse that shape state and national action about "the border."" (Fleuret and Castaneda, 2017: 32). This follows Altheide's (1997) point underlined above, that fear mongering by the media has the potential to negatively shape political action. Fleuret and Castaneda (2017) emphasise how it is not surprising to them, after conducting a thorough media analysis on the topic, that the dominant concern when it comes to the US borderlands has primarily revolved around the idea of security.

Most importantly, the authors ponder on a relevant question in this discussion: why does the media persistently promote negative stories about the border, depicting the region as a risky place? According to their findings, the image of a corrupt and insecure border region with Mexico "makes sense" to the American public, which has for years been "scapegoating Mexicans and Mexico in times of economic stress" (Fleuret and Castaneda, 2017: 43) and journalists act as mere gatekeepers to the narrative, often unconsciously, profoundly influencing public perception and political action.

Similarly, Reece Jones (2014) also focuses on the media portrayal of the US southern border, however primarily referring to the TV series *Border Wars* produced and aired by National Geographic Channel, in an attempt to "Follow the Department of Homeland Security's federal law enforcement agents and officers as they defend and protect America's borders." (National Geographic, 2018).

Interestingly, Jones (2014) looks at the how the representations and narratives of faraway places and distant events are crucial for both the audience's perception of the area as well as the political rhetoric and action that follows (Jones, 2014). Jones quotes Foucault, who argues that "once established and inscribed into the consciousness of a population, these geopolitical discourses act as a disciplinary regime of truth by shaping how events are understood and interpreted by the population" (Foucault, 1971 mentioned in Jones, 2014: 532).

The series' title alone might suggest how the region is framed and portrayed, and Jones (2014) offers an in-depth analysis of the methods National Geographic employed to depict the US-Mexico border regions as "a dangerous space that needs to be secured to protect American jobs from immigrants and American children from the scourge of drugs" (Jones, 2014: 533).

The author argues that a combination of visuals and sounds give the impression that the region is torn by an ongoing war and that this pattern of exaggerating threats is recurring in every episode of the show. Jones (2014) believes that these representations buy into the stereotypical and enduring narrative of the border which solely emphasises danger and threat while paying little to no attention to what is actually happening.

Following an attentive and thorough analysis, Jones (2014) concludes that "borderlands are defined as a dangerous place where every trail is a smuggling route, every encounter is potentially dangerous and everyone in that space is a suspect until they can prove they are not" (Jones, 2014: 547).

However the authors who have conducted the research described above by studying the media's representation of the US-Mexico borderlands, arguably miss two important aspects. First, the identification of the specific formats, frames and narratives employed by the news media in their portrayal of the US-Mexico borderlands and how they convey such negative images. While both Jones (2014), and Fleuret and Castaneda (2017) researched the media's representation of the borderlands, the first did so by analysing a Television series and the latter looked at the relationship between media and health in the Rio Grande Valley, providing little depth to the media analysis itself. Second, both works fail at understanding the aspects of borderland reality overlooked by the media; while arguing that the reporting on the border depicts the area as risky, dangerous and unsafe

and that journalists recreate narratives that are easily recognisable among the American public, this dissertation argues that the existing research does not provide the reader with knowledge on the elements which shape the cultural identity of the US southern borderland's reality,

This paper will therefore focus on an analysis of the formats, frames and narratives that shape the coverage of the US-Mexico borderlands to reveal the cultural context the media reporting lacks.

What exactly defines "border culture"?

Before moving on to the analysis, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of the cultural traits of the region being discussed - and most importantly to understand what media outlets are purposely leaving out in favour of dramatic and fear-loaded stories on the southern border and the communities that live along it. What is the purpose of arguing that the American media's reporting on the US-Mexico border is dramatised if we don't understand the the context in which the stories are actually set in?

The anthropological studies of borders can provide us with exactly what is needed: a contextualised insight into the essence of the US-Mexico border, through a deeper understanding and reconceptualisation of predefined notions and constructions of borderland communities and their culture (Alvarez, 1995; Castells, 2010; Dear, 2013; Manos et al., 2016; Anzaldua, 1987; Heyman et al., 2012). This section of the literature helps us go beyond Green's (2013) understanding of borders as entities that "act as techniques of classifying and ordering" (Green, 2013: 350) but rather as creators of a distinctive and unique identity and culture which stem from a complex web of intra-national historical relations.

Narrowing down one factor that contributes to the formation of identity and culture in borderland communities is however not simple, not only because of the vast number of diverse borderland regions across the world, but also due to the number of contrasting theories which attempt to explain the process of identity and cultural formation.

Also, as Michael Dear (2013) underlines, "the borderlands have always been a place of strife" (Dear, 2013: 50). Quoting History Professor Oscar Martinez, who referred to the area as a "troublesome border", Dear (2013) emphasises that the formation of what can now be identified as

borderland identity and culture derives from a combination of antagonisms and alliances that over time turned into borderland integration.

Studying the cultural dynamics at the US-Mexico border can in fact be rather complex, as the region has for long represented a symbol of division, separation and difference. And unlike European borders which have gone through a number of changes in the last decades, especially in their permeability, the US-Mexico border has seen a reinforcement over recent years "through ethno-nationalist aspirations and security concerns over terrorism and illegal migration" (Manos, 2016: 4). The concept of two separate, divided communities has for long characterised the border between the United States and Mexico mostly because no other border in the world exhibits such inequality of power, economics and human condition (Alvarez, 1995).

Resistance Identity

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2010) reflects on the process of identity formation and its power in society, defining identity as "people's source of meaning and experiences" (Castells, 2010: 6). He understands the process of identity formation as the internalisation and manifestation of a set of identified cultural attributes which are given priority over others (Castells, 2010). Interestingly, the author distinguishes different processes of identity building, one of which can help us understand the cultural formations in borderland communities.

In his work, Castells (2010) outlines his concept of "resistance identity", generated by actors whose conditions or positions in society are devalued and/or stigmatized from the domination of other cultural factors. Resistance identity is therefore understood as a response from a number of actors to a dominating cultural framework.

In the context of cultural identity in the US southern borderlands, Gloria Anzaldua (1987), a Texan scholar best known for her book "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza", where she recounts her upbringing in the region, believes that border culture emerges as a response to the challenges faced by voiceless communities against a dominant cultural framework. Specifically in relation to the US-Mexico border, Anzaldua (1987) highlights how people of Mexican origin living in *colonias* (name given to communities living in the region) have maintained specific cultural traits which "challenge the Anglo-American definition of US culture" (Anzaldua in Heyman et al., 2012: 49).

Heyman et al.'s (2012) theory of cultural formations at the US-Mexico border can also be linked to the concept of resistance identity. In emphasising how the "United States-Mexico borderland have particularly been the setting of key ideas and debates over border cultures" (Heyman et al, 2012: 48) the author explains how cultural developments at the US southern border stem from a "two-sided attitude towards the United States" (Heyman et al., 2012: 49) by Mexican nationals, who view their northern neighbours as a threatening power on one hand and as a model of modernity on the other. The same, however, happens vice versa as many United States citizens look down on Mexico but still perceive the country as exotic, traditional and sensuous (Josiah in Heyman et al, 2012)

Borderlands as "perfect laboratories" of cultural identities

Other theories look into how borderlands are places where the hybridisation of different identities and cultures gives birth to a unique set of features and traits.

Alvarez (1995) argues that the study of border culture leads us to "re-conceptualize our terrain by breaking out of predefined constructions" (Alvarez in Winston et al., 2012: 539) of borderlands. He presents a thorough analysis of the state of the research on the anthropology of borderland regions, looking into how they "became a perfect laboratory in which to view the coming together of, dashing of and interface between cultures." (Alvarez in Winston et al., 2012: 545)

The author argues that the phenomenon known as 'transnationalism', understood as the influx of different values, ideas and customs in borderland regions, gives birth to what today is known as identity and culture in *colonias* at the southern border. Similarly, Anderson (1996) sees borders as "makers of identity" as they contribute to the construction of unique local cultures which feature a set of important assets (Anderson, 1996).

The "Third Nation"

The uniqueness of cultural traits and identity features that stem from the transnationalism and interconnectedness of two countries coming together (Alvarez, 1995; Anderson, 1996), gives place to what Professor Michael Dear (2013) defines the "Third Nation", a very interesting concept in this analysis.

By studying and outlining the historical developments in the region, Dear (2013) develops the notion that the features inherent to a cultural identity in the US southern borderlands are too unique to be regarded as either American or Mexican. Therefore he argues that the space between the two countries forms a Nation of its own, understood as a voluntary association by a group of people who identify with one another based on a set of shared history, geography, values, ethic traits and so on. Dear understands it as an area which does not divide the US and Mexico, but rather that acts as "connective membrane uniting them" (Dear, 2013: vii)The author defines it as the following:

"The 'third nation' [between the US and Mexico] is an in-between space, transcending the geopolitical boundary that divides the constructive nation-states and creates from them a new identity distinct from the nationalisms of host countries" (Dear, 2013: vii)

According to the author, adopting this view of the US southern borderlands can help generate a understanding of the region as a place characterised by coexistence rather than difference; a view, Dear (2013) argues, that runs counter to the general perception of the US-Mexico border by the wider American public.

Characteristics of the 'Third Nation'

Given the complex web of historical interconnections between Mexico and the United States, there are myriads of attributes one can give to cultural and identity formations along the US-Mexico border, from the daily use of "spanglish", a hybrid language which blends Spanish and English vocabulary, to the celebration of the Mexican traditions such as "quinceanera", when girls come of age (Dear, 2013). However, there are a few which stand out and are important to bear in mind before dwelling into the analysis. One of the most prominent and politically relevant is the shared identity of border dwellers (a term coined by Andaluza and refers to an inhabitant of the borderlands)(Andaluza, 1987), which gives place to a hybrid and harmonious society, rather than one divided by a politically constructed border (Dear, 2013; Alvarez, 1995).

Dear argues that border dwellers are likely to "get along perfectly well with people on the other side, but remain distrustful of far-distant national capitals [since] continuity and connectivity across the border line existed for centuries before the border was put in place." (Dear, 2013: 1).

The cross-border harmony is in fact such an important characteristic of the mentality of border communities that alone it can potentially distinguish border-dwellers from those living elsewhere. To explain this point concretely, Michael Dear (2013) mentions the divergence in viewpoints between Brownsville-native Betty Perez and US-Representative from Colorado Tom Tancredo in discussing the value of a fortified border during an April 2008 meeting held in Brownsville, Texas. While Perez argued that the line dividing Mexico from Texas "isn't really a border" for those living in the area, Tancredo dismissed her standpoint by calling her a multiculturalist, adding that the border fence would be more effective if built north of Brownsville instead (Dear, 2013: 96). The analysis section in this dissertation will look into detail at the media representation of the sentiment towards Mexico in the US' southern communities in order to understand the representation of this important aspect of borderland identity.

Conclusion

Having gone through the theories concerning the reporting of the 'distant other' in the media, narrowing it down to the constructed images of Latinos, then outlining how the news media is adapting to an "entertainment" format, starkly characterised by human-interest and dramatised narratives and looking into Altheide's (1997) reflections on the rise of fear mongering in news media stories; then by introducing the main focus of this work, being the media portrayal of the US-Mexico border in the American media, the little yet important amount of literature on the topic served as a starting point to conduct the analysis; and finally, by outlining the most relevant theories on cultural and identity formations at the US-Mexico border, specifically Dear's (2013) concept of "Third Nation" and its characteristics, this work will now focus on an Ethnographic Content Analysis (Altheide, 2013) that will look into the relation between the coverage of the US-Mexico borderlands, and the representation of the "Third Nation"

Methodology

The research outlined in this dissertation was conducted through an ethnographic approach to document analysis, which stems from of an interrogation on the media's portrayal of the borderlands through a conducted on-the-ground research in border communities. The research will reflectively combine a qualitative media analysis of a set of chosen documents together with the findings produced by fieldwork interviews.

This analysis will follow Altheide's "Ethnographic Content Analysis" (ECA) methods, which overall "stem from an awareness among researchers that a simply study of the content of mass media was not enough" (Altheide, 2013: 5) and extend the findings of a regular qualitative media analysis by involving participant observation in the selected topic and orient it towards a constant comparison and discovery of images, meanings, styles and settings. Altheide (2013) describes how ECA focuses on verification through discovery and is characterised by a reflective progression from data collection, to the analysis and interpretation. As the media scholar outlines, "A major difference [compared to a traditional qualitative media analysis] is the reflective and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis" (Altheide, 2013: 26)

In the specific, to understand how the reality of the United States' southern borderlands is conveyed through the media, the research will firstly be based on a traditional qualitative media analysis, which Altheide (2013) defines as a method "oriented to documenting and understanding the communication of meaning, as well as verifying theoretical relationships" (Altheide, 2013: 26). Such method will allow a primary understanding of the formats, choices in framing and wording used in the coverage of borderlands, guided by the theories outlined in the previous chapter.

The main analysis till then present a reflective and comparative approach to the qualitative media analysis, through the theory, combined with the researcher's interpretation and the opinions expressed by interviewees in the city of Brownsville, Texas, where the fieldwork was conducted.

Qualitative Media Analysis: The USA Today's Border Wall report

Altheide (2013) emphasises the methodological importance of contextualising the analysis by justifying why the material was chosen to begin with.

The research conducted for this work will focus on 16 long-reads, included in the USA Today's report 'Border Wall', as set of documents taken as representations of institutional relations and social meanings of the US southern borderlands.

The US national news media outlet USA Today was specifically chosen for two distinct reasons: first, because it is registered as the most read national newspaper in the United States: the print and online version of the paper attract 7 million readers on a daily basis (Agility, 2017); second, because it is reportedly the least biased national news outlet in the country (Fact Check/Media Bias, 2018), and as the purpose of the qualitative media analysis (and subsequently the ethnographic content analysis) is to understand how the reality of borderlands is portrayed in the media, it requires that the articles are produced by an outlet characterised by a lower partisan bias.

Ethnographic research in Brownsville, Texas

Ethnography refers to a methodological approach which researches the "description of people and their culture" (Atkinson et al., cited in Altheide, 2013: 24).
Data collection in an ethnographic study, usually involves direct participation on behalf of the researcher, observing people's everyday life for an extended period of time and asking them questions by conducting face-to-face interviews (Atkinson et al., 2001). The ultimate aim is to gather "whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging facts of enquiry" (Atkinson et al., 2001: 3).

The ethnographic research at the border comes into play by taking this research one step forward through relating and comparing the findings of a traditional qualitative media analysis with the opinions and thoughts expressed by a select number of interviewees. As Altheide (2013) outlines, an "ethnographic perspective can help delineate patterns of human action when document analysis is conceptualised as fieldwork" (Altheide, 2013: 23).

Ethnography in fact requires a full immersion into the environment, context and situations of the reality being researched. This serves to "guide the mode of inquiry and the orientation of the investigator" (Atheide, : 24). The research was conducted in the city of Brownsville, Texas, specifically chosen for its location by the borderline and its potential in conveying a full understanding of the reality and cultural traits of borderland communities.

Other reasons include Brownsville's location in the Rio Grande Valley, the region of the over 2,000 mile long border which registers the highest number of migrant crossers (US Customs and Border Protection, 2018), and the city's 10-year long experience with a border fence (or wall, as locals call it), completed in 2008 following the "Secure Fence Act" of 2006.

The ethnographic research: interviews in Brownsville

The material gathered through the interviews adds to the reflective aspect of this analysis, serving as as a constant process of reflection on the topics being analysed and the findings produced by the initial qualitative media analysis. As Altheide explains, the researcher "interacts with documentary materials so ha specific statements [from the ethnographic research] can be placed in the proper context for analysis" (Altheide, 2013: 5).

A total of 11 people were interviewed in Brownsville, Texas. The interviewees were asked a number of questions on topics ranging from their perception of the national media's portrayal of borderland regions, to their life since the construction of the border fence in 2006. A full guide to the interviews, including the questions asked, can be found in the Appendix section.

The interviews were conducted through a semi-structured approach, meaning that a drafted set of questions served mainly as a help guide during the research process. The interviews were then incorporated with a more conversational aspect. This structure was purposely chosen to give the researcher full flexibility to gather information from the interviewees, based on their answers, expertise and background. For example, if an interviewee was broadly asked "How do you feel like borderland culture is represented in the media?", and their answer mentioned a particular aspect of their cultural identity the research knew little about, the question that followed would focus on that particular subject the interviewee raised.

It is worth underlining in this context that the emphasis of the interviews was data collection, meaning that the language and wording employed by the interviewees does not particularly matter in this analysis.

Coding Technique

After completing the preliminary qualitative media analysis and having transcribed the interviews, a coding technique was essential to conduct the reflective and comparative analysis Altheide (2013) refers to. An appropriate coding structure for the qualitative media analysis allows the researcher to identify how the different theories presented in the Literature Review were traceable in the documents being analysed (e.g. 'otherism' in the storytelling, the 'discourse of fear' throughout the narrative etc), and subsequently relating them to the opinions of the interviewees.

In order for this to be executed appropriately, this dissertation follows Seale's (1998) concept of 'thematic coding', which the scholar deems effective when conducting qualitative and ethnographic research. As Seale writes, "it is easier to make sense of the data when it's divided up into themes" (Seale, 1998: 367). As the name suggest, this coding technique allows the researcher to select a number of themes on which the analysis is based, and code the material accordingly.

As Seale (1998) suggests, the analysis of theory should be conducted before coding. The literature review of this work in fact serves to "inform the design of the qualitative study", as it outlines the the theoretical approach to the research, which serves as a structure to the whole analysis and to the thematic coding. The themes are: 'otherism' in the reporting, the 'entertainment' format of personalised and dramatised news, the use of 'discourse of fear' in the storytelling, and the aspects of hybridity and interconnectedness unique to cultures at the border.

Both the articles and the interview transcripts were then read with these themes in focus, highlighting sentences, expressions and specific terms employed by the journalist(s) that would relate to the theme. An example of the coding structure and technique used is located in the Appendix section.

Incorporating the theory, the media analysis and the ethnographic research

Once the full thematic coding was completed though an attentive reading of both the USA Today's sixteen long-read articles and the eleven interview transcripts, this work proceeds to the main analysis.

This is structured following the different themes chosen and outlined in the Literature Review, presenting a reflective analysis of both the coded content in the articles and the one from the interviews - offering the kind of constant reflective analysis between the qualitative media analysis and the ethnographic research Altheide refers to.
For example, if a specific article presents a strong fear-mongering narrative, the sentences and words highlighted in the article related to this specific theme are discussed and reflected upon, through the theoretical framework and the opinions expressed by the interviewees which specifically refer to the topic.

Sampling

Outlining the sampling methods is essential to enhance the validity of research conducted through employing interviews as a data source, as it outlines “a set of inclusion criteria or exclusion criteria, or a combination of both” (Robinson, 2014: 26). This section will go through how the researcher reached the 11 interviewees who took part in this research.

The first step in this research was to secure a ‘gatekeeper’, someone who would “actively help with publicising the study and encourage participation” (Robinson, 2014: 36) and who had access to a number of potential interviewees in the city of Brownsville, where the ethnographic research was conducted.

After having reached a specific number of sources through the gatekeeper, the sampling methods followed a ‘snowball effect’, based on asking participants to involve acquaintances in the research, through a process Robinson (2014) defines as “referral chains”. The criteria the researcher kept in mind within the sampling process, ensured that the participants were all born and raised in Brownsville, as the ethnographic research required observations by individuals who are borderland natives.

Ethical considerations

It is important to underline in this context that the ethnographic research conducted in this work do not aim at understanding whether or not the USA Today is reporting the truth, nor why the media

outlet’s network of journalists employed specific formats and framing techniques; but it rather aims at gathering data on the perspective of border dwellers on how the events from the borderlands are covered are presented to the wider American public. This means that all participants were asked a number of questions in regards to their opinions and perspective of the media’s portrayal of borderland communities, therefore not involving questions that breached the interviewees’ privacy.

All respondents were presented an informed consent form, through which they agreed to share their opinions and perspectives with the researcher. An example of the form is located in the Appendix. For privacy reasons, the real identity of the interviewees is kept anonymous, meaning that the names used in the analysis in referencing the obtained material are not real.

Analysis

The USA Today: America's most popular and least biased

Born as a daily newspaper on September 15, 1982, with a focus on national and international news, the USA Today, also known as "The Nation's Newspaper", has for long been one of the United States' most prominent media outlets. At the time it was launched, it was among the most updated and trustworthy news sources, publishing "fresh" news on a daily basis (Wicks, 1985). The USA Today was also the first in the market to introduce "a radical new concept concerning the use of photographs, features and graphics" (Wicks, 1985: 2) by incorporating coloured pictures alongside its reporting. Today, the USA Today is the most read across the country: the print and the online editions combined attract up to seven million readers per day (Agility, 2017), followed by The New York Times and and The Wall Street Journal.

One of USA Today's distinctive characteristics within the US national media landscape, is its low political bias, an important factor as the US media has repeatedly suffered from accusations of partisan reporting. Everette Dennis (2005), scholar at Northwestern University in Qatar, stated that the lack of objectivity is one of the most prominent issues in the American media landscape (Dennis et al., 2005), and a 2018 Gallup/Knight Foundation survey discovered that most Americans believe that national media sources are incapable of separating fact from opinion, while still believing that the media plays a key democratic role in informing its public (Gallup-Knight Foundation, 2018).

By analysing a Pew Research report on the levels of trust towards news outlets in the United States, the partisan bias makes it hard to point out a US news source which is equally popular across the political spectrum. For example, while The New York Times holds high levels of trust among consistently and mostly liberal groups and is highly distrusted by conservatives, Fox News presents the exact opposite findings. However, the USA Today is among the few outlets that register a fairly equal level of trust across the surveyed groups (Pew, 2014).

According to a Blind Survey conducted by Allsides.com, the USA Today presents a "centre" media bias, meaning that the outlet does not endorse any specific candidate for office; the online platform Media Bias and Fact Check labels the USA Today as "least biased", stating that the outlet has a "minimal bias and uses very few loaded words - wording that attempts to influence an audience by

using appeal to emotion or stereotype" (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018). The source also attributes high factual reporting standards to the USA Today.

As the primary aim of this work is to provide an analysis of how news stories convey images of US southern borderlands to the American public and how specific reporting techniques lead journalists to include certain aspects of the reporting and leave out others, it is important for this analysis to primarily rely on the content produced by a media outlet which has both a wide reach among American audiences (the most-read US newspaper) and that does not side with any partisan bias (the least biased news outlet).

The Wall Report: thorough and explanatory?

In September 2017, the USA Today published *The Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences*, an extensive coverage of the often unexplored territories of the southern United States, aimed at offering a thorough reporting of events taking place at the US-Mexico border in the wake of Donald Trump's call for the construction of "a big, beautiful wall" (Trump, 2015). The report was published on its own web page, separated from the paper's main site, showcasing footage from the borderlands through short clips of territories along the border and soldiers marching in deserted lands. It includes an array of material, from video reporting to podcasts and sixteen articles in the form of long-reads - all aimed at providing the reader with an exclusive, thorough and remarkable understanding of the reality at the border (USA Today, 2017).

The news outlet hails the report "landmark" and "unprecedented", stating that its primary goal is to "let you experience the border any way you choose, so as discussions take place and decisions are made, you have all the information you need" (USA Today, 2017).
Earlier this year, The Wall won the USA Today a prestigious Pulitzer prize for its alleged in-depth, on-the-ground and explanatory reporting (USA Today, 2017).

The articles included the USA Today's report will be central focus in this research.
They come in the form of long-reads, aiming to "promote understanding of complex issues" (USA Today, 2017) through a contextualised and researched reporting. Long-reads belong to a traditional journalistic practice known as "slow journalism", characterised by an interest in 'ordinary' people and those who have been marginalised. Meuret (2013) has observed how such practice has re-

gained relevance in today's overly-meditated world to offer the reader well-written and documented stories which can help them make sense of the complexity and diversity of this world, countering the growth of what Nick Davies defines as 'churnalism' (Meuret, 2013)(Davies, 2008). The term refers to pre-packaged, short and snappy news that significantly lack a thorough analysis and where "the scale and quality of coverage has been swept away" to an extent that "[it] has taken the place of what we [journalists] should be doing: Telling the truth". (Davies, 2008: 1). Davies' concept of 'churnalism' arguably presents close similarities with the theories concerning the entertainment-focus of news stories (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012; Snow, 1983).

An overview of the analysis

As images and metaphors shape human thinking, devoting attention to media portrayals gives an insight into their deep effects on influencing and potentially distorting perceptions of reality. This work will look at media representations of border dwellers and Latinos as 'the other' and as an intrinsic problem in society, analysing how such portrayals are conveyed to the audience and interpreted by border dwellers, and how underrepresenting certain aspects of borderland culture can undermine a full understanding of the reality at the border.

This section will present how the reporting of the US-Mexico border conducted by the USA Today's network of journalists is packaged and presented to the American public. The following paragraphs will identify the main characteristics of the media formats, frames and narratives being employed in relation to the analysed documents from the USA Today. As this work follows Altheide's (2013) methods for an Ethnographic Content Analysis, particular emphasis will be given to the conducted fieldwork, which offers a reflective approach to the analysis and contributes to an original insight into the perception of border dwellers of the media reporting of the areas they come from and live in.

Although most of the aspects of news stories being analysed are often intertwined and linked to one another, this work will present how this analysis reveals the following broad patterns, structurally divided into four chapters:

- **The reporting of the 'distant other'**: This section will focus on how the narratives employed by the USA Today's network of journalists reflect the notions concerning the decontextualised

faraway reporting and 'otherism', with a specific focus on Chavez's (2008) Latino Threat Narrative.

- **The entertainment format**: the second section aims a contextualising how the reporting of faraway lands turns news coverage in infotainment, with a specific focus on how the USA Today reporting employs big personalities and dramatic narratives to attract and entertain audiences.
- **Fear and the 'problem frame'**: interlinked with the previous sub-chapter, this section relates to Altheide's (1997) theory that the entertainment format of news stories leads to 'the problem frame', analysing how narratives of the US-Mexico border reporting conducted by the USA Today are particularly leaned towards fear-mongering.
- **Border culture**: This last section will analyse the documents to analyse how border culture, and specifically the hybridity and transnationalism of Michael Dear's (2013) "Third Nation" is conveyed by the USA Today.

Lucas, a Texan rancher and retired anthropology professor interviewed for this project, describes the USA Today's report as "very self serving and following traditional party lines" (Lucas, 66). Students, immigration attorneys and journalists from Brownsville expressed similar concerns on the matter, and the following paragraphs will analyse how.

1. The 'otherism' of faraway reporting

Media scholars who have focussed on the new media's reporting of distant events, unveiled how news stories are often characterized by "self-other" distantiative narratives - also known as "otherism" (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Brons, 2015). It is believed that this process of distinguishing who "we" are from who "we" are not (Brons, 2015; Crang, 1998), leads to representations of the 'distant other' through negative and recurring stereotypes as a helpless and inferior victim (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999)

Besides, scholars have argued that coverage of faraway events is often poorly contextualised, failing at providing an account of the circumstances the events unfold in (Franks, 2013; Chavez, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2006). In supporting this, other studies have argued that media images have a stronger impact on the perception of people who have less experience with the subject being covered (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011), meaning that in the case of faraway reporting the line between the media's "world" and reality can often blur.

Interviewees in Brownsville reflected on the aspect of image-construction in the coverage of the southern border. Adriano, a 23-year-old student at the University of Texas at the Rio Grande Valley, believes that 'otherism' in the national media is pervasive, presenting a constant flow of constantly repeated negative stereotypes.

Q: How do you feel represented in the media?

A: They [news outlets] come up with stories on the Valley and the border in general without having the slightest idea about what goes on here: they constantly picture us through very negative stereotypes, as if a white person is offering help and we are rednecks. They constantly put us in boxes to an extent that they don't even seem to realise that we are are humans [...] they might depict us in certain ways but we are more than just an argument to build a wall: we breathe, live and have emotions, and people seem to forget about that." (Adriano, 23)

Adriano's reflection of the reporting not considering border dwellers as humans can be considered as the ultimate stage in the "us" versus "them" distantiation which characterises the reporting of the 'distant other' (Chouliaraki, 2006; Brons, 2015; Boltanski, 1999; Franks, 2013; Benthall, 2014). However, an appropriate contextualisation of 'otherism' in the USA Today's Border Wall report requires an understanding of the representation of minorities in the media - and more specifically, of Latinos (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016).

1.1 The 'Latino Threat Narrative'

Chavez (2008) defines the "Latino Threat Narrative", referring to a set of images and representations which recurrently construct the portrayal of Latinos in the media as "an invading force from south of the border" (Chavez, 2008:3) and as a set of newcomers who "are unwilling or incapable of integrating, or becoming part of the national community" (Chavez, 2008:3) . Chavez (2008) notes how specifically the portrayal of Latino immigrants in the US media places the constructed idea of the US nation and its values in contrast with the 'invading' migrant - images which audience assimilate as undoubtedly truths through constant exposure (Chavez, 2008).

One of the most noticeable features of the USA Today's Border Wall reporting is that Latinos are almost exclusively set within a discourse of immigration and its legality (Akdenizli et al., 2012; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Chavez, 2008). The few excerpts analysed as examples in the following

paragraphs, give an idea of how representations of the ethnic group are linked to those of dangerous migrant crossers. As the Chavez (2008) explains, "the construction of the "Mexican Immigrant as Threat" occurs not in one statement alone but through repetitive statements in various public discourse contexts" (Chavez, 2008: 121). Let's see how this takes shape in the USA Today report.

Chavez's (2008) and Reny and Manzano's (2016) theory that 'otherism' towards Latinos is pervasive and promotes a "self-other distanciation" (Brons, 2015) can be understood in the following excerpt from the introductory section of the fourth article of the series, *Border crossers, and the wall that won't stop them:*

"There was just enough light to see. Three men. Black bandanas on their faces. [...] By force, the two migrants were hustled to the gate of the cemetery [...]. The two migrants had no money, no possessions. They had already decided they were never going south" (Carranza, 2018).

The narrative gives minimal hints to who the subjects are, depicting the men as dangerous and merely naming them as 'the two migrants', reconnecting to Chouliaraki's (2006) theory that one of the most prominent features of 'otherism' within the media is a poor specification of the identity of the 'other' being portrayed (Chouliaraki, 2006). The two men are simply identified as the wrongdoing 'other', and their identity is marked as "criminals and thus illegitimate members of society" (Chavez, 2008: 5) and as "a faceless group or social phenomenon" (Figenschou et al., 2015: 786).This is specifically noticeable in the last sentence, which hints to the migrants' plan of crossing the border into the US with no intention to go back. Besides, the narrative's combination of the mysterious "three men" wearing "black bandanas on their faces" and their intention of migrating to the United States, exemplifies theories which conclude that the depiction of Latino immigrants in the media is framed as a threat to the American society (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Figenschou et al, 2015).

Similarly, other sections from the analysed documents allude to Latinos as threatening border crossers. In the following excerpt, extracted from the introduction to The Wall, Dennis Wagner (2017) gives an account of the influx of migrants crossing the Southern border, by framing the subjects as a burden to the American society "from Alabama to Alaska". The paragraph reads:

"For decades, the US-Mexico boundary was pretty much wide open, allowing millions of migrants to move north, fleeing poverty and crime in Latin America. From Alabama to Alaska, the influx had

profound impacts on neighborhoods, employment social welfare and other aspects of American life"

This excerpt highlights three points worth considering. First, it reconnects to both Chavez's (2008) observation that "immigrants are represented as plagues that threaten the nation [...] in much the same way that germs penetrate the human body" (Chavez, 2008: 117) and to Reny and Manzano's argument that immigration from Mexico is portrayed "as both undesirable and an affront to strong American traditions of law and order" (Reny and Manzano, 2016: 196). The conveyed image is of a "wide open" boundary, where migrants from southern nations freely and uncontrollably cross in order to reach any US state as an invasive and unwelcomed "force from the south" (Chavez, 2008) that will eventually lead to diminished safety, economic disruption and an overall incompatibility with the "us", the "American life".

Second, the context is reduced to a bare minimum, not giving the reader the slightest understanding of the powerful statements the journalist makes. The alleged "profound impacts on neighborhoods, employment, social welfare and other aspects of American life" are strong expressions of the presumed consequences of migration to the United States, nevertheless clustered into one generic sentence with no relation to empirical facts or data. This aspect reconnects to Franks' (2013) observation that the reporting of 'the other' is often overly simplistic and fails to take account of the larger social, political and economic context.

Third, the view of Latino migrants as a threatening 'plague' (Chavez, 2008) in the above except, can be read through the lens of an interesting study conducted by Hermansen et al. (2016), which analyses the language employed by the news media within the discourse of immigration. The study outlines how migrants are often portrayed as natural phenomena, where man is too powerless to intervene, emphasising a "linguistic dehumanisation […] where the relation is constructed as human in contrast to nature and [migrants] are characterised as violent, threatening, and overwhelming" (Hermansen et al., 2016: 2)

Another interesting example that showcases the representation of Latino migrants as the dangerous, threatening and overwhelming 'other' invading the United States (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Hermansen et al., 2016) is this except from Wagner's (2017) article *Border ranchers, in a world without wall*:

"During the 1980s, perhaps 300 border crossers would pass through a ranch each month [...] and then the borderland slowly turned into hell [...] by the early 2000s, a boom was underway. More migrants, more border patrol, more fences.".

The last sentence is particularly evoking, due to the close association of Latino immigrants with border patrol and fences, conveying an overall image of the migrants as the ultimate reason to deploy of more agents and build a wall to protect the region which the journalist describes as "slowly turned into hell". It provides a clear example for a general theory that media constructions of Latino migrants are associated to danger and threat to "us", the American society (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016).

Linking 'otherism' in the USA Today's portrayal of Latinos to the construction of 'dangerous' migrants in the storytelling, leads this analysis to one of the most contested aspects of the reporting of immigration in the southern borderlands: the terminology.

1.2 The terminology of 'otherism': the fight against 'illegal'

Starting from Sadie's opinion, the following paragraphs will a reflect on the terminology employed by the media in relation to Latino immigrants.

Q: So, in what ways do you feel that are Latinos represented in the US media?

A: You mean us? Because, you know, in the United States we are all immigrants. Well… all the usual: the drug dealer, the smuggler or the illegal immigrant. Illegal! Can anyone be illegal? No! [...] We are fighting down here for the media to drop that word, it's dehumanising. (Sadie, 22)

One of the most salient factors which comprise Chavez's (2008) "Latino Threat Narrative" and other theories regarding 'otherism' towards Latinos within the discourse of immigration, are choices in terminology. Donald Trump's constant blustering about "illegal aliens" entering the United States and his orders to "send them back to their country", has led to an increased urgency in revising the use of adjectives like "alien" and "illegal".

In their works, both Chavez (2008) and Reny and Manzano (2016)argue that specific choices in terminology contribute to a negative portrayal of Latinos (Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016). Chavez (2008) stresses that "Their social identity has been plagued by the mark of illegality,

which in much public discourse means that they are criminals and thus illegitimate members of society undeserving of social benefits, including citizenship." (Chavez, 2008: 4). Similarly, Reny and Manzano (2016) argue that positioning Latino immigrants within this legal framework heavily influences public opinion over the implications of the current flux of immigration from the southern border.

The increased awareness on the topic has led select media outlets to "drop the I-word", expression used in a petition launched by journalist José Antonio Vargas (an undocumented immigrant himself) in 2013. As a result, the Associated Press advocated for the term to solely be used to describe actions, not people, by removing the phrase "illegal immigrant" from their stylebook. In 2013, the USA Today instructed their employees to "no longer use the term illegal outside of direct quotes" since the term is "considered pejorative" (Coon, 2013).

1.3 The narrative of illegality in The Wall

The analysis of the USA Today's Border Wall report can attest, however, that while the news outlet has dropped the expression "illegal immigrant" outside direct quotes, the word "illegal" was recurrently employed in the description of Latino migrants and their activities. In the sixteen articles analysed for this dissertation, the word "illegal" outside quotations was employed a total of 33 times, while its most common alternative "undocumented" just once, reflecting a general tendency among the media to place the controversial discourse of immigration within a larger legal framework (Chavez, 2008; Dionne et al., 2012; Renny and Manzano, 2016; Akdenizli et al., 2012).

The following excerpts from the articles can provide an understanding of how the the term "illegal" is employed in the USA Today's long-reads and how it gives place to an intrinsic sense of 'otherness' towards Latinos, even when it is not strictly combined with the word "immigrant".
In the report's introduction, Wagner (2017) employs the term to describe the government's approach to immigration policies during the Obama administration, by writing:

"Democrats often seemed to ignore the negative consequences of unfettered illegal immigration while tapping into political support from the country's surging Latino population" (Wagner, 2017)

This excerpt can provide reflection on to two important points. First, by referring to the Democrats, Wagner (2018) draws the attention to the implementation of policies aimed at controlling

immigration to the United States. In their study on the debates on immigration in the US media, Akdenizli et al. (2012) discovered than media reporting on Latino immigrants contextualised with political action almost exclusively focuses on "efforts to devise and implement policies to control unauthorised migration" (Akdenizli et al., 2012: 37), leading to an overshadowing of important legislation and policies on legal migration that have longer-lasting effects (Akdenizli et al., 2012, 2012). Therefore, in this context, Wagner enters the political debate by only focussing on the dangerous consequences of uncontrolled policies.

Second, Wagner's (2017) specific choice in wording alludes to a disorderly, uncontrolled immigration (he names it "unfettered"). It reflects another of Akdenizli et al.'s (2012) findings, that the cumulative portraits on Mexican immigrants in the American media almost exclusively refer to an uncontrolled immigration, rather than an orderly one. Besides, the allusion to "negative consequences" in this context does not only refer to the incoming of migrants, but also to their activities and behaviour once settled in the country.

Two other examples are worth mentioning as they completely overlook the USA Today's guidelines of dropping the phrase "illegal immigrant". In one case, he authors of *'Mass disaster' grows at the US-Mexico border, but Washington doesn't seem to care*, write that "Texas has become a main entry point for illegal immigrants from Central America" (O'Dell et al., 2018) and in another case, slightly nuanced, Wagner (2018) replaces the term 'immigrant' with 'crosser', both generally used interchangeably in the discourse on immigration (Renny and Manzano, 2016), writing: "Agents had not captured an illegal crosser in more than a week" (Wagner, 2018).

After exploring the narrative of "otherism" in the reporting of the faraway border-dwellers and the dangerous, illegal Latino immigrants through sections of the analysed documents, this analysis will proceed to the contextualisation of the articles into the ever-growing body of entertainment-geared news media.

2. The Entertainment Format

It is widely argued that news stories presented as facts often adhere to pre-existing communication formats which dictate the selection, organisation and presentation of information that ensures that

the final product is based on elements which are familiar and recognisable by its audience (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012).

Media scholars have observed how, in some cases, the adherence to specific communication formats turns news stories into fiction-like reads, with short but intense scenes, a strong emphasis on drama and the constant presence of emotional conflict (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012, Snow, 1983). As seen in the previous chapter, American sociologist David Altheide (1997) and scholar Robert Snow (1983) have analysed the shift among the US news media towards an ever-growing production of news stories and reporting aimed at entertaining rather than educating their audience. It is a format that has been "acquired and widely adopted by various organisations and state agencies that serve as major news sources for the news media" (Altheide, 1997: 651)

As Altheide explains, "In another age, there was the mass media and there was reality; in our age, there is popular culture—everywhere— and even "reality" is presented to us as entertainment" (Altheide, 1997: 10).

Based on such notions, the analysis of the USA Today's report on the border wall can reveal that the reporting fits into the trend of entertainment-focussed and episodic news stories, in relation to personalised and dramatised narratives.

2.1 A strong focus on big personalities

Whether it is Tony the Texan rancher, Selene the Mexican crosser or Alexis the mysterious human smuggler, most news stories published in *The Wall* report draw big personalities to the centre of the narration. From the beginning of the story to its conclusion, this narrative style allows the reader to closely follow the events unfold through the personal recounts of ranchers, smugglers and border crossers - to name a few.

Personalisation, or 'human interest frame', is a journalistic genre characterised by the presence of a "human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an issue or a problem" (Semetko & Valkenburg cited in Figenschou et al., 2015). It is widely deemed as successful in achieving both audience identification and engagement, salient aspects of entertainment-geared news stories, given its potential to allow readers to escape to a fictional world characterised by personalities one

develops strong positive or negative feelings for (Bennett, 2012); however, it is criticized for conveying little to no context about the settings the events unfold in, by downplaying the larger social, economic and political picture. As previously emphasised, this results from the journalists' fear that a well-examined and thorough analysis has the potential to turn readers away (Bennett, 2012; Figenschou et al., 2015)

A prominent example is Wagner's (2017) article *Border violence, and the families in its wake,* which follows the story of Kelly Terry-Willis, who recounts the death of her brother Brian, a Border Patrol agent. The narration starts with Kelly's nostalgic quotes, reminiscent of her brother's passion and dedication in life, and evolves following the events that led to Brian's death, eventually blamed on migrants. One of the final paragraphs in the story reads:

"many other American deaths at the hands of migrants in the US illegally galvanized a clear political notion. If people without legal status had not gotten into the country, some innocent Americans would be still alive". (Wagner, 2017)

Three points are worth considering here. First, the article relates to previous findings that the images of migrants in stories built on a strong human interest angle "tend to be presented as anonymous objects linked to crime, threat, and danger (Figenschou et al., 2015: 784), and that this journalistic genre favours human drama and and tragedy over a detailed contextualisation of the events (Bennett, 2012; Figenschou et al., 2015). By backing none of the claims that link immigration to the deaths of Americans across the country with empirical facts or data, and starkly overlooking the deeper causes and effects, Wagner's narrative reflects Suro's (2011) criticism that the media presents migrants "outside of their political, social, and economic context" (Suro cited in Figenschou et al., 2015: 787).

Second, it underpins the feature of human-interest stories as characterised by the search for a 'case', where news journalists feature specific individuals who are directly affected by the issues they cover, as a means to increase audience engagement, empathy and retainment (Figenschou et al., 2015).

And third, it showcases "the occurrence of narrowly defined victim frames" (Figenschou et al., 2015: 788), in this cases the American people, who are just referred to as a large, narrowly-defined group who dies "at the hand of migrants" (Wagner, 2017).

Another example is Daniel Gonzales' article *Border crossers, and the desert that claims them*, which explores the harsh conditions of migrants crossing deserted lands to reach the United States through an insight into the personal life events of Selene Ramirez, who lost her brother during the attempted crossing. The narration is entirely focussed on following Selene's life, starting with the sentence:

"As she climbs out of the truck, it's clear Selene Ramirez has never hiked in the desert", and ends with "Two months after that, tests results give the family an answer. Selene's brother has been found" (Gonzales, 2017).

This expert showcases Bennet's (2012) conceiving of the human-interest frame as a journalistic flaw, as the narration conveys a rather shallow understanding of the political context the story is set in. In discussing possible solutions to the repeated deaths of migrant crosser, Gonzales writes, "What about Trump's border wall? Would that help prevent migrant deaths?".
While the question could have potentially been followed by an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of Trump's controversial proposal or to look at whether the existing 700 miles of border fence have affected; instead, the journalist quickly dismisses the topic and turns the narrative to yet other stories about migrant crossers. It is worth remembering in this instance Bennett's (2012) understanding that in news stories built on human-interest frames, journalists tend to to secure audience retainment by avoiding an in-depth analysis of the issues presented (Bennett, 2012).

2.1.1 The case of drug-related coverage: American heroes vs Mexican smugglers

In the specific, a detailed analysis of the USA Today's report can attest how news articles that cover drug-related violence can provide a good example on how the human-interested angle studied thus far favours the entertaining narratives of human tragedies while lacking a broader understanding of the issue at stake.

Julien Meraile (2014), who studied the relation between the entertainment-geared media and the coverage on drug-related violence, outlines how the reporting often focuses on heroic American personalities, by scapegoating Mexico and its smugglers. She discusses that "[the media] focus on the Mexican cartels and the violence associated with them while emphasizing tough policies such as drug seizures, arrests of kingpins, and bolstering of Mexico's military and police forces. Neither

hawks nor doves discuss U.S. responsibility in the Mexican drug trade in any depth or the uses of drug war rhetoric" (Meraile, 2014: 112). Similarly, Jones (2017) who studied the portrayal of the US southern borderlands in National Geographic's *Border Wars* documentary, observes that the media "create the image of the Border Patrol agent as a patriotic, brave, and compassionate human being who does everything possible to protect "us" from "them."" (Jones, 2017: 547)

Silvia, one of the participants in Brownsville, reflected on how articles related to drug violence seldom provide the reader with an understanding of why drug smuggling happens in the first place, yet focussing on the heroism of US law enforcement agents. She noted that:

"drugs are a national problem, they [the media] can't just address the traffic, but also those who consume it. You have to address the problem at its core. You always read about American officials fighting the cartels in southern Texas, but never about the drug addicts across the country" (Silvia, 27).

In the USA Today's *Border Wall* report, Gustavo Solis' article *Drug smuggling, and the endless battle to stop it*, looks at one of the most discussed and controversial problems at the US-Mexico border. The story starts by introducing Mike Unzueta, a retired federal criminal investigator who has "spent 30 years trying to stop drugs from coming into San Diego" (Solis, 2017) and shifting the focus shortly after to David Shaw, who took over Unzueta's duties following his retirement. By leading the reader straight into the lives of the two criminal investigators, the article narrates how the drug wars that take place along the dangerous border have posed a constant threat to the lives of the two men, often framed as law enforcement heroes. The article ends on a fearful tone by quoting Unzueta, who suggests the arrival of new smuggling techniques border that investigators have not experienced yet. A few quotes can explain the findings:

"The retired Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agent spent 30 years trying to stop drugs from coming into San Diego […] The border patrol agents have about 40 seconds to find signs of smuggling […] Agents look for anything that could point to drug smuggling […] A group of about 50 border patrol agents patrol an area that's larger than the state of Connecticut […] Wiretaps and paid informants are among the unit's [border patrol] most effective tools for uncovering the inner workings of drug-smuggling organisations" (Solis, 2017)

The quotes demonstrate how the article's narrative resembles an action movie script and the fight between the agents and drug smugglers is a central feature, thus giving the reader a rather shallow

understanding of the events taking place and possible solutions that could solve the everlasting problem of drug violence at the southern border.

2..2 Not all personalised stories are decontextualised

This analysis can attest, however, that not all stories that draw to big personalities necessarily share the flaws Bennett (2012) and Figenschou et al. (2015) refer to. While the articles mentioned above demonstrate an intrinsic link between strong personalisation and weak contextualisation, this research observes how articles published in *The Wall* that do not cover particularly controversial topics (such as immigration, drug smuggling, politics etc.), while still adhering to a human-interest frame, offer a rather complete picture of the events being narrated. Thus in these stories, personalisation is not accused of downplaying the political and social context, but rather considered as a tool that can “raise public awareness of the difficulties faced by a marginalised population whose status and experiences stand in stark contrast to those of most citizens.” (Figenschou et al., 2015: 788).

For example, Aileen Flores’ article A community, and its holy ground at stake follows the story of Osiris Ortiz and her father, who are part of a Christian group who frequently hike up Mount Cristo Rey, which is topped by a sculpture of Jesus Christ and sits in between the US city of El Paso, Texas and the Mexican Ciudad Juarez. Following the main characters still allows the journalist to create a sense of relatedness among the audience, but the article contains none of the “human trials, tragedies, and triumphs” (Bennett, 2012), with a rather harmonic narration from start to end, avoiding a downplay of the issues it presents.

2.3 Drama as a central feature

Together with the human-interest frame, one of the most salient aspects of the entertainment-geared USA Today’s border coverage is a stark dramatisation of the narrative, a not-so-surprising feature given that drama is by far the most common form of entertainment today (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012). This aspect of the long reads is clear to the reader from the very beginning: all sixteen articles start with emotion-evoking narratives, delivered though short, snappy and emotion-stirring sentences, representations that are “momentary, singular and quickly eclipsed” (Silverstone, 2007: 121). By setting the context in which the stories are placed as well as the narrative tone, the

introductory paragraphs are among the most relevant sections of an article. Here, if the chosen style of wording is, for example, fear-inducing, the reader is likely given impression that the story will be characterised by scary imagery and fearful storytelling. The following excerpt can provide an example. It narrates the introduction to Border crossers, and the desert that claims them written by Daniel Gonzales and published under the section 'Living and Dying', setting the scene in which the story will be set. It reads:

"On a map, the southwestern Arizona desert is an empty stretch, the size of Connecticut, a sea of nothing.

On a map of deaths, it is a sea of red.

For those determined to enter the United States, this is a way in: A fence that can be crossed, an empty land with few watching eyes, a promise of a route north. But in reality, there is no way across without a smuggler as a guide, without finding extra water. And both the smugglers and the land are harsh.

So people die here, and keep dying. And a wall may only speed their pace." (Gonzales, 2017)

Apart from presenting a number of features which adhere to the previously analysed 'otherism' and personalisation of stories, this excerpt places the news story in a highly dramatised context through gruesome imagery. It can be argued that such narration methods are an example of Altheide's (1997) belief that the media teaches society what to worry about (Altheide, 1997) and Shaw's (1994) findings that the media have the tendency to overplay the risks and dangers being reported (Shaw, 1994)

However, such dramatic tone in the reporting is not only limited to the introductory sections of the articles. Scenes of drug-related shootouts, of human trafficking and the drastic consequences related to it, and of the courageous work carried out by heroic Border Patrol agents to prevent immigrants from crossing the border can be traced throughout the whole reporting. "In the desert, men with guns are waiting. Migrants risk being robbed, beaten, kidnapped or raped" (Gonzales and Solis, 2017) write Daniel Gonzales and Gustavo Solis in covering the story behind the techniques employed by human smugglers at the border; or as Raffael Carranza writes in his article on border vigilantes, "A military helicopter hovers near the border. Neither federal not country agents support members of Arizona Border Recon [a group of local vigilantes], taking the border security into their own hands" (Carranza, 2017).

One of the aspects of an overly-dramatised reporting is linked a concept Curtis defines as "Oh Dearism" (Curtis, 2009), which refers to feelings of complacency and helplessness developed among the audience due to an exposure to excessively dramatised reporting, characterised by constant images of war-torn areas, conflict and human suffering. Curtis' concept leads this analysis to expose one of its main findings in relation to the dramatisation of narrative, namely the construction of problems that are too great to deal with and overcome (Curtis, 2009).

2.4 Consequences: constructed and insurmountable 'problems'

The practice of turning journalistic stories into dramatic, movie-like narratives leads to meaningful consequences - from a distortion of real life events to counterproductive political measures (Altheide, 1997). Most importantly, though, a closer look to the USA Today's report demonstrates how coverage adheres to Edelman's (1988) argument that the mass media is often responsible for the exacerbation (and in some case the construction) of already existing problems through an excessive resort to dramatic narratives (Edelman, 1988). As Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) observes, the media often confront their readers with problems too big "for us to feel that we can make a difference" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 7).

Lorena, who is among the Brownsville-natives interviewed for this work, stressed how dramatised news stories are responsible for both worsening the perception of the current state of reality and creating problems out of nowhere - similar to a point raised by professor Jonathan Benthall (2014), who believes that the media should be responsible for covering, not constructing issues (Benthall, 2014). The interviewee states:

"For he media, the border is just about insecurity and is far from being safe, but we don't feel like that at all. It feels like they are thinking: let's find something that is wrong and present it wronger than it is. Like everyone else, we definitely have problems here, but they are not that big, it's not like we are just sitting here and seeing the drug dealers in front of us. [...] The media always exaggerate, and it's not nice, because it has consequences down here, such as racism towards people crossing. It's simple, we believe what we read and we act consequently." (Lorena, 31)

Similarly, Miriam, who works as an immigration attorney in Brownsville, reflected on the consequences of overly-dramatised reporting. She said:

“The difference between what the media portrays and what you see and experience here is that there is no huge concern about danger and how dangerous it is. It is true that some parts of Mexico are not safe, so one cannot freely cross back and forth, but that doesn’t come over and you don’t see it as much. There might be drug trafficking issues, but not necessarily something we deal with all the time down here” (Miriam, 29)

In relation to the construction of such insurmountable problems in the entertainment-geared news media, this analysis also demonstrates how the USA Today stories fit into Bennett’s (2012) understanding that dramatised narratives poorly stimulate critical thought or action, leaving audiences with feelings of powerlessness. The choices in framing, narrative tone and quotes selection, which ensure high and constant engagement, sparking significant levels of interest among the reader who is encouraged to closely follow the gradual uncovering of life events of the stories’ protagonists, simultaneously counter the development of thoughts that can act as constructive solutions to the alleged disastrous reality of the southern borderlands.

For example, the introductory article to the USA Today report, titled *A 2,000-mile journey in the shadow of the border wall,* intended as an overview of the extensive work conducted by the journalists and as a primary outline of their main findings, draws the attention to the different realities of the southern border through loaded wording and dramatised sceneries, which generates an impression that borderlands are characterised by a number of insurmountable problems. The following quote can serve as an example:

“Arizona had become a funnel point for smuggling and violence. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was killed by Mexican bandits. Rancher Rober Kentz was murdered by someone on his range, and authorities said they followed tracks from the slaying to the border” (Wagner, 2017)

The narrative is characterised by a pronounced and powerful conglomeration of three distinct problems: a general violence at the border, the killing of a border patrol agent and that of a rancher, which likely overwhelms the reader by conveying an image of the border as intrinsically violent and dangerous. This example follows Lorena’s observation as well as Edelman’s (1988) and Chouliaraki’s (2006) theories that the media are responsible for a general exacerbation of existing problems.

It also applies to the opinions expressed on the topic by another border dwellers interviewed:

“I feel like the media portrayal of the border and the Valley makes the reader feel like the problems are bigger than them, that’s pretty much how I see it. Events are presented in a way that does not

give people a chance to rationally come up with a solution and leaves them… rather complacent about what is being reported, whether it's drug violence or the death of border-crossers. People think, oh it's such a big problem, I don't have the power to do anything about it". (Julieta, 67)

The entertainment-geared news stories, through the human-interest angle and dramatisation of the narrative, showcase a significant amount of fear-evoking scenes, by adhering to specific choices in framing and wording. The next subchapter will analyse how the element of fear shapes the USA Today's long reads.

3. Fear and the 'problem frame'

The final article published in the USA Today's report is entitled *A moving border and the history of a difficult boundary,* and it follows the historical developments that led to the current borderland geography between the US and Mexico. Serving as a conclusion for both the specific article and, indirectly, the whole report, the last paragraphs focus on the current line that divides the two countries, which runs from the Rio Grande River in southern Texas, crossing through the New Mexican and Arizonian deserts and ending in between the cities of San Diego and Tijuana in southern California.
This final section present a gruesome, fear-evoking account of an alleged dangerous reality at the border:

"Drugs moved across this new line. And people. [...] The border is transient. The Border is dangerous. The border is crass. The food is bad, the prices are high, and there are no good bookstores. It is not the place to visit on your next vacation. [...] Mexico's problems inevitably become ours [...] The US has always had a border problem", and as a final statement, "Mexico struggles with poverty, disputes erupt into gunfire and the desert claims weary travelers. People rush to the line, then cross." (Dungan, 2017).

Relatable to this section is an opinion expressed by Aileen from Brownsville, who emphasises the media's portrayal of the southern borderlands is filled with fear-mongering narratives to the extent that it resembles the coverage of war zones. She says:

"The media portray the borderlands and the Rio Grande Valley as a warzone, characterised by an ongoing war on drugs and immigration, when it's not really like that, this is a place full of culture, people, and life. The media wants to play it off as a war torn place, when it's not". (Aileen, 25)

Altheide (1997) is among the scholars who have most thoroughly studied the recurring use of fearful narratives among the entertainment-geared news media, suggesting how specific choices in the selection of frames, tone of narration and wording are ultimately responsible for teaching society “what to worry about” (Altheide, 1997: 660). The author defines this narrative as “discourse of fear”, where “the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life”, turning the media into a “problem-generating machine”, which frames the most common issues as a problem and as an imminent threat to society (Altheide, 1997).

A careful analysis of the documents studied for this dissertation, can conclude that the centrality of fear in the reporting gives border dwellers a new social identity: the victim. Articles published in the USA Today’s Border Wall report present an abundance of fear-inducing narratives, by depicting the US-Mexico border as dangerous and as starkly characterised by drug wars and human smugglers. As Jones (2017) suggests, the media tend to define the US southern borderlands “as a dangerous place where every trail is a smuggling route, every encounter is potentially dangerous and everyone in that space is a suspect until they can prove that they are not” (Fleuert and Castaneda, 2017: 547). Throughout the 16 long reads, from the title, to the introduction and throughout the whole narrative, the ‘discourse of fear’ is ever-present, whether the journalist is reporting on human smugglers, drug wars or on the rights of ranchers whose properties might be confiscated in order for the wall to be built. A few examples might give an idea of how Altheide’s “discourse of fear” comes into play (Altheide, 1997).

The article *Drug smuggling, and the endless battle to stop it* starts with a gruesome narrative on the alleged reality of shootouts constantly caused by drug wars at the border. It gives an insight into how narratives about the borderlands give an impression that, as emphasised by Aileen, the borderlands are characterised by an ongoing war. The first paragraphs read:

“Drug shootouts. Smugglers scrambling down the canyons. When congressmen wanted tours of the area, they’d have to see it from the window of a helicopter because Border Patrol couldn’t guarantee their safety! [...] But the fences did not stop the drug smuggling. [...] No wall will stop them” (Solis, 2017).

In the article *Border agent, and the risks at the edge of the line*, Diana Soular (2017) describes the reality at the border as a gamble between life and death, and is an example of how the “discourse of

fear" and the entertainment-oriented dramatisation merge together (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012). The journalist adopts fear-fuelled and dramatic narratives through crime-like scenarios, which are designed to keep the reader constantly engaged yet scared. A few excerpts can provide a clear understanding:

"To patrol the New Mexico line is to watch, wait and follow. And even when there's no one elese to be see, there's one person to watch out for: yourself. [...] Agents' focus is to arrest border crossers before they reach Interstate 10, a major east-west corridor that can carry people, or drugs, far away from the highly patrolled border region. [...] Often, as darkness falls and immigrants begin to cross the border fence, the sensors begin signalling." (Soular, 2018).

3.1 A scary border 'makes sense' to an American audience

In analysing fear-inducing narratives in relation to the material, one question arose: why are fear and Altheide's (1997) 'problem frame' such a recurring features in the narratives of news media articles covering the US-Mexico border?

Silverstone (2007) argues that media have turned into a tool which defines "a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcive" (Silverstone, 2007: 5), implying that journalists tend to allude to and thus reinforce preexisting notions on the topic being reported. In the case of the US-Mexico border specifically, there is a well rehearsed argument that the media's constant definition of the area as risky and dangerous is reflective of a collective imagination among the wider American public, it shares "conventions of public communication in popular culture" (Silverstone, 2007: 120), developed in turn through a constant exposure to fear-loaded narratives over the years. (Fleuert and Castaneda, 2017; Alvarez, 2012; Chavez, 2008).

Kathryn Fleuert and Heide Castaneda, who have conducted some research on the topic, conclude that "An insecure, corrupt, and risky border region with Mexico "makes sense" to an American public, which has a history of scapegoating Mexicans and Mexico in times of economic stress" (Feluert and Castaneda, 2017: 43). The choice of representing the US-Mexico border as risky and dangerous thus reflects the argument that an entertainment-focussed media adopts specific narratives as a means to generate a sense of relatedness among the audience (Bennet, 2012; Altheide, 1997).

Francesca, journalist at the New York Times and native Brownsvillian, underlines that the combination of existing notions about the border and recent developments in political rhetoric, have influenced the outcome of news stories. She says:

"The media adapts to pre-existing ideas about the border and responds to the political discourse in deciding what to write about it, and if it wasn't for politicians turning the conversation into drugs and immigration, the media wouldn't have turned so fully just to those themes, so you have to look at the intersections between all these factors." (Francesca, 44)

Similarly, Lucas raised the same point in discussing media representation of the borderlands:

"I don't think that the media portray the border and border communities with any accuracy at all. Why? Because I think that each one of the individual journalist has preconceived notions about what it is, what it should be, and that's what they write" (Lucas, 66)

3.2 A misconceived reality

In reflecting on the evolution in the role taken by the media over time, Silverstone emphasises how it has now "increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life" and it is "tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday" (Silverstone, 2007: 5), meaning that in many cases what gets reported is taken as "truth" (Chavez, 2008). The constant exposure to specific, replicated narratives can thus shape public opinion accordingly.

Altheide (1997) argues that today, as the media is so deeply ingrained in society, one of the immediate and most powerful consequences of journalistic news stories based on fearful narratives is the construction of an often misinterpreted reality. As he writes, "the discourse of fear has important consequences for public perceptions of social issues, the demise of public space, citizens who are becoming more "armed" and "armored," and the promotion of a new social identity—the victim." (Altheide, 1997: 2)

This precisely relates to how an exaggerated recurrence to "discourses of fear" in the media's representation of borderlands can lead to misconceived ideas of what reality is actually like. As highlighted by Linda Heath and Kevin Gilbert (1996), the media "overrepresent more severe,

intentional and gruesome incidents" resulting in an overestimation among readers of the frequency of violence along the border, and that danger and risk are central features in the lives of local communities. The perception that the media contribute to a misconceived understanding of the border and its communities was resounding among respondents in Brownsville.

In remembering a specific conversation at her University with students visiting Brownsville, Aileen reflects on how fear-creating narratives completely distort the conception of reality at the border:

"We have a lot of people from outside who come here and are primarily concerned about bullets and all. I once went to this university here in Brownsville which is walking distance from the border wall, and people who were visiting would come to me and ask, "If i go to the corner store, am I going to get shot? What is going to happen?" and that was shocking to us. But at the same time that's what they've heard and read about here, that it's a dangerous place. For me it's hard to understand it, because it's far from the truth, but I can see that." (Aileen, 25)

Similarly, Adriano emphasises how an excessive focus on drug-related violence and immigration completely distracts the reader from the reality of the border:

"Negative aspects of the borderlands in the media, such drug dealers and the "scary" immigrants, just don't correlate with what reality is like here". (Adriano, 21)

And Flor describes the media as 'hypocritical' in their reporting, accusing the narrative of presenting border-dwellers as scapegoats:

"I think the media is very hypocritical, it is true that there are drugs and crime, bus just like you see in every other major city in the US where they don't even have a bordering country. [...] it's very easy to put someone or some place as a scapegoat and throw it in the back end when nobody cares to really ask: hey, is this really true?" (Flor, 32)

The last quote specifically contextualises and links the 'discourse of fear' within earlier discussions on 'othering'. Cap (2017), who has studied patterns of fear-inducing narratives by the media, observes how coercive forms of communication tend to delegitimise 'the other' through negative portrayals and "the use of ideas of difference and (geographical,cultural) boundaries", adding that "delegitimization can manifest itself in acts of negative other-presentation, acts of blaming, scape-goating, marginalizing, excluding" (Cap, 2017: 3).

Reconnecting the theory of 'discourse of fear' with elements of 'othering', leads to the last section in this analysis, which serves to demonstrate how the choice in formats, frames and narratives discussed thus far, led the USA Today's reporting to consistently overlook specific aspects of the US-Mexico border, in relation to the communities' cultural identity.

4. Border culture: the hybrid and transnational 'Third Nation'

An analysis of how the United States' reportedly least-biased news outlet frames and presents the southern borderlands in their Pulitzer prize-winning report, aimed at examining "the U.S.-Mexico border in unprecedented ways" through a "2,000 mile search for answers" (USA Today, 2018), serves as a foundation for this final section. The understanding of how 'otherism' creates an "us versus them" distanciation between border dwellers and the audience (Chouliaraki, 2006; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016); of how personalised and dramatised entertainment-focussed news stories favour human tragedies over an appropriate political, social and economic context (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012); and how fear-inducing narratives are pervasive, constructing the borderlands and their communities as places and people to be afraid of (Altheide, 1997; Bennett, 2012; Cop, 2017), guides this research to its final section: understanding the aspects of borderland reality the media consistently overlooked.

As Fleuert and Castaneda (2014) write:

"Rather than a rural backwater where the state and national media go seek stereotyped and sensational stories, the borderlands should be framed as a site of dynamic interaction between adjacent countries" (Fleuert and Castaneda, 2014: 44)

The ethnographic research at the border produced interesting findings in relation to border-dwellers perspectives on the national news media's representation of the US-Mexico borderlands.
By underlining how news articles about the border portray communities as the 'distant other', and how representations of the area are filled with gruesome and coercive narratives, respondents emphasised a general lack of representation of what they defined "the border in its entirety", specifically relating to the aspects of transnationalism and hybridity, which are unique to the region. As Manuel, 66, described it: "the media is missing the general fluidity between the two countries which goes from generation to generation" (Manuel, 66).

Reece Jones (2008) argues that representation of borderland culture in the news media are generally “boiled down to simplistic recurring representations in texts and through images [...] Nevertheless, the US-Mexico border is not a drama produced in a TV studio, but rather is a real space inhabited by real people” (Jones, 2014: 548).
As previously discussed, “Border culture” in itself is hard to define due to the myriad of different attributes it comprises. Julieta, interviewed for this thesis, described border regions as an “in between zone”.

Q: How would you describe the borderlands in your own words?

A: “The borderland is what happens where there are in between zones, things change. And this is what happens culturally at the border… It is border zones worldwide that are in between zones, where cultures collide are convene.” (Julieta, 67)

An expert in border studies and professor at Berkeley University in California, Dear (2013) has observed how the United States’ southern borderlands have, over the years, developed into a ‘nation’ of their own. The author believes that such ‘nation’ represents an “in between space” which transcends the geopolitical boundaries that officially separate the countries and gives birth to a “new identity distinct from the nationalism of the host countries” (Dear, 2013: 71). As Lorena, who was interviewed in Brownsville, said:

“It is a very different and unique place here, because you don’t feel like you are in Mexico, you don’t feel like you’re in the USA, you feel that you’re at the border.” (Lorena, 31)

Alvarez (1995), who has deemed borderlands as “perfect laboratories” which showcase the coming together of different cultures, argues that one of the aspects that most strongly characterises Dear’s concept of ‘third nation’ is its distinctive hybridity. This aspect of the challenges our notion of the borderline as an “impermeable divide and boundary” and of the two countries’ cultures as distinct and separate, suggesting instead a cross-border and transnational perspective. In adopting this perspective, border culture can be defined as encompassing “unity and continuity” across politically-defined boundaries (Alvarez, 1995; Dear, 2013).

Historian and native Brownsvillian Manuel, in answering a question on what “border culture” means to him, drew attention to this specific aspect:

“Historically there has been a fluidity from country to country, whether it was crossing with little boats in the 1920s or if it is through the current international bridges and border patrol. There is a mindset that our border is divided politically and not .. .It might be a physical border, but throughout time it is not the physical border that is a threat, as long as people can maintain a connection, which is what matters to us the most.”

Today, “Third-nationhood” marks the “connectivity and continuity along the international boundary line molded by the mental maps of border-dwellers” (Dear, 2013: 175) - but how is it represented in the USA Today’s report?

4.1 Representation of the ‘Third Nation’ in the USA Today

While the anthropological studies of borderlands have reached substantial conclusions on the evolution and traits of the mentality in borderland societies, the media’s representations of the US-Mexico border and its communities are far from conveying ideas of a transnational and hybrid culture. Instead, aspects of ‘othering’ and dramatic, fear-loaded narratives that characterise the USA Today’s Border Wall report communicate quite the opposite and this research can attest how these very aspects overshadow the representation of this aspect of borderland culture.

The USA Today Border Wall report barely alludes to the elements of transnationalism and hybridity of the southern border. In the introductory article *A 2,000 mile journey in the shadow of the border wall*, journalist Dennis Wagner dedicates a small paragraph to emphasise the complexity and richness of borderland culture and identity. He writes:

“No helicopter flight can capture the flavors, smells, sounds and feel of the zone known in Spanish as la frontera. The cultural milieu and contacts. The vastness, emptiness and brutal heat of deserts. The vibrancy and unease of an evening on the Juarez streets. The enormous economies of binational cities where backyards and front porches sit in the sight of the fence.” (Wagner, 2017)

It is clear, however, that even the very paragraph aimed at representing the cultural traits of the borderlands fails at exposing its transnationalism and hybridity.

The rest of the articles get lost in their fear-loaded narratives of drug smugglers and migrant crossers, not locating the event in the specific cultural context the events take place in.

Such deductions and reflections on the portrayal of border culture in the USA Today's reports were mostly possible through the ethnographic research in Brownsville, as the interviewees pondered on how their communities are represented and what specific aspects media outlets are overlooking.

4.3 Border-Dwellers and their desire for representation

In Brownsville, Texas, whether it is students, ranchers or journalists, the resounding need for an appropriate representation of the borderlands' cultural traits in the media is clear, sharing the idea that "if the media would start covering more of this, it would impact their ideas about the borderlands for sure", as expressed by Miriam from Brownsville.

A few excerpts from the interviews conducted in the southern Texas city, can convey the importance border dwellers attribute to a deeper understanding of their cultural traits among the american public, by increasing its exposure in the media.

Lucas, a Texan rancher and native Brownsvillian, blames the media for showcasing a substantial lack of understanding of borderland culture in their portrayal of the region. His reflections relate to one of Fleuret and Castaneda's (2017) observations on the use of the term "border", which signals division in spite of the deep social relations that underlie life at the border (Fleuert and Castaneda, 2017). He says:

"They don't understand our culture, they don't understand our society, they don't understand the dynamics of how the border works. You know, when we call it border, it's a government term, it's not our term. Half of my family lives in Matamoros, and I grew up here and spent most of my life crossing back and forth across "the border" to do my business, have dinner, buy pharmaceuticals, see friends, do research, as if Brownsville is north side of town and Matamoros is the south side of town. Journalists don't understand this at all, therefore they don't write about it." (Lucas, 66)

Maria talks about a general detachment between news media representations of the border and cultural reality, mentioning the 'sensationalism' as a feature of news media articles on the border:

"Media representations are completely detached from the local culture at the border, no doubt. Even when I read an article that is responsibly done and entirely factual, because there is different degrees of responsibility and some are more sensationalist than others, I can still see that on its own is a misrepresentation of the full reality here, and i can also imagine the sort of effects it is having." (Maria, 41)

Aileen, instead, expressed her discomfort towards the national media lack of reporting on Charro Days, a unique week-long festival that takes place in Brownsville and celebrates the ties with its twin Mexican city Matamoros. She said:

"How the past weekend we had Charro Days, the media did not capture that. We celebrated our culture and showed that there is no hate between us and Mexicans in a way that the media portrays. We want them to show this. We have culture very dear to our hearts." (Aileen, 25)

The conducted fieldwork in Brownsville gave this research a deeper and original understanding of 'third nationhood' (Dear, 2013), and the transnationalism of the 'in-between' regions along the United States-Mexico border. It particularly shaped the research in understanding the aspects of reality at the borderlands that news media outlets overlook, specifically in this case the USA Today's report.

An analysis of the specific formats, frames and narratives employed by the over 30 journalists who worked on *The Wall* was crucial for this final section of the analysis, where the perspective of the interviewees resulted as an essential component for the understanding of salient aspects of borderland identity, and how portrayals of a dangerous border miss out on its hybridity.

Conclusion

Started as a research project aimed at understanding the similarities and divergences between the US national media's construction of the southern borderlands and reality at the border, this thesis explored how America's most read and reportedly least biased news outlet, The USA Today, portrays and conveys images of the US-Mexico border.

Their recent report, published in September 2017, and entitled 'The Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences', was chosen for its aim to showcase the southern borderlands in their entirety, through reporting conducted by a network of more than 30 journalists along the over 2,000-mile-long border (USA Today, 2017). Through a combination of high readership, low political bias and the production of an "outstanding report" which won the outlet a prestigious Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting, The Wall provided this research with the essential documentation.

This dissertation closely follows Altheide's (2013) methods of an "Ethnographic Content Analysis" (Altheide, 2013), aimed at understanding the content of news media consumed on a daily basis, by involving the researcher's direct observation and participation (Altheide, 2013). In fact "Ethnography" refers to the study of "people and their culture" (Altheide, 2013: 24), conducted in this case in the city of Brownsville, located in the Rio Grande Valley at the southernmost tip of the state of Texas.

The fieldwork in Brownsville shaped and defined this research for two reasons. First because many of the preconceived notions on borderlands were simply not experienced when confronted with reality, deducing therefore that negative and fearful images of the region were entirely influenced by the countless articles read prior to the field trip; second, discussing the topic of the national media's reporting on the borderlands gave the researcher an insight into the lack of complacency on the subject and the extent to which Brownsvillians hold strong opinions on the alleged misrepresentation of border reality and culture.

In Brownsville, a total of 11 interviews were conducted, where the opinions and perspectives of native border-dwellers offered the researcher original insights into the topic. Questions ranging from "how do you feel the national media represents the borderlands?" to "what is borderland

culture for you?" were asked to the participants through semi-structured interviews, which allowed both the researcher and the participant to freely follow a conversational flow in the discussion.

The findings from the ethnographic research, were then applied to the analysis of the 16 long-reads published by the USA Today. The theoretical framework of this dissertation dictates the very structure of the main analysis, which combines, compares and contrasts the existing theories with findings from the media analysis and the ethnographic research, through a reflective approach suggested by Altheide (2013).

It starts by looking into the media reporting of the 'distant other' (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016; Brons, 2015; Franks, 2013; Benthall, 2014), emphasising how the extensive literature on the topic concludes that specific formats, frames and narratives employed by journalists are crucial in shaping the way in which the news media "shows the world to the world" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 4), especially in cases where the events being covered happen at a distance, meaning that the media is ultimately responsible for constructing and conveying such images (Silverstone, 2007).
This work thus aimed at understanding the 'formats, frames and narratives' employed by the USA Today, to understand the reporting of the 'distant other' between drama and fear, and how distinct aspects of borderland culture are conveyed.

First, it narrowed down the generic discourse of 'othering' in the media to theories on the media portrayal of ethnic minorities, and specifically of Latinos, understanding how recurrent media constructions of the ethnic group apply to the USA Today's reporting (Cottle 2000; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016). It concluded that narratives employed by the USA Today fit into a number of theoretical findings on 'otherism' towards Latinos, by being "negative in tone, full of stereotypes, and highly sensational" (Reny and Manzano, 2016: 195). Specifically, it discovered how most of the representations of Latinos in the long reads were set within the 'discourse of illegality' (Akdenizli et al., 2012; Chavez, 2008; Reny and Manzano, 2016), linking the ethnic group with the contested topic of immigration; the analysis brought up specific excerpts from the documents can attest how such narratives frame Latinos as the 'illegal other'.

Then, it looked into how the coverage of the US-Mexico borderlands fits within Altheide's (1997) and Bennett's (2012) viewpoint that the news media is increasingly adapting to an 'entertainment'

format, where human-interest frames and dramatisation of narratives are central components (Altheide,1997; Bennett, 2012). This section of the analysis looked at how the USA Today shaped the articles through a human-interest angle, by closely following the life events of big personalities to achieve audience identification and retainment. It uncovered why Bennett (2012) deems this aspect as a “flaw” of the news media, explaining through the USA Today’s reporting how the human-interest angle often diminishes the depth of the analysis and exempts the story from being placed into a broader political, social and economic context. This research discovered how specifically news stories which deal with the contested issue of drug violence at the border, tend to draw to big personalities and lack contextualisation to explain of the issue at stake (Meraile, 2014; Bennett, 2012). This analysis can nonetheless attest that not all of the USA Today’s articles which employ the human-interest frame are necessarily decontextualised, bringing the examples of two specific long reads which “raise public awareness of the difficulties faced by a marginalized population” (Figenschou et al., 2015: 788) by giving the reader a full picture of the context the narrative is set in.

This section then looked at how dramatic narratives are also a strong component of the USA Today’s reporting, which convey an over exaggeration of the problems being presented, framing them as insurmountable and - quoting one of the respondents - “bigger than us” (Aileen, 25). This study discovered how certain choices in the narratives and wording tend to poorly stimulate thought and action (Bennett, 2012), leaving audiences with a feeling of powerlessness.

The last section which looked into the choices in formats, frames and narratives employed by the USA Today in their coverage of the US-Mexico border, analysed the articles through Altheide’s (1997) theory that, through an excessive recurrence to fear-mongering narratives, the news media “teaches society what to worry about” (Altheide, 1997: 660) and Shaw’s standpoint that such stories make us worried about the wrong things (Shaw, 1994) .

This analysis looked at the element of fear, reaching two conclusions. First, that the construction of a scary and dangerous border “makes sense” to an American public, looking into how media narratives are “increasingly mutually referential and reinforcive” (Silverstone, 2007: 5). The field work and the perspectives of border-dwellers on the topic were particularly helpful in reaching such conclusions, given a general acknowledgement that “the media adapts to pre-existing ideas about the border” (Francesca, 44).

Second, that the portrayal of a scary border simply does not reflect its full reality. In this case too, the material gathered through the ethnographic study, can attest that a general view on the media's portrayal of the Southern borderland is characterized by a dissatisfaction in the representation of its reality.

The final subchapter of the analysis looked into how the choices in formats, framing and narration adopted by the USA Today's network of journalists have led to a general overlooking of the portrayal of borderland culture, and in specific of the region's transnationalism and hybridity. This final section serves to wrap up the findings and relate them to what the long reads do not convey in their representation of the southern borderlands.
The articles were analysed both through the lenses of research on the development of borderland identity, specifically Michael Dear's (2013) concept of an in-between 'third nation', and through the perspectives of Brownsvillians, who stressed that the representation of the borderlands as dangerous, unsafe and risky, leaves out the aspect of interconnectedness between the United States and Mexico in the region, which is a vital and crucial component of the region's cultural identity.

Future studies

Researching and discussing with border-dwellers a number of topics ranging from their perspective on media representations, to the most salient aspects of borderland culture and conducting life at the border between the United States and Mexico, not only helped shape this dissertation, but raised a myriad of interesting topics that can be the focus of future studies on the relationship between the media and the US-Mexico borderlands. Among the most salient are an understanding how local media respond to the coverage of the border by outlets like the USA Today or the New York Times; and how the narratives employed by journalists in their coverage and their adaptation to "entertainment" formats could merely reflect the media's profit-driven nature.

The Local Media

Cottle (2000) reflects on the importance of local media in areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities, stressing how "between the international media conglomerates and the daily mediated communications of ethnic minorities, there stands an array of 'intermediate' minority media organizations – the minority press, local cable TV stations, local radio" (Cottle, 2000: 3). The

scholar emphasises how such field is under researched, in relation to the struggle ethnic minorities fight “ for ‘authentic’ and/or pluralistic representations” (Cottle, 2000: 3)

In Brownsville, more than one respondent focussed on this topic, raising two distinct points, both of which could serve as suggestions for future studies. The first, is a general view that one of the main reasons behind the national media’s portrayal of the borderlands which follows recurring stereotypes, is linked to news outlets not employing reporters who have experienced the borderlands firsthand for years. To quote a few of the participants interviewed in Brownsville:

“Are reporters from the borderlands? Never, sometimes you get the reporter who has family in the RGV [Rio Grande Valley] and they came once - but most of the times they are not from the RGV so from big cities and have only known of big city life and not border town life.” (Aileen, 25)

“My general impression is that for the most part they are not informed, they haven’t done their homework, they don’t understand the border, you can’t come in, find a few people, interview them and leave and think that they get the border.” (Lucas, 66)

“When it comes to the media portrayal on the valley, it’s usually reported by someone who has never been to the valley, news outlets come up with stories about Brownsville, the valley and the border in general are people who have no idea about what goes on here” (Adriano, 21)

The second point relates to the reporting on the border conducted by local media outlets, as one of the interviewees said: “on The Valley, from The Valley” (Aileen, 25). A few of the participants pointed to an outlet named “Neta”, whose official stated mission is to “amplify border voices in the Rio Grande Valley and challenge mainstream narratives of the Texas-Mexico border” (Neta, 2018). Initially, the analysis in dissertation was meant to incorporate a section dedicated to Neta, relating to its work as a local media outlet whose primary aim is to respond to the national media’s representations of the border. However it was deemed too extensive of a research topic for this thesis.

Entertainment as profit?

Another possible field of research related to the material studied and analysed for this dissertation, is the the potential link between the evolution of entertainment-oriented news media and a desire for higher audience engagement, and ultimately profit.

Such link is emphasised by scholars and Brownsvillians alike. Simon Cottle (2000) explains how news organisations “are in business to mae profits and all compete for readers and audience” (Cottle, 2000: 31) and Julien Mercille (2014) believes than an increased adherence to the entertainment format by the news media can be considered a consequence of their profit-driven nature; she observes that “the media and entertainment industries tend to share the goals of the corporate sector as a whole: steady profits, maximising market share at home and globally, promoting “free-market” and consumption” (Mercille, 2014: 112).

Keeping in mind that drama is deemed as the most popular form of entertainment (Altheide, 1997), respondents in Brownsville shared observations on how the news media portraying the US-Mexico borderlands through dramatised and personalised narratives to engage audiences, can be profit-driven. According to Francesca, for example.

“It is simple, the media want readers, they want clicks. The mainstream media is always going to ask: what is the issue that is most being talked about, that is most timely and most relevant? And the reporting of borderlands which resembles an action movie is quite simply the result of this.” (Francesca, 41)

The outlined topics are just a few among the plethora of subjects that can be analysed in relation to the United States-Mexico borderlands within the field of Media Studies - nevertheless they can serve as a starting point, and evolve accordingly.

For now, this work has shed a light on how the least-biased media outlet in the United States conforms to pre-conceived notions of the southern border and adopts formats, frames and narratives that reinforce ‘othering’ through fear-loaded stories and overlook its distinct and unique culture and hybridity, in an era marked by the rhetoric of a border wall, of “bad hombres” and “rapists”.

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Appendix 1

Coding Structure for the qualitative media analysis

Coding Theme	Example from documents
Reporting the ’distant other’	“Her organisation has long demanded that the federal government move aggressively to control illegal immigration”; “suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a man pops up from a bush, waving his arms. It’s a migrant”; “for those determined to enter the United States, this is a way in”; “more migrants, more border patrol, more fences”; “The two migrants had no money, no possessions”
Entertainment format	“In the middle of a peaceful green valley, it can be hard to remember the chaos”; “the agents catch one of the migrants after a short chase on foot through the desert”; “he would go down the block and then hide under where someone else cut a hole. The border patrol will search for him but would not find him”; “some smugglers operate differently, guiding migrants through the west”
Fear and the ‘problem frame’	“Drug shootouts. Smugglers scrambling down the canyons; no wall will stop them”; “Fences went up, but drugs kept moving”; “the fence has been a success, but there have also been unintended consequences”; “the area is full of migrant trails that snake through the desert”; “it’s easy to get lost, even with a smuggler”;
Border Culture	“But the idea of a wall, and all it symbolizes, has left some in the community reeling. Especially when the symbol, turned reality, would divide sacred ground”; “the flavours, smells, sounds and feel of the zone known in Spanish as la frontera”;

Appendix 2

Example of an interview transcript and coding method

How do you think the media portrays the US southern borderlands?

So the way the media portrays the borderland and the RGV, the place where the wall is going to be built even though we already have a wall, everyone tried to frame it as this war zone, where this ongoing war on drugs and immigration, when it's not really like that, when it's a place full of culture and people, and life. So, what is portrayed in media is the worst way in which people could deal with the empathy towards community where it's not like that, it's a thriving place and the media wants to portray it was worse than it is, but on the ground immigration and the border wall would hurt the community, most people I know are immigrants and they are afraid. we have colonies filled with, where the population is Mexican immigrants who are undocumented, and it's harder for them to get out of the colonias because they are living in poverty, another thing which isn't portrayed in the media is how widespread poverty is, and this whole thing about the wall, millions of dollars which can be put into the infrastructure of the valley and these colonias. It is mind blowing because it can be put into many other things but it just isn't - the media wants to play it off as a war torn place, when it's not.

What do you believe are the consequence of such portrayal?

I feel like people, the consequences are definitely, not attracting people from coming and visiting the valley, which is full of rich culture, we were once part of Mexico, then Texas and now the US, there is so much culture in just one place, three different regions that brought history, there is a lot of culture and people and so the fact that the media pores us in such a bad way keeps people from coming because they think something bad is going to happen to them because the media is saying that this and this is happening, oh there is a lot of corruption, oh there are drugs being smuggled in, when in reality we are just living and striving here so… it keeps people away because they are afraid when they shouldn't be.

I feel like the media portrayal of the border and the Valley makes the reader feel like the problems are bigger than them, that's pretty much how I see it. Events are presented in a way that does not give people a chance to rationally come up with a solution and leaves them… rather complacent about what is being reported, whether it's drug violence or the death of border-crossers. People think, oh it's such a big problem, I don't have the power to do anything about it

What is the extent to which you agree with the level of threat the media conveys?

When the whole drug war on mexico happened… i haven't been to mexico in over 8 years, and most people here are afraid to go there because the media portray mexico so bad, even though we are the closest living city to mexico, it's just this fear that something bad might happen, it's going to be the last time we see someone, even though a lot of people come and go. The media has scared everyone to go.

What is borderland culture for you?

How the past weekend we had Charro Days, the media did not capture that, we celebrated our culture and whether its that or the university has celebrations about hispanics, only media in the valley captures that, how the community is having students joining in the community and the heritage - we have culture very dear to our hearts.

What are the differences, for you, between national and local reporting on the wall?

I feel like in a national level the borderlands have received so much attention because of the proposed wall, like, its going to be built or getting funded. What would happen if there is a border wall?

Do you feel like borderland communities frowned upon in the media?

Yes. People don't realise how much we have to offer and I know for sure the Valley is one of the poorest regions in all of Texas and one of the poorest places in the nations, so the fact that people overlook us and do't want to have anything to do with us is bad but it's something that the media

needs to stop doing and shaming us - we have a whole culture, a whole university that is pretty well off.

Is the mainstream media's view challenged locally?

We have local initiatives here to get support from our representative and congress people to not fund the border wall because it's something people don't want. Send us much of the support they can

Neta is one of the biggest initiatives that happened in the valley, because Neta is just a real, honest on the border region and from the border region. other outlets are talking about the border region but they are in big cities, 1000s of miles away from the border. Neta is a way to reconnect the community. I was living in Austin for a while, and Neta was the only outlet I would read because they were the only ones actually talking about home.

They just report what they think it is.

Are reporters from the borderlands? never, sometimes you get the reporter who has family in the RGV and they came once - but most of the times they are not from the RGV so from big cities who have only known of big city life and not border town life.

Appendix 3

Informed Consent Form

Lund University

Project Title: "US and Them: representing the United States-Mexico border between drama and fear"

Investigator/Researcher:

- Gabriele Dellisanti

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General Information: This consent form describes the research study to help you decide if you want to participate. This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the interview, about the risks and benefits of participating, and about your rights as a research subject.

1. **What is the Purpose of the Study?** The purpose of this research is to understand the ways in which the coverage of the US southern borderlands is packaged and presented to the American public. It will study the coverage conducted by the USA Today in their recently-released report entitled "The Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences". The aim of the interviews is to understand border-dwellers' perspective on the topic.

2. **Request for Participation:** You have been asked to participate in this study as you are a borderland native and live in Brownsville, Texas, where this research is being conducted.

3. **How many people will participate?** As this research method employs the so-called "snowball effect", at the moment the number of people participating in the research is not known.

4. **How long will it take to participate in this study?** If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last for the time you, as a participant, choose. The interviews follow a semi-structured method, meaning that they are characterised by a conversational aspect too.

5. **What will happen during this study?** During this research study, the principal investigators will conduct a semi-structured interview. The questions' topics range from the participant's perception of the media coverage of the US southern borderlands, to borderland culture and on how the current border fence has impacted the life of Brownsville's residents.

6. **Audio Recording:** One aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of your participation. The audio recording will be used to transcribe the semi-structured interview. Recordings will be made on a digital voice recorder and stored in a locked location until

transcription. No identifying information will be transcribed. Complete transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected computer.

I give you permission to make audio recordings of me during this study:
[ ] Yes [ ] No

13. Further Questions? We encourage you to ask questions. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Gabriele Dellisanti - all contact details are available above.

This Informed Consent Form is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate.

____________________________________ ____________________

Participant Signature Date