

Rich, Poor, and Unequal

Media Portrayals of Immigrants Then and Now.

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This article addresses media depiction of wealth and poverty from a primarily historical perspective. The main focus is on depictions of German immigrants in the United States in the period 1848-1914. The study is based on a multidimensional conceptualization of wealth that encompasses tangible (i.e., financial), intangible (i.e., cultural and social), utopian (i.e., aspirational), and absent (i.e., debt and poverty) forms of wealth. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine 766 articles from 15 English-language U.S. newspapers published between 1848 and 1914 in U.S. cities with significant German immigrant populations. This article then turns to current media depictions of poverty in connection with migration and draws comparisons to the analysis of the historical material. A notable finding is that coverage today places a growing emphasis on individual failure, whereas in the past, intangible wealth such as labor and moral integrity were highlighted more often. This article concludes with a discussion of ethical implications for contemporary news coverage, along with some recommendations to guide the work of journalists.

The study addresses a research gap in knowledge of how English-language news media perceived and portrayed German immigrants in the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The analysis is guided by a more nuanced concept of wealth that considers not just financial assets, but also social and symbolic forms of wealth, both at the individual and at the collective level. This conceptualization of wealth draws on a model proposed by Rakopoulos and Rio (2018). Their approach enables consideration of various forms of relational wealth, such as kinship networks and communal solidarity, which played an important part in facilitating migrants' navigation of new environments, their ability to confront challenges, and their potential for successfully integrating themselves into a new society.

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Analysis of the newspaper content revealed that these intangible forms of wealth predominated, with references to the German work ethic, family values and labor expertise, for example. Newspaper articles described these immigrants as “industrious,” “thrifty,” “law-abiding” and exhibiting “good behavior.” These descriptions of German character traits served to help construct a perception of “desirable” immigrants, particularly in comparison to other immigrant groups such as Italians, Irish or Chinese. German aid and support organizations contributed to the resilience of German immigrants and reinforced the image of a group armed with social wealth rather than appearing as a burden on the public. Over time, as German Americans increasingly acquired tangible wealth assets, they became more woven into the social fabric of the United States as farmers and small-business owners. Not all coverage was comprised of success stories, though. Newspapers occasionally addressed poverty among German immigrants, often in the context of immigrants who were swindled out of their money shortly after arriving, or who were misled into exploitative work situations. These types of depictions remained in the minority, however. More prominent was a narrative of German immigrants contributing to a prosperous future of the United States through their disciplined work ethic and their strong moral convictions, and in turn, that future would provide German Americans with seemingly endless opportunities to flourish in their new homeland. Such representations obscured structural barriers that prevented some immigrants from escaping the conditions of poverty that accompanied them since their arrival.

Current news coverage of migration focuses on poverty as well, often connecting poverty to failures of individual responsibility and to political mismanagement. Such journalistic approaches tend to obscure structural obstacles such as inequities in the labor market, discrimination and political factors. They also result in a distinction between „desirable“ and „undesirable“ migrants based on perceived burden on the host society, and those groups strongly associated with poverty are relegated to a discursive underclass.

Comparison of historical news coverage of German immigrants in the United States with current coverage of migrants reveals that the former were often characterized as „desirable“ due to their moral fortitude and work ethic even when they were materially poor, whereas poverty in current coverage seems more often linked to individual moral failure or a breakdown of public support measures. While initially this appears to be a notable contrast, closer examination of the historical articles

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points to a similar logic of valuation: immigrants were seen as desirable if they were perceived as fulfilling the economic, political or social needs of the United States.

Principles of journalistic ethics include the avoidance of sensationalism and distorted portrayals of entire groups such as the economically disadvantaged, since such portrayals can result in negative stereotypes. Ethics codes of professional journalism organizations highlight respect for human dignity and avoidance of discrimination as core values. As best practices, journalists should consider including the voices of migrants in efforts to present a multitude of perspectives. Contextual factors surrounding poverty should be presented transparently. Visuals can also contribute to stereotypes about poverty, an ethical point journalists should reflect on when choosing images for their reports. These guidelines are especially important because of the deep extent to which media shape the public's understanding of poverty and wealth inequalities.

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Full Article (German):

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und ungleich.

Mediendarstellungen

von Eingewanderten

damals

und heute. In:

Communicatio Socialis

(2/2026) 59: 225–236.

DOI: 10.5771/0010-

3497-2026-2-225