



Empty Signifiers and Ideological Silences: A Thematic Content Analysis of Five U.S. Newspapers' Construction of Human Trafficking (2000–2020)

Janine Burroughs

Brunel University, United Kingdom

Abstract

The discoveries challenge previous findings in media scholarship that assume U.S. media engagement with human trafficking is sustained and ideologically neutral. Through a thematic content analysis of 5,846 articles published in five widely subscribed U.S. newspapers from 2000 to 2020, the findings reveal that coverage experiences, including peaks and hiatuses, are event-driven and shaped by ideological orientations. Through the lens of McChesney's Critical Political Economy of Media (CPEM), the conclusions highlight how conglomerate ownership and media-political relations shape public conversations around trafficking. It argues that these structural forces limit diversity in coverage, reinforce dominant ideologies and silence counter-discourses—thereby challenging the liberal democratic model of U.S. media. Key conclusions highlight the malleability of the term "human trafficking," often aligned with presidential agendas and broader socio-political conversations around crime, victimhood and national security. The study identifies trafficking as an "empty signifier," weaponised to support geopolitical strategies, critique policy, or deflect attention from elite misconduct. It critiques the reductive conflation of trafficking with sex work, which reinforces racialised and gendered stereotypes—casting white women as ideal victims and immigrants as criminal offenders—while marginalising labour trafficking, male victims and survivor agency. By broadening the ideological spectrum of newspapers analysed, the findings reveal how partisan reporting shapes public polarisation and societal divisions. While dominant constructions around trafficking persist, subtle shifts reflect political transitions. The findings underscore the need for further critical analysis to expose silences and power asymmetries in media constructions and advocate for more critical media consumption.

Keywords: critical political economy of media (CPEM); ideology; partisan reporting; media-political complex; media silence