

# The First 100 Days of the Biden Administration: A 'Surge' in Negative Language Around the Border

**Migrants were crossing parts of the southern border in March in record numbers. But did that really constitute a *surge* or a *crisis*? The leading media outlets made it seem so.**

The emphatic headlines news organizations chose to describe the situation dominated President Biden's first 100 days. But calling the increase in migrants arriving from Central America a **surge**, **wave**, or **flood** actually dehumanized individuals seeking asylum. Water metaphors showed people as a dangerous force of nature to be feared.

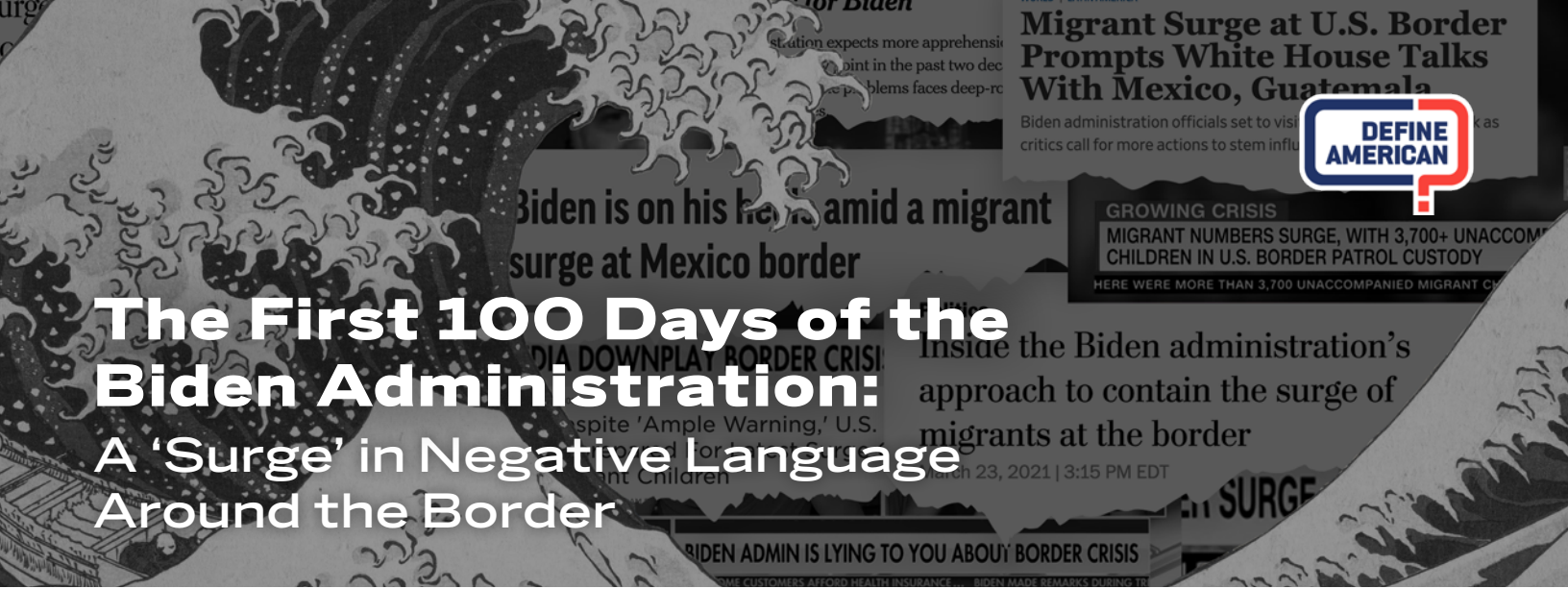
These words belong to a familiar nativist lexicon serving to incite fear of the other.

Because **#WordsMatter**, Define American chose to analyze 12 news organizations that cover immigration. We examined how they relayed the news during a particularly intense period at the border: March 14 to April 4, 2021. We tracked **negative** terms as ones that provoked emotion, as well as **neutral** terms that simply described what was happening.

Define American used Nexis/Lexis combined with the search engines from specific newspapers. Research by Ethan Corey, in consultation with Liz Robbins, Director of Journalism Partnerships.

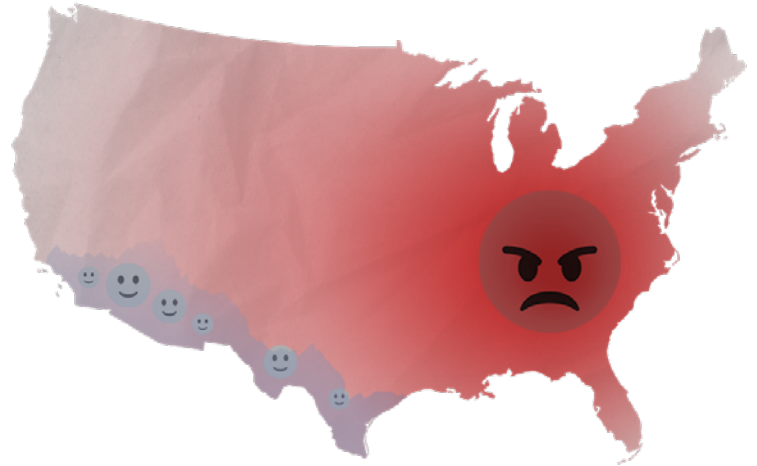
TERMS ANALYZED	
NEGATIVE TERMS <b>crisis</b> <b>flood</b> <b>surge</b> <b>wave</b>	NEUTRAL TERMS arrival crossing increase situation
OUTLETS ANALYZED	
NATIONAL BROADCAST    	
NATIONAL PRINT/DIGITAL     	
BORDER PUBLICATIONS    	

Here are our top findings:



## Key Findings

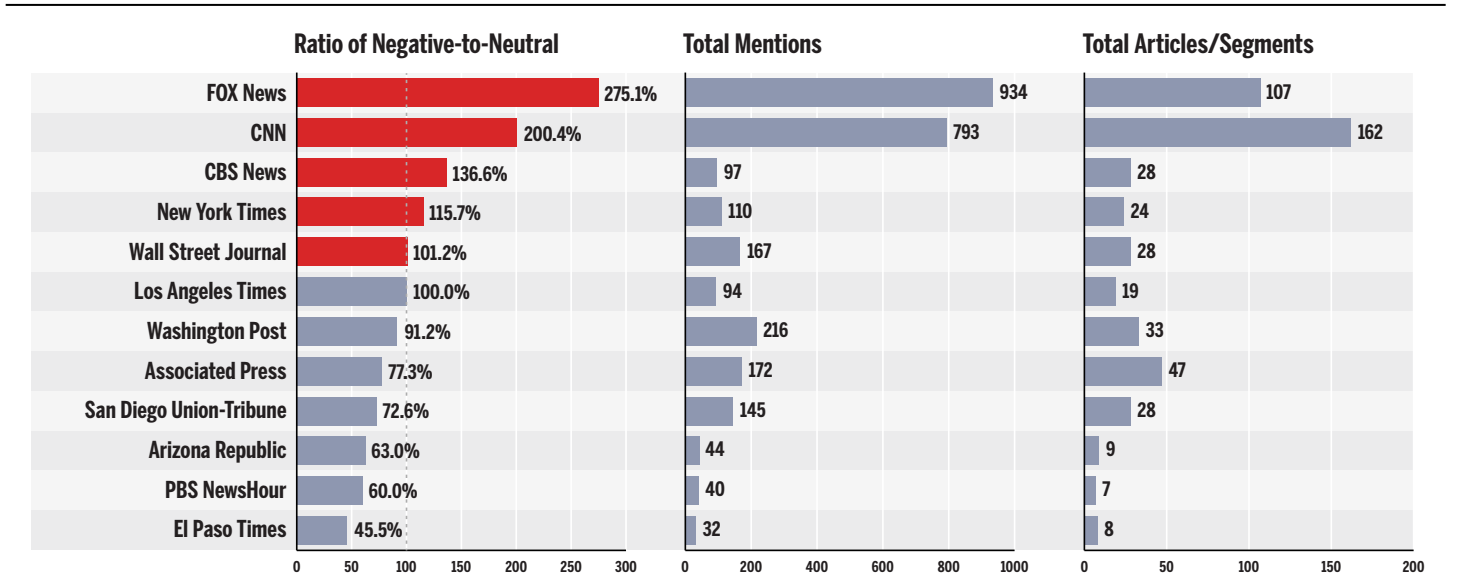
- TV news was far more likely to use negative terminology than newspapers, using negative terms 2.5 times as frequently.
- FOX News, closely followed by CNN, had the highest percentage of negative word usage of all 12 outlets. The *New York Times* had the highest negative percentage among 8 newspapers.
- Overall, negative terms appeared over 1.5 times more often than neutral terms.
- Negative words were far more common than neutral ones in headlines.
- Newspapers in communities close to the border in Texas, Arizona and California used neutral language about 1.25 times more than national newspapers.



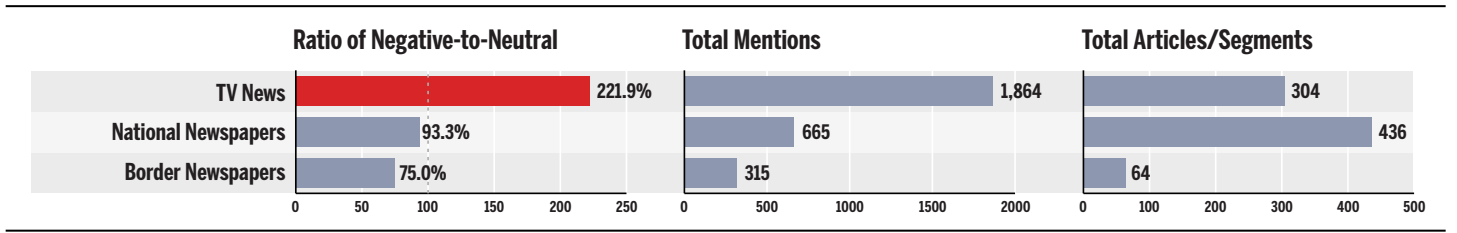
We produced [a TikTok](#) to summarize our findings. Here is an expanded look.

## Expanded Look

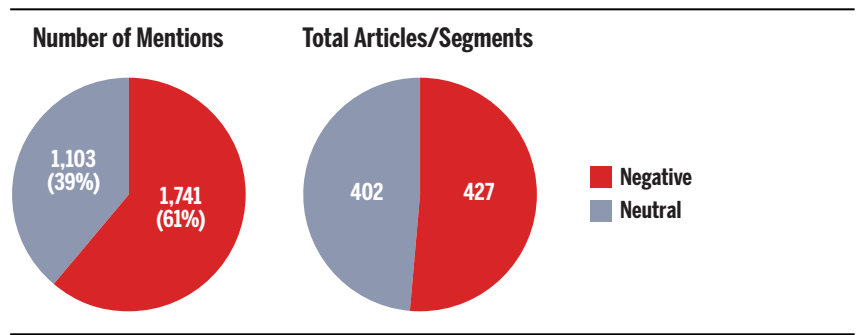
Among the 12 outlets included in our sample, FOX News had the highest ratio of negative-to-neutral terms, and *El Paso Times* had the lowest:



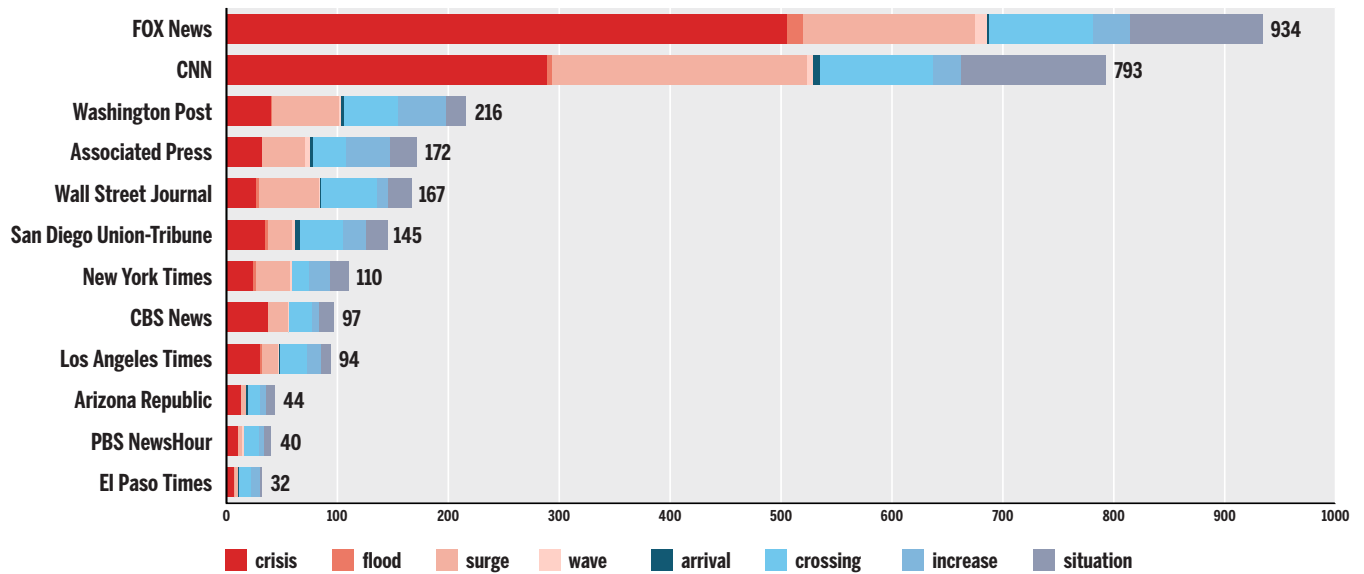
By geography, national newspapers used negative terms 25 percent more frequently than local papers near the border.



In terms of broad category of words, negative terms (crisis, surge, flood, wave) predominated over neutral terms (increase, crossing, arrival, situation).



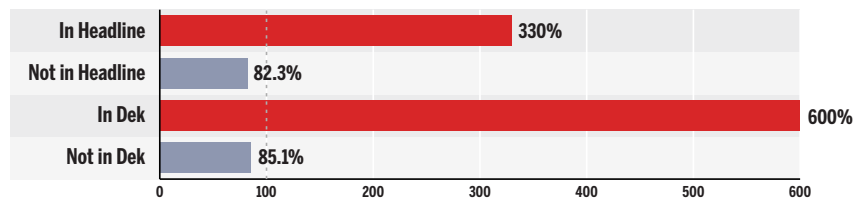
Most Frequently Used Word by Outlet



Negative words were three times more common than neutral ones in headlines.

In deks (article summaries), negative words were six times as frequent as neutral ones.

Negative-to-Neutral Ratio Within Article



#WordsMatter, which is why Define American wanted to bring attention to how the media covered this significant event. We hope this snapshot research will make journalists more aware of the dehumanizing effect of words for the next instance. Patterns of migration are cyclical. But the language we use to describe them does not have to repeat.

## About Define American

Define American is a culture change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants. Our advocacy within news, entertainment, and digital media is creating an America where everyone belongs.