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Framing Agricultural Labor Issues: An Analysis of News Coverage of the H-2A Program

Abstract

The H-2A program is a temporary agricultural worker program created by the Immigration Control and Reform Act in 1987 that allows agricultural employers in the United States to hire nonimmigrant foreign workers when a shortage of domestic workers exists. The H-2A program reduces labor shortages and helps to offset the incline in undocumented immigrants in the U.S., but the program is complex and continues to evolve as labor needs in agriculture continue to increase. Issues in agriculture, like the H-2A program, can be difficult to understand and often require specialized communication efforts. Researchers have found the news media help to shape public perceptions of complex issues, and news framing is often used by journalists to simplify details and make sense of unfolding information. This study analyzed the frequency of media coverage, frames, and sources used to communicate information about the H-2A program in newspapers located in the four states with the most certified H-2A workers – Florida, California, Georgia, and Washington. Newspaper articles pertaining to the H-2A program communicated information largely through a “policy/government” frame. The most frequently referenced sources throughout these articles were nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or NGO representatives, followed closely by elected officials. Recommendations for future studies involving media framing and the H-2A program are discussed.

Keywords

Framing, Issue Communication, H-2A, Media Sources

Authors

Erica D. Summerfield, Cara Lawson, Finn Garrison, and Lauren Chase

Introduction

In 1986, the Immigration Control and Reform Act created the H-2A program to allow temporary agricultural workers to legally enter the U.S. to offset the potential increase in undocumented immigrants (Guan et al., 2018). Today, the H-2A program remains and exists as a temporary agricultural worker program that allows U.S. employers the opportunity to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the U.S. when a shortage of domestic workers exists (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). Employers have the options to hire workers through the H-2A program on either a temporary, less than a year, or seasonal basis in accordance with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which outlines qualifications and requirements for employers to follow in order to hire nonimmigrant workers (USCIS, n.d.).

To utilize the H-2A program, there may not be “sufficient able, willing, and qualified United States (U.S.) workers available to perform the agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature for which an employer desires to hire temporary foreign workers [H-2A workers],” (USCIS, n.d.). Employers must also ensure the wages and working conditions of domestic workers are not compromised because of the employment of H-2A workers (USCIS, n.d.). The use and implementation of the H-2A program changed the ways in which the U.S. government, and farm employers, manage and support the agricultural workforce.

The ultimate goal of the H-2A program is to support the production of fresh food produced in the United States (Simms, 2000). Historically, the number of undocumented workers has continued to increase, while the number of legal domestic workers willing and able to perform agricultural jobs has continued to decrease (Roka et al., 2017). This issue has contributed to a shortage of legal, able workers to perform necessary agricultural jobs. The use of the H-2A program provides employers with the labor needed to sustain agricultural production and harvesting practices throughout the U.S. (Luckstead & Devadoss, 2019). Through the H-2A program, and the nonimmigrant workers involved, farmers can ensure the majority of fresh produce is harvested before becoming spoiled (Simms, 2000).

However, the H-2A program is not without complexities or limitations. Issues with the H-2A program involve requirements for employers (Vaughan et al., 2019), cost considerations, and complicated program policies (Escalante et al., 2019). One of the main challenges with the H-2A program is the extensive hiring process (Bier, 2020). Employers must work with their local, state, and federal agencies to petition for and hire guest workers (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). After petitioning and justifying the need for H-2A workers, as well as making and proving attempts to recruit domestic workers, employers must provide evidence of a lack of available domestic workers to fulfill their production needs (Roka et al., 2017). Once the need for H-2A workers is justified, potential workers must complete a background check and receive individual work visas before entering the U.S. (USDOL, 2010). Time estimates suggest the employment process for H-2A workers takes up to 90 days to complete (USDOL, 2010).

Another challenge with the H-2A program involves the cost considerations – especially those costs associated with the extensive, time-consuming hiring processes, and the regulations and policy requirements (Bier, 2020). Employers experience both expenditure costs as well as opportunity costs associated with the process of utilizing the H-2A program (Escalante et al., 2019). For example, time spent during the hiring process for guest workers influences the amount of time employers have available to manage and maintain their agricultural operations (Johnson, 2021), which are subject to financial downfalls resulting from decreases in available time to manage daily processes. The U.S. Department of Labor sets compensation requirements

for all H-2A employers to follow, including salary, transportation, lodging, and food expectations (USDH, 2022). Compensation can often be higher for guest workers than domestic workers, thus adding to the H-2A program costs for employers (Escalante et al., 2019).

Although laws and regulations are in place to help protect guest workers, there have been cases of worker abuse associated with low wages and dangerous working conditions (Nowrasteh, 2021). Abuse claims of H-2A workers are cited as a key concern limiting the expansion of the H-2A program (Garcia, 2014). While some research has found workers in the H-2A program to have lower death rates than U.S.-born workers with similar employment, accurate numbers of abuse and human rights violations are difficult to pinpoint because of self-reported data (Nowrasteh, 2021). It has been noted that some H-2A employers abstain from reporting cases of abuse and/or worker rights violations (Garcia, 2014). Perhaps in response to these issues, the United States Department of Labor published the final rule, *Temporary Agricultural Employment of H-2A Nonimmigrants in the United States*, to “improve program protections for workers and enhance enforcement against fraud and abuse, while modernizing the H-2A application and temporary labor certification process” in November of 2022 (United States Department of Labor, para. 2, 2022). At the same time, numerous organizations seek to provide support for migrant workers who may face challenges in the United States outside of government agencies (Douglas et al., 2004). The H-2A program is complex and continues to evolve as the need for migrant workers continues to grow in the United States (Peri & Zaiour, 2022).

The H-2A program is just one complicated issue among many facing the agriculture industry. When issues are controversial or complex, the news media play a role in shaping public perceptions about the issue and hold the potential to influence policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). News media messages can be influenced by public opinion and political pressures, thereby creating a unique impression of the issue within the minds of media consumers (Baum & Potter, 2008). News media coverage can also bring to light information about governmental programs (Schmertz, 1986). Throughout the use of news reporting, it has been found that “news and source organizations cooperate closely because each benefit from a cordial relationship” (Chermak, 1994, p. 567). Political elites often rely upon news media, especially at times near election periods (Arceneaux et al., 2016). More than one frame can be presented and the variety, or lack thereof, can influence the ways in which individuals think about issues. As suggested by Dunaway and Graber (2022), “the images that media create suggest which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy, and which are outside the mainstream” (p. 2).

Issues in agriculture, especially those with policy implications such as the H-2A program, can be difficult to understand. The reporting of these issues can take on a variety of frames that may result in changes in actions or policies (Osaka, et al., 2021). Scholars have noted a recent prevalence in media coverage of the impact of COVID-19 on farmworker communities (Aday & Aday, 2020; Flocks, 2020; Rahimi et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2020), but a general lack of studies concerning farm labor or H-2A coverage in the media exists. While researchers have investigated topics such as the impacts of COVID-19 policies (Farnsworth, 2020) and the effects of contractual farming (Ruml & Qaim, 2021) on agricultural labor issues, no studies have explored how the H-2A program has been communicated in the news media.

As stakeholders work to resolve the issues associated with the H-2A program, it is important to recognize how the news media communicate the issue and its potential implications. To understand any potential media influence on the H-2A program, it is key to understand how news frames may influence understandings of agricultural issues (Ruth et al., 2005). Therefore,

the purpose of this study was to explore media frames utilized to communicate about the H-2A program in states with the most documented H-2A workers.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory was used as the theoretical lens to describe and interpret the data. Framing is the selection of distinct elements associated with an issue to communicate and promote a specific interpretation, recommendation, or evaluation in regard to the issue (Entman, 1993). When issues are complex, the media use frames to make sense of relevant events and suggest defined themes (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Further, framing is a helpful tool to the news media as it allows for the creation of simple, interpretative packages that reduce the complexity of the issue and make things easier to understand and interpret (Kim & Willis, 2007). From a news reporting standpoint, journalists use frames to make sense of incoming and unfolding information (Scheufele, 1999).

Framing suggests placing emphasis on certain elements of an issue over others can affect how the issue is viewed or perceived by the public (Chong & Druckman, 2007). To simplify and make complicated issues easier to understand, the media employ frames to share specific details with their audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Frames help media consumers make sense of relevant events, organize key ideas, and suggest issues at hand (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Finally, frames can be used to define problems, diagnose causes, and suggest remedies while at the same time omitting or obscuring other associated elements of the topic (Entman, 1993), which could result in incomplete presentations of information.

Framing is used in the media to present information about a variety of topics, including, but not limited to, health, crime, politics, and agriculture (Kim & Willis, 2007; Lawson et al., 2020; Lundy et al., 2018; Schmertz, 1986; Swenson et al., 2018). Media messages about issues regarding health and crime are often framed to help individuals understand the complexity involved (Kim & Willis, 2007). In politics, framing is often used to present new ideas or governmental programs to the public (Schmertz, 1986). Framing in agriculture has been used to both present new ideas and to simplify complex topics in the industry (Lawson et al., 2020; Lundy et al., 2018; Swenson et al., 2018). Framing theory has been applied in a variety of contexts in agricultural communication in response to the array of issues facing the industry. A number of recent agricultural communication studies have explored how issues in agriculture were framed by the media. For example, a previous study found migrant worker issues to be a prevalent frame used in agricultural health and safety in some Florida news media outlets (Lundy et al., 2018). In that study, Lundy et al. (2018) explored media frames used to communicate issues associated with agricultural safety and found evidence of migrant labor issues embedded in human interest frames and frames that highlighted the complexities, such as efforts to improve working conditions, faced by migrant workers. In another framing study, Swenson et al. (2018) found farm safety reporting to largely focus on accident coverage.

The media serve an important role in distributing information and hold the potential to improve knowledge and change behaviors in regard to agricultural issues (Swenson, 2018). The frames selected by the news media also hold potential to influence the public's understanding of the issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In short, the way a message is framed can influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about issues in agriculture and beyond (Iyengar, 1990; Lawson et al., 2021). These impacts of media framing, in turn, create an atmosphere ripe for possible impact on policy formation and support in response to how the media represent the issue

(Netherland & Hanson, 2016; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). As agriculture faces careful examination from outside groups and public officials, communicators face the challenge to create messages that encourage confidence in the industry (Kaufman et al., 2008). Framing provides the media with options to communicate about issues not easily understood.

Purpose and Research Objectives

Given the media's role in distributing information about agriculture and the potential influence of framing on how individuals understand complex issues, it is important to understand the frames used by the news media to communicate about the H-2A program. The purpose of this study was to explore how major newspapers located near top agricultural production areas in states with the most H-2A workers framed the H-2A program from January 1, 2008, to March 1, 2023. Three research objectives guided this study:

1. Determine the frequency of newspaper media coverage pertaining to the H-2A program.
2. Identify and compare news frames used in media coverage pertaining to the H-2A program by newspaper.
3. Determine the sources most frequently used by the newspapers for information about the H-2A program.

Methodology

Quantitative content analysis (QCA) was applied to determine how the H-2A program was framed in the *Orlando Sentinel*, *The Fresno Bee*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Spokane Spokesman-Review*. QCA is “a research technique for the systematic, objective, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). For this study, QCA was used to segment content from each news article and assign categories to be tallied for each research objective. Information gathered through QCA helps to describe a phenomenon and assist in further understanding of that phenomenon (Ary et al, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While descriptive studies can be limiting in terms of scope and generalizability, conducting descriptive research allows for a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and along with a deeper understanding, and ultimately the opportunity to develop future research questions and exploration of a topic (Sirisilla & Sirisilla, 2023). Descriptive data in this study were assessed to better understand how newspapers have communicated about the H-2A program and to achieve a baseline understanding of the media's role in communicating about this issue. Descriptive studies applying content analysis studies have played a role in shaping and informing scholarship in agricultural communication to explore issues and phenomena (Cannon et al., 2016; Regusci et al., 2022; Steede et al., 2018).

The newspapers selected for inclusion in this study were located in each of the top four H2-A employment states. These four states accounted for approximately half of all certified H-2A jobs in the U.S. in 2021 – Florida, California, Georgia, and Washington (USDA, 2023b). Each of the newspapers analyzed were chosen based upon their circulation rates and the number of daily subscribers (Agility PR Solutions, 2022a), as well as their proximities to major agricultural production sites (USDA, 2023a). The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* has the highest daily circulation rate in the state of Georgia (Agility PR Solutions, 2022d). The *Orlando Sentinel* (Agility PR Solutions, 2022c) and the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* (Agility PR Solutions, 2022e) have the third highest circulation rates, respectively, but are located in dense agricultural areas

where most H-2A workers are employed. *The Fresno Bee* is within the top ten newspapers for circulation in California and is also located near the most H-2A workers (Agility PR Solutions, 2022b). Each of these newspapers are circulated near major specialty and commodity crop production areas within each state where the majority of H-2A workers are hired (USDA, 2023a). Newspapers were selected for analysis because news coverage can affect perceptions of knowledge about an issue and are perceived as more credible compared to other news media outlets (Abdulla et al., 2002; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020; Moy et al., 2004).

Articles for the four newspapers were collected via the NewsBank Database by searching the term “H-2A” with the time period covering January 1, 2008, to March 1, 2023. Articles collected through the NewsBank Database consisted of news stories, feature stories, editorials, and opinion editorials from print and online versions of each newspaper. This timeframe was selected to include the Department of Homeland Security’s 2008 release of a new list of countries eligible to participate in the H-2A program (Department of Homeland Security, 2008) and to capture the most recent view of the issue at the time of data collection. The U.S. government’s release of a new list of eligible countries in 2008 was the first expansion of the H-2A program since its start in 1987 (Department of Homeland Security, 2008), thus using the year 2008 to anchor the study was found to be the most appropriate. The initial search yielded 142 articles. Articles that were not primarily focused on the H-2A program were omitted from the study. After removing duplicates and articles that did not focus primarily on the issue, a final sample of 121 articles from the *Orlando Sentinel* ($n = 17$), *The Fresno Bee* ($n = 49$), *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ($n = 42$), and *Spokane Spokesman-Review* ($n = 13$) were included in data analysis.

A researcher-developed codebook and code sheet was the primary instrument used in this study. The instrument was developed using the emerging coding method, which allows for the establishment of categories after initial data observations (Stemler, 2000). Codebook sections included article information, frame, and sources. Article information, including publication date, article title, newspaper name, and article type, were collected prior to coding for frame and sources. Definitions for sources and frames were established to assist the researchers in identifying each article’s primary frame (Table 1). Frame names and definitions used in the codebook were informed by previous studies exploring how agricultural issues were framed within the news media. While more than one frame can be present within a news article, this study analyzed only the primary frame used to explore the main focus of each article (Boydston et al., 2013). The primary frame in each article was coded as 1 = *present*, and 0 = *not present*. Individuals, organizations, and other entities were coded as sources when quoted or referenced within the articles. Eight source types were included in the codebook: Non-Government Organization (NGO) representative, elected official, government agency, farmer/H2A employer, attorney, H-2A worker, university representative, and other.

Table 1

Frames Used by the Orlando Sentinel, The Fresno Bee, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and Spokane Spokesman-Review to Communicate About the H-2A Program

Frame	Description
Economic	Refers to business and monetary influences of the H-2A program such as cost, financial benefits, and disadvantages to an individual, family, community, or overall economy.
Policy/Government	Government or elected official involvement on the issue. Could refer to any governmental considerations on the issue including a new policy, program, initiative, law, regulation, or other measure regarding H-2A.
Legal/Crime	Focuses on lawsuit or court hearings regarding H-2A - reference to H-2A workers or employers as criminals, breaking laws, loopholes, fines, sentencing and punishment, reference to illegal immigration.
Advocacy/Awareness	Non-government groups working to share information about the issue. References to H-2A support services or involvement from stakeholders such as activists, special interest groups not affiliated with the government. Could refer to support services for issues of housing, wages, or working conditions.
Labor	Article discusses workforce issues including struggles with agricultural workforce, worker shortages, or the need (of lack of need) for migrant labor.
Health/COVID-19	Impacts of COVID-19 on workers, access to testing, need for PPE, living conditions, etc. for workers, or other health related issues.
Other	Frames of the article do not fit any of the frame descriptions listed above.

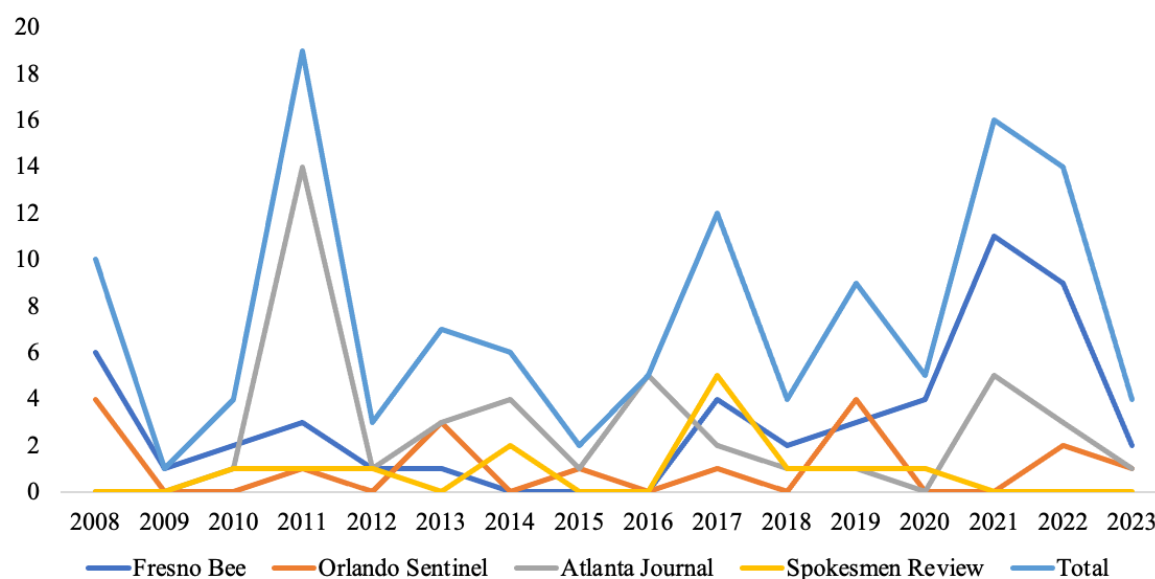
Three researchers were trained to utilize the codebook, verify clarity, and determine reliability. Riffe et al. (2014) suggest using intercoder reliability to evaluate validity and aid in study replications. A pilot test was conducted with similar articles from different newspapers prior to the evaluation of articles included in this study. There is no standard subsample size for reliability assessments (Neudendorf, 2002), but Wimmer and Dominick (2011) suggest 10% to 25% of the sample size is adequate. To determine the instrument's reliability, the researchers independently coded 14 articles and acceptable Krippendorff's alpha levels were achieved with scores ranging from .72 to 1.0 across frames (Riffe et al., 2014). Two researchers coded the remaining articles. Once all articles were coded and data were entered into a Microsoft Excel file, data were exported to IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.1 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to address research objectives one through three.

Results/Findings

Research objective one sought to determine the frequency of newspaper media coverage pertaining to the H-2A program (Figure 1). News articles were analyzed over a 15-year period, starting in 2008, when a new list of countries eligible to participate in the H-2A program was published, and ending on March 1, 2023, which corresponded with the timing of data collection. The number of articles pertaining to the H-2A program published each year in the newspapers explored in this study were inconsistent throughout the timeframe of investigation. In 2008, there were 10 (8.3%) total articles published, while in 2009 only one newspaper featured one article about the H-2A program (0.8%, $n = 1$). In 2011 the most coverage on the topic for an individual year occurred with 19 articles (15.7%). Considering a two-year period, 24.8% ($n = 30$) of the articles were published in 2021 and 2022. In total, *The Fresno Bee* (40.5%, $n = 49$) and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (34.7%, $n = 42$) had more than double the number of articles compared to the *Orlando Sentinel* (14.0%, $n = 17$) and the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* (10.7%, $n = 13$).

Figure 1

Frequency of News Media Coverage on the H-2A Program (N = 121)



Research objective two sought to identify and compare news frames used to communicate about the H-2A program in newspapers in the four leading H-2A states. To gain a better understanding of media coverage of the H-2A program, coders analyzed articles to identify the primary frame, which referred to the most prominent and leading focus of the article. All 121 articles analyzed presented primary frames in one of the seven categories: “economics,” “policy/government,” “legal/crime,” “advocacy/awareness,” “labor,” “health/COVID-19,” and “Other” (Table 2).

Table 2*News Frames Used in Media Coverage Pertaining to the H-2A Program by Newspaper*

	<i>Fresno Bee</i> (<i>n</i> = 49)		<i>Orlando Sentinel</i> (<i>n</i> = 17)		<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> (<i>n</i> = 42)		<i>Spokesman-Review</i> (<i>n</i> = 13)		Total (<i>N</i> = 121)	
Frame	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Policy/Government	28	57.1	7	41.2	22	52.4	5	46.7	62	52.0
Labor	10	20.4	2	11.8	5	11.9	4	26.7	21	17.1
Legal/Crime	5	10.2	2	11.8	10	23.8	0	0	17	13.8
Advocacy/Awareness	2	4.1	4	23.5	1	2.4	2	13.3	9	7.3
Health/COVID-19	2	4.1	0	0	2	4.8	2	13.3	6	4.9
Economics	2	4.1	1	5.9	1	2.4	0	0	4	3.3
Other	0	0	1	5.9	1	2.4	0	0	2	1.6

Newspaper articles pertaining to the H-2A program communicated information largely through the “policy/government” frame (52%, *n* = 62), which was the most frequently-used frame across newspapers. This frame was related to government or elected official involvement on the issue. Example articles that employed this frame covered topics such as immigration reform and proposed policy changes. The second most common frame present in the dataset was “labor,” (17.1%, *n* = 21). Articles implementing the “labor” frame discussed the need or lack of need for migrant labor. Of note, articles in this frame tended to focus on a lack of local farm labor and the need for H-2A labor. The “legal/crime” frame was also present (13.8%, *n* = 17), and involved the coverage of topics such as incidents of illegal activity by H-2A employers, reform for pay, and fair treatment of H-2A workers. Articles that featured the “advocacy/awareness” frame (7.3%, *n* = 9) involved non-government groups and activists who shared information on issues with housing, working conditions, and wages for H-2A workers. Other frames that appeared in the dataset were “health/COVID-19” (4.9%, *n* = 6), “economics” (3.3%, *n* = 4), and “other” (1.6%, *n* = 2). “Health/COVID-19” tended to discuss health impacts of working and lodging conditions for H-2A employees. Articles with the “economics” frame discussed the business and monetary influences of the H-2A program. Two articles did not fit within any of the established frame categories and thus fell into the “other.”

Objective three sought to determine the sources frequently used by the newspapers for information about the H-2A program. The total number of sources appearing in the dataset across articles was 504 with an average of four sources per article. As detailed in Table 3, the most frequently referenced sources were nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or NGO representatives which accounted for 31.5% (*n* = 159) of sources used across newspapers. The NGO sources included groups in support of immigration, employee rights, and commodity support organizations, such as the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and Northwest Horticultural Council.

Table 3*Sources Used in Media Coverage Pertaining to the H-2A Program by State Newspaper (N = 504)*

	<i>Fresno Bee</i> (<i>n</i> = 198)		<i>Orlando Sentinel</i> (<i>n</i> = 64)		<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> (<i>n</i> = 184)		<i>Spokesman-Review</i> (<i>n</i> = 59)		Total (<i>N</i> = 504)	
Source	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
NGO / representative	86	43.4	12	18.8	45	24.5	16	27.1	159	31.5
Elected official	44	22.2	10	15.6	43	23.4	4	6.8	101	20.0
Governmental Agency / Rep	21	10.6	7	10.9	29	15.8	6	10.2	63	12.5
Other	17	8.6	17	26.6	17	9.2	8	13.6	58	11.5
Farmer / H-2A Employer	12	6.0	14	21.9	19	10.3	12	20.3	57	11.3
Attorney	4	2.0	3	4.7	16	8.7	1	1.7	24	4.8
H-2A Worker	5	2.5	0	0	7	3.8	9	15.3	21	4.2
University Study/Rep	9	4.5	1	1.6	8	4.3	3	5.1	21	4.2

Elected officials were also frequently used as sources throughout the articles in newspapers analyzed and described 20.0% (*n* = 101) of all sources identified. This source type included any elected official at the local, state, national, or international level. Governmental agencies or agency representatives accounted for 12.5% (*n* = 63) of all sources within the dataset. This category included interviews with representatives of government agencies and information provided directly by the agency itself. Farmers and H-2A employers accounted for 11.3% (*n* = 57) of sources identified in the dataset and included any individual that was identified as hiring or supervising H-2A workers, or identified as a farmer or rancher. Attorneys, H-2A workers, and university representatives were the three sources least utilized in the articles analyzed. Attorneys were identified throughout the articles and accounted for 4.8% (*n* = 24) of all sources, while H-2A workers and university representatives each made up 4.2% (*n* = 21) of sources identified. Although most sources fit within a defined source type category, there were 58 (11.5%) sources that did not correspond with any of the categories in the codebook. These sources were classified as “other” and consisted of community members, religious leaders, local businesses, news representatives, past agricultural workers, and others.

Conclusions/Recommendations

While this study provides valuable information regarding the media choices about frames and coverage of the H-2A program, it is not without limitations. This study only explored the top four states with the most H-2A workers and is not a comprehensive look at all H-2A media coverage. Major newspapers in these states were selected based upon their circulation rates and proximities to agricultural production areas. The decision to include these newspapers helped to manage the scope of the project but left an incomplete account of total news reports about the H-2A program in each state. News coverage in the form of print and online articles were analyzed in this study, which presents an additional limitation. Live TV news broadcasts, video and audio recordings, and social media content were not included in this study and may yield additional insight to this issue and such is appropriate for future studies. Articles used in this study were also bound by the timeframe of January 1, 2008 and March 1, 2023 and do not provide a full account of all H-2A articles in the selected newspapers outside of these dates. While there are many labor and agricultural issues covered in the media, this study focuses on the news coverage of the H-2A program. This study provides descriptive information about reporting trends but does not explore consumer perceptions of labor and agricultural issues nor does it explore perspectives of specific news reporting strategies. Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights to the issue, sets the stage for future research, and provides the opportunity to suggest practitioner recommendations.

The H-2A program was established to help address farm labor challenges to ensure better public access to fresh produce from the United States (Simms, 2000). This program is complex in nature and often controversial. As discussed above, when issues are controversial or complex, the news media play a role in shaping public perceptions about the issue and can also influence policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). As stakeholders work to resolve the issues associated with the H-2A program and agricultural labor as a whole, it is important to understand how the news media communicate the issue. The purpose of this study was to explore how major newspapers located near top agricultural production areas in states with the most H-2A workers framed the H-2A program from January 1, 2008, to March 1, 2023. The findings provide a snapshot of how the news media framed the H-2A program over a relatively short period of time but lay a foundation for future studies that might explore the media's or a message's influence on perceptions of the H-2A program and other agricultural labor issues.

Overall, articles that sought to communicate about the H-2A program have been published inconsistently since 2008, and a variety of frames and sources have been used to communicate about the H-2A program. One hundred twenty-one articles pertaining to the H-2A program were identified between January 1, 2008 and March 1, 2023. During this timeframe *The Fresno Bee* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* had more than double the number of articles pertaining to H-2A compared to the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*. While Florida is the state with the most H-2A workers, news coverage of the program was lacking compared to California and Georgia, which are ranked second and third for H-2A workers. Some of the influx in news coverage in Georgia was likely a result of House Bill 87, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act, which occurred in 2011. In 2021, the United States elected President Joe Biden and passed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021, both of which could have influenced news reporting in the states explored. Future research should further explore variation in newspaper coverage in other top H-2A states.

The number of articles per year ranged from one to 19 with noticeable coverage in 2008, 2011, 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2022. The Department of Homeland Security (2008) published a new list of countries eligible to participate in the H-2A program in 2008, which accounts for the

high amount of media coverage identified. In 2017, the United States swore in President Donald Trump, which caused a shift in the federal government. Like with many new leadership roles, questions regarding governmental programs came to light in the news media (Schmertz, 1986). This change in federal leadership may have been a contributing factor to the increase in H-2A articles published in 2017. In 2019, nine articles appeared, up slightly from the previous year, which saw four articles. The year 2019 started with a governmental shutdown caused by issues with approving a federal operations budget for the 2019 fiscal year. As the H-2A program is government funded, the shutdown may have contributed to the increase in media coverage in 2019. In 2021 and 2022, many issues regarding food production were escalated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which again may have helped fuel increased media coverage about the H-2A program, given its relationship with food production (Aday & Aday, 2020; Rahimi et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2020).

The H-2A program is first and foremost the result of governmental policy (Guan et al., 2018). As government and elected officials are responsible for creating and altering policies, and because concerns with policy have been cited in the past in conjunction with the H-2A program (Escalante et al., 2019), the common use of the “government and policy” frame within this study was not unusual. At the same time, the fact that all newspapers in this study most commonly utilized this frame suggests the issues associated with the H-2A program may be more of a national trend than regional. While there may be nuance in this frame between newspapers, the prominence of this frame seemingly instills the issue as one of policy and government from a media standpoint. The media hold the potential to influence policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), so it is reasonable to assume that framing articles in this way may have implications for future policy decisions on this issue.

Ultimately, the H-2A program was created to help address farm labor needs, which helps to explain why “labor” was also a common frame in the dataset. As agriculturalists continue to face needs associated with labor, the H-2A program will likely play an important role (Luckstead & Evadoss, 2019). Issues within the program have been identified (Vaughan et al., 2019) and will need to be resolved to improve experiences for both workers and farmers, and thus provide a more reliable food system. As issues unfold and resolutions are sought, the media play a role in defining problems and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993) and influence knowledge about an issue (Moy et al., 2004). The use of the “labor” frame in this study further appears to solidify the need for and importance of the H-2A program for the agricultural workforce in the U.S.

Any government program is subject to legal considerations, including regulations regarding worker rights and employer responsibilities. Within the dataset examined in this study, the “legal/crime” frame was present in all newspapers except the *Spokesman-Review*. While this frame was not as common as others within the articles, its presence suggests a theme in the reporting of the H-2A program. Articles utilizing the “legal/crime” frame focused on the mistreatment of H-2A workers, salary requirements, and workload expectations. The lack of articles utilizing a “legal/crime” frame in the *Spokesman-Review* could be because of the lower number of overall H-2A articles and the use of other major frames when reporting these issues, suggesting possible issue nuance from region to region or even state to state. Post-hoc analysis revealed NGOs, governmental agencies, and attorneys were the most utilized sources for when the “legal/crime” frame was present. This is not surprising as there are many NGOs that help to support migrant workers throughout the United States (Douglas, et al., 2004) and legal issues primarily relate to governmental policies and attorney councils.

There are many financial considerations associated with the H-2A program, yet “economics” rarely appeared as a primary theme in the dataset. While the H-2A program can be costly for employers, there are also financial advantages for hiring H-2A workers including tax deductions for social security and Medicare (USDOL, 2010). Initial costs of recruiting and hiring H-2A workers is high, but over time employers can save money by limiting training and turnover cost for new employees (Roka et al., 2017). Advantages to employers are joined by the benefits to the local economy with the increased purchasing of goods and services in areas with H-2A workers (Castillo & Charlton, 2023). Although there are many documented economic considerations surrounding the H-2A program, very few articles in this study employed this frame. The “economic” frame may have been overpowered by the primary use of the “policy/government” frame which ultimately is the source for many economic considerations. There were also a low number of farmer and H-2A employer sources which could explain the lack of focus of economic impacts of H-2A. Future research should explore secondary frames to establish potential economic influences.

Based on the results of the primary frames that emerged in this study, it is clear that more research is needed to better understand the media’s influence on public and individual perceptions of the H-2A program. Based on this study, news coverage of the H-2A program focused primarily on policy and labor issues. Research is needed to explore any potential relationships between the media coverage and the political and social issues influencing H-2A reporting. To fully communicate about the H-2A program, journalists and editors should explore alternative ways of framing H-2A to improve coverage. Framing can be used by journalist to help consumers understand the complexities of the H-2A program (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Coverage focused on specific issues within the H-2A program such as awareness, labor needs, and health could provide media consumers with a more comprehensive understanding of the H-2A program. Reporters should consider expanding their coverage of the H-2A program to include information outside of general policy and labor issues, including the important social issues involving H-2A workers (Peri & Zaiour, 2022). Additionally, future studies exploring the influence of events outside of the H-2A program on media coverage could help to explain media coverage trends.

When exploring the sources utilized in articles pertaining to the H-2A program, it became evident that news media in this study had a tendency to rely upon NGO and elected official sources. Again, with the political nature of the H-2A program (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Guan et al., 2018; Escalante et al., 2019), it is not surprising the organizations and people who greatly influence policy are the sources most utilized by news media professionals. One surprising finding was the lack of worker representation within sources. Even though all articles analyzed reported on the H-2A program, the use of H-2A workers as sources was scarce. With the high use of political sources and lack of worker representation, there appears to be a leaning toward overall policy implications of the program rather than the impacts of individual workers. While there is no literature to support this possibility, the use of H-2A workers as sources may have been limited because of challenges with access and understanding. H-2A workers are employed on a seasonal basis during prime production periods and are provided housing and transportation through their employers (USDOL, n.d.). While employees do have off-hours, many rely solely on their employer for any off-site access. This means that news media would likely have to work with farm owners and operators to gain access to H-2A workers for on-site interviews during peak production seasons. Access to these key sources may become more difficult compared to sources with regular working hours in public service positions, such as elected officials and

NGOs. It is arguable that the news media may be utilizing more assessable sources, rather than sources who have first-hand knowledge and experiences with the program. Research investigating the sources used in reporting other agricultural issues could help to identify trends in source use and explore the role of source accessibility.

This study provides a baseline understanding of how the H-2A program has been portrayed in selected newspapers and provides an opportunity for future investigations related to the H-2A program and other labor issues. The H-2A program continues to be a major source for finding vital seasonal workers in the agricultural industry. The continued need for an increase in food production promotes the need for, and growth of, the H-2A program (Bier, 2020). Given the role of H-2A program throughout the U.S., future studies should explore the use of frames in other newspapers across the country. Investigating additional newspapers could help to inform the commonalities found between the top four H-2A states used in this study. The depth of reporting should also be explored in future studies on issues such as this to better understand the levels of attention and importance media sources place on complex agricultural and labor issues.

As this study revealed common news frames used to communicate about the H-2A program, future studies should explore how the different media frames impact perceptions of the program. Further exploration into framing effects and potential variables influencing perceptions of issues like this could help to build better understandings of potential media impacts on news consumers.. Finally, the H-2A program is just one topic within a larger realm of labor issues in the United States, and there are many additional elements to explore from the perspective of agricultural communication. Agricultural and labor issues outside of the H-2A program should also be explored to further how these key issues facing the industry are communicated. Moving forward Researchers should also continue to investigate major issues in a variety of communication media to determine any relationships between issues facing the industry.

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