

# The Perils of the Boomerang Effect: White House Messaging to Deter Border Crossing Backfires

*Designing a Public Awareness Campaign to Educate Central American Migrants*

Mariely Valentin-Llopis, Ph.D.  
Barry University  
Miami Shores, FL

Jessica Delgado  
Florida International University  
Miami, FL

**Abstract:** The Boomerang Effect explains how a given persuasive message produces attitude change in the direction opposite to that intended. We seek to explain how the convergence of Central American migrants at the southwest border since 2014 is, in part, produced by the United States (U.S.) White House messaging misstep. We propose a bottom-up persuasive approach to effectively spread awareness of the dangers of unauthorized border crossing. Instead of state authority voices, local native voices can effectually convey the message. The bottom-up approach of persuasion is a foundational strategy to effectively design a public awareness campaign focusing on *ethos*. The objective is not to stop immigration, but to educate migrants to (a) identify propaganda and (b) refuse smugglers' advances. The model considers three main factors: (1) most frequently used and trusted media channels, (2) dynamic influencers and knowledgeable local leaders, (3) competent and trustworthy sources of information.

**Keywords** —Boomerang effect theory, bottom-up approach, migration, White House

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**SUGGESTED CITATION:** Valentin-Llopis, M., & Delgado, J (2022). The perils of the boomerang effect: White House messaging to deter border crossing backfires. *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference Volume 5* (pp. 16-19). Orlando FL: Nicholson School of Communication and Media. <https://doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2022.03>

## INTRODUCTION

During the migrant crisis of 2014, American newspapers the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, along with Mexico's *Reforma*, and *El Universal*, reporting framed the border crisis as the convergence of events unfolding in the United States (U.S), Mexico, and Central America. The 2014 border conflict became newsworthy due to the large number of unaccompanied minors. A content analysis [2] of the aforementioned newspapers revealed that White House messaging was ineffective and often used as propaganda by Mexican cartels and smugglers seeking to profit from the plight of Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorians. Hence, many unaccompanied minors crossing the borders believed they would be granted "permisos" (permission). These children's parents and relatives, who paid thousands of dollars to "coyotes" (smugglers) under the false pretenses that children were guaranteed entrance to the U.S. territory, were victims of misinformation and fraud. Similarly, in 2017, The White House's border-wall rhetoric did little to deter Central American migrants who mistook the incessant sound bite as a coded message for time is running out. The border-shutdown rhetoric accelerated the migration plans of thousands of Hondurans, Salvadorians, and Guatemalans who converged in the so-called "caravans." These groups of migrants believed that a physical wall would make it harder to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The White House's anti-immigration messaging was, in part, the accelerant in the summer of 2017, and resulted in a boomerang effect.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Boomerang Effect occurs when a persuasive message produces an attitude change in the direction opposite to that intended [1]. Recipients generate counter-arguments substantially stronger than the arguments contained in the original message. Hovland et al. theorized that the boomerang effect is more likely under certain conditions:

ISSN: 2576-9111

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<https://doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2022.03>

- when weak arguments are paired with a negative source;
- when weak or unclear persuasion leads the recipient to believe the communicator is trying to convince them of a different position than what the communicator intends;
- when the persuasion triggers aggression or unalleviated emotional arousal;
- when the communication adds to the recipient's knowledge of the norms and increases their conformity;
- when non-conformity to their own group results in feelings of guilt or social punishment; and
- when the communicator's position is too far from the recipient's position and thus produces a "contrast" effect and thus enhances their original attitudes.

Further, the work of Cohen [3] and Sensenig and Brehm [4] add to the discussion the negative impact a message can have on a recipient. Sensenig and Brehm's contend that message presentation coupled with a recipient feeling a lack of freedom can produce psychological reactance. Reactance can cause the person to adopt or strengthen a view or attitude that is contrary to what was intended and increases resistance to persuasion [5].

## ANALYSIS

### *CASE #1 – THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION*

Historically, the causes of Central American migration are related to social violence and economic distress (poverty). The least obvious causes are climate change (drought), femicide, and misinformation about the U.S. immigration laws. However, children's migration is caused by all of the above and parents' migration history [6]. The migration of children of non-migrant parents is almost non-existent [6].

In the summer of 2014, the Obama administration, repeatedly, voiced concern about the unusually high number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the southwest border. During an exclusive interview with ABC's Chief Anchor George Stephanopoulos, the President's message was clear. Obama warned, "Do not send your children to the borders. If they do make it, they'll get sent back. More importantly, they may not make it." [7]

President Obama dubbed "Deported in Chief," presided over the highest deportation rates of any U.S. administration. Nonetheless, messaging coming out of the Obama White House had no effect on stopping the flow of Central American migrants nor the alarming number of unaccompanied children. On the contrary, many more arrived as the White House intensified its *do not come* media campaign. Two conditions seem to have triggered the Boomerang Effect: (1) weak or unclear persuasion that led the recipient to believe the communicator is trying to convince them of a different position than what the communicator intended, and (2) the communication adds to the recipient's knowledge of the norms and increases their conformity.

The Obama Administration's weak and unclear messaging, unintentionally, served as fodder for smugglers. The Mexican media reported that smugglers propaganda led thousands of Central American parents living without permits in the U.S. to believe that the legal status would be granted by bringing over their children. White House messaging on smugglers was ineffective as it reinforced the recipient's deep-seated belief, therefore the communication added to the recipient's knowledge of the norms and increases their conformity. While the image of the smugglers is demonized in the U.S., for many migrants hiring a smuggler is the only way through the corruption-ridden Mexican trail. In response to the "crisis," the Obama Administration sent Joe Biden, then the Vice President, to Guatemala. Biden met with the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in June 2014. Part of the White House mission was to educate Central Americans about the dangers of unauthorized migration and the predatory nature of smugglers. [8] Government messages have no effect on Central Americans who are accustomed to the image of the smuggler across generations of migrants. Furthermore, the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts in collaboration with Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador [9] aimed at educating the Central American population had little deterrence effect. Guatemala launched a deterrence campaign named "Quedaté!" El Salvador announced the launch of a six-month, \$1.2 million media campaign on the dangers of migration by children and families [9]. The Honduran government launched a media campaign to educate migrants, and Operation "Rescue Angels" along the Honduran-Guatemalan border [9].

### *CASE #2: THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION*

In the case of President Trump's "wall" rhetoric, we argue that two conditions triggered the Boomerang Effect: weak arguments paired with a negative source. Trump's anti-immigration messaging was characterized by harsh and negative language. Objectively, the Trump White House messaging on Mexican and Central American migrants can be characterized as the type of persuasion that triggers aggression or unalleviated emotional arousal.

Building on Sensenig and Brehm's argument that message presentation and recipients' feelings of lack of freedom can produce psychological reactance, we also argue that Trump's rhetoric exacerbated Mexico's treatment of Central American migrants. Migrants' right to transit withheld by the Mexican constitution was threatened by Trump's messaging. The Mexican government was hard-pressed to stop migrants from crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border. Taken together, message presentations about building a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border to impede transit and Mexico's new policy of deportation triggered migrants' opposition. Migrants converged in large caravans in defiance of messaging curbing their freedom to transit.

*IMMIGRATION: THE ONGOING CRISIS*

In fiscal year 2021, there were more than 150,000 unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border. This does not account for those that did not make it and were not apprehended. This number is a significant increase from 2014 which was 68,631 unaccompanied minors apprehended. The current U.S. communications policy is not effectively reaching the target audience, and if so, the message is not taken seriously. The current approach operates in a top-down approach. In traditional top-down communications, there is a hierarchy in which the message is set by the highest authority and disseminated down the pipeline. It is a typical, traditional organizational communication style.

*BOTTOM-UP APPROACH*

Looking at the fundamentals of crisis communication, the three fundamental steps are planning, managing, and responding [10]. The bottom-up approach would affect each of these steps. In the planning period, understanding and listening to migrants becomes primordial. There are two popular entities that migrants across Central America trust: faith-based organization and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Organizations such as these are effective in assisting migrants receive life-saving information. The medium in which information is communicated is via WhatsApp via cellphone apps. According to UNESCO, smartphones are “crucial to the survival of migrants and refugees” for migrants worldwide” [11]. Cellphones allow migrants to keep in touch with families, understand weather conditions, and provide some support on treacherous journeys. According to Jesus Serrano, ICRC’s regional communication coordinator in 2019, cellphones have helped disseminate essential information and “self-protection messages for migrants are a success” [12]. In addition, WhatsApp, with more than 2 billion users worldwide, allows for end-to-end encrypted messaging that keeps moving migrants’ information secure when compared to other less secure messaging platforms.



There are two impediments to U.S. messaging reaching audiences directly and accurately: the distrust in Central American media and the self-interest of certain coyotes. Therefore, the U.S. government’s use of traditional forms of communication are not effective. As such, it should plan campaigns focusing on trusted sources. These campaigns should include text messaging via partner aid organizations such as local churches, shelters, internet cafes, and the ICRC. This would allow up-to-date information to get to the migrants immediately. It would also cut out the coyotes as the information intermediaries.

The next step in managing an on-going crisis is managing the messaging. Applying the bottom-up approach, also referred to bottom-up listening, into these messages is taking end-user information to shape the message. Over the course of the last several years, we have seen that there is an inverse effect when the U.S. government announces the borders will be “closing” and the influx of migrants arriving at the U.S. Mexico border. As such, when managing messages there are certain factors that should be taken into consideration. The first is understanding migration patterns. The scorching summer months have fewer migrants crossing Mexico’s hot, arid conditions and therefore the border. While safety and security are year-round issues and should be continued, understanding that these are “down” times for migrants is important. Another issue to take into consideration when managing messages is selecting the appropriate partners for certain messages. While the information should not change, the way the information is presented should be dependent on the audience at hand.

The Communication Matrix also takes into consideration when managing messages. The U.S. Government should work with local churches directly during the more active migration months. In addition, face-to-face communication becomes the most media rich format to communicate. Holding monthly information sessions on what it means to migrate, what the

current policies are, and how to spot disingenuous coyotes are all safety measures that will help mitigate and manage migration.

The final step is responding to the crisis. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. government is planning stricter and more forceful communication. However, we are dealing with two different interpretations of the same message. In this instance, a proper response would be using the most trusted (ethos) organizations to disseminate information about migrants' safety measures.

### Author Biography

Mariely Valentin-Llopis holds a doctoral degree in communication studies from Regent University, Virginia. She currently teaches at Barry University, [mvalentin-llopis@barry.edu](mailto:mvalentin-llopis@barry.edu).

Jessica Delgado holds a master's degree in communication from Florida International University. She currently teaches at Florida International University, [delgadoj@fiu.edu](mailto:delgadoj@fiu.edu).

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