

Media Describes Illegal Aliens As “Undocumented Californians”

By Jon Feere

It is very difficult to keep up with all of the activist-created euphemisms for the legally accurate and concise term “illegal alien”. For the most part, the media has been more than willing to embrace activist terminology, frequently referring to “undocumented migrants” or “out-of-status persons”, for example. Such terms create inaccurate, imprecise, and wordy sentences — the exact opposite of what is expected in good journalism. A common example of activist language resulting in inaccuracy is where a journalist claims there are “11 million undocumented workers in the United States”. In reality, only about seven to eight million illegal aliens are actually working. The activist terminology gives the impression that all illegal aliens are employed, misinforming readers about the true costs of illegal immigration. All because some journalists believe that accuracy is less important than advancing the open-border agenda.

Two California newspapers are apparently pushing a new effort to legitimize the presence of illegal aliens. Both the [Los Angeles Times](#) and the [San Jose Mercury News](#) have welcomed use of the phrase “undocumented Californians” to describe illegal aliens living within the state. My attempt to get the writers and editors to change, or at least explain, this phrasing is detailed in the e-mails below.

How does one become a “Californian”? Prior to the U.S. Civil War, states granted citizenship to individuals born within their jurisdictions and the federal government subsequently recognized that citizenship. Since the 14th Amendment, the federal government grants citizenship to individuals born within the country and the states recognize that status. As the amendment explains, those born or naturalized within the United States “are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside”. While the scope of state citizenship has changed over the years, it does exist and it remains clear that a state need not extend all benefits and services equally to citizens of the state and citizens of a different state. For example, a state can issue hunting licenses to state citizens and deny them to citizens of other states. See *Baldwin v. Fish and Game Commission of Montana* (436 U.S. 371).

The point is that one does not acquire a state’s citizenship simply by entering the state. A U.S. citizen from Nevada who visits San Francisco does not automatically become a Californian.

Similarly, a legal foreign visitor who enters the United States to visit Disneyland does not suddenly become a Californian.

While journalists cannot be expected to be experts on the history of citizenship, it should have occurred to someone at the papers that referring to citizens of foreign countries with no colorable right of entry as “Californians” might not jibe with the common understanding of what it means to be a Californian. And judging from the comment sections, the term’s use rubbed many readers the wrong way.

I reached out to the journalists and their editors for an explanation of why the term was used and for a correction. Below are the e-mail conversations in full. The lack of interest in protecting the reputation of the newspapers is quite shocking.

Jon Feere is the Legal Policy Analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies.



Center for Immigration Studies

First up is my exchange with the *Los Angeles Times*. I did not receive a response from the writer or editors attached to the inquiry (Linda Rogers is apparently the head editor of the Sacramento bureau from which the article originated). The *Los Angeles Times* ombudsman (Deidre Edgar) did respond and at least acknowledged that “whether [undocumented Californians] is an accurate term is debatable”. No one made an attempt to defend use of the term.

Here is the first e-mail inquiry:

Linda Rogers:

The first sentence in your latest article, “[Brown acts on driver’s license, deportation bills](#)” (10/1/12), contains the odd phrase “undocumented Californians”, which has no legal or logical meaning. There’s simply no such thing as an undocumented Californian. Even a legal immigrant who enters on a temporary visa — say, to visit Disneyland — is not a Californian by any standard. Those who enter illegally are also not Californians.

Can you correct this so that it refers to “illegal immigrants” or “illegal aliens” in accordance with AP standards?

As the Los Angeles Times’s Deidre Edgar notes: “The Times’ Style and Usage Guide advocates the use of ‘illegal immigrants’ when referring to ‘citizens of foreign countries who have come to the country with no passport, visa or other document to show that they are entitled to visit, work or live in the United States.’” See, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/readers/grammar/>.

Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,

*Jon Feere
Legal Policy Analyst
Center for Immigration Studies*

Later that day I received the ombudsman’s response:

Dear Mr. Feere,

Thank you for writing. Since you quoted me, I thought it was most appropriate that I be the one to respond.

In fact, The Times’ style guide allows for use of both “illegal” and “undocumented”. That’s explained in the blog post you cited, in the graph following the one you included:

The Times’ Style and Usage Guide advocates the use of “illegal immigrants” when referring to “citizens of foreign countries who have come to the country with no passport, visa, or other document to show that they are entitled to visit, work, or live in the United States.”

It continues: “The term ‘undocumented immigrant’ is acceptable as a synonym for ‘illegal immigrant’ under certain conditions, such as when a form of the word ‘illegal’ already appears in a sentence.”

That second paragraph is what relates to today’s article. The phrase “illegal immigrant” had already been used in the sentence, so “undocumented” was used for the second reference.

I understand your point about “Californian” — and whether that is an accurate term is debatable. We, of course, are not talking about tourists who are visiting Disneyland. This article refers to people who are living in California — and since they are here illegally, “undocumented” was used describe that living status.

Center for Immigration Studies

Whether or not we agree with the language used in the lead sentence, the story does not warrant a correction. As I explained, the language does in fact follow The Times' style guide. Even if it did not, a stylebook is a guideline — not a law. Corrections are reserved for errors of fact. And re-editing the article is not an option, either. The Times does not alter articles that have already been published, with the exception of appending a correction.

(One additional note on AP Style: AP recommends “illegal immigrants” — it does not use “illegal aliens.”)

Best,

*Deirdre Edgar
Readers' Representative
Los Angeles Times*

While I appreciated the response, it evaded the central issue. I responded:

Dear Ms. Edgar:

I thank you for the response. However, I remain confused as to what an “undocumented Californian” is. I understand that the article is not about immigrant tourists. My point is that a tourist on a legal visa living in California during their stay does not automatically become a Californian, and similarly, an illegal immigrant who enters without a visa also does not automatically become a Californian. Yet, at least in the former case, their presence was welcomed by the country. It seems odd to suggest that an unwelcomed entry somehow results in one acquiring the title of “Californian.”

Is it the position of the L.A. Times that illegal immigrants in California are, in fact, Californians? If not, will the editors be sure to not use such an odd phrase in the future?

Thanks again for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jon Feere

Clearly there was no interest in getting into a discussion of the offending phrase:

Mr. Feere,

I don't have anything to add to my response from yesterday. You appear to have a particular point of view on this subject, so perhaps a letter to the editor would be a good venue. Letters may be sent to letters@latimes.com.

Best,

*Deirdre Edgar
Readers' Representative
Los Angeles Times*

Of course, I wasn't looking to voice my opinion; I was looking for an explanation. The e-mail addresses of the article's writer and editor were attached to every response in this e-mail exchange. Neither of them were interested in explaining the phrase, though they would be the appropriate people to do so. I sent a final e-mail to the group, hoping that either the editor or writer would respond:

Center for Immigration Studies

Ms. Edgar:

I'm simply trying to determine the L.A. Times's point of view on this subject. Is Linda Rogers still employed as the editor of the Sacramento bureau? I have alerted her to previous errors as well but she has remained silent despite the fact that this falls under her jurisdiction.

Would she be the one to speak to whether or not the L.A. Times now takes the position that illegal immigrants in California are, in fact, Californians?

Thanks again,

Jon Feere

I gave it a week. No response. I re-sent the last e-mail a week later, thinking that perhaps it had not made it to the intended inboxes. It's been yet another week without a response.

Now for the *San Jose Mercury News*, which used the same odd phrase a day after the *Los Angeles Times*. I sent the inquiry to the writer (Matt O'Brien) and some editors:

Mr. O'Brien et al.:

The first sentence in your latest article, ["Driver licenses for undocumented Californians get lukewarm response"](#) (10/2/12), contains the odd phrase "undocumented Californians", which has no legal or logical meaning. An illegal immigrant who enters without a visa does not automatically become a Californian; even a tourist on a legal visa living in California during their stay does not automatically become a Californian. Yet at least in the latter case, their presence was welcomed by the country. It seems odd to suggest that an unwelcomed entry somehow results in one acquiring the title of "Californian".

Is it the position of the Mercury News that illegal immigrants in California are, in fact, Californians? If not, will the editors be sure to not use such an odd phrase in the future?

Can you correct the first sentence and headline so that it refers to "illegal immigrants" in accordance with AP standards?

Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,

*Jon Feere
Legal Policy Analyst
Center for Immigration Studies*

An editor responded quickly, promising to review the request:

Mr. Feere:

Thanks for your note. We'll review your request and then decide whether any change is warranted. As you know, the AP style is more flexible than simply using "illegal immigrants" as is the style used by the Bay Area News Group. While we generally follow the AP, there are exceptions.

- Dave Butler, Editor

Center for Immigration Studies

I gave it a week hoping to see some change on the article, or at least a response defending use of the term. Seeing none, I sent a follow-up:

Mr. Butler:

Thank you for the response. Have you come to a decision as to your use of the odd term “undocumented Californian”? If you’re sticking with it, can you please provide me the paper’s definition of the term?

Thanks,

Jon

I received a quick response:

Thanks for your note. Should we decide we have informartion [sic] we want to share with you we surely will do that.

I could see he had little interest in getting back to me, but I played along and sent a quick response:

Thank you. When might you decide whether you have information you want to share with me regarding the paper’s use of the term? How long does the review process generally take?

It has been yet another week and there has been no response. No edit to the article. No defense of the odd term by the writer or editor. Perhaps it’s on account of the fact that the *Mercury’s* newsroom is busy dealing with visits from the San Jose Police Department investigating the dozens of competitor newspaper bins [found in the Mercury’s metal recycling dumpsters](#).

It is unfortunate that many media outlets have joined the open-borders agenda and are so uninterested in taking a critical look at illegal immigration, not to mention mass legal immigration. It is unfortunate that newsrooms have embraced activist terminology to describe illegal immigration. And it is unfortunate that some newspapers will not defend their own work.

This shouldn’t be viewed as an indictment of all newspaper writers and editors. Some papers have been willing to make edits after being alerted to inaccurate immigration reporting. In recent weeks, editors and writers of the *Washington Post*, the *Denver Post*, and the *Sacramento Bee* have made corrections after I explained that their description of the Obama administration’s deferred action plan was incorrect. Sure, some did so grudgingly without so much as a “thanks”, but at the end of the day everyone benefits from careful, honest reporting.

For a list of reporters engaged in quality immigration reporting, check out our list of winners of the [Eugene Katz Award for Excellence in the Coverage of Immigration](#).