Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Racist Discourse

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Abstract

On 3 August 2019 a mass shooting took place in Texas, USA. The suspect posted his 'manifesto' online, clearly stating that his actions were racially motivated. His views echoed the restrictionist views of the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which is currently classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. This essay analised whether or not it disseminates racist discourses through its website. It looked at the role of the internet in modern day communication and presented a brief overview of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The FAIR homepage was examined to evaluate claims of racist discourse using the methods of MCDA, and the study concludes that the website contains racist discourse.

Keywords: Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR), racism, discourse, analysis, multimodality, CDA, MCDA

Introduction

The deadly shooting on 3 August 2019 in El Paso, Texas, claimed 22 lives and injured 24. Shortly afterwards the media was quick to report the anti-immigration 'manifesto' the perpetrator posted online just minutes before the shooting. The statement was posted on *8chan*, an image board website

consisting of user-created message boards. Its founder, Frederick Brenan, was "committed to near absolute free speech" (Wong, 2019), and the site was known to be widely used by alt-right groups and individuals, such as the Christchurch mosque shooter (Roy, 2019) and Poway synagogue shooter (McGowan, 2019). The site had been accused of being a "notorious bastion of hate speech" and is no longer available to the public as it was dropped by its network infrastructure provider. His manifesto, along with his actions, were celebrated on *8chan* (Wong, 2019). It stated clear motives in targeting this predominantly Hispanic city near the US-Mexico border, echoing the strong restrictionist sentiments, which the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is renowned for (Crusius, 2019).

The perpetrator followed the example of the Christchurch mosque shooter and the Poway synagogue shooter and posted his manifesto on *8chan*, titled *The Inconvenient Truth*, which starts as follows:

> In general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.

The notion of 'Hispanic invasion' and 'cultural and ethnic replacement' are ideas widely supported by alt-right groups and individuals, often referred to as "white replacement theory" (Schwartburg, 2019). Hours after the shooting, Dan Stein, president of the FAIR, issued a tweet in the organisation's name denouncing the shooting and, in an interview, "repeatedly brushed aside connections between FAIR's ideology and the suspect's" (Nakamura, 2019).

FAIR is a non-profit anti-immigration organisation in the United States. It was founded in 1979 with the aim of influencing US immigration policies. Its founder, John Tanton, was "the guiding force of the contemporary anti-immigration movement" (Goodman, 2019). The retired ophthalmologist and

pro-eugenist made his case "against immigration in racial terms" (DeParle, 2011). He expressed his concern about the decline of "folks who look like you and me" when writing to a donor.

The president of FAIR quickly distanced the organisation from the gunman in the aftermath of the shooting, despite the fact that many of the organisation's anti-immigrant arguments were cited in the statement by the perpetrator. The organisation is currently categorised by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as a hate group (Beirich, 2008) for reasons, among other things, such as the receipt of $1.2 million from the Pioneer Fund, an organisation founded by Nazi sympathisers "to pursue race battlement" (Beirich, 2010), prevalence of anti-Latino and anti-immigrant attitudes (Beirich, 2008), and the promotion of racist conspiracy theories (Potok, 2007).

The aim of this essay is to ascertain whether or not the claim by the SPLC is legitimate, with the focus on whether the organisation's website disseminates racist discourse to its readers. It seeks to establish whether the narratives provided by FAIR are 'unjust', that is, whether it is "*illegitimate* according to some international human and social rights" (Van Dijk, 2009).

Methodology

FAIR's homepage will be examined to ascertain if they single out certain groups of people; whether they depict those singled out in a prejudicial manner; and whether they display displeasure, dislike or even hate towards the members of those groups. Both the content and its presentation are analysed to see if they display *manipulative discursive practices* using the framework presented as tool kits by Machin (2007) based on the multimodal, social semiotic approach. The subjects include iconography, modality, colour, typography, inventory of

meaning potentials, and visual composition. All these aspects play a significant part in recreating a certain reality through metaphorical association. In doing so, it reconstructs social practices including its power relations and inequalities.

The focus here will be on iconography, colour, and visual composition of images on the website. Particular attention will be paid to the semiotics of colour. Visual composition of images with people will also be examined, and so will be the content and typography of headlines. Hence, two headlines and one article have been selected on the basis of accompanying images in order to assess the representation of people on this website (figures 3, 5 and 6). Another headline has been chosen in order to evaluate its colour and visual composition (figure 4).

The Internet and the Extremist Views

8chan is neither the first nor the last website to attract widespread criticism for inciting more extreme elements in society such as white supremacists and other alt-right groups. With the election of Donald Trump as the 45th US president, his then chief executive officer and Chief Strategist in his administration for some six months, Steven Bannon, came to prominence as an outspoken advocate for national populist conservatism. He was a co-founder and the former executive chairman of *Breitbart News,* a far-right website, well known for its alt-right readership, and has been criticised for escalating misogynistic, xenophobic and racist attitudes among its already conservative readers. Another website, *InfoWars* is also well known for its far-right briefs and conspiracy theories.

While the freedom of the internet and its democratic potential were being marvelled at in the early 2000s, Sunstein (2001) warned that the Internet's

filtering technology would "increase people's ability to wall themselves off from topics and opinions that they prefer to avoid" (p. 202). He argued that it would allow individuals to tailor "the daily me", in which they choose only to see "exactly what they want to see, no more, no less" (ibid. p. 3), leading to greater polarisation of a country's politics. Although it is understood that people are not so contained within their comfort zones, Pew Research Centre (2014) found that "it is virtually impossible to live in an ideological bubble" in the US, and the majority of people consume an array of news resources with varying audience profiles. However, it was also noted that "liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds" when it comes to politics. It is also true that those on the extreme ends of the political spectrum, while relatively small in number and have "little overlap in the news sources" with each other, tend to have greater impact on political processes, through voting, donating or participating directly in politics. They also found that consistent conservatives are more likely to distrust other media outlets than the ones they closely follow, and they are more likely to voice their political opinions while on *Facebook.*

In recent years, we have witnessed the dramatic rise in prominence of far-right movements in the US. While the election of Donald Trump to the White House has been cited as "a factor in the re-energisation of activists and groups that reject both left-wing ideology and mainstream conservatism", social media is said to be playing a large part in promoting these ideologies (BBC, 2017). Their movement is predominantly online, enjoying the anonymity and freedom that the internet affords them, and consequently there has been an urgent call for a government ban on far-right hate groups from making media appearances (Dearden, 2019). Several social media outlets have already implemented some measures not to provide platforms for those with extreme viewpoints. For example, a dozen far-right individuals and organisations have been banned from *Facebook* (BBC, 2019), and such sites as *8chan* have disappeared from

the world wide web altogether. The turning point was when the Christchurch mosque gunman live-streamed his attack on *Facebook,* which was "replicated seemingly endlessly and shared widely in the wake of the attack" (Wakefield 2019). The company came under enormous pressure to take action against hate-groups, and other outlets such as *YouTube* and *Reddit* followed suit in removing video clips of similar content (BBC, 2019).

Television broadcasters are expected to adhere to certain ethical standards, and each network has a standards and practices department which is responsible for the moral, ethical and legal implications of the programs that they air. This, in turn, gives the broadcasters a sense of trustworthiness albeit the degree of which may depend on the predisposition of viewers. On the other hand, the internet media enjoys far greater freedom that comes with the anonymity of unidentifiable, though not completely untraceable, pseudonyms. Yet, certain sites carry the air of being more credible than others, and those with a sense of credibility can influence public opinion by effectively disseminating their views and beliefs, although it may not go as far as tailoring 'the daily me'.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

MCDA emerged as a school of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the 1990s, inspired by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 148) which explains the prerequisite existence of 'context' or social environment in the production and the use of any given language and focuses on the social function of such language. Moving towards a sociologically orientated approach, from the more linguistically orientated *text-linguistics*, CDA combines linguistics with sociology by taking into account the social and cultural context in which language is used. Its concern lies with unveiling

patterned mechanisms of the reproduction of power asymmetrics, that is, to address the power behind discourse: how 'powerful' people, i.e., those with access to the production of discourse, "shape the 'order of discourse' as well as the social order in general" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 10).

While the term 'discourse' is often used to mean 'text', or "an extended stretch of connected speech or writing", Van Leeuwen (2009) defines discourse as "socially constructed ways of knowing some aspects of reality" based on the Foucauldian use of the term (p. 144). Kress (2011) explains discourse as "a result of processes of 'weaving' together differing 'threads' —usually assumed to be either *speech* or *writing*—into a coherent whole" (p. 36). According to Kress, 'weaving' implies the presence of a 'weaver' who has a sense of coherence, and in MCDA, who the 'weaver' is, and what forms of 'coherence' are shaped by the 'weaver' is of great significance. Furthermore, he argues that coherence is a defining characteristic of text, and the coherence of a text derives from the coherence of the social environment in which it is produced, or which it projects. What is important here is that discourse is not just a string of words which exists independently from its social environment, but it is born out of its social environment and functions as a part of social practices.

This process of 'weaving' can involve different semiotic resources, which have the potential to make meanings through metaphorical association. In other words, our communication practices can be multimodal. In fact, our communication practices are rarely through a single mode: they usually involve combinations of textual, aural, linguistic, spatial and visual resources. This is markedly the case on the internet where texts can easily be mixed with or accompanied by other modes. Multimodality describes the grammar of visual communication and the analysis of rules and principles adopted by speakers that helps us understand the *meaning potential* of discourses beyond impressionistic approaches of symbology. This field of study is increasingly relevant in modern

society, for our communication is becoming more and more multimodal as technologies advance.

Halliday's (1985) social semiotic theory provides a framework for MCDA by presenting a multimodal approach to semiotic systems. In the lexical approach, signs are assigned with meanings and are dealt with individually. Therefore, there can be an infinite number of signs in our communicative systems. On the other hand, in the multimodal approach, meanings are created through combinations of signs via what Halliday called lexicogrammar. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), any act of communication involves 'choices' and lexicogrammar explains the interdependency between vocabulary and grammatical structures, that is, the choice of lexis (vocabulary) in language production is limited by its grammatical structure, making the choice 'predictable'. A multimodal approach based on this model, therefore, "involves creating inventories of the choices available and the patterns that govern these choices" rather than just looking at their denotive, connotative or symbolising meanings of individual signs (Machin, 2007, p. 5). Lexicogrammar in short helps combine an infinite number of lexical choices with predictable combinations, hence there would be a finite number of meaning potentials. Drawing on Halliday's work, Kress and Van Leeuwen offer a systematic methodology for describing and analysing visual communication in the same way linguists offer a precise, systematic methodology for language description and analysis, which equips us with greater powers to describe what we see rather than referring to the effects of visual elements.

The essence of metaphor is transference, which allows meanings to be transferred from one domain to another (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 30). For example, the thickness and weight of bold typeface, or even a simple line, can be associated with the thickness and weight of real-life objects, giving texts and lines a sense of strength and magnitude. The intensity and the heat of the sun

may be transferred to the warm, saturated colour of an object in a picture.

Thus, discourse is socially constructed knowledge about reality (Van Leeuwen, 2009), and by projecting the social and cultural environment in which it is produced, or omitting certain aspects, discourse can be said to legitimise (or negate) some social practices (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). In other words, discourses are socially accountable.

Analysis

On accessing FAIR's homepage (appendix 1), what you see is a changing display of six images with headlines. The design of the site is quite simple with a small organisation logo on the top left corner. Each of the changing images fills up the entire screen. It rotates every five seconds, giving more than enough time to read the headline. The word "40 years" is incorporated in the blue logo FAIR with the image of a gold comet-like star, which is somewhat reminiscent of the starts and stripes patterns on the national flag (figure 1). The colouring is blue and gold, and the image is slightly saturated. Associations of colours greatly depend on their culture: it could be associated with water and purity, or it could be associated with legality and loyalty as in royal blue. It has been associated with science and knowledge, but it has also been associated with negative feelings (the blues). At an individual lexis level, this list goes on. However, when combined with the declaration of its 40-year-history in a bright golden logo, its associations are potentially narrowed down to loyalty, truth or knowledge, which can render credibility to an organisation's image. The standard logo is similar in the choice of font face and colouring, without the words "40 years" as shown in figure 2. The brightness of the gold, combined with the curved lines of the comet-like star, adds a sense of softness, warmth

and gentility. Given that this is the only instance where such a curved, sweeping line is used, it can be juxtaposed with the representations of immigrants and immigration on the website. Out of the six images with headlines, the first, second and fourth will be closely examined.

Figure 1: Current FAIR logo   Figure 2: Standard FAIR logo

The first headline reads "Recent Surges in Illegal Immigration Drive the Alien Population to a Record 14.3 Million, Finds Analysis by FAIR" with an image of a silhouetted group of people, who appear to be a family, standing in front of a fence with their backs to the camera (figure 3). Showing a group of faceless people in an image has the effect of dehumanising them, as opposed to showing an individual; face can have familiarising, or humanising, effect (Machin, 2007, p. 118). Distances in pictures, as in real life, signifies social relations (p. 117). In this image, the group of people are not close to the camera, indicating a lack of intimacy or familiarity. This image is computer generated and is not of an actual family. The figures have alien-like proportions, and do not have normal human characteristics in terms of their physical demeanour giving them a dehumanised and almost zombie-like characteristics, increasing ominousness and a sense of threat and danger. The headline is presented in bold, regular and straight typeface. The weight of the bold typeface can mean substantiality, stability and daring, while regularity indicates formality and order (p. 104). The use of large numbers reveals the strategy of aggregation, which adds a sense of overwhelmingness (Baker and McEnery, 2005) to the lexical terms, "illegal", "immigration", "surges", "alien population" and "record"

numbers. Combined with those lexical terms, the formal look of the headline can increase the uneasiness or even animosity towards immigrants, especially for those who are already intolerant towards them as the wording of the headline promotes a sense of urgency by letting you imagine a sudden and large influx of illegal immigrants. The lexical term 'alien' is a legal term for a person who is not a citizen or a national of a given country and is synonymous with the term, foreign national. However, the term has an unfriendly connotation. What stands out in the image is the high metal fence in front of the family holding hands. Its towering presence is ominous, and the greyness of the silhouette and the sky exacerbates the ominousness, whereas brightness would introduce optimism (p. 79).
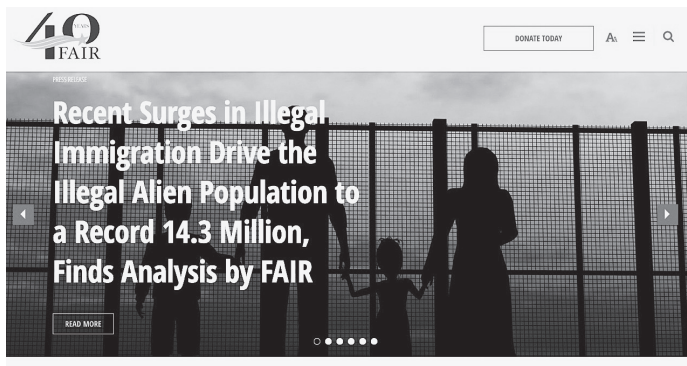

Figure 3: Headline 1

The second headline reads "Montgomery County's Illegal Alien Crime Wave" with an image of yellow police cordon tape (figure 4). Although the headline does not really explain the content of the linked article beyond the subject of the article, being crimes committed by illegal immigrants in Montgomery County, the murkiness of the image denotes a sense of gravity, and the blurred background creates a sense of the unknown. The meaning potential of saturation expresses emotional 'temperature' (p. 70). This rather desaturated

image may appear unemotional. Yet the lexical term "police line" written in black, bold uppercase on the tape shout out urgency and danger. The choice of words that are grammatically expected to follow the subject "crime wave" is a verb. Combined with the salience of the police cordon tape right across the picture that add severity and authority to the headline, the choice of words the viewers imagine may become narrowed down to such words as "surges", "soars" or "sweeps".
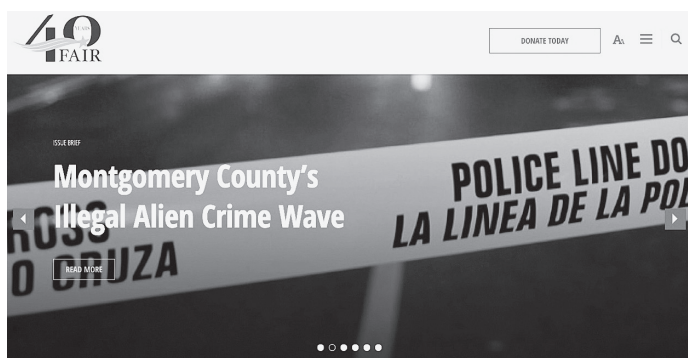

Figure 4: Headline 2

The fourth headline reads "Mainstream Media Raises Concerns about Impact of Growing Number of Asylum Cases (on Mexico)" with an image of seven people of different ages and gender walking in one direction, shot from behind (figure 5). The social actors in this image are a group of people, four adults and three children, who appear to be members of one family. Again, like the first image, a group of people, rather than an individual, has a dehumanising effect, as does their facelessness, and their distance from the camera adds a sense of 'otherness'. There are seven people, and five of them, the three children and two of the adults, are hooded. A hooded individual is not a depiction of someone agreeable: the person is regarded to have something to hide and is almost dehumanised. Two unhooded adults are showing their dark hair and

swarthy skin. You would assume it was a migrant family from Mexico, partly from the appearance of the people in the image and partly from the words "on Mexico" in the headline, despite that their faces are not shown. Although FAIR have avoided overtly linking their positions to race or ethnicity (Nakamura, 2019), there seems to be an intention to let the viewers assume their ethnicity. None of them are well-dressed, wearing tracksuit bottoms, jeans and anoraks, and the plastic bags they are carrying suggest that they are neither wealthy nor well-prepared for the journey. The picture as a whole is slightly desaturated of colour, creating an unemotional, cold, or even forlorn feeling. They are walking in a barren environment and you can see a square yellow sign in a distance. Although the writing on the sign is not legible, its colouring and regular typeface signal the presence of officialdom. The group is heading towards the direction of the sign, which implies that it may be the US-Mexico border. The dishevelled look of the people magnify the connotation of the word "asylum" in the headline that they will require welfare assistance once they reach their destination, the USA.
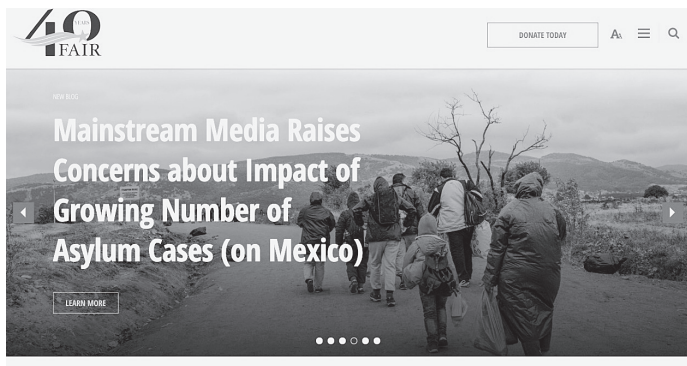

Figure 5: Headline 4

One of the links on the homepage leads to an article titled "The Fiscal Burden of Illegal Immigration on United States Taxpayers" with a closeup

image of a 100 dollar bill (figure 6). The image of Benjamin Franklin is the only human face so far, though not a living one, that makes an eye contact with viewers. The gaze is a symbolic 'contact' or 'interaction' (p. 110) and combined with the proximity delivered by the close shot, he alone is 'humanised' and shows familiarity to the viewers. The article starts with a bullet point of six key highlights, and it consists of the sections: 'Introduction; The Number of Illegal Immigrants in US'; and 'The Cost of Illegal Immigration to the United States', followed by three sets of diagrams titled 'Total Governmental Expenditures on Illegal Aliens' (figure 7), 'Total Tax Contributions by Illegal Aliens' (figure 8) and 'Total Economic Impact of Illegal Immigrants' (figure 9) respectively. The weight and impact of the lexical terms "burden", "illegal immigration", "expenditures", "impact" and "illegal aliens" in the headline and the captions for the diagrams are emphasised by the use of aggregation in the accompanying diagrams (figures 7, 8 and 9) as in the case of the first headline. Showing the large numbers without abbreviation further increases a sense of severity and graveness. The diagrams show that the expenditure of $134,863,455,364 greatly exceeds the contributions of $18,968,857,700 by $116 billion, and the

Figure 6: Article title

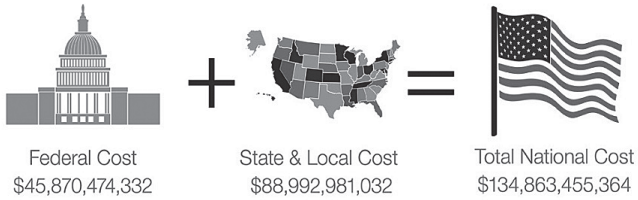**Total Governmental Expenditures on Illegal Aliens**

Federal Cost
$45,870,474,332

State & Local Cost
$88,992,981,032

Total National Cost
$134,863,455,364

Figure 7: Diagram 1

Total Tax Contributions by Illegal Aliens

Federal Taxes Paid
$15,447,897,700

State & Local Taxes Paid
$3,520,960,000

Total Taxes Paid
$18,968,857,700

Figure 8: Diagram 2

Total Economic Impact of Illegal Immigration

Total National Cost
$134,863,455,364

Total Taxes Paid
$18,968,857,700

$116 Billion

Figure 9: Diagram 3

final figure of "$116 billion" is larger than other writings and in bold, bright red typeface. The associations of bright red are, almost universally, alarm, danger, and warning. The bold and regular typeface is consistent with all other headlines in this site. The site is filled with authority through and through, with the use of regular, bold typeface, and none of the social actors in all images are depicted in a humanised, friendly manner (with the only exception of Benjamin Franklin on a $100 bill). Each page seems to provide alarming information about immigrants and their impact on US society with government-like formality.

Conclusion

This essay set out to ascertain whether or not the organisation FAIR disseminates unjust discourse towards immigrants into the United States on its website. Using the methodology of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis it analysed three headlines, an article and the associated images. Tool kits based on the multimodal, social semiotic approach were used to analyse the content and its presentation in order to identify whether or not they display *manipulative discursive practices*. Particular attention was paid to the areas of iconography, colour, and visual composition in imagery, and content and typography of headlines. Brightness and saturation of colour were examined in evaluating the effect by which colour can add to images and writings as well as associations of colours themselves. For example, the desaturation of an image of a group of faceless people created a barren and desolate atmosphere, whereas bright and saturated colour in the organisation's logo portrayed them as warm and friendly. Associations and inventory of meaning potentials were looked at in analysing lexical items in both headlines and captions. The representation of people in the

website was marked by several techniques designed to dehumanise immigrants and portray them as threatening, dangerous and burdensome. For example, the distance and facelessness of the people in pictures create a sense of physical and emotional distance by the reader towards the people.

From the design point of view, the FAIR homepage is well-designed to fulfil its purpose; to convey a message about issues surrounding immigration in a very effective manner. They succeed in dehumanising 'immigrants' and creating alarming textual and visual materials which allege serious 'problems' they bring to US society, potentially fuelling animosity towards them. The claim, therefore, by the SPLC that the FAIR is a hate group appears legitimate, and their website does indeed disseminate racist discourse.

This study was limited in its scope, but was still able to identify unjust discourses in the small number of materials reviewed. In order to understand the full extent of unjust discourses contained in the overall online output of FAIR, future research could utilise the methods of corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CCDA) to supplement multimodal analysis. In CCDA large
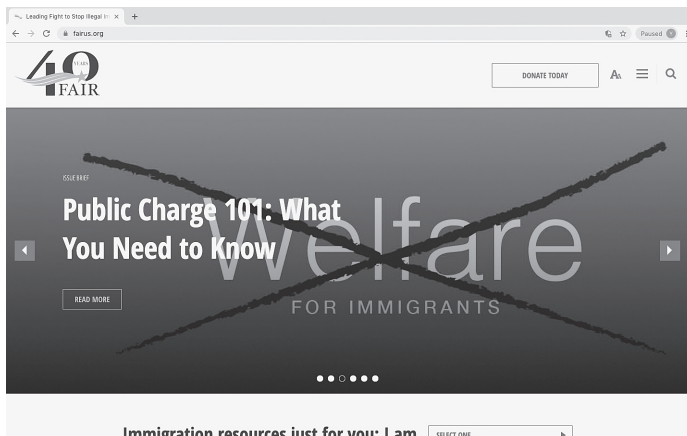
Appendix 1: FAIR homepage screenshot

amounts of textual data can be analysed using various software applications to ascertain both the extent of the dissemination of unjust discourses, as well as the linguistic techniques used.

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