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The Framing Techniques and Sources used in Coverage of the Boston Marathon Bombings

When disaster strikes, people often turn to journalists to understand what has happened. During the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, journalists played a crucial role in delivering information to the public. However, American journalists used a biased framing perspective to promote a national narrative in coverage of the bombings. Handley and Rutigliano's theory of framing will explain how classifying the suspects as "un-American" constructed a certain narrative. These practices promote what Oliver calls American Exceptionalism. Further, Fishman's concept of images facilitates a discussion about the difference in coverage between "Americans" and the "other". Thompson's and Glassner's work on crime and misrepresentations in the news will exemplify the consequences of these frames. Moreover, the bombings also marked the first time citizens created user-generated journalism content in the context of a massive national event. However, the limits to this new era will be explained by Paulssen and D'heer. Both the framing of the event and the sources used to convey information are important to examine during the Boston Marathon bombings because they contribute to Petley's exploration of journalism ethics. Thus, I will attempt to explain how media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings, through the use of nationalistic framing and the rise of user-generated content, facilitate a wider discussion about journalism ethics.

On April 15th, 2013, two pressure-cooker bombs went off at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three people were killed and 264 were injured. The suspects were identified as

brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Allan 134-135). A shootout followed on April 19th, 2013 while trying to capture the brothers, and Tamerlan subsequently died. Dzhokhar was later found and arrested (Starbird et al. 655). Despite the fact that the brothers had lived in and grown up in the United States (US), news coverage repeatedly mentioned their Chechnya biological background (Kibria et al. 197-200). These racial suggestions reveal the biased framing that was used in press coverage of the event.

Framing refers to “textual practices that embody the cultural values and beliefs to which journalism adheres” (Shahin 648). According to Handley and Rutigliano, frames are often a consequence of the US national narrative as frames portray events from a certain perspective. The national narrative is the unwritten rule that Americans should always be portrayed in the news as good and of the purest intentions (Handley and Rutigliano 744-745). In the case of the Boston Marathon bombing, framing was used to separate the brothers from their American identity. Once the Tsarnaev brothers were identified as suspects, almost every newsstory mentioned that they were Muslims from Chechnya, despite that they spent most of their lives in the US. Identifying “the bombers as ‘Chechen’ and ‘Muslim,’ [was] closely accompanied by ‘terrorist’ and ‘radical,’ ... a simultaneous and interchangeable quality” (Kibria et al. 201). The press thereby cited their ethnic backgrounds as the basis for their deviance and denied them as Americans (Shahin 652-653). It is important that the perpetrator be non-American to advance the national narrative. Through these frames, journalists have the power to influence agenda-setting and public opinion by defining what is normal and what is deviant (Handley and Rutigliano 749). The press thereby can reinforce power and privilege, specifically related to the national narrative (Shahin 646).

The underlying concept of the national narrative is that Americans can do no harm. Despite that Muslims are often cited as the villain of any American attack, most attacks in the United States are committed by Americans (Bjoergum 3). Yet, the news media constantly uses patriotic frames due to the concept of American exceptionalism. Oliver explains that American exceptionalism is the idea that American's are superior and somehow better than others. When contradictions to the national narrative arise and American superiority is threatened, journalistic framing must be used to solve these discrepancies (Oliver 254). Like My Lai as discussed by Oliver, the Boston Marathon bombings challenged the narrative Americans like to tell about themselves (Oliver 251). When American troops killed non-threatening villagers during the Vietnam War, American institutions tried to cover it up. Yet, when word did spread, the press dealt with it by blaming the sociology of war and saying that a few bad soldiers did not represent Americans as a whole (Oliver 247-259). Thus, frames work to conceal crime and separate the perpetrator from the American Identity.

Like My Lai, the Boston bombings created a problem for the national narrative and American exceptionalism because the brothers were not only from the US, but Dzhokhar looked very American and representative of Western culture. Thus, the media had to deal with the anxieties that Dzhokhar looked more like an American terrorist than a Muslim one (Kibria et al. 196-198). A distinction between the bomber and the American was needed to preserve American exceptionalism. Journalisms proposed that Dzhokhar assimilated into American culture, but his brother Tamerlan, who had been exiled by society and was angry, persuaded Dzhokhar to aid him in the attack. As Dzhokhar embodied an "American", the public actually became sympathetic towards him. Dzhokhar had to be portrayed as more likeable if he was to be

American, while his brother had to appear foreign and disjointed in order to support the national narrative (Kibria et al. 198).

Another aspect of nationality in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings was the use of images. This event brought to light the discrepancy in values between images of foreigners and images of Americans. Fishman argues that photojournalism employs certain types of nationalist ideas and agendas (Fishman 149). In terms of photojournalism, the press gives Americans more respect and privacy as they are shown at a distance, and not identifiable (Fishman 129). The sensitivity towards American images was shown when pictures arose of a Boston bombings victim who had both legs ripped off. Most news outlets cropped the photo, citing the fact that goriness was unnecessary. In other images, journalists blurred victims' faces for privacy. Yet, the nationalist bias is revealed through a double standard. For instance, a detailed image of a corpse in a casket was published after a man from India died from a mob beating (Fishman 133). Journalists have no issues "running unadulterated photos of bombing victims from foreign lands" (Allan 137). This reinforces the idea that Americans are more superior, and are thus given more thought and sensitivity in photojournalism.

Moreover, photojournalism is problematic because photos will only be used if they support the national narrative. For instance, it was said that photos (although censored) were widely used in coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings because they were "honest and powerful representations[s] of the tragic impact of the bombings" (Allan 137). In comparison, the United States has imposed media bans during wartime to avoid pictures of US prisoners of war. Americans were outraged whenever a few wartime images were allowed to circulate (Fishman 139). This reveals the bias in which photojournalism is selectively used to ensure the American is always the victim and never the deviant.

The villainization of Muslims that was repeatedly seen in coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings reproduced an emotionally charged panic. It was formed by fear, stereotypes and myths about the ‘other’ (Kibria et al. 193). This panic was created by the need to have a ‘bad guy’ to blame for societal ills. Glassner argues that the best crime stories have innocent victims and a brute perpetrator (24). The reason these frames are widely reproduced is because people want to talk about a problem without confronting the actual issue (Glassner 28). When Muslims are used as a scapegoat, the problem seems clear. However, if the US press framed bigger issues as the cause for the Boston Marathon bombings, such as violence in the US, then suddenly the story becomes more complicated. Nonetheless, if journalists did not focus on the easier narrative, one would have to acknowledge that the US has faults.

When blame is placed on a specific group of people, fear and discrimination are not just contained within news journalism. As Thompson highlights, the press has the ability to define and create American boogymen (Thompson 46). Like the Hell’s Angels, it can be seen that journalists, through their power as an information source, created deviant perceptions of all Muslims (Thompson 40). Thompson theorizes that when an entire group is villainized, everyone is targeted, and the innocent suffer along with the guilty (43-45). Likewise, because Muslims were identified as the perpetrators for the Boston bombings, every Muslim was at risk of being harassed and questioned by the press and state authorities. For example, “a Saudi Arabian student who had come to Boston to study English” was wrongly accused in the media as being a suspect, only because he resembled a Muslim (Kibria et al. 196). The modern Muslim folk devil created was a product of the media. As such, Thompson recognized that if one did not have a frame of reference about the media, one would have no idea how these false accusations came

about (Thompson 57). Thus, in recognizing the framing techniques used by the media, it must be examined who exactly has been given the power to shape these agendas.

The Boston Marathon bombings were significant not only because of the press' framing techniques but also because it was the first major disaster to be covered on social media (Allan 136). With the rise of technology, citizens were some of the first people to take pictures at the scene and upload them on social media (Allan 133). Social media was used during the crisis to share information and collaborate response efforts (Starbird et al. 655). Reddit, a website that relies on user-generated content (UGC), immediately started posting information about the bombings. Some information, such as eyewitnesses and personal accounts were not even covered by mainstream journalists (Suran and Kilgo 1035). This is evidence of the rise of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism refers to a "range of amateur information reporting and sharing activities" (Loke and Grimm 102-103). It is important to recognize the rise of citizen journalism as it represents an unfiltered alternative to traditional journalism sources (Allan 137). Citizen journalism can help create and use framing techniques that influence coverage of events (Loke and Grimm 104). Thereby, citizen journalism has the opportunity to have a massive influence on the structure of US news (Loke and Grimm 101-102).

Despite the potential of citizen journalism, the Boston Marathon bombings revealed how it can also be dangerous in the context of serious events. Citizens are good at uploading content, but they are not well versed in norms and rules (Witnessing 136). Specifically, citizen journalism on social media led to a rise of misinformation. For example, Reddit users accidentally misidentified the Boston bombing suspects after the FBI released photos of them (Suran and Kilgo 1037). This was important because whether purposely or by accident, rumours on social media can spread quickly and affect mainstream media (Starbird et al. 654).

Part of the problem with citizen journalists is that they tend to rely on personal experiences or witnesses for their information. This makes their information more bias and emotional, as they have little access to official sources (Paulsen and D'heer 588, 596). Furthermore, many do not mention sources at all, which is partly the result of using these types of sources. A study found that over three-quarters of citizens journalists do not cite sources, which hinders the credibility of their information. Professional journalists, on the other hand, are much more likely to reference their sources (Paulsen and D'heer 597). This contributes to some concern as mainstream journalist institutions worry about their ability to verify information from social media (Loke and Grimm 103). Thus, due to the complications that arose during the Boston Marathon bombings, it is important to consider going forward how the citizens' role will be used in journalism practices.

As a result of the concerns with citizen journalism, news sources have been careful in the ways in which they use citizen accounts. Paulsen and D'heer suggest that citizen journalism is good for "soft", "good" news, while professional journalists should handle the "hard" and "bad" news (588). However, they also acknowledge that citizens reports can be used to fill gaps in coverage of certain issues (Paulsen and D'heer 595). For instance, the Boston Globe was a major news source during the Boston Marathon bombings. The Boston Globe had a live blog for the entire event following the bombings, including public responses and arrests (Loke and Grimm 101). However, it hardly used content from citizen journalists because it was too difficult to verify their information and thus are irresponsible to use during a serious matter (Loke and Grimm 102, 106). Nonetheless, the Boston Globe did have some use for social media. If someone post[ed] online that she or he was at the finish line when the bombing occurred... the

Globe would then contact that individual for an interview (Loke and Grimm 107). This filled the gap of first-hand accounts and allowed for a unique angle to be taken.

Using the discussion of framing and sources related to the Boston bombings, it will be evaluated how this contributes to journalism ethics. Specifically, framing and the use of sources define what the narratives in journalism are, and who gets to define them. As seen, the use of framing can have many problematic consequences, from racial profiling to mass panics. Journalists are taught how far they can go with stories, now how far they should go (Petley 531). This brings ethics into question due to the power the press has in constructing agendas. When journalists promote an aggressive national narrative with few boundaries, they inherently support American political ideologies and hinder their democratic function to ethically inform the public (Petley 536). Furthermore, the restricted use of UGC allows journalists to further their own agendas. Yet, perhaps citizen journalists use different frames that would help the press function more democratically. There are little regulations in place to ensure an unbiased press. Thus, some resolution to ethical issues should be proposed, as journalists seem “happy to investigate anything other than their own practices (Petley 536).

Discourses set by the press help set boundaries of what is good and bad in society, and thereby are important to monitor. As seen in the Boston Marathon Bombings, discourses around immigrants can be constructed through framing and thus influence the way immigrants and viewed. The Tsarnaev brothers were defined in the media in binary terms, “having lived in the United States and as having hailed from Chechen backgrounds” (Kasun 229). The press, because of its tendency to push the national narrative and the idea that the American is always good, could not recognize the transnational identities of the brothers in terms that they could be both

American and Muslim. Therefore, political agendas compromised discourses of race and identity (Kasun 229).

The solution to more regulation of journalistic rules and ethics may lie in education. Petley highlights the idea that courses which teach journalists how to cover news do not have a mandatory component about ethics. Although they may be taught ethically, perhaps there should be curriculum standards. Petley says that correcting these ethical mishaps should be high in the industry's priorities (530). In terms of the national narrative, "educators [should] consider reframing the talk and discourses about immigrants and immigration toward a more complex understanding of transnationalism" (Kasun 227). Transnationalism is the idea that one's identity can come from various social and political sources (Kasun 230). Therefore, there is no "pure American" which helps to destroy biases of American exceptionalism. On the other hand, more formal principles could aid in deciphering between credible and non-credible social media sources. It is important that mainstream journalists hear from a plurality of voices, rather than just promoting their own agendas. However, it may be wrong to discard UGC as a source altogether. Rather, a system should be implemented to verify and manage these sources more efficiently.

In recognizing both framing and the potential of citizen journalism, coverage of the Boston bombings highlight not just the current press landscape but also shows where progress is needed. Mainstream journalists seemingly have a self-serving bias, rather for their own country, or for themselves as a single source. The press is good insofar that it acts "in the public interest and reinforcing democratic ideals, but not good insofar as it suppresses diversity, impoverishes public debate, [and]...exacerbates social divisions" (Petley 537). Thus, the Boston Marathon bombings, while demonstrating journalistic practices, also reveals questions of journalism ethics

in the both mainstream and citizen journalism. Although this event focuses on American journalism, the US press is one of the most globally influential institutions and thereby is important for examination.

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