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The Boston Marathon Bombing and how the Media Framed the Terror Attack

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Abstract

This paper will examine the theory of framing and its impact on today's media and news outlets. Framing will be broken down and deconstructed in order to understand how it is used to help a consumer society interpret information. In order to examine its effects on audiences, the Boston Marathon Bombing media coverage will be used as an example of framing and whether the media handled the incoming flow of news correctly.

Introduction

In today's world, society is constantly being told who to be, what to do, what to think, and how to act. This sort of dominance and instruction is becoming extremely popular by mass media and its ability to reach audiences 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Having the power to access society with the tap of a button is quite the asset, one the news media has taken full advantage of. They can alert audiences on their phones, pop up on their television screens, and appear in magazines. Their constant reporting and framing of news by using certain words and photos (Framing: Frame Building vs. Frame Setting, p. 100) can influence the way audiences think and what they believe in. It is up to the consumers to interpret it.

Framing

Framing is a form of agenda setting theory that dives deeper into the question of how society views reality and how consumers interpret given information. "The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning." (University of Twente) This helps those such as media outlets, politicians, and journalists decide how to release their message to the public in a way that will be easily understood and, hopefully, accepted. It effects many things such as agenda setting, knowledge, and persuasion. (Framing: Frame Building vs. Frame Setting, p. 101)

There are different interpretations of framing theory. One interpretation is the psychological option that believes the way people understand a message is constructed by the different ways the message is released. Then there is the sociological interpretation which believes that society relies on each other to understand and decode stories to give them meaning. Both of these interpretations lead into the effects of framing and how it influences consumers. "Framing can result in several types of effects, including having an impact on knowledge,

persuasion, or agenda setting.” (Framing: Frame Building vs. Frame Setting, p. 101) Depending on who they wish to effect and how, news and media outlets have two types of framing to choose from; frame building and frame setting.

Frame building is the beginning structure, like a skeleton, of the message being presented. It is the most important type of framing as it determines who will be framing the message – be it journalists, politicians, or culture. Whoever can relate best to the public will have a more successful outreach and understanding. Journalists were found to frame their work by being influenced by five factors such as “societal normal and values, the pressure and constraint of news organizations, pressures from interest groups or policy makers, their professional routines, and their own political orientation or ideology.” (Framing: Frame Building vs. Frame Setting, p. 103) After journalists form their message, a group referred to as “elites” try to frame that message and give it their own meaning to broadcast to their own publics. The “elites” are made up of people who have some type of power in society, be it political power or social power. If it is not the elites trying to help frame journalist’s messages, it is the culture that surrounds them. Which then leads into the second type of framing; frame setting.

Frame setting is important because it determines how the public will interpret the story and how successfully it was interpreted. The reading states, “frames can influence individuals to make connections in their minds that can result in four outcomes – defining the issue, determining the causes for an issue, noting the implications for an issue, and the treatment of an issue.” (Framing: Frame Building vs. Frame Setting, p. 103) It is during the frame setting period that all of this is constructed carefully. It must be presented to the public in a way that will affect the audience’s existing schema in which they want to while inconspicuously telling them what

and how to think. The more the audience knows about the issue or story being presented, the more likely they are to accept the frame.

The Boston Marathon Bombing

On April 15th, 2013 at 2:49 p.m., two explosions went off at the 117th annual Boston Marathon. They were near the finish line, 12 seconds apart, and killed three people while injuring hundreds more. Upon later inspection, the explosions came from two homemade pressure cookers that were filled with BB gun pellets and nails as a form of shrapnel. False reports of more bombs are released. An electrical fire at a nearby library is thought to have been bombed as well but is later dismissed. President Obama speaks at the White House on April 16th as Boston is still in a frenzy a day later. He calls the bombing an act of terrorism. Later that day, it is confirmed that there were only two bombs despite false reports of more. (CNN, 2018)

On April 17th, a miscommunication happens among news outlets and government officials. It was falsely reported that they had a suspect in custody. The news outlets had to retract their statements. (CNN, 2018)

On April 18th, photos of the suspects are released. It takes a whole day, April 19th, to correctly identify the bombers as Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. On that same day, Tamerlan is killed and Dzhokhar is arrested. (CNN, 2018)

During this five day ordeal, the media was sent into a frenzy. Not only in Boston, but all throughout nation and even the world. It was a race for who could release statements the quickest which often lead to conclusion being jumped to and false reports being released. No matter where the public was, there was nonstop coverage and live updates. At one point, “authorities asked the media to stop reporting on police movements in order to prevent the suspect from obtaining information about the in-progress manhunt.” (Welsh, 2013) The FAA had to step in

and prevent news helicopters from circling areas where the suspect was thought to be and police scanners were shut down for the time being.

How the Media Framed the Boston Marathon Bombing

This act of terrorism traumatized an entire city. There was no time for false statement, yet because news outlets were in an all fire hurry to beat the competition, false reports were becoming common. As stated above, outlets reported that police had a suspect in custody on April 17th when they did not. The police station had to take time away from the investigation to clear up miscommunications and release a statement asking them to be cautious and verify their information before reporting. On top of that, there were false reports of suspects being identified. A Saudi man was wrongly accused of being a “person of interest” and put in danger because the outlets were too quick to react. The 24-hour cycle of constant live reporting was not comforting the public, it was only making them more anxious. It seemed that the media was not taking the time to build their frames. At a time like that, it is understandable that they would want to update the public. Yet, they were not keeping the public’s best interest in mind. Instead of frame setting, they were firing off any information they got their hands on.

As time went on and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was caught, the media turned their sights on him. It was a constant update on who he was, who his brother was, who his family consisted of and what their motives were. That is all well and good. Until *Rolling Stone* released their August issue in 2013. On the cover of the infamous magazine was Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. He looked posed, as if laying down, and his eyes looked as though he was inviting you to stare at him. People were outraged, to say the least. Convenience stores throughout Boston and the New England area refused to carry the issue, many commented how it was a slap in Boston’s face, others demanded that it be taken down and replaced with the face of the victims. There were even Facebook

groups started to boycott the magazine. To top it all off, the mayor of Boston, Thomas M. Menino, wrote *Rolling Stone* a letter saying the cover was “ill-conceived [and] reaffirms a terrible message that deconstruction gains fame for killers and their causes.” (CBS News, 2013)

Rolling Stone released a statement for the cover where they explained that their hearts are always with the victims and their families; however, “the cover story we are publishing this week falls within the traditions of journalism and *Rolling Stone*’s long-standing commitment to serious and thoughtful coverage of the most important political and cultural issues of our day.” (Reitman, 2013) The editors went on to explain that Tsarnaev fit the same age group as most of their audience so they felt that it was important to cover the story and analyze what lead such a kid to carry out a heinous terrorist attack to hopefully catch signs and prevent it from ever happening again. No matter what they said, it did not stop the hate and betrayal many felt.

In this case, the media, *Rolling Stone* thought they were frame building towards their most popular audience – teenagers. What do teenagers like to read about? Bad boys. Unfortunately, *Rolling Stone* picked the wrong the bad boy to cover. Instead of presenting all the sides of the issue – for instance, the fact that Tsarnaev detonated bombs that killed three people and injured hundreds only to run off in a man hunt – they presented his story as if he was just a good boy turned bad. They only focused on one aspect and that is where their framing failed.

Conclusion

To conclude, framing is not only an integral part of the agenda setting theory, it is also a necessary focus of mass media and news outlets. It is important to frame a message that is easily interpreted in the desired way; however, it depends on the consumer and the event they are trying to frame. In this particular instance, one must also take into account sensitive material and the way the audience is currently feeling towards the issue. Information overload is not a smart way

to release information as it leaves no room for framing. When there is no framing, there is no order and mistakes are made.

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