Framing the 2020 Election

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Comm 431-01: Mass Media and Society

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April 30, 2021

Abstract

This research paper sets out to prove media framing during the 2020 US Presidential Election. It begins; setting the scene, with a descriptive overview of the surrounding socio-political landscape in the months and weeks prior to Election Day. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the "Framing Theory," as defined by media philosophers, as well as a close visual analysis of Connecticut television news (from the night of the election), and paper news (from the morning after). Finally, this paper concludes with a recap of the results, and the effects of said results on the public consciousness.

Keywords: Mass Media, 2020 Presidential Election, Framing

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Framing the 2020 Election

America's 2020 Presidential Election transpired amidst chaos and turmoil. In the months prior to Election Day, "a minuscule virus, a thousand times smaller than a dust mite, humbled and humiliated the powerful nation" (Yong, 2020, p. 1). As instances of the SARS-Cov-2 (COVID-19) virus began to rise, death and destruction filled the air. American citizens took to the streets to protest their inattentive nation (McCormick, 2020). Pandemic protests were accompanied by Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests—some violent, some peaceful—seeking to raise awareness about segregation and brutality in modern America (McCormick, 2021, p. 5). Considering the above, the 2020 US Presidential Election should've served as a wakening call; it should've mobilized a movement towards nation-wide change (McCormick, 2021, p. 5). Nonetheless, this event did quite the opposite; it heightened polarization, fortified turmoil, and tested the ideas of American democracy...

Discussion I: The Media's Manipulation

America's mass media takes sole responsibility for the ramifications of the election. The United States media more-or-less marshaled this event; television, paper, and social media sources documented every little detail. The media's depiction of the election, however, was far from accurate. Many media consumers turned a blind-eye to this. They trusted that their news sources were informational and had faith in the fallacy they were fed; they were completely oblivious to the manipulating power their news sources held (McCormick, 2021).

Per media philosopher Norman Fairclough (1995), America's mass media was once trustworthy. When it primarily assumed printed mediums, the US media was used as a platform

for democratic discourse and a means to accumulate current information (p. 2). Technology, however, has altered its moral purposes. Today, the "mass media is a big business operating within a social" system; it's "more concerned with upholding capitalism, than democracy" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2).

Because it can reach a large number of consumers, via its various mediums, in a matter of instances, the media is a primary means for marketization (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). To sell products and ideologies, media producers prioritize entertainment within their programming. They sensationalize—striving to produce an eye-catching story, that will guarantee a profit, as opposed to releasing accurate information (McCormick, 2021, p. 6). Because political conflict is both eye-catching and entertaining, it's exploited within the media market. During an election season in particular, media producers strategically "frame" the content placed in their programming, to heighten political conflict and spur audience reaction.

Discussion II: The Framing Theory

"Framing," or the "Framing Theory," finds its roots in the field of psychology and sociology (Del Ama Gonzalo, 2021). Generally speaking, "Framing" is a term used to describe the way media producers present information to the public (Framing, p. 100). Because producers are tasked with providing current information—and any necessary clues needed to interpret said information—to the public, they have an influence on the surrounding socio-political landscape, as well as the general consciousness (Del Ama Gonzalo, 2021).

There are two components to the "Framing Theory." The first, is the art of Frame Building—the way frames are constructed by journalists. Frames are typically built based on five defining factors: 1) societal norms and values, 2) the pressure and constraint of news

organizations, 3) pressures from interest groups of policy makers, 4) the professional routines of

journalists, and 5) each journalist's own, political association or ideology (Framing, p. 103). All

of these factors have the ability to influence the public consciousness.

The second component in the "Framing Theory," is Frame Setting—how a frame

influences public consciousness and behavior (Del Ama Gonzalo, 2021). Media framing can

influence cognitively (it can change public perception on a certain event/issue), or affectively (it

can change the way the public feels about an event/issue) (Framing, p. 103). That being said,

media producers must be serious about presenting truthful information to the public, on all sides

of a given issue. Otherwise, public confusion and conflict could ensue...

The Case Study

The consequences of media framing were made apparent during the 2020 US Presidential

Election. During this election, media framing divided America and challenged its democracy.

Instances of framing could be clearly identified in several Connecticut news sources (see below).

I. Newspapers

On the morning after the election the majority of Connecticut newspapers contained

warlike parlance. States, for instance, that could reasonably be one by either candidate were

called "Battleground Territories." Additionally, many newspaper articles—specifically those in

the *Hartford Courant*—paraded "Trump vs. Biden" in their headers. The use of war-like

terminology was a marketing tactic, used to spur audience reaction; it served to heighten the

feud, pin both candidates against each other, and encourage citizens to ally with one candidate.

Bias reporting only amplified polarization. Many Connecticut newspapers, released the

morning after Election Night, were framed in favor of the Demoratic candidate, Joe Biden. Take

the November 4, issue of the *Bristol Press-New Britain Herald,* for example, which began with

an article entitled Biden, Trump Score Wins, But Race too Early to Call, containing wording that

indisputably favored Biden (see below).
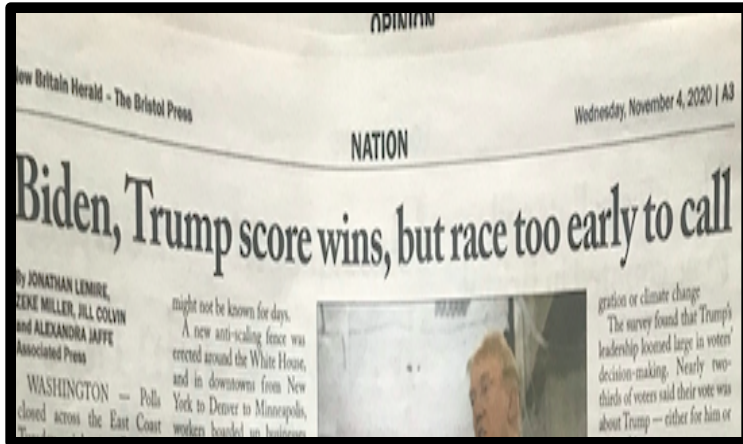
The article began with the name of the Democratic candidate, followed by the Republican candidate
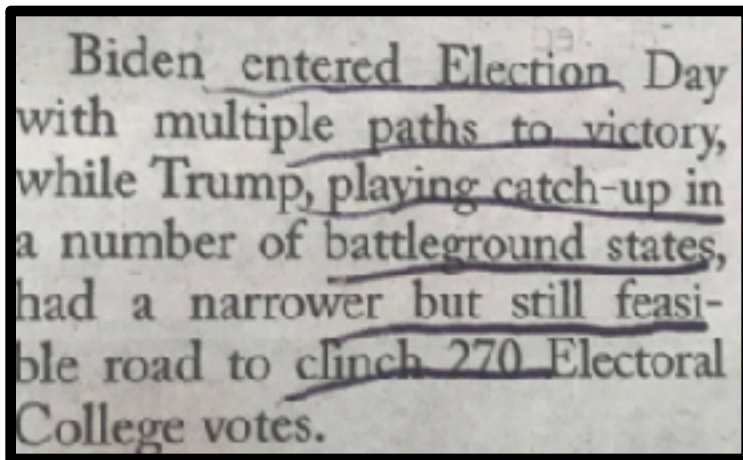
This sentence seemed to suggest Biden was better fit for the presidency than his opponent
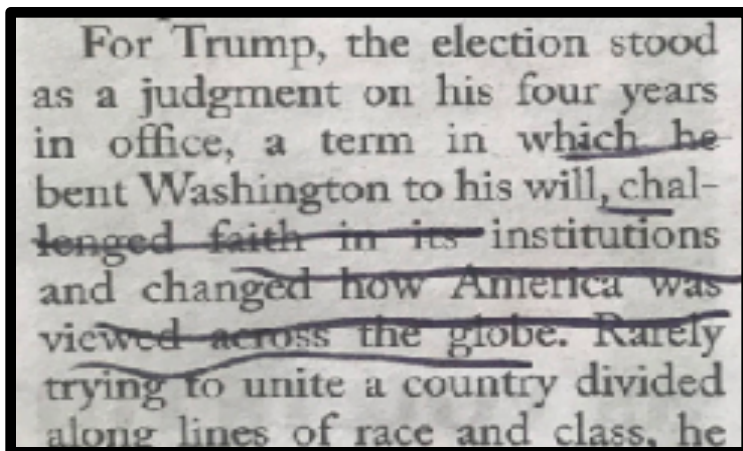
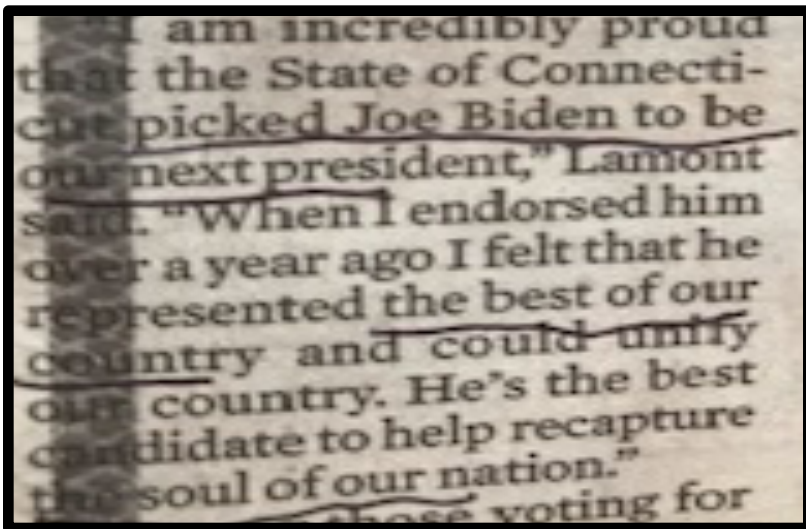This paragraph surmises that Trump's presidency was a failure

The November 4, 2020 issue of the *Hartford Courant* also swayed Democrat (see below).

The title of the paper, The Nation Waits Biden, Trump Refuses To Concede as the Votes Trickle in, favors Biden

The first two articles concern the Democratic candidate/party

The paper's first article contains a quote, from the governor of Connecticut, that praises Biden and bashes Trump

II. Television

Framing was also evident in local television news. On Election Night, New England Cable News (NECN)—a popular news station filmed in Connecticut's sister state, Massachusetts—was filled with Democratic partisanship (McCormick, 2021, p. 42). Every NECN news anchor was dressed in blue—the color of the democratic party (see below). The NECN set was also adorned in various shades of blue (see below). Although critics may argue this was merely a coincidence, costuming and set design should never be overlooked—especially on the night of a presidential election (McCormick, 2021, p. 42).

NECN's set and costumes

WFSB—a news and weather channel owned by the Columbia Broadcasting Company (CBS) and licensed to Hartford, CT—was also quite partisan in their reporting. On election night, WFSB streamed coverage filmed from its headquarters in New York City. Both New York City and Connecticut are Democratic regions; this explains why information was framed in favor of the Demcoratic candidate/party.

Unlike NECN, WFSB's set design and costuming was relatively neutral—containing an

even amount of red and blue hues. The network's scripting and news anchor ad-lib, however,

contained several instances of bias. At the very beginning of programming, WFSB brought the

Republican and Democratic Party Heads on stage to talk about the fate of the election. This

discussion, which began with a slight, was officiated by Anchor Norah O'Donnell. O'Donnell

started off, introducing the Republican Head (Reince Priebus), but quickly cut him off, passing

the microphone to the Democratic Head (Valerie Jarrett) instead. A full transcription appears

below…

Norah O'Donnell: I want to bring in Valerie Jarrett and Reince Priebus. Jarrett was a senior advisor to former President, Barack Obama, and Reince Priebus was President Trump's first chief of staff.
O'Donnell: Welcome both of you. I wanna hear what you're hearing from the campaigns. Priebus you were the former Head Of The Public and National Committee what's the inside scoop?
Reince Priebus: Well Thanks Norah, like you all, I'm looking at my charts and history.
O'Donnell: *(Cutting Priebus off)*
Alright Reince stand by; I should've done ladies first anyway.
(Priebus looks confused)
O'Donnell: Since the audio is not working (*even though it clearly is*).
So forgive me for not doing ladies first.

WFSB's commercial breaks were also quite biased. The Democratic agenda—which focused on minority representation and pandemic relief—was conveyed via a surplus of Ancestry.com commercials—urging Americans to vote and make their ancestors proud—as well as healthcare commercials (McCormick, 2021, p. 45).

An Ancestry.com commercial

Notably, WFSB stopped streaming election night coverage, and changed its focus to weather, once the Republican candidate took the lead. Although this transition was likely planned in the days prior, it's still quite suspicious and could be another instance of media framing/bias.

Conclusion

In sum, all of the news sources collected seemed to lean Democrat. Media producers from Connecticut—a region that's notoriously Democratic—broadcasted coverage that complimented their audiences' beliefs and predispositions. This partial reporting—combined with the use of strategic, battle-like terminology—helped maintain conflict on the home-front, as

well as a polarized environment, ideal for media marketing. American citizens must learn to

recognize the media's capitalist agenda and power to manipulate, so that they can debar such

deception and use the media's messages to fulfill their own goals and agendas.

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