

Case Study:
Framing the Capitol Riots

COMM 431 Introduction to Mass Communication

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Introduction

In this day and age, millions of people are “flooded” and “bombarded” with news and information the second it happens. No more are the days where people would have to wait and get their information through traditional sources such as newspapers, radio, and television. Today, people can get it all almost instantly through media devices such as tablets, phones, and personal computers. With people consuming more and more information/news, it’s important for readers and researchers to examine how media outlets they frequent with present their stories. Many, if not all, frame their stories in ways that appeal to readers or to help push their agenda. One concept that is currently used by many news outlets that cover stories is the “Frame Building” concept. This concept allows news outlets and reporters to pick and choose what they want to tell you about the news story. If the particular news outlets think a certain story will appeal more to the audience if they highlight certain points of the story, they will do it. The outlet will also use certain points to push their agendas. Many of the cable news networks and other media outlets have interests and connections with certain political parties. It might be in their best interest to highlight certain points to help appeal these issues and tie them into the parties. Just look at the two predominant cable tv news network’s CNN and Fox News. Both deliver almost the exact news stories and topics, but both highlight certain ideas and issues within the story. CNN caters more to Democrats while Fox News caters more to Republicans. If the story works better with certain facts highlighted for Democrats, CNN will highlight those. If certain facts appeal more to Republicans, Fox News will report those. This is what attracts their audiences, people tune in because they hear what they want to hear. This is what frame building concept allows them to do. The concept helps and allows these networks to build their base and satisfy that base.

Background info on The Capitol Riots/Protests

Over the past few years, Americans have become more and more divided when it comes to political topics and news. One of the biggest news stories of 2021 so far was what some news outlets called the Capital Riots or Capital Protests. The difference in wording/naming depended on what political affiliation your outlet has ties to. If you follow the news, you should have seen coverage and followed the ongoing reports and stories about the events that took place. If you don't have knowledge of the event, it took place on January 6th, 2021 at the United States Capitol. The event was put together by conservatives and President Trump supporters as a "Pro-Trump" and "Save America" rally. The rally was organized to show support for the president but to also show their disapproval of the 2020 Election results. However, as the event progressed, it went from being a rally to a storming and or riots at the Capitol Building. This caused major chaos in Washington DC and led to non-stop coverage of the event from all news outlets. When discussing framing in media, I believe that this news story perfectly shows how outlets can use the frame-building technique and style to sway readers and viewers a certain way. Let's take a dive into both major cable tv's news networks CNN and Fox News and examine their coverage of the events on their online website platforms. While it is no secret that both networks have their specific group of people they target, this study is to show how different they report news topics. In no way is this study determining which side or network people should get their information from. The study should serve as an example of how an event such as the ones that took place at the Capitol can be twisted and "framed" in a way for audiences and readers to feel more connected to their stories.

Example of “Frame Building”

To begin, let's first take a look at who watches which network. According to a Pew Research Center study in 2020, 67% of American Democrats/Democrat-leaning trust CNN to their political and election news. On the other side, 65% of American Republicans/Republican-leaning get their political and election news from Fox News (Pew Research Center). With both sides almost equally trusting the two networks on each side, it's clear that both those outlets are going to cater to those parties' beliefs and policies. And with this event revolving around politics and former President Donald Trump, both were going to heavily invest in airtime and non-stop articles about it.

As alluded to before, depending on which network you trust or follow, the “framing” and the information about the event are skewed in their favor. When visiting CNN.com and looking for articles surrounding the events, it takes you to an area of their site that organizes all the articles of the event. The title they gave this event was “Washington DC Election Riots” and the articles underneath this site take shades at the former president and essentially grouped all articles about the president. Article titles consist of “Lives would have been saved" had Trump acknowledged reality earlier, Michigan governor says”, Trump's CIA director and intel chief unlikely to resign over response to violence at Capitol”, and “Pelosi and Schumer tried calling Pence to urge him to consider invoking 25th Amendment”. Many of these articles are attached with clips from CNN's news shows. The webpage allows includes summaries on the left side of the screen, that gave people up to the date information in smaller doses. All of those summaries come from another part of the CNN website, CNN Politics. No matter which side you are on or what opinion you have about the event it's very clear what view CNN is pushing in these articles. In each article, the stories all go to the idea of the 25th Amendment and the possible

impeachment of former President Trump. To get an article that discusses the event, you have to scroll down pretty far until you reach the article title “First federal charges filed in US Capitol riot”. In that article, it summarizes the events and what some of the protesters/rioters did while they were in the Capitol Building. CNN’s purpose to frame their stories this way was to appeal to the Liberal and Democratic audience they have. If CNN were to downplay this story or not devote much coverage to the event, it may have turned off its audience. Viewers and readers may turn the channel or find another website to get more information from.

Now when we take a look at CNN’s competitor, Fox News, their site sells a different story and angle. Similar to CNN’s website, Fox News has a page dedicated to the events. Although Fox News doesn’t classify the event as a riot, instead they considered the event the “Capitol Protests”. The articles that appear on this part of the site push a different view on certain events that happened that day. In particular, one of the first articles that pops up on the Fox News webpage is titled “Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick died of natural causes after Jan. 6”. Articles also include stories about the Portland protests/riots that took place in the summer months of 2020 titled “Almost half of federal cases against Portland rioters have been dismissed”. Similar to CNN’s website, Fox News is taking the event that took place in Washington DC and trying to spin it off a different way. Many of the articles have newscast clips attached to them but many of the articles have opinion pieces from their newscasters/talk show hosts. CNN’s angles on their stories were to tie it all back to President Trump and other Republican leaders in Washington DC, while Fox News is trying somewhat to play down the event and even compare it to an event that happened a half a year prior. Both of these media outlets have to make these spins or write these stories this way, so they are able to keep the large audiences they have. In this case, Fox News wanted to make it seem like this event wasn’t as big

of a deal as many other outlets were making it out to be. They felt that because this event involved Trump supporters that their framing had to cater to their audience. If they decided to make a bigger deal of the situation, it may have turned viewers and readers the wrong way.

Conclusion

Overall, news outlets and stations frame stories to appeal to their respected audiences. Stations like CNN and Fox News have audiences that want to hear the news but also want those stories to appeal to them. Framing and in this case “Frame Building”, allows these networks to give the viewers and readers the top news stories, but let them use certain facts and information to tell the story differently. The goal of this study was not to determine what side is correct or which side you should get your news from. The study was to show how these media outlets can use these events to touch their audiences and to cater to them. Framing is such an important technique and skill for these networks and it’s clear that they use it to their advantage.

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