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## Framing Effects in Relation to Climate Change

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Abstract

This case study is an analysis of how journalists are able to frame an event for their audiences to interpret the information. The purpose of this case study is to see how the events are framed in media in relation to the natural disaster event Hurricane Maria. The sources used were the articles themselves talking about the effects of climate change and the death toll after the disaster had struck. The conclusions were that journalists are able to frame their articles, with audiences pre – conceived notions that climate change is the cause of such a disaster.

*The Concept of Framing*

The concept that is focused in this case study is framing theory. The general definition of framing is that it is used to look at the reality that surrounds us. It is based off of pre – conceived notions that are based off the information that we are given to get a sense of our surroundings. Framing theory is also in conjunction with the agenda setting effect; their relation to each other is how it is perceived in the mass media society. The pre – conceived notions are called schemata, which is biased. It is formed based on someone’s assumptions on certain topic. Framing is more responsible for giving the unbiased, fact – based information to the mass audiences for them to decipher how they feel about an event that took place. There are multiple effects of framing as well.

The effects that have the most influence are knowledge and persuasion. A lot of times when an event happens, the audience might already have a certain belief on the issue and the reporting’s could not change the persons opinions of the subject. Or, the opposite can happen and the news that was framed can sway the person’s thoughts or beliefs other way from their original beliefs. When studying framing, there are two kinds, frame building and frame setting. In frame building, it is key in on the way frames are designed by reporters and other media outlets. In a certain instance, the way topics are framed by the media who inform the audience, and, in the ways, they present the information.

There are five known factors that can have effects on how reporters and journalists can frame the information they share which are; societal norms and values, pressures from groups, professional routines, and a journalist own bias on the topic at hand. For frame setting, a frame can have the power of to sway how a person feels about a certain issue or topic in the media by the way the story laid out by the journalist. The results of the report can change the person’s

belief on something too, if they were leaning one way, they have the potential to lean the other way. In this case study, it focuses on how the media framed the events of the 2017 tropical storm Hurricane Maria and how audiences interpreted the information that was given to them based on climate change.

### *Framing Hurricane Maria Media Reaction*

In the late summer to early fall of 2017, the tropical storm named Hurricane Maria was one of the deadliest and most destructive hurricanes seen in recent memory in the western hemisphere. The destruction that it caused stretched across from Dominica, St. Croix, and, Puerto Rico. The storm lasted for a total of seventeen days in the hard – hit Caribbean areas. Most of the areas were missed by Hurricane Harvey just a month prior. When Hurricane Maria hit landfall in Dominica, it was considered a category 5, and weakening only slightly to a category 4 when it arrived on Puerto Rico. The island of Dominica was in total ruins, with a total loss of communications throughout the entire island. Houses and vegetation were left beyond repair. In Puerto Rico they lost power throughout the entire island and the after math in the damages caused there to be a humanitarian crisis. The total death toll of Hurricane Maria was 3,059 people. In the effects following Maria, in the liberal media it was framed as this hurricane being the effects of climate change.

After the storm, the media focused heavily on climate change and how it relates to Hurricane Maria. In the article *Climate Change Was the Engine That Powered Hurricane Maria's Devastating Rains* author Rebecca Hersher said, “When Maria hit in 2017, it dropped nearly a quarter of that annual rainfall in just one day” (Hersher, 2019). As time goes on more studies have come out about climate change for reporters to report to its audiences who feel passionately about slowing down the effects of climate change. Hersher also stated, “As climate

change models have grown more sophisticated, the field of so-called attribution science has grown more robust, allowing scientists to start investigating how our current global climate affects specific weather events” (Hersher, 2019). The media outlets talked heavily about climate change and how storms will only get worse and that a hurricane the size of Maria will be more common in the future. Articles that focused on Maria in relation to climate change also laid out the possibility from future storms will look like with facts they gathered from scientists.

### *Framing: Climate Change vs Death Toll*

There are two types of mainstream media that audiences either follows, liberal media and the conservative media. In relation to Hurricane Maria the liberal media framed their news reports on climate change effects. While the more conservative media, like Fox News focused more on the aftermath of Hurricane Maria like the death toll. For the liberal media, their reporting’s all had similar sentiments. They talked about Hurricane Maria, while also saying what a storm like that could mean going forward. In the article *Forests Protect the Climate. A Future With More Storms Would Mean Trouble*, the author Henry Fountain talks about researchers studying forests saying, “climate change is expected to increase the frequency of extreme weather events in many parts of the world, the work will also help researchers understand how forests could be changed permanently as the world continues to warm” (Fountain, 2018). This article was research based and relied on scientific facts to convey the impacts that climate change can have on the environment. Audiences reading this article most likely are reading this because they care about climate change. By reading this they have facts from researchers doing work on forest in heavy hit hurricane regions. The audience’s reaction might stem from wanting to learn more about the research or even be fearful of what climate

change will do to the environment. Many articles today are still being written about Hurricane Maria, with one article, *'We are all in this together': California, Puerto Rico Officials Join in Climate Fight*, from *USA Today* from author Kristin Lam stating, “With continued use of fossil fuels, climate change makes hurricanes in Puerto Rico more severe” (Lam, 2019). The author framed the news report so that climate change is the reason why Hurricane Maria was so impactful, especially in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory.

In conservative media, framing can look a lot different. In one article from *Fox News*, *Puerto Rico Governor raises Hurricane Maria death toll from 64 to 2,975*, the author Nicole Darrah talks about the death toll saying, “The number is more than double the government's previous estimated death toll of 1,400” (Darrah, 2018), she also uses scientific information by stating, “A previous study led by a team of Harvard scientists found that more than 4,600 people were killed in the devastation, dismissing the initial toll of 64 as a "substantial underestimate” (Darrah, 2018). This article did not focus on climate change at all rather focusing on the death toll in Puerto Rico and how it was higher than originally reported. It was still fact based from Harvard scientists themselves counting the death toll. This article did not criticize the current President of the U.S. like liberal media does when talking about the impacts of climate change and the current administrations lack of acknowledgment towards it. Darrah states about the president that, “The number of dead has political implications for the Trump administration, which was accused of responding half-heartedly to the disaster” (Darrah, 2018). The article did not offer much more on the politics of the situation, rather relating it back to the death toll. It even goes back and references Hurricane Katrina, when at the time was the worst Hurricane in modern history. When conservative audiences go to read this, they will not read anything about climate change. When framing this article, the author related it more towards how many people

died in the hurricane. The people reading it might feel sad by how many lives were lost or they might think that the President of the U.S. was treated too harshly since the article mentions he was ridiculed for his lack of actions. The conservative audience might perceive the hurricane events as something that terrible has happened but there is no scientific reason behind the storms from the articles given to them. In liberal audiences, they might be more aware of the impacts of the hurricanes, knowing there are reasons why tropical storms are only getting worse as time goes on. In both cases shown here, the information was supported with scientific evidence, one leaning towards a look into the future of hurricane and the other information about death tolls and more about the current state rather than what the future climate will look like. These articles were framed so that one might want to do more about climate change efforts. By reporting on climate change frequently anytime there is a natural disaster, then it might make audiences more inclined to do something about it. By not framing the article to talk about climate change in articles, audiences might not think it is as bad as it is, or not believe in it all together.

#### *Understanding Framing in relation to Climate Change*

In conclusion, framing has the power to sway the way audiences think about a certain event. In this case, it was about the natural disaster Hurricane Maria. The mass media was able to influence the way audiences think about climate change by framing the reports about what effects might be ahead, like devastation to forests, land, and places with no or low financial help. This can help understand framing theory because the events that occurred following Hurricane Maria were so vast and lengthy that the media was able to pick out one of the effects from it, which would be climate change. Before reading anything about Hurricane Maria, audiences might have the pre-conceived notion that climate change is not that legitimate. However, by reading articles based off of facts from scientists and research that climate change was the cause

of a category 5 hurricane, then they might be more inclined to believe that climate change was reason for it. On the more conservative side of media, they will frame their articles more about the aftermath and the remnants that Hurricane Maria left behind, like the number of people that died, or the financial toll Hurricane Maria caused.

By framing it in relation to climate change audiences also have a better understanding of the matter because the articles mentioned all have facts to back it up. By having facts in articles, journalists are able to frame the article better for their angle. They want to frame so that climate change is the main focal point of the liberal articles, and with the audience's values they are able to relay the information to that specific audience. The articles mentioned talk about how climate change will shape the future, how it is going to change the way audiences look at natural disasters.

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