What do you believe?: How Different Coverage of Ferguson Shows the Media’s Power to Influence Perception
Abstract

Truth is not universal. America, in particular, is a country where interests are fairly polarized due to the fundamentally different conditions that individuals experience whether it be due to race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or gender. Subsequently, these different factions of the public naturally seek information from the news outlets that represent their interests. The duality of these two factors in conjunction with each other has given media an unparalleled responsibility and power to influence what people perceive as the truth. This paper will use the scandal surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri as a test case in order to examine how different news outlets (Fox and CNN) have the ability to shape the public's perception a story through the use of bias and framing. We ask whether or not the perception of the public to the different reactions towards the scandal (police and protestors) and those accused of being responsible (Darren Wilson, Michael Brown, police in America) can in fact be different between the two new sources. By drawing on previous literature on scandal, the content analysis of media, and race relations in America, we hypothesize that CNN’s coverage of the scandal is more favorable towards the protestors while Fox’s coverage is more favorable towards the police and Darren Wilson.
Literature review

It is important to realize that the media’s ability to capitalize on the polarization of the public is an unprecedented power. In his research published in the American Journal of Political Science, Matthew S. Levendusky’s piece titled “Why do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?” suggests that the “partisan media polarize the electorate by taking relatively extreme citizens and making them even more extreme.” Media and news outlets have a dangerous level of influence and can do this because they are aware of two things. First, those who report the news are the gatekeepers of facts because everyday citizens have made the conscious decision to defer to these individuals with the assumption that these people are both credible and will report with integrity. In addition, news outlets are aware that different interests groups in the country generally want to obtain information and facts from sources that are proponents of like minded interests. Levendusky goes on to explain that “though only and narrow segment of the population watches partisan media programs, partisan media’s effect extend much more broadly throughout the political arena.” This paper will explain how Fox and CNN’s coverage of Ferguson is merely another representations of the awareness that both outlets have about their ability to influence their partisan viewers.

Fox and CNN have different partisan agendas. Subsequently, both are constantly pushing ulterior agendas that deal with issues beyond the scope of a particular story (H1).

Robert Entman, writer of Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Misconduct, explains that the coverage of a scandal style phenomenon like Ferguson ultimately becomes partisan because “the information could alter attitudes towards a politician (Entman Book 50).”
He found that particular “frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions (Entman 55).” Due to framing, “politicians seeking support are thus compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames (Entman 55).” Elites in media and politics can use frames to “determine just ‘what’ public opinion is (Entman 57).”

Lance Bennett, writer of *Politics of Illusion*, claims that partisan bias happens in the news because “news organizations default to authorities and officials as surrogates for objectivity (Bennett 188).” He believes that “authorities of all political stripes often filter what they say and do through political calculations” which “makes the news more a window on power and political strategy inside government than a platform that examines politics critically in some broader democratic context (Bennett 188).” It can even get so extreme where “there are stories that are essentially made up for political purposes (Bennett 189). For most Conservative politicians, the outrage in Ferguson was uncalled for. They would rather steer clear of addressing police reform. It is an isolated incident to them, and this view is going to come out in the mainstream Conservative media platforms. Liberal news media is a bit more scattered, as addressing Police brutality has not been a major running platform of any major Democratic political candidates in recent history. The mere fact that a majority of Republican politicians attribute the events occurring after Michael Brown and Darren Wilson’s initial transgression to Michael Brown acting unlawfully give a majority of Democrats a platform for the topic just so they can embrace a viewpoint that goes against the party they are competing against. Media coverage from the
more liberal news platform will project this, being somewhat more balanced with leanings against the major inclinations of Fox News.

Both news new outlets purposefully use fragmentation, dramatization, and personalization biases an effort to frame the stories that they publish in a particular manner, hoping to influence the perception of viewers in a certain direction (H2 H3a, H3a, H4a, H4b).

Bennett claims that these biases are the main “reasons that public information in the United States does not always advance the cause of democracy (Bennett 45).” Both dramatization and fragmentation “feed into…the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger contexts (Bennett 47).” Fragmentation does not have to be bad, and in civil society it could be used as a tool to lure people into informing themselves on political issues. Yet, in the arena of modern day American news coverage, this is not the case. Bennett’s fragmentation bias claims that the news isolates events so people are itching to know the next plot line in the story in the hopes that they can return to the news source that fed them the warped information for updates. He believes that “framing draws attention away from other elements in a situation (Bennett 42).” According to Bennett, all of these information biases should be present to some extent across partisan medias.

It is the agenda between the two that should differ. Conservative media might be more prone than liberal media to fragmentation and personalization because the politicians representing conservative media push an agenda that would suggest that a situation like Ferguson is an isolated incident. Bennett claims that fragmentation leaves “underlying realities” unconnected with “surface events.” Conservative fragmentation of the events in Ferguson leaves questioning
institutional issues like racial bias in policing in America, a factual phenomenon, unquestioned. Fragmentation is usually a result of the personalization or dramatization of a story. A news source applies a dramatized frame to their coverage of the story when they “favor dramatized narratives filled with personalized drama with exaggerated emotions (melodrama) over more complex realities (Bennett 43).” The main issue with personalization, or favoring characters in a story as opposed to institutions, is that it “leaves larger lessons and social significance, if there are any, to the imagination of the audience (Bennett 45).” Dramatizing in the news downplays “complex policy information, the workings of government institutions, and the bases of power behind the central characters (Bennett 46).”

**In Politics of Force, Regina Lawrence describes that police’s use of force is “framed individually by police and systemically by non-police. (H4a and H4b)”**

According to Lawrence, agenda pushing and information warping happens in real world police altercations where “some accidental events become the centerpieces of struggles to designate and define public problems, as other groups vie to provide journalists with frames and claims to define these events (7).” She says that “whether brutality is understood as a problem depends greatly upon which voices and views the media emphasize (18).”

If Conservatives truly want to keep things the way they are in terms of policing, they would benefit from pushing incidents of police brutality as isolated incidents. She separates claims about police use of force incidents into two camps, “individualizing claims” that are
“generally…made by police and political officials, while ‘systemic’ claims are typically made by non officials…activists, community leaders, residents of minority and urban communities, and many academic experts (35-36).” The individualizing claims “place responsibility for the use of force with the suspect” and believe that the victim in question “deserved their treatment at the hands of police (37).” These claims are “preemptive damage control strategies (39).” The other side making systemic claims “cite several kinds of systemic problems that, in their view, create police-brutality problems (40).” She believes that those who advocate for systemic claims believe “that police administration, local political officials, or both are at some level responsible for the conduct of rank-and-file officers (40).” She writes that those making systemic claims feel that “police brutality…is just one particularly blatant way that dominant groups keep oppressed groups “in their place (42).” Those critical non officials “make this claim about police brutality, they contend that brutality is systematically aimed at particular groups, indicating a problem that extends beyond individual prejudices to institutionalized racism within the department and the society as a whole (42).” Her descriptions about systemic claims here are presumed to apply to the pro-protester anti-police agenda of the liberal media’s coverage of Ferguson, which for this study is CNN. Her individualizing claims and the attributes she applies to them will be used as information to apply to conservative media’s coverage of the case, which for us is Fox News.

Black lives, White lives: Three Decades of Race Relations in America, written by Bob Blauner in 1989, is a book which examines the racial consciousness of White and African Americans alike during a 30 year period that featured featuring a multitude of political climates. The rationale behind CNN’s pro-protester coverage of Ferguson can be found in the
arguments made in this book, which is that the Michael Brown case is one that mirrors the social movements described in the book during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. All of the movements attempt to bring the racial injustices of America to the forefront of the national conversation by conveying that America is still a country that is racially divided despite the abundance of post-racist-society assertions. As with the other scandals mentioned above, CNN attempts to demonstrate that the division between races in America has been systematically constructed in order to serve and protect those who are apart of the majority while destroying any chance at socially and economic mobility minorities (H4 and H5).

Erik P. Bucy, Walter Gantz, and Zheng Wang are the writers of *Media Technology and the 24 hour news Cycle*. The purpose of their work is primarily to describe the nature of the 24 hour news cycle in America and its role in determining what stories the public thinks is important. Stories are typically replayed throughout a full day, before being replaced with more current stories the following day. However, during a scandal, news outlets flood the airwaves with coverage of the scandal, breaking the conventional rules of the 24 hour news cycle. Robert Entman’s book explains the various phases of a scandal in media coverage and how they captivate public attention. These readings will help why CNN and Fox spend considerable amount of their news coverage on the “public response to a scandal phase” of a scandal (H6).
Hypothesis:

H1. There are partisan differences between Fox and CNN.

Previous research leads us to believe that the partisan differences between the two news outlets polarizers those who follow each news source. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

H2: Both news sources use fragmentation, dramatization, and personalization bias equally in amount.

We expect that both new sources will use the biases mentioned above in order to convey their partisan agendas to their viewers. This leads us to our third hypothesis:

H3a: Fox will use the personalization and fragmentation biases at a higher rate than CNN.

Fox will use the biases mentioned above in order to push a pro police agenda, shifting attention away from problematic institutions and isolating the Ferguson scandal from the much larger conversation concerning police brutality in America. This leads us to our fourth hypothesis:

H3b: In addition CNN will use the personalization, fragmentation, and dramatization biases in order to shift focus towards the institutional failure of the police and the plight of the Protestors.
CNN will use Ferguson in order to shift the attention of viewers towards a much larger conversation about police brutality and race relations in America. This leads to our fourth hypothesis, which is the following:

**H4a:** We expect that Fox will frame Ferguson as a scandal that focuses more on the individuals as opposed to institutions.

Fox will attempt to push the agenda of pro-Police institutions (such as police unions and the politicians that represent them).

**H4b:** CNN will be expected to frame the story primarily as a scandal that is part of a much larger conversation concerning systematic/institutional injustice in America.

CNN will attempt to represent the anti-establishment and liberal side of the case. This leads to our fifth hypothesis:

**H5:** We expect CNN to focus on institutional and policy ramification of the scandal pointing focus towards a broader context while Fox will focus on economic, partisan, and personal ramifications of the story.

**H6:** We expect that both CNN and Fox would cover the scandal heavily during the public response to the scandal phase, but that the coverage would be polarized.
Data and Methods:

All of the data used for this experiment is original, and was conducted over a period of 2 months at the University of Southern California. The goal of this study was to determine how exactly Fox and CNN covered Ferguson. Did both sources use different biases? What elements of the story did each focus on? In order to answer these questions, we did the following:

- We wanted to have 100 articles for our study. (50 from CNN and 50 from Fox)
- To determine the pool of articles, we searched the term “Ferguson Missouri” and sorted the articles by relevance on both websites. (only the first 50 pages)
- We used a random number generator to compile 50 articles from both CNN and Fox News. For example, if you were on the first page for Fox, and the first number on the random generator was 7, we coded the 7th story on the page. If the next random number was 4, we coded the fourth story following the previously coded story and so on.
- Once we had all of the stories, we conducted an intercoder reliability test on 4 stories in order to ensure that our perspectives of the questions and responses for each code would be consistent. For instance, each of us sat down and coded the same story, calculated the percentage of responses that we agreed on, and then discussed how each of us should perceive the responses that we disagreed on for the remaining codes.
- Each of us coded 25 stories from both news outlets, totaling 50 stories each.
- With each story, we answered a plethora of questions from a code sheet created in Qualtrics, each asking something specific that we wanted to find out about the coverage of the story by both news outlets.
- We only examined articles that were created between August, 9th 2014 and March 30th, 2015.

- Once all of the stories were coded, we extracted all stories out of Qualtrics and into SPSS in order to begin examining the findings.

- In SPSS, we ran specific tests (cross tabs, average of means) on information in the data that would be useful for specific hypotheses. They were the following (See hypothesis section for hypotheses)

H1.

- We ran 5 separate crosstabs between the News outlet and who was identified as the primary accused, whether the story mentioned justice or social injustice, the light in which president Obama was mentioned, the dominant frame used in the story. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.

H2:

- We ran 5 separate crosstabs between the News outlet and who was identified as the primary accused, whether the story mentioned justice or social injustice, the light in which president Obama was mentioned, the dominant frame used in the story. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.

- We ran 3 separate crosstabs between the News outlet and whether the story exhibited Bennett's fragmentation, dramatization, and personalization bias. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.
H3a:
- We ran 6 separate crosstabs between the news outlet and the light in which president Obama was mentioned, the tone towards the police, and layered it with whether the story exhibited Bennett's fragmentation, dramatization, and personalization bias. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.

H4b:
- We ran 2 separate crosstabs between the news outlet and whether or not other instances of police brutality were mentioned, who was identified as the primary accused in the story. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.

H5:
- We ran 6 separate crosstabs between the news outlet and whether economic, partisan, institutional, policy, or personal ramifications were mentioned in the story. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.

H6:
- We ran 3 separate crosstabs between the news outlet and what phase of the scandal was the primary focus of the story. These tables can be found in the Appendix A.
- We examined the chi-square portion of all of these tests in order to determine the statistical significance of our codes.
The research design was strong because we were able to compile stories randomly and with a plethora of questions and variables to examine afterwards. However, the design was also weak because there were only two students available to code. Though inter coder reliability was high (*), the validity of our findings would have been even more significant if that number was higher or if there were more people involved in the study.

Out of 17 of the main questions used for the survey (Q1, Q8, Q17, Q63, Q65, Q19, Q20, Q21, Q28, Q29, Q30, Q66, Q34, Q36, Q37, Q38, Q39, Q40, Q57, Q58) 94% (16/17) across 4 random samples majority (75%+) same answers between the two coders, with 10 of those 16 at 100% same answer.
Findings and Analysis:

**H1. There are partisan differences between Fox and CNN.**

The partisan differences between CNN and Fox are highlighted in the data in a couple of ways. First, CNN identified the police as the primary accused in close to 50% of the stories that were coded while Fox identified the protesters and other individuals over 50% of the time (See Figure 1). Second, social justice on the side of the protesters is mentioned in 87% CNN’s stories, yet only 15% in Fox’s stories. Along those same lines, justice on the side of the police is mentioned in 84.4% of Fox’s stories and only 13% in CNN stories (See Figure 2). In addition, though the bulk of the stories coded for both news outlet never mention President Obama, Fox still paints the president negatively relative to CNN (See Figure 3). All three of the findings above proved statistically significant.

The numbers suggest that during the time frame of our research, CNN manifested its partisan sentiments by painting the police negatively and focusing on social justice on the part of the protesters while Fox manifested its partisan sentiments by painting the protesters negatively and focusing on justice on the part of the police (See Figure 2).

**H2: Both news sources use fragmentation, dramatization, and personalization bias equally in amount.**

The percentages between the two news sources were found to be very close together while the Chi-square test that came from cross-tabbing News Outlets and Personalization (Figure 5) bias
came out as statistically insignificant. For fragmentation (Figure 6), Fox News did use fragmentation at a higher rate than CNN, but that was found to be statistically insignificant as well. Both sources were found to use Dramatization (Figure 7) on a majority of their stories, and the difference was found to be statistically insignificant between them as well. This confirms Bennett's suspicions that all news sources use Dramatization and Personalization as tools to leave their stories fragmented for their audiences. Both Fox and CNN use them in an amount that is too close to draw any sort of statistical significance.

H3a: Fox will use the personalization and fragmentation biases at a higher rate than CNN.
Numerically speaking, Fox news did use personalization (Figure 5) and fragmentation (Figure 6) at a higher rate, yet according to the Chi-square tests the differences did not call for any statistical significance. The percentages between the two news sources were very close even though on both biases Fox was seen garnering slightly higher numbers. Both news sources use personalization and fragmentation to advance their own agendas, and even though out of this sample it appears that Fox News does use them at a higher rate than CNN it is not statistically enough to garner any extra attention if we are looking at just the amount they are using personalization and fragmentation.

H3b: In addition CNN will use the personalization, fragmentation, and dramatization biases in order to shift focus towards the institutional failure of the police and the plight of the Protestors.
For personalization (Figure 8), CNN's tone towards police did not change whether or not the bias was used, and was predominantly neutral or negative. Fragmentation (Figure 9) saw a slightly higher jump for the tone of police when the bias is being used, but the numbers were still in the same general ballpark. Dramatization (Figure 10) saw the highest jump between the three in terms of the tone towards police when the bias is being used. So the tone towards police does get slightly more negative between the 3 biases with Dramatization seeing the sharpest climb of negativity towards police verses when it is not being used. The numbers for the tone towards protesters for personalization (Figure 10a) were all very close, with a slight 5% spike in negativity when personalization is being used for CNN. Under Fragmentation (Figure 11), the positive spin towards the protestors by CNN spiked 16.9% while the neutral and balanced articles got cut in half and the negative articles jumped almost 10%. It is clear that amongst CNN articles the opinions of protestors get much more polarized when Fragmentation is present. The results for Dramatization (Figure 12) nearly mimicked those for fragmentation. The opinions when all 3 biases are present versus when they are not present on police and protestors do necessarily vary in terms of how CNN differentiates itself from Fox. It is clear that CNN does get slightly more opinionated on the issues when any of the 3 biases are present even in terms of projecting negativity towards the protestors but not necessarily for becoming more positive towards the police.

Although statistically insignificant, it was found that when all 3 biases are not present, that CNN tends to portray Obama in a positive light more often than when there are biases present. This could potentially be due to shifting focus towards the issue of police brutality and away from partisan conflict and other blockers of institutional change.
H4a: We expect that Fox will frame Ferguson as a scandal that focuses more on the individuals as opposed to institutions.

The information regarding the difference between outlets and bringing up institutional ramifications of the scandal (Figure 20) were very close to being statistically significant but in terms of the definition of statistical significance, they were not. The Chi-square test rounded out to .055 and CNN brought up institutional ramifications 43.5% of the time while Fox News brought it up 24.4% of the time. Although the difference is not statistically significant it should be noted that Fox is shying away from institutional ramifications while CNN is bringing it up almost half of the time.

H4b: CNN will be expected to frame the story primarily as a scandal that is part of a much larger conversation concerning systematic/institutional injustice in America

One of the only statistically significant disparities between Fox News and CNN were that CNN blamed the police 15 times (Figure 17) as the primary accused for the scandal portrayed in a negative light while Fox had zero articles that portrayed the police in a negative light and blamed them for the scandal. There was one article that did attribute the scandal to the police but it was portraying the police in a positive light. The other statistically significant difference between the two sources was that Fox had multiple instances of blame on Mike Brown, mostly negative, while CNN never attributed blame for the scandal to him. There was no statistical difference
found in amount that either source used other incidents of police brutality (Figure 16), probably due to both sides using them are rhetorical tools to push their own agendas in the scandal.

**H5: We expect CNN to focus on institutional and policy ramifications of the scandal pointing focus towards a broader context while Fox will focus on economic, partisan, and personal ramifications of the story.**

As expected, Fox focused on the institutional ramifications of the scandal in only 24.4% of the time, while CNN focused on institutional ramifications in 43.5% of its stories. Policy ramifications were mention six times more frequently in CNN stories than in Fox stories. These parts of the data were some of the most statistically significant of all the findings in the study. (See Figure 18-22) Contrary to our hypothesis, Fox and CNN focused on economic, partisan, and personal ramifications in roughly the same number of stories. This was a statistically insignificant code (See Figure 18-22).

**H6: We expect that both CNN and Fox would cover the scandal heavily during the public response to the scandal phase, but that the coverage would be polarized.**

The data reinforces the first part of this hypothesis, as both Fox and CNN covered Ferguson heavily during the public response to scandal phase (20 and 17 stories respectively). Though the coverage is not statistically significant, there is evidence to suggest that the outlets are polarized. CNN’s tone towards the police was negative in 33.3% of the stories while a total of zero stories had a negative tone towards the police for Fox. While it is true that both sides did have a neutral balanced tone towards the police (42.9% for CNN and 30.8% respectively) in a considerable
portion of the stories, 55.2% of Fox’s stories had a positive tone towards the police during the public response phase while CNN yielded zero on this matter (See figure 24).
Discussion Conclusion:

The findings presented in this study validate much of the research that exists about partisan media and their role in shaping public perception on issues. Both CNN and Fox used Bennett's biases in their coverage of Ferguson, pushing their partisan agendas when framing the story to their viewers. CNN fragmented, dramatized, and personalized Ferguson in their coverage to focus the attention of a nation with all eyes on the story towards the institutional and policy ramification of the scandal. Fox used the same biases to shy away from institution relative to CNN, which helps support Regina Lawrences claims that the police’s use of force is “framed individually by police and systemically by non-police.”

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the research done in this study is that it adds to the abundance of research that exists on the existence of partisan media. The first hypothesis showed how differently Fox and CNN, who represent the conservative and liberal wings respectively, painted the protesters and the police in Ferguson. Though not quantifiable by any variable or code in the study, it is reasonable to suggests that people would have different attitudes towards the different parties accused in the Ferguson scandal based on what news source they received the majority of their knowledge from. But what does this really mean? Some people genuinely believe that Ferguson was an isolated incident of police aggression that while violent, was completely warranted given the facts in the case. Others are at the other end of the spectrum, with equally legitimate claims that Michael Brown’s death was merely an addition to the plethora of African American males who have been systematically attacked by the police through violence and the prison system for years. Who is correct? The answer to that question is
impossible to answer objectively, which is not necessarily the problem. Differences of opinion is the key to the advancement of society. The real issue lies in the fact that the media is dangerous. Instead of trying to foster healthy debate and discussion, news outlets are constantly bashing each other based on partisan motives, ultimately reinforcing the differences of opinions that the public has on issues and making people more divided. The media today has taken their responsibility to as the impartial voice in debate and ignored it, instead opting to reinforce polarization with any issue that causes any kind of debate.

The research done in this paper is by no means perfect. So much more could have been done in order to make the claims in the hypotheses even stronger. For one, the data would have been more compelling if there were more than two people coding stories. If our class could have had 5 to 10 people researching this topic, with high inter coder reliability, it would have further validated the findings that just two students got in this study. In addition, the scandal in Ferguson is changing every day with new twists and extensions of the original transgression. The data in this study could have had the potential to say even more if there was more time to really examine the implications of how the story continues to unfold. There are so many variables in this scandal that either were overlooked or not coded during the research period for this paper.

Ultimately, the American society has entrusted those who report the news with the responsibility of keeping the public well-informed. In theory, everyday citizens have made the conscious decision to defer to credible individuals in the American society who are well trained in reporting the news with integrity. This deferral however, has come at a price. Democracy needs
the news outlets to use their power as the gatekeepers of facts inform people without all of the political motives that continue to push people to shift towards opposite ends of a political spectrum.
References:


