Exploring the Depiction of the Black Lives Matter Protests in the News

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Abstract

The following research explores the coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd on three major news networks: CNN News, FOX News, and MSNBC. This research specifically studies the Anderson Cooper 360 show, The Five show, and The Rachel Maddow show, respective to each network. This research works to understand how these networks cover the protests and how the language they use, the images they choose to show, the guests they choose to bring on, and the questions they ask their guests contribute to any biases about the protests. Furthermore, I found in my research that although many would believe that these three channels are vastly different from each other, they all share a lot in common when it comes to covering the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. After watching hours of footage for each respective show and understanding how each of the four themes (language, images, guests, and questions asked) connect to one another, I find that all three of these networks depict the protests as violent in some way, the hosts bring up the pandemic, and the hosts make insensitive topic changes about electoral politics still while talking about the protests. In addition to these three key findings, this research also finds that while FOX News is more direct in their disapproval of the protests, CNN News and MSNBC are more subtle and subliminal with their messages.

Introduction

In a world where everyone's main source of information is the media, people learn about current events through news networks and social media platforms. Therefore, it is important to understand how these media sources decide what to show and how to show it. The Black Lives Matter movement gained a lot of attention from the public eye in 2020 and has since been a very influential movement. Media sources began to broadcast Black Lives Matter protests and events

related to the protests, each source showing different perspectives given their party affiliations. It is widely known that news platforms, such as CNN and FOX, are very polarized and appeal to the two main political parties: Democratic and Republican ("Political Polarization and Media Habits"). However, there is very little research about exactly how they differ and compare to each other, especially regarding coverage of a race-related event such as the Black Lives Matter protests.

In today's world news channels run on money and viewers, making it hard to know exactly who to listen to (Hagan). Although this does not seem like a huge problem, people are highly influenced by the news, whether they know it or not, and if someone's news network of choice uses language or shows images that paint bad events in a good light or vice versa, that can instill stereotypes and hurtful beliefs in that person's mind, causing more of a divide in this already highly polarized country. The media has an undeniably terrifying grasp on society and oftentimes, people do not even question the validity of what is said on the news, which contributes to growing public naivety. Actually understanding and dissecting what is being said on these news networks can help people decide if the channel of their choice really reflects the morals they hold in this world and whether the information they're receiving really is untainted. (Gorvett). This information prompts the question:How did three different news programs on three different channels portray BLM in terms of language, images, guests, and questions asked?

Literature Review

Before analyzing how news networks portray the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, it is necessary to understand what pre-existing research says about this topic and what areas within this topic need more research and information. First, it is important to ensure that

misinformation does exist in the media and that there is ample research about this problem in the first place.

Misinformation in the news has been studied and researched for quite some time. In 2003, Richard J. Lundman published his piece, "The Newsworthiness and Selection Bias in News about Murder: Comparative and Relative Effects of Novelty and Race and Gender Typifications on Newspaper Coverage of Homicide." As the title might suggest, this piece talks about selection bias in the news and how newspapers' coverage of homicide would differ when it came to racial and gender differences. Although this has to do with newspapers and not news networks, this piece is relevant in that it shows that issues like racism and misogyny happen regardless of the type of news outlet, emphasizing the gravity of the situation. Lundman writes, "In urban areas, murder victims are disproportionately African American … Journalists do not consider normal urban murders with Black victims especially newsworthy (359)." Although different from the portrayal of protests, this research paper proves that misinformation has been a problem in the news for quite some time, especially when it comes to race. However, this research only looks at race when it comes to murder, and in order to address the protests, it is necessary to understand if race continues to be a topic that is misrepresented in the news. Looking at his piece, "Only the News They Want to Print," Rainier Spencer talks about the convergence of Mainstream Media and Critical Mixed-Race Studies and finds that the way the media talks about race "is generally no different whether one reads an article from 1994, 2000, 2006, or 2012 (163)." Therefore, this proves that the news media has many issues when it comes to misinformation in general and about race, both of which are crucial in order to answer the research question at hand.

Looking at the BLM protests in specific, since that is the main topic of this research, it is important to see if there is research on any misinformation in this specific area. Fortunately, many people have conducted some research and published some journalistic articles about this area, proving that there was indeed an overwhelming amount of misinformation circulating on social media platforms about the protests in 2020. For example, NPR posted an article titled, "Black Lives Matter Fights Disinformation to Keep The Movement Strong," on May 25, 2021, exactly a year after the murder of George Floyd. The author, Cheryl Corley, writes, "Online…posts are riddled with disinformation, including those specifically targeting BLM activists." Corley then provides an example saying that "one post…falsely claims the government has identified it [Black Lives Matter] as a terrorist group," showing that many people have spread lies about the movement and that this topic is not unheard of. However, although this article provides an example of misinformation circulating about the Black Lives Matter movement, it does not talk about news outlets in particular, which is the focus of this research. In order to understand how different networks portray the protests, it is necessary to see if the news itself perpetuates misinformation. In October of 2020, a fake video showing a group of protesters, portraying them as an angry mob, beating up a man went viral due to the president's endorsement of the validity of this video. This video then got picked up by many news outlets, including, TMZ, Daily Wire, Daily Mail, Gateway Pundit, and END (Gallagher). This is just one of the many examples of anti-BLM propaganda being shown in the news to invalidate the movement as a whole. Furthermore, in an article on The Conversation titled, "Fox News viewers write about 'BLM' the same way CNN viewers write about the 'KKK'" the authors talk about the stark differences between the two networks and how they both talk about BLM in completely different ways. Overall, while these articles and research pieces prove that

there are issues within the major news networks, they do not outline the ways in which these networks perpetuate one opinion or another nor do they conduct research on how the major news networks relate to each other in this way. Therefore, these gaps prompt the research question at hand.

Methodology

In order to collect data for this research, I first started watching hours of footage on the BLM protests from CNN, FOX, and MSNBC, as these were the top three most watched television news channels in 2020 (Ali) . I used a variety of different resources to find this footage including, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Nexis Uni, Internet Archive, and sometimes cnn.com, foxnews.com, and msnbc.com. Although this initial tactic proved very useful, giving me ample information about each network, it was clear that I had to narrow down my scope and what I was looking for in order to extract real data. First of all, by using the networks' actual websites to find footage, my data could be susceptible to bias. For example, if I decided to watch the top five videos that come up when I search "Black Lives Matter" on Fox News' website, how would I know how Fox chose those videos or why those particular videos were the first to come up. Given these limitations, I scratched those websites and decided to use the most useful archival tool which was Internet Archive. I then decided that for each news channel, I would watch footage close to May 25th, 2020, the day George Floyd was murdered, and then footage close to June 25th, exactly a month after Floyd's death, to see how coverage changed and to give myself a limited amount of footage for each network.

After watching hours of footage and writing down my initial reactions and thoughts to the way different channels were depicting the protests, I realized that there were so many different

shows on each channel that I was watching. For instance, when I watched FOX News some of the footage was on The Tucker Carlson Tonight Show, while some of the other footage I watched was from The Five. This proved to be another issue because I didn't pick one show for each channel, which made my research inconsistent across the three channels. Therefore, I scratched what I had watched and picked the most watched show for each channel in 2020. After conducting this research through a few google searches, I decided I would watch The Five show for Fox News, The Anderson Cooper 360 show for CNN, and The Rachel Maddow show for MSNBC, as all three of these were the most watched shows on each of their respective networks in 2020 (Ali). After making sure everything was set, I decided to watch 4 hours of footage for each show, with two of the videos being closer to the May 25th date and the other two being closer to the June 25th date. Each of these videos had about an hour worth of protest material.

In order to organize all the data, I came up with four themes or categories to place my observations in: language, images shown, questions asked by reporters/anchors, and type of guest. I came up with these themes just by noticing what was most common in the footage I watched. As I listened and watched the videos from each show, I wrote down different quotes that stood out or the way people spoke about something, the type of images they decided to show on air, the exact wording of a question people would ask their guests, and who they brought on as guests in a color-coded, mater footage document. After I finished watching four hours of footage for each network and compiling all of my notes, I went through and identified major trends across all of the themes. After completing these methods, I came out of this research with three main findings: all three networks depict the protests as violent, they bring up the pandemic in the middle of discussing the protests, and they make insensitive topic changes to electoral

politics while also talking about the protests. I will discuss each of these findings in depth in the next section.

Findings/Data Analysis

Implied that the protests were violent

One attribute that I noticed across each of the television networks was the fact that each of them, whether it was purposeful or not, reinforced that these protests were violent in some way. This observation does not mean that the anchor directly called them violent but many of the ways in which they speak and the images they show portray the protests as violent.

Although emphasizing how horrible George Floyd's murder was, many of the anchormen on CNN (The Anderson Cooper 360 Show) use language like "boisterous," "volatile," and "violent," to describe the protests themselves, which makes the audience question exactly what their aim is (Internet Archive). Many of the images CNN shows also makes the audience question their goal, as many times the reporter on the scene will be interviewing protestors who are working hard to get their message out into the world, but then quickly pan the camera over to a building on fire (Internet Archive). Moments like this cloud the real message behind the Black Lives Matter movement which is that Black people aren't being treated right in this country. Furthermore, given that over 93% of these protests were peaceful (Mansoor) , no network should reinforce the horrific stereotype that minorities, or specifically Black people, are violent. Many times, reporters use vague language that insinuate negative connotations with these protestors, even though they aren't saying anything directly. For example, one reporter on CNN was talking about the police and the protestors and said, "they've done a pretty good job deescalating the situation." Calling these protests a "situation" and insinuating that it needs deescalating immediately belittles the entire movement. Moments like this continue throughout May and June

footage, as reporters and anchormen choose to use language and show footage that paints these protests in a negative light (Internet Archive).

Apart from language and images, CNN also has many guests on their show, and while some of them are leaders of the protests and have very important messages to convey, some of the guests perpetuate this idea that protests are violent. For example, on CNN, Anderson Cooper brings on James Gagliano, a retired FBI Supervisory Special Agent, who talks about how the police should have been better prepared for these protests. He says, "this takes me back to 1992, I remember small pockets of protests, Rodney King Riots, Baltimore, Ferguson; How have we not learned to be better prepared?" Instead of asking how we have not learned to treat everybody equally, Gagliano focuses on police preparation, which seems insensitive and again, makes the audience question the goal behind the news (Internet Archive). Eventually, Cooper has to reel it back in and talks about how sad it is that we keep letting this happen.

Much to my surprise, FOX (The Five Show) engages in much of the same language as CNN does, with some of the common phrases being, "we do hope for a more peaceful night tonight" and "cities are bracing for more violence (Internet Archive)." FOX is definitely more direct than CNN about how they think the protests are violent and use much stronger language such as "coordinated attacks" and "domestic terrorists" to describe the protestors. However, although they're more direct, much of the same sentiments are there between CNN and FOX (Internet Archive). For example, many of the anchormen on FOX talk about how these protestors are destroying our monuments and our landmarks, and while CNN anchormen don't use quite as many words, CNN will quickly pan to a building on fire in the midst of talking about George Floyd. In some of FOX's June broadcasts, they decide to show a leader of one of the BLM protests talking about how this country is based on violence and how we need to burn this

country to the ground (Internet Archive). FOX uses this clip to make the point that the protests are violent and that they will destroy the country. One of the direct quotes from this same broadcast was, “and then there’s looting, and then there’s more theft, and then there’s assault, and then there’s rape, and then there’s murder.” This quote does prove that FOX is definitely more direct with its ignorance towards the protests (Internet Archive). FOX has very few guests overall and on The Five, for the dates I picked for BLM, there were no guests at all.

Turning to MSNBC (The Rachel Maddow Show) , again, there is very similar language and images all around; however, it is more aligned with CNN in terms of being less blatant with its negative messages. In terms of images, MSNBC shows lots of fires and protesters, just like the other two channels. Many of the quotes in the very first clip I watched were pretty jarring and included phrases like, “the famous Minneapolis police station is on fire,” “St. Paul Minnesota had their hands full tonight,” “the liquor store continues to burn,” “there are at least 4 fires I can see from here,” “this is mostly a protest,” and “I'm listening to glass being broken (Internet Archive).” These phrases, although in passing seem normal, highlight only the “violence” of the protests and nothing else. Given that it is clear that the majority of these protests are violent, this is a very dangerous observation because, as addressed before, people are easily influenced by the news, and if all people are hearing on the television are these negatively weighted words and if all they are seeing are fires when learning about the protests, they will begin to have a negative association with the Black Lives Matter Movement.

In terms of guests that MSNBC brought on, they started with Maya Wiley, a former Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York. The first question they asked was, “Maya, I just need to see your reaction to this horrendous, horrendous scene we are seeing in one of America’s finest cities that is absent of one of its residents, George Floyd.”

Immediately, this question seems to have a lot of bias in it already, calling the scene "horrendous" twice (Internet Archive). However, Wiley quickly addresses this question by saying "you have to wonder if the images we would be seeing tonight would be different if we had heard from prosecutors that they were taking the officers in" (Internet Archive). So, although this question was insensitive, the guest they brought on was able to convey an important message to MSNBC's viewers, a quality that FOX lacked entirely (Internet Archive). Additionally, there are many times when MSNBC has guests on who have very important messages to convey and have nothing to do with the violence of the protests and everything to do with the message behind the protests and the long history of violence in America, but they decide to show fires and looting the entire time they're talking. One of the guests, Ben Jealous, the former Chairman of the NAACP, says, "we could endanger a great deal of real estate and god forbid, residential property" (Internet Archive). He talks so gravely about the destruction of inanimate objects but doesn't speak at all about the destruction of real people. One of the questions the anchorman asked Andrea Jenkins, the Vice President of the Minneapolis City Council, was, "as you watch the night unfold, as you see these pictures, as you see parts of your beloved city on fire, what goes through your mind?" Once again, the focus of this question is on the "beloved city" and not the people being killed on the streets (Internet Archive). Another guest they bring on specializes in fires specifically and they brought him on for a full segment to talk about the state of the buildings on fire, taking away from the protestors and the stories that they have to tell (Internet Archive).

Brought up the pandemic abruptly

Another theme that constantly came up during my analysis was the way that every news station would bring up the pandemic while talking about the protests. Of course, the pandemic is very important and should be spoken about in the news, however, there is a time and place to do so, and if the purpose of one broadcast is to talk about the protests, then any talk of the pandemic is not expected to be included. In a clip on CNN, the anchormen are talking about the protests and Anderson is talking to a reporter on the scene and keeps on asking about how many people are there and then eventually says, “the pandemic is still happening you know” and then starts to laugh (Internet Archive). Again, although the pandemic is important and dangerous, making a comment like this belittles the protest and insinuates that the protesters should not be out there because of the pandemic. During a later segment on CNN on June 1, 2020, the anchormen are having a very important conversation about how trust can be built between the police and protestors saying that “trust is built when there isn’t a dead Black man in the street.” However, this important moment is immediately disrupted when one of the reporters decides to say , “we are in the middle of a pandemic,” interrupting the conversation and putting an end to the important messages being spread (Internet Archive). Shortly after this, the conversation about the pandemic continues, and the camera pans to a Macy’s getting looted while the reporter says, “lots of these businesses were closed because of the pandemic" and “they’re breaking windows with their hammers,” showing empathy towards the buildings, once again (Internet Archive). In this instance, the topic of the pandemic shut down a fruitful conversation that was addressing real issues between the police and Black individuals in America.

On FOX, while talking about the mayhem of the protests, the anchorman also says “now you have the pandemic ….” insinuating that both are inconveniences, playing the protests and the pandemic on the same level. Very similar events occurred on MSNBC as well. For example,

while showing footage of tear gas and protestors running in the streets, the anchorman says, "this is happening during the pandemic and this is quite the opposite of social distancing," as if that is what is in the minds of these terrified people as they run from teargas (Internet Archive). Also, while interviewing Maya Wiley, one of the questions the anchorman asks is, "how often do you remind yourself over the course of your coverage, oh, yeah, we're also in the midst of a pandemic?" and they also say "so much for social distancing" before sending Wiley off. Lastly, when asking Andrea Jenkins, the Vice President of the Minneapolis City Council, what her message is to protestors right now, she responds with, "please go home right now. We are trying to preserve human life…we are in the middle of a pandemic," which is the last thing she says before leaving for the night (Internet Archive). Although these comments are small, they impact the direction of discourse and speak to the motives of the network.

Brought up electoral politics while talking about the protests

Similar to the pandemic finding, anchromen across all three networks also talk about electoral politics in the midst of talking about the protests. For CNN, for example, while talking about how protests can move forward with their guest Angela Rye, who runs a podcast about Black rights, the anchorman immediately starts talking about Trump and how he's caused all of this (Internet Archive). Although he has played a role in perpetuating this, the way the anchorman distracts from a problem that has been going on since the birth of America was incredibly insensitive and took the attention away from the problem at hand. Furthermore, after talking about the protests, CNN quickly switches to a rally Trump had during the pandemic and spent a good 15 minutes talking about how he should not have done this and how this is spreading the virus (Internet Archive). Having this segment squeezed in between segments about

the protests seems so random and also distracts from the protests. This kind of randomness and insensitivity occurs when anchormen are asking questions to their guests as well. For example, CNN had W. Kamau Bell, the host of CNN's United Shades of America and Gloria Brown Marshall, a Constitutional Law Professor at John J. College of Criminal Justice, on the show and after asking the first question, "how do you feel about the president saying All Lives Matter instead of Black Lives Matter?," the anchorman then asks, "What are your hopes for this election?," instead of turning the conversation to the protests, which is what his initial question could have easily led into (Internet Archive).

FOX has a very similar habit and brings up the election and political candidates in the midst of talking about the protest and the Black Lives Matter movement. After talking about how the protestors are getting out of hand, someone from the panel interrupts and talks about Biden and Trump and how "Joe Biden doesn't know what he's doing here" (Internet Archive). Phrases like this take away from everything and makes the audience think that the protests aren't worth giving their full attention to. Furthermore, just like CNN, the FOX panel pans to the Trump rally and talks about that for a while, and although the comments about the rally are different given the political affiliation of FOX News, the way they switch from talking about the protests to FOX is eerily similar to CNN. MSNBC joins CNN and FOX with this trend; while talking to Paul Butler, a Georgetown Law Professor and former Federal Prosecutor, about the arrest of Derek Chauvin, the anchorman quickly talks about some tweet that Trump put out and starts criticizing it (Internet Archive). The anchorman also calls FOX, "the president's favorite news channel," adding to the pettiness that is seen across all three networks. Additionally, they start talking about Trump getting in a fight with his general and taking pictures during the protest (Internet Archive). Essentially, they deface Trump every second they get, which is the same for

CNN with Trump and the same for FOX with Biden, in the midst of talking about the protests, making the protests seem irrelevant and not worth the time.

Conclusion and Limitations

Access to news and information about what is going on in the world is very important and it is something that everyone should have a right to. However, given the strong political affiliations and other motives behind our modern day news sources, it is incredibly difficult to decipher what to listen to and what to ignore. Given this seemingly unsolvable problem, I thought it best to see how our main news networks portrayed one of the most crucial moments in the past few years, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Not only were these protests heavily covered on almost every radio station and news channel (Datadhrumhil) but they were also easily subject to lies and false claims, making them the perfect event to look at when conducting this research.

It is more than common knowledge that everyone has their preferred news network and that each network is highly politicized and very different from each other (Hart, P. S., Chinn, S., & Soroka, S.); however, I wanted to see just how different these news stations were and if maybe they had more similarities than expected. Given the research and findings explored in this paper, it is clear that the three channels and shows I had chosen to look at had many similarities when it came to faults in the way they portrayed and spoke about the BLM protests. Of course, FOX was very different from CNN and MSNBC in terms of how direct they were in putting down the protests. However, CNN and MSNBC, although not direct at all, had many habits that painted the protests in a similar, bad light. Through images, language used, guests, and questions asked, all three networks, at some point, behaved in a way that painted the protests as dangerous or

irrelevant, which is the opposite of what the majority of them were. This, of course, is not to say that the three networks did not uplift the protests in any way. All three networks had moments where they accurately portrayed the protests; however, that was not the point of this research and was therefore not covered extensively.

In terms of limitations, I only watched four hours of footage for each channel, which definitely could have led to skewed results as a result of a small sample size. However, I did watch those twelve hours from start to finish and documented everything that came up, which means the research I did was conducted extensively. Furthermore, I only watched television networks and did not look at newspapers or listen to radio stations, which means this research should be taken lightly and should only be applied to the networks and shows I did watch. Lastly, I only watched the three most common news channels and none of the smaller or even medium-tiered ones, which, once again, means that this research should not be applied to anything other than the three networks and channels I watched. Overall, this research proves that these networks may be more similar than we think and urges the reader to be vigilant when watching the news.

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