



Exploring the Depiction of the BLM Protests in the News

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Introduction

- The question that I am exploring with this research is: How did three different news programs on three different channels portray BLM in terms of language, images, guests, and questions asked? The significance of this study is to understand what is actually being said on the most watched news networks and see how they depict something as important as the BLM Protests of 2020
- There are many current articles and papers about how these protests were depicted, however, none of them have explored a comparison amongst different
- Given people’s reliance on the news for information and how easily the news can influence the way people think, I wanted to see if people should rely on it that much
- Much of my foundation relates to work done in the past about how the news often loses its accuracy when it comes to coverage relating to marginalized identities, influencing my work on BLM

Goals & Hypotheses

- The purpose of this research is to observe how different news networks explore and cover the BLM Protests of 2020 through four different themes: language, images, guests, and interview questions
- I conducted this research in order to provide a real concrete way to see the way in which different news networks portray a big even such as the BLM protests and to then encourage the public to understand this research before watching the news
- I hypothesize that the networks are drastically different, with FOX News having the most bias when covering the BLM Protests. However, I hypothesize that there will be common themes of bias amongst CNN and MSNBC

Methods

- Initially I started by watching hours of footage for each network (CNN, FOX, MSNBC) using a few different tools: Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Nexis Uni, Internet Archive, cnn.com, foxnews.com, and msnbc.com
- I realized that using those last three sites would cause bias and that I needed to narrow my scope so I decided to use just Internet Archive and decided that for each news channel I would watch footage close to May 25th, 2020, the day of George Floyd’s murder, and footage close to June 25th, exactly a month after
- I also realized that each network had so many different shows and I was watching a mix of everything, which could also lead to bias. So, I decided to see what the most watched show was on each network and decided to only watch footage from The Anderson Cooper 360 Show (CNN), The Five Show (FOX), and The Rachel Maddow Show (MSNBC)
- I watched 4 hours of footage for each show; each of these videos had about an hour worth of protest material
- I then 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 had watched
- After this, I watched the footage and wrote down all of my observations within their respective theme/category in a big, color-coded master footage doc, which I then deciphered and extracted my findings from

Results & Discussion



- Implying violence by using language like “boisterous,” “volatile,” and “violent,” panning to items on fire randomly, calling the protests “a situation” and saying it needs to be “deescalated, brought on a guest that talks about how the police should have been better prepared
- Bring up the pandemic with these phrases like “the pandemic is still happening you know” and highlighting how businesses were already going down because of it
- Bring up electoral politics by changing the topic to Trump and how he is the cause of the and asking misleading questions to guests



- Implying violence with much of the same language (“we hope for a more peaceful night” and “cities are bracing for more violence;” more direct but similar sentiments
- Bring up the pandemic and insinuating that both are inconveniences: “now you have the pandemic...”
- Bring up electoral politics in the same way as CNN but just talk about Biden instead of Trump: “Joe Biden doesn’t know what he’s doing here”



- Implying violence by showing lots of fire and damage and saying things like “St. Paul Minnesota had their hands full tonight”
- Bring up the pandemic, saying, ““this is happening during the pandemic and this is quite the opposite of social distancing,” and had a guest on that said: “please go home ... We are in the middle of a pandemic” to the protesters
- Bring up electoral politics, mostly Trump, in the middle of talking with guests about serious issues about Black lives in America

Conclusions & Next Steps

- 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 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.
- The research was conducted on a small scale and has much more room to grow
- If I decide to continue this research I would branch out into different events, different networks, and different media types; for example, I would look at newspapers, articles, and radio shows and see if the patterns persist there

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