

Refugee Crisis, News Crisis: The Framing of Episodic and Thematic Articles

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A main tenet of 21st Century journalism is to engage the public with highly informative and affective content. Through sociological journalistic processes of creating news content, however, audiences may lose the ability to completely conceptualize the level of human suffering observed in the coverage of refugee crises. This experimental survey tested the use of episodic and thematic frames in formatting American news articles about the Syrian refugee crisis of migrants landing on Grecian shores. It found that episodically framed articles increased moral understanding among Americans, as well as overall engagement in the crisis event. Respondents, however, were not more likely to participate in civic engagement about the refugee crisis with others. The results suggest that the use of episodic frames in the construction of refugee news articles may engage audiences more in the issue, however, alone are not enough to affect behavioral outcomes such as discussion. Further research should investigate the implications of framing choices made in the presentation of news stories about important issues such as mass human migrations.

Keywords: framing, news, refugee, diaspora

Introduction

Nearly 15 years since the Syrian civil war began, over 14 million people have fled their homes seeking safety, 6.8 million of which have fled the country for asylum behind other borders, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The crisis reached a climax in 2015 with over 100 refugees landing on Grecian shores daily, peaking at 3,000 daily arrivals that August and approximately 1.3 million displaced migrants traversing through the Greek islands into Europe that year (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). Classic migration theory states that “push factors” such as war and “pull factors” like economic opportunity are what drive such a diaspora (Arnon & Shamai, 2016, p. 322).

When a Syrian boy’s body washed ashore at a Turkish resort on September 2, 2015, the diaspora occurring through the Mediterranean made international headlines, bringing the world’s attention to how other countries would need to deal with such a large mass human migration. “The full horror of the human tragedy unfolding on the shores of Europe was brought home on Wednesday as images of the lifeless body of a young boy – one of at least 12 Syrians who drowned attempting to reach the Greek island of Kos – encapsulated the extraordinary risks refugees are taking to reach the west” (Smith, H, 2015). In May of that year a European Union

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Mediterranean Naval Force (EUNAVFOR MED) was launched with a focus on search and rescue operations, as well as work to stop human traffickers (Zichi, 2018).

To better understand the impact of this coverage, Google Trends analysis shows a dramatic increase in use of the search term “refugee” from just 16 percent the week before the story aired, to a peak of 93 percent in the proceeding days from September 6–12, 2015 across the world. In the United States, however, attention during this same time period reflected only a 42 percent peak interest in searching the term “refugee.” Searching more specifically for “Syrian refugee crisis” showed similar results jumping from 4 percent to a full 100 percent peak interest around the globe, yet reaching just 60 percent interest in the search term in the United States (Google Trends). While responses to the media coverage triggered online searches in the U.S., they were less pronounced than in many other countries.

So while contemporary journalism strives to engage the public through highly informative and affective content, American mass news media should explore best practices for coverage in the 21st Century. News media needs protect sensitive audiences, while also making major international issues relevant to disconnected Americans. Through production processes of routine story coverage, Americans may understand the Syrian refugee crisis, but lose the ability to completely conceptualize the level of human suffering in these refugees affected by political, economic and military conflict. Increased knowledge about immigration can stimulate integration between citizens and new populations, transform societies and promote knowledge of cultural heritage (Francese, Uz & Adamo, 2016). Inadequate media coverage can also create opportunity for misinformation such as overvaluations of the impact from migrations such as in the case of Mexico and the United States (Gonzalez-Rosas & Zarate-Gutierrez, 2018).

Thus American media may yet be too sanitized to create real civic discussion and more active engagement, but work is needed to provide information about these historically underrepresented immigrant and refugee groups (Lee & Weng, 2019). Alternative methods of covering conflict in contemporary refugee crises should be explored. Conflict-based journalism is based on providing audiences accurate information and generating public discourse aimed at the resolution of a posed issue. Further research should be conducted reviewing the degree of effectiveness obtained by the display of conflict-based graphic content such as in a diaspora. A review of American news media decency standards could allow for more appropriate use of the display of human suffering.

Thus, to analyze the effects on viewing audiences, we must first understand the current operating procedures of mass news media as an institution. Subsequently, the main areas of consideration for this study include journalistic framing of news stories about the refugee crisis, the aesthetic quality of suffering in visual reportage and audience perceptions of moral agency in the presentation of human suffering in news media.

Literature Review

Under the right circumstances, frames can exert influence on audiences exposed to them. Scheufele (1999) identifies the first step of framing as frame building, which is how media outlets construct frames to be used in communication. Next, frame setting is the psychological process that takes place in audiences when frames interact with individual predispositions to influence a variety of outcomes, including knowledge and perceptions. At the effects end of framing, individual-level effects occur when thought affects attitudes and behaviors. The last step of framing completes the cycle when citizens affect the journalists' frame building process through direct communication and participation in public affairs.

The Sociological Approach to Framing

The complexity of the framing process is perhaps why today, half a century since the word "framing" joined the mass communication lexicon, there is still debate about what constitutes a frame, how one is embedded in content by journalists, and ultimately how they should be measured by researchers. There is some agreement that framing effects involve how the construction of media messages influence individual thoughts, attitudes and behaviors, but divergent operationalizations rooted in sociological and psychological traditions remain a problem for examining frame construction and framing effects (Scheufele, 1999).

In sociology, framing analysis has roots in theory about the individual and society. At a young age individuals learn frames as a way of processing information in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Frames help people make sense of the physical and social world around them. They underlie all social activity, and guide the senses, determining what is seen, heard, smelled and tasted, as well as what is not noticed. To interpret information efficiently, it is placed into schemas, which then allow us to quickly make sense of the world around us (Goffman, 1959).

This natural framing of societal perceptions was later applied to media in the 1970s as a way of interpreting media messages. The social consequences of the way women were framed in magazines were studied by Goffman, in which he determined that advertisements could reinforce how women are portrayed in daily life. Women were found to be repeatedly portrayed as inferior and subordinate to men (Goffman, 1974). Studies continue to test how contemporary societal issues are framed in different media, exemplifying the importance of framing and audience perception (McLeod & Detenber, 1999).

Because of the demanding nature of journalism as a profession, many sociologists maintain that common events and applicable frames were emerging as tools for journalists to more effectively explain complex information to the public. Journalists were believed to use different frames for covering issues in ways that would make complex information more salient for a general audience. This is understood as the sociological process of news construction with more focus on the journalist and choices that are involved in developing news texts (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Some key examples of different viewpoints for framing news stories are found in Iyengar's distinctions of episodic and thematic frames (1991). Episodic frames use details about specific events or cases that are part of a larger political issue. They use a dramatic narrow picture to represent a larger societal issue (Iyengar, 1991). Thematic frames instead focus on "political issues and events in some general context" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 2). They are more abstract and often use metaphors to explain societal problems. "Visually episodic reports make 'good pictures,' while thematic reports feature 'talking heads'" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 14). These two distinct framing approaches for reporting the refugee crisis could have important implications for audience understanding of human suffering, depending on if the audience views a thematically or episodically framed news story. "Politicians and media tend to associate the general term of immigration with the specific term of illegal immigration, causing legal immigration to fade into the background" (Yang, 2021, p. 12). But historical studies show that education about diversity can foster change in the minds of citizens (Zervas, 2017). This makes for an even more challenging case to reframe an issue that is already problematically labeled in society.

The Psychological Approach to Framing

For other communication scholars, framing is understood in terms of the psychological dynamics of information processing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). A landmark study in economics by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) connected the psychology of information processing with media effects. It found that an economic issue portrayed from different perspectives would change the resulting actions made by the study participants. The experiment used strict internal validity to prove that only a shift in the portrayal of the issue (while holding factual information constant) caused a change in action by the participant, proving that the framing of an issue affected the psychology of the participant, and ultimately the outcome of the decision-making process. Followers of Kahneman and Tversky utilize strict internal validity to ensure that effects are caused by the frame. This psychologically-based, perspective argues that maximizing the internal validity will isolate the effect caused by the different perspective of the news story.

Today, framing is still dissected even further, calling for recognition as a device used by both media producers and audience members (Scheufele, 1999). In studies such as the one presented here, frames can now play roles as both independent variables (media frames) and as dependent variables (audience schemas). This recognition calls for specific attention to the operationalization of framing.

Thus, this input from mass news media and subsequent audience interpretation applies to this study in the form of one key question: What type of news frame is most effective for completing the framing cycle by spurring discourse about contemporary refugee crises and active participation in addressing this global issue?

Furthermore, is the American public able to adequately understand the level of human suffering involved in contemporary refugee crises because of censorship of graphic content? If news media frames must be interpreted by an audience, then the way in which the material is presented can be altered to increase the interpretive

ability of the audience. Research conducted regarding news coverage during the first Gulf war which has shown how many production and political influences sanitize coverage (Pfau et al., 2004). Embedded journalists during the first few days of the invasion of Iraq in the second Gulf War were found to decontextualize and present content in a more favorable tone compared to non-embedded journalists (Pfau et al., 2004).

Jones, Sheets, & Rowling (2011) also found that journalists have used defensive techniques in reporting that lead to the omission of civilian casualty reports, which dampen a viewer's moral agency when interpreting a controversial news event. This is essential because news media frames have been shown to, "define problems . . . diagnose causes . . . make moral judgements . . . and suggest remedies" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This past research of news media framing offers insight into a key question of this study: Does American news media frame stories in a way which removes the human element of suffering, thus creating a disproportionate response to conflict?

Aesthetic Quality of Suffering

While it has been shown that the audience interprets an event through a journalist's frame in mass news media, research in human suffering focuses on the object of viewership, who is called the "unfortunate," and the audience member is referred to as a "spectator." This relationship is identified by the aesthetic portrayal of graphic content within a news event, and the potential impact it can have upon spectators. With the aesthetic viewing of suffering, "there is an unfortunate who suffers and on the other a spectator who views the suffering without undergoing the same fate and without being directly exposed to the same misfortune . . . Pity exists in this" (Boltanski, 1999, p. 114).

The experience of the unfortunate can only be felt by the unfortunate, but as the spectator actively views the visual representation of the suffering the unfortunate has experienced, the spectator gains an element of empathy for the unfortunate. Removing the visual representation of the unfortunate's suffering impedes the spectator from empathizing with the unfortunate. This supports the importance of the aesthetic quality in the presentation of a news event, which is more often present in episodically framed news stories rather than those framed thematically. As found in Pfau et al.'s 2004 study, episodic frames were used significantly more often than thematic frames, which decontextualized the traumatic events being reported.

Moreover, the presentation of an event by mass news media must first be compiled by a journalist, "he is a creator and displays the horror in the materiality of a picture. The spectator does nothing. He sympathizes with the painter; he is a painter who does not paint. It is at the cost of doing nothing that his contemplation of the horrific can be total" (Boltanski, 1999, p 117). The action of leaving actually-occurring footage un-edited is critical to this study, as the current method of American mass news media is to edit portions of content which are too graphic in nature.

The concept of un-edited footage having a greater impact upon an audience is also supported by Nohrstedt (2009), who references the grotesque images captured from United States armed forces torturing inmates of Abu-Gharib prison in Iraq. Spectators being exposed to these images ultimately saw the uncompromised effects of war upon involved humans. It is through this close-up portrayal of human suffering that enables spectators to understand and substantiate the ramifications of war. As it has been shown, the un-edited presentation of conflict allows for a greater level of compassion from the audience.

Furthermore, Chouliaraki (2006) found that conflict-oriented coverage can potentially be manipulated to reduce the production of empathy within spectators. Journalists have portrayed atrocities, such as the unsanctioned bombing of a civilian populace, without emphasizing the human toll of the atrocity. This creates an ambiguous environment for the spectator. By presenting stories without the element of human suffering, the audience is left without a candid moral gauge of the event. This information is essential to this study because it suggests that the removal of human suffering can potentially skew spectator perception of a conflict-oriented news event.

Witnessing Derived Moral Agency

Understanding how spectators will be prompted by observing the element of suffering is essential to this study as it allows for the reaction to the aesthetic element to be interpreted. “The about-to-die image freezes a particularly memorable moment in death’s unfolding and thereby generates an emotional identification with the person facing impending death” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 34). The moral impacts of viewing death allow for the spectator to account for an unfortunate’s situation on an unadulterated level which all humans share — death. Research conducted by Sumiala (2009) has shown that individuals from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and geographical locations can be brought together by having experienced suffering. Thus, individuals can connect on the basis of having witnessed violence and have a higher likelihood of discussion and participation.

To further connect the aesthetic portrayal of an unfortunate to the moral interpretation of the spectator, Peters (2001) defined past examples of witnessing versus reading. Solely reading or listening to information regarding a news event has been shown to lend itself to an element of ambiguity. However, by witnessing an event first hand, truth and understanding are obtained by actively viewing suffering, as opposed to dry summations and statistical recreations of suffering (Peters, 2001).

Thus, three hypotheses were generated to provide the framework of this study:

- H1) News stories with thematic frames will affect perceptions of importance about the refugee crisis more than episodic frames.
- H2) News stories with episodic frames accompanied by the cue of a photograph will affect moral evaluations about the refugee crisis more than thematic frames.
- H3) News stories with episodic frames will affect motivations for civic engagement in the refugee crisis more than thematic frames.

Methodology

The methodology for this study was conducted using an experimental survey design involving 515 participants randomly selected from the student body of midwestern university in the United States of America. All participants were given the same survey after being randomly selected to be fragmented into two groups for reading an episodically or thematically framed conflict-based news story with an accompanying visual cue of a refugee camp.

To adequately show the effect that graphic content has upon an audience, excerpts were taken from two news sources, which covered the same news event. The story was created by content from American-based Associated Press (AP) and by Greek-based ΣΚΑΪ (SKAI). The resulting story provided informative content with references to loss of life and injury during the news event, as well as presented traumatic events as statistics and facts, which could be analyzed.

The survey given to all 515 participants contained basic demographic information, age and ethnicity. A YES/NO question asking if each participant had any prior knowledge of the news event, and 14 participant news event interpretation-based questions aligned on a five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale questions were generated to accommodate for three dependent variables:

- a) Importance: Demonstrating participants' overall reaction of the news excerpt;
- b) Empathy: Participants' ethical response to the news excerpt; and
- c) Engagement: The effectiveness of a call to action attained by participants from each news excerpt.

The questions relating to the overall reaction of the news event act to gauge the differences in news media frame interpretation of the event between the episodic and thematic participant groups. The questions relating to each participant's ethical interpretations of their given news excerpt are valuable to this study as it acts to contrast the impact which episodic and thematic news coverage may have upon each participant group's moral agency and feelings of empathy. The questions relating to the call to action act to measure the effectiveness of episodic and thematic news coverage in persuading participants to actively go out of their way to communicate information from the news excerpt to others, or support domestic/international intervention regarding the news event.

The results of each participant group's survey was coded and analyzed through Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Dependent variables within the episodic story/thematic story populations were analyzed against each other using an Independent-Samples T-test for statistical significance. This was done to validate the variances, or lack thereof, regarding the participant's interpretation of the news event. In addition to the participant's interpretation-based survey questions, demographic information, such as gender, age, and ethnicity, was added to the survey. This methodology was the best fit for the study because it partially accounts for preconceived bias, captures each participants' response psychological to

variables, and allows for further comparison of gender, age, and ethnicity within and between the participant groups.

Results

The results of this study will be presented in the order of the three main variables examined:

- a) Importance: Overall reaction of the news excerpt;
- b) Empathy: Ethical response to the news excerpt; and
- c) Engagement: Effectiveness of participants' call to action from the news excerpt.

Initial hypotheses predicted that the thematic participant group would report stronger responses for questions measuring importance while the episodic participant group would report a stronger response in terms of empathy and civic engagement.

Importance

The questions relating to participants' overall reaction to the story elicited an overall stronger reaction from the thematic test group means, supporting hypothesis 1. The first question of this variable group, "Do you believe this is an important issue?" reported a significant difference in the scores for episodic participants ($M=3.31$, $SD=.73$) and thematic participants ($M=4.02$, $SD=.89$); $t(100) = 4.39$, ($p=.001$). The second question of this group, "Do you think there should be more news about this issue?" also reported a significant difference in the scores for episodic participants ($M=1.98$, $SD=.927$) and thematic participants ($M=3.00$, $SD=.69$); $t(100) = 2.17$, ($p=.032$).

Thus, the outcome of the participants' overall reaction does not reject hypothesis 1, suggesting that the episodically framed news story had a significant effect upon the perceived importance of this diaspora news event (Table 1).

Table 1. Importance, by Structural Frame

	Episodic	Thematic	t (100)
Importance	3.31	4.02	4.39***
More News	1.98	3.0	2.17*
N	257	258	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. A t test compares the means between each group of frames.

Empathy

The results regarding participants' ethical response to their given excerpt also reported an overall stronger reaction from the episodic group means, which confirms hypothesis 2. The first question of this variable group, "Do you feel morally affected by the news story?" reported a significant difference in the scores for episodic participants ($M=2.76$, $SD=.79$) and thematic participants ($M=2.24$,

$SD=.99$); $t(100) = 2.98$, ($p=.004$). The second question of this group, “Do you feel empathy for the refugee population?” also reported a significant difference in the scores for episodic participants ($M=2.25$, $SD=.69$) and thematic participants ($M=1.84$, $SD=.70$); $t(100) = 2.99$, ($p=.004$).

The outcome of the participants’ ethical response does not reject the hypothesis 2, indicating that an episodically framed diaspora news event has an impact on participants’ amount of empathy (Table 2).

Table 2. Empathy, by Structural Frame

	Episodic	Thematic	t (100)
Morals	2.76	2.24	2.98***
Empathy	2.25	1.84	2.99**
N	257	258	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. A t test compares the means between each group of frames.

Engagement

The results regarding the participants’ call to action reported the most equal variances of all the question groups means, which did not support hypothesis 3. The first question of this variable group, “Do you believe political action should be taken to address the refugee crisis?” reported a significant difference in the scores for episodic participants ($M=2.37$, $SD=.72$) and thematic participants ($M=1.92$, $SD=.66$) conditions; $t(100) = 3.30$, ($p=.001$). The second question of this group, “Would you communicate with others to raise awareness for the refugees?” reported no significant difference in the scores for thematic participants ($M=2.74$, $SD=.84$) and episodic participants ($M=2.4902$, $SD=.85726$); $t(100) = 1.512$, ($p=.134$).

The results of hypothesis 3 show that an episodically framed news story influences participants’ call to action, however, does not influence participants’ individual willingness to actively discuss or engage in participatory acts. Thus, hypothesis 3 is not fully supported nor confirmed (Table 3).

Table 3. Engagement, by Structural Frame

	Episodic	Thematic	T (100)
Political Action	2.37	1.92	3.30***
Raise Awareness	2.74	2.4902	1.512
N	257	258	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. A t test compares the means between each group of frames.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine if the framing of American news media has resulted in ineffective understanding of contemporary refugee crises, resulting in disproportionate responses to refugee conflicts by Americans, dependent upon the format in which information was delivered. It was initially predicted that participants shown the episodically framed news story would report a stronger response than the participants shown the thematically-framed story. The hypotheses

were found to be proven in areas of importance and ethics, however, not for civic discussion and participation after viewing the episodically framed news story.

These outcomes give insight into the initial question for this study: does American news media frame stories in a way which removes the human element of suffering, thus creating a disproportionate response to conflict? Findings indeed support the prediction that the way in which American news media frame stories without the human element of suffering has created a disproportionate response to conflict. These results also align with the findings of Scheufele (1999) on the basis that news media frames can alter the interpretation of an event by viewers.

Participants in the episodic story treatment disclosed stronger overall reactions to the event in alignment with research conducted by Jones, Sheets, & Rowling (2011), which proposed defensive mode journalistic reporting dampens a spectator's response. This further strengthens the auxiliary connections between news media framing and a disproportionate response to conflict. However, the extent of influence that content has within an episodically framed news story has upon a spectator's schema can only be speculated. For this reason, future research in this subject should take the aspect of spectator overreaction to a conflict news event via the observation of suffering into account.

Given all the scores reported in reference to the participants' ethical response to their excerpt lie within statistical significance, it can be suggested that the episodic frame elicited a stronger ethical response from participants. These outcomes provide insight into past research produced by Boltanski (1999) suggesting pity can be derived from watching another suffer. Furthermore, the collected data of this grouping is supported by Chouliaraki (2006) and Peters (2001) on the basis that removing the aesthetic element of an unfortunate's suffering creates a sense of ambiguity, thus reducing the empathetic reaction of spectators. In addition, the results of this grouping are supported by Chouliaraki (2009) and Zelizer (1999, p. 34) in reference to the formation of emotional identification within a spectator via the bearing witness of an unfortunate's death.

The results of the call-to-action grouping did not elicit a statistically significant enough response to predict if the presentation of episodically framed news stories have a greater impact on audiences than thematically framed news stories. Journalism is grounded in enabling public discourse regarding news events and public discourse actively leads to a call to action remedying that event. Therefore, future research regarding news media presentation and interpretation should take into account the rationale behind the mobilization of spectators call to action.

Limitations

For continuation of research on the censoring of graphic content, there are several limitations which should be taken into consideration. First, it is difficult to fully account for participants' pre-conceived biases, however, designing a pre-experiment survey which gauges participant bias of relevant parties or interests that are involved in the chosen news excerpt is an adequate screening.

A second consideration that should be taken into account when designing the format of the Likert-scale questions is central tendency. For this reason, a five-point

Likert-scale design was used, however, a seven-point Likert-scale format would allow the participants a greater range of agreement or disagreement.

A third limitation of the methods used in this study is the overall length and informational content of each excerpt. While the excerpts in this study provide adequate background information for the interpretation of the event, excerpts providing more information rather than less would allow for the researcher to ask a greater range and more in-depth questions regarding the event.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to question whether there is need for alternative methods of news media reporting of conflict in contemporary refugee crises. Conflict-based journalism is based on providing viewers accurate information and generating public discourse aimed at the resolution of a posed issue. Further research should be conducted reviewing the degree of effectiveness obtained by the formatting of news stories. In addition to this, American news media should review decency standards to allow for the appropriate use of the display of human suffering. Perhaps news media platforms could invest in an internet-based program which would act as a loophole to the strict decency standards of traditional media. An internet-based program could potentially allow for the display of conflict-based graphic content and story details, to only be viewed by those over eighteen or those who have a subscription. This would allow for more episodic news stories with conflict-based content to be displayed in a manner which not only protects minors, but also members of the public who are sensitive to viewing such images. This would simultaneously allow the remaining spectators a verified forum to obtain news devoid of conflict-based censorship.

In news events where material containing human suffering is available, consideration should be given to displaying this information to viewers, as it has been suggested by data to provoke a stronger element of sensitivity with the presented refugees. Nath, Pedriana, Gifford, McAuley & Fulop found that in the United States, alternative framing of pro-immigration appeals can moderate attitudes (2022). This could be especially persuasive in news events where civilian casualties are present or acts of genocide are being committed. To suppress these images passively influences audiences' emotional interpretation of refugee conflict events, thus skewing public knowledge, discourse and calls to action (Allen, 2018).

An increase in technological capabilities has allowed for an increase in the availability of conflict-oriented footage. This modern rationale caters more recently to research conducted by Plaisance (2011) who suggests that technological advancement and a globalized world has opened the door for different forms of journalistic reporting. Rimoldi & Belgiojoso cite the poverty equivalence scale as a tool to measure levels of poverty (2016). Thus, changes should be proposed to lift the ethics-based censorship standards because these constraints have an impact on the moral interpretation of a news event by audiences and thus limit a society's power to address ethical problems.

By understanding there has been a shift in the way news can be broadcasted and obtained, a new method to safeguard what content is allowed must be established. This lies within ensuring audiences can interpret conflict-based news based on genuine ethical consideration. In an era of smartphones with readily available recording equipment and ease of access to the world-wide web, the range of first-hand visual content of conflicts is readily available and yet American mass news media is still restricted to stay in line with outdated American standards of decency.

Chouliaraki (2009) further supports the interconnectedness of moral agency and witnessing, which refines witnessing into two categories, bearing witness and eye-witnessing. Eye-witnessing is visual coverage of a news event which omits extremely graphic content. Footage is used to create a story of the event which appeals to spectators. Eye-witnessing is ultimately the less constructive of the two as it relies upon a journalist to set the frame of the event. Conversely, bearing witness displays the event as it actually unfolded with no content omitted. This allows for frames of thinking to be constructed and then interpreted within the viewer. Which allows for the news event to be experienced as if the viewer were present and thus is more authentic.

There is also a difference in spectator interpretation regarding each form of witnessing. The spectator receiving the eye-witness report holds a politically-motivated frame of objective truth. Whereas the bearing witness report holds the morally-motivated frame of identifying with the unfortunate and those the unfortunate represents. The distinction between a journalist relating the events of an unfortunate's suffering to spectators and the genuine aesthetic presentation of the unfortunate's suffering supports a key question of this study: Does American news media frame stories in a way which removes the human element of suffering, thus creating a disproportionate response to conflict? This also supports the notion that witnessing allows for a more sensitive discussion on the basis of moral agency. The witnessing of an unfortunates suffering by a spectator holds a greater element of sensitivity than written, verbal, edited-visual content, and the way in which news content is presently constrained is not adequate.

The information obtained regarding news media framing, the aesthetic quality, and witnessing derived moral agency are essential to sustaining the validity of continuing research. Without this knowledge, the impact of presenting the un-edited human element of suffering in broadcast media to viewers cannot be interpreted.

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