

2017 Charlottesville Riots – Media Coverage Paper

Media & Terrorism

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1 INTRODUCTION

On August 12th, 2017, a gathering of counter-protestors were opposing the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, when a Dodge Challenger suddenly accelerated into the crowd. As the vehicle backed away it was badly damaged and spattered with flesh and blood. In the aftermath one woman was killed and thirty-five others were left injured. The driver of the vehicle, James Alex Fields Jr., had already driven hundreds of miles before he made that fateful and murderous decision to drive one block more. Fields had previously endorsed white supremacist and neo-Nazi beliefs and in Charlottesville, he and thousands of other alt-right gatherers were protesting the removal of Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s statue from a public location. Their actions were a display of prejudice, threat, and radical ideology. Klansmen, fascists, militiamen, and supremacists marched through the streets brandishing emblems of hate and violence. With their rifles slung over shoulders tatted with swastikas and arms swinging confederate flags, the protest unfolding was a terrorist act.

The FBI defines terrorism as, “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives”^{1;2}. These supremacists were committing a terrorist act through their attempted threats to a group of counter-protesters, who wielded rainbow flags and flashed peace signs in rejection of white supremacist values. Following the Charlottesville events there were weeks of discourse trying to capture what had unfolded. This discussion attempted to dissect the trajectory of the supremacist group and how to interpret the violence that unfolded. The driver involved in the attack, James Fields Jr., was found guilty of first-degree murder and dozens of hate-crime charges. Hate crimes are defined by Oxford English Dictionary as, “a crime, typically one involving violence, that is motivated by prejudice on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or similar grounds”. Media surrounding this event did

not attach the terms “terrorism” or “terrorist” to this attack. While both terrorism and hate-crime definitions share themes of violence, terrorism requires more distinct motivations. Hate crimes do not carry the intention of “furtherance of political or social objectives,” which is a critical distinction regarding the coverage of the attack. This event closely fits this definition of terrorism but was not labeled as such. This is typical of American mainstream media and revealed the hesitations to use a term with as much gravity as “terrorist.” The magnitude and objective of a terrorist act are easily curtailed through the hate crime distinction. This paper explores the media coverage of the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” marches and car attack were terrorist events in U.S. partisan media and shows how the event was framed differently by emphasizing “terrorism” in liberal media, while de-emphasizing and deflecting it in conservative news.

2 METHODS

The objective of this analysis is to describe and discuss the Charlottesville marches and car attack through the lenses of generally contrasting American media: MSNBC and Fox News. These outlets were selected because of MSNBC’s liberal sociopolitical tendencies and Fox News’ conservative leanings. This media polarity is necessary to fully examine media coverage and how stories can be manipulated. A comparison of multiple publications will demonstrate how this event was covered from different sociopolitical stances by both outlets. This event will be contextualized and interpreted using the FBI’s definition of terrorism. A concept that drives much of this analysis is media framing, which is defined as, “the way that information is selected, organized, and presented in the media. . . to make stories that make sense to their writers and audiences”³. Headlines, perpetrator identity, imagery, and tone will be used as variables to capture the social and political atmosphere of this event and how the two media organizations covered it differently.

A breakdown of many publications through these

variables will show that “perpetrators espousing domestic extremist ideologies may be incorrectly charged with hate crimes when the crime more accurately reflects an act of terrorism”^{4,5}. James Fields Jr. and accompanying protesters marched with intentions of intimidation and enabling their political ideologies. The events of Charlottesville were an exhibition of terrorism, by definition, but were not publicized or litigated accordingly. MSNBC adopted a perspective that was adamant on holding Fields and the other alt-Right protestors accountable for their actions, while Fox News held a more defensive tone—attempting to deflect the reality of the event. The variables above influenced the framing of the Charlottesville attack and were crucial in the discussion of this event as a possible terrorist act. This paper will consider relevant media surrounding this event and discuss the incorrect labeling of an event representative of a more meaningful term: terrorism.

3 MEDIA CASE STUDIES & DISCUSSION

3.1 Definitions

It is necessary to dissect the provided definition of “terrorism.” The essential words within the FBI’s established definition are, “intimidate or coerce a government the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.” Nowhere are there specifications that sensational weaponry (bombs, vehicles, or other military-grade equipment), mass deaths, or a massive counterterrorist movement are necessary for an event to qualify as terrorism. Designating this definition is important because “terrorism” has a variety of definitions and is ever-evolving. The FBI’s verbiage has not been diffusely accepted, and different departments within the United States government may have unique and conflicting definitions. This extends to media coverage, as Fox News and MSNBC may be referencing different definitions of “terrorism,” however, neither news article discussed included an explicit definition or otherwise indicates what definition they are using. This lack of coordination is one factor that contributes to the media differences that will be discussed below. One reason there is such variety for this term is that “the terrorism label has implications for the government’s available response options and for the public’s perceptions of such groups”⁶. This is relevant to Charlottesville, as the national response to the event could have been drastically different if it had been labeled as terrorism. The repercussions of such a profound title could include a more sustained use of armed forces, investigation of the individuals and groups involved, and likely ongoing pressure for dissolution. Without the terrorism label, the events are viewed as isolated and the persons involved can easily be ignored. Throughout this discussion, the ambiguity

associated with the term is an underlying consideration that influences the included sources.

3.2 Headlines

The wording of headlines was one variable that illuminated certain differences between the media coverage of the Charlottesville events. Headlines are a crucial variable because they introduce the general emotions and argument that an article or video provides. Before engaging the full story, a headline expresses an immediate opinion. In a comparison of MSNBC and Fox News, their headlines differed by using more passive or more pointed language. For example, the MSNBC video headlined, “Why Won’t Trump Call the Charlottesville Attack Terrorism?” contrasts the Fox News counterpart, which is headlined, “McMaster Calls Violence in Charlottesville ‘Terrorism’, as Trump Pressed to Reject Group”^{7,8}.

The MSNBC headline very clearly designates the events as a terrorist attack. The headline is presented as a question as if begging the former president to do something deemed obvious. The title is confrontational and desperate for Trump to acknowledge the reality of this situation. His failure makes the question essentially rhetorical, suggesting there is no debate that the attacks were a terrorist act. The Fox News article is much more indirect and attempts to minimize the statements of the Lieutenant General and former National Security Advisor, H.R. McMaster, who considers the event terrorism. Instead of confronting the issue headstrong, Fox News navigates around the consequence of the “terrorism” label. Mentioning McMaster, the National Security Advisor, shows that “terrorism” had been considered, but is not again mentioned in the article. The article moves away from H.R. McMaster’s statements and instead summarizes other information about the event, diluting the article and realigning focus away from the pertinent quote by McMaster. Adding the phrase “... Trump Pressed to Reject Group” also diminishes the focus on the subject, which is terrorism. The entire title aims to take focus away from the word terrorist in favor of other noteworthy names (McMaster and Trump). Fox News deploys a wordy and confusing headline to establish that they (as a media outlet) are not associating the event with the terrorism term, it was just the quote of a lone person. As shown by these two sources, headlining represented broad differences in the approach to the Charlottesville attacks.

3.3 Perpetrator Identity

The next critical variable showing the differences between these two outlets is perpetrator identity, given that these depictions change the perception of the attack. Perpetrator identity regards different qualities and

groupings of the individual(s) involved in an event. These typically include race, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and other descriptors. Media utilizes these qualities to characterize perpetrators, which develops their story and assigns blame. Many of these traits are subject to stereotyping, which has exposed some (general) sociopolitical differences between outlets. One source may show tendencies to utilize language consistent with traditional stereotypes, while another strives to adopt progressive terminology and utilize appropriate descriptors. Biased perpetrator identity reporting is part of the reason MSNBC is considered a more liberal outlet, while Fox News is described as conservative. Media outlet perpetrator framing can shape these sociopolitical stories because the language subtly introduces certain qualities of protagonists and antagonists. A careful approach to perpetrator identity is important for a consumer base, as it often avoids biased portrayals of perpetrators, such as white supremacists in Charlottesville in Fox News reporting. The use and focus on certain perpetrator characteristics regularly shape the tone of a publication and establish how blame is placed.

Perpetrator identity is important in media analysis because it shows the biases of each outlet. The MSNBC article frames the perpetrator by generalizing the perpetrator as extremist alt-right, instead of only mentioning Fields⁹. Blame is assigned to a broader group instead of the lone individual. By framing the perpetrator through their membership in these groups and through their engagement in hate speech and violence, the “social objectives” of the event are more visible. A Fox News article only focuses on Fields and uses terms such as “prosecutors say...” and “allegedly...” to avoid asserting connections between the perpetrator and hate groups, which minimizes blame¹⁰. For MSNBC, the perpetrator identity was necessary to expose broader influences, such as white supremacist group membership. Fox News attempts to isolate the perpetrator and framed Fields Jr. differently to remove this context. By separating the entities of the car attack and Unite the Right protests, the combined event loses effect. Perpetrator identity is critical because it combines multiple elements together and explains how the violent event came to fruition. This framing contributes to the interpretation of the attacks as terrorism, or not.

3.4 Imagery

The imagery included in different publications surrounding this event also distinguishes the outlets. Differences in media coverage of this event demonstrate racial bias prevalent in American social media. This bias is displayed in a video by MSNBC where they find “terror attacks by Muslim perpetrators receive 449% more media coverage than other attacks”⁸. This coverage bias is relevant to Charlottesville because the perpetrator

was a white man and ensuing coverage inadequately reported the event. Underlying trends contribute to the differences in coverage, especially with reference to perpetrator identity. The statistic reveals a hesitation for certain individuals and events to be identified by terms such as “terrorist,” much like the white supremacists and their actions.

The inclusion of pictures and clips of violence and threatening actions helped this MSNBC content to intensify the situation. Weapons and slurs helped frame the perpetrator(s) in a more violent and hateful manner. Fox News article only included a single image—the mugshot of Fields Jr., which minimized the intensity of the situation at hand¹¹. There were no images of the actual attack or of protests. The Fox News sources incompletely covered the actions of this event, which had a diluting effect regarding the perpetrators. Demagnifying the violence and hate displayed by the white supremacists was indicative of disproportionate race reporting, most commonly found in conservative media. Multiple MSNBC video clips reveal supremacist shouting racist remarks, wielding torches, brandishing weapons, and flying flags of hate symbols, which the reporters suggest are clearly indicative of terrorist action and comply with the FBI’s definition. MSNBC emphasized the violence and terror with images of weapons and injury, whereas Fox News downplayed these actions by avoiding more gruesome content. MSNBC effectively illuminated the reality and magnitude of the situation, whereas Fox News was more engaged in avoiding this coverage.

3.5 Tone

Tone was the most important variable in distinguishing the media coverage of the Charlottesville attacks. Differences in tone were exhibited in each of the variables discussed above and are the culmination of the framing utilized by MSNBC and Fox News. Examining the tone helps show why and how the demonstrations of hate, threats, and violence were presented differently. The value of the tone is demonstrated through the cascade of criticism that followed Donald Trump’s failure to condemn the white supremacists responsible in the Charlottesville attacks. In a very brief passage from an MSNBC article, the author effectively captured the emotions of the event¹². Through the lens of Trump, who “... preferring to remain maddeningly vague, could’ve condemned neo-Nazis, white nationalists, and terrorists – when someone deliberately uses a car as a weapon, driving into a crowd...” the author emphasizes themes of hate and violence¹³. These themes and the tone are pivotal in MSNBC’s framing of this event.

One month after the attack, a Fox News article written by Kaitlyn Schallhorn took a very defensive and almost apologetic stance. Instead of addressing the

moment or criticizing Trump, this article used language to develop an excuse of sorts. The language used was matter-of-fact and did not use passionate or accusatory language like seen in the MSNBC publications. In a long and drawn-out timeline of events and quotes, Schallhorn avoids distress and intensity. The tone was established by words such as “accusation.” For example, “police say a Nazi sympathizer plowed his car through a group of counter-protesters” has a much milder tone than beginning the sentence with “a Nazi sympathizer. . .”¹⁴. The simple addition of “police say. . .” weakens the effect of this statement. The intention here is to alleviate the tension surrounding this event. Tone is essential for these outlets to effectively frame the moment.

The tone continued to shape the framing of this event, even years after the “Unite the Right” rallies, when a medley of trials provoked new discussion surrounding the Charlottesville attack. An MSNBC article emphasized that “when speech demonstrably incites violence, the perpetrators of that violence must be held accountable. The Charlottesville trial offers an opportunity to demonstrate that”⁹. The author explicitly suggests that the perpetrators used speech to incite violence. This confrontational tone is relevant to framing, especially considering the FBI’s definition, as speech was used as a form of intimidation and coercion. This accusatory tone is also essential because it drives the claim that “First Amendment protections do not excuse violence,” which eliminates excuses for the event⁹. The Fox News response to the Fields trial (different than Unite the Right trial) had a very defensive tone, stating “James Alex Fields Jr. . . was “scared to death” after witnessing violent clashes between protesters and counter-protesters”¹⁰. The use of language such as “scared. . .” and mentioning “clashes between protesters. . .:” weakens the conviction of accusations. This defensive tone redirects blame and changes the framing of this event by also marking the actions of counter-protestors. Overall, the tone is the ultimate variable in the consideration of “terrorism” and how violence is framed.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There are marked differences in the coverage of the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” marches and the deadly car attack. MSNBC chronicled the event through critical headlines, emphasizing the extremist ideologies of the perpetrator, showing frightening images surrounding the event, and ultimately using a tone focused on illuminating the terror of these attacks. Fox News was more committed to deflecting blame instead of confronting the tragedy and terror. The headlines were more matter-of-fact and less accusatory, the perpetrator was often framed in an isolated role acting out of fear, and the publications lacked imagery of violence

and terror. These differences in framing culminated in the application, or not, of the label of “terrorism.” This discussion reflects a broader trend, “despite the cases of domestic terrorism prosecutions identified by Aaronson (2019), it appears that most instances of right-wing extremist violence are not prosecuted as such”⁴. For these media outlets, there were more than political differences involved in the framing of the attacks. This event reflected broader trends in America—the presence of white supremacist radical groups, criticisms of leadership and their actions, and the enabling of violence. MSNBC aimed to emphasize these trends, while Fox News was keen on minimizing the perceived reality of these ideas.

The Charlottesville “Unite the Right” marches and the car attack were terrorist events. Following the FBI’s definition of terrorism, all these actions are intended to intimidate a population and provoke the “furtherance of political and social objectives”¹. Brandishing weapons, hateful remarks, and killing an innocent counter protestor each support this judgment. However, this was not the conclusion of the collective news media. MSNBC and Fox News covered the event differently. Fox News did not engage in critical and active coverage of the event, which diminished the magnitude of this event and allowed their publications to navigate away from the “terrorism” label. MSNBC contrasted this detachment by exposing the consequences and developing a more critical depiction of the entire episode, including use of “terrorism.” The broader implications of avoiding the “terrorism” label for this event is the protection and enabling of white supremacist groups. “Hate-crimes” do not capture the true magnitude and intensity of this event. Failing to acknowledge terrorist attacks by misrepresenting their violence as hate crimes reflects the prejudiced underpinnings of this country.

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