

Media Framing in the Centennial Olympic Park Bombing: How Media Coverage of Terrorism Shifts When a Suspect Is Revealed

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Abstract

Terrorist attacks often dominate news cycles as reporters seek to interpret the attack through their own desired framing tools. Since “humans are predisposed to attend to negative and threatening information”¹, news coverage of terrorist attacks receive a lot of attention and how the attack is framed can manipulate the narrative portrayed to the public. This study utilized the Nexus database to examine framing techniques used by a local and an international newspaper in reporting on the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Park bombings both before and after a subject was identified by the FBI. This case study raises major concerns about the responsibility of journalists in balancing the pursuit of a story and ethical obligations surrounding the presumption of innocence. This paper explores how perpetrator identity, legitimacy in sources, and perceived future threats influenced how the bombing was covered and the consequences of these framing tools. Overall, once a suspect had been named, both news outlets utilized “othering” techniques to deemphasize the domestic terrorism label, their sources cited became less qualified, and they stopped speculating about the possibility of another attack.

On July 27, 1996 during the Summer Olympics, a pipe bomb exploded at the Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, Georgia, killing two people and injuring over one hundred more. The explosion would have been far deadlier if the bag concealing the bomb had not been discovered by security guard Richard Jewell, who began clearing the area after alerting the Georgia Bureau of Investigation². Despite Jewell’s critical role in discovering the bomb, the news organizations that had first deemed him a “hero” quickly changed their narrative once the FBI labeled him as a suspect in the bombing. The notion of being innocent until proven guilty is a cardinal principle of the United States’ legal system. Entwined with the concept of presumed innocence is the burden of proof. In criminal cases, the prosecution must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the plaintiff is guilty of the charge in which they are accused. Yet this issue of criminal jurisprudence often becomes irrelevant in a media driven world since journalists are not held to the same standards as actors in the legal system. The case of the Centennial Olympic Park bombing raises major concerns about the responsibility of journalists in balancing the pursuit of a story and ethical obligations surrounding the presumption of innocence, especially in sensitive cases such as terrorism.

The Atlanta Centennial Olympic Park bombing

serves as an excellent reflection of how much power the media holds in our society. This study examined two articles from two sources to determine how The Atlanta Journal Constitution (AJC) and USA Today covered this terrorist incident as well as what factors influenced how the attack was framed. Because the AJC was the first newspaper to release Jewell’s name as a suspect, their reporting set the tone for several other local news outlets. USA Today was also included in the study to represent an international media outlet to determine if audience size would influence how the media distilled information to their perspective audiences. Both of the newspapers selected are highly credible outlets with only moderate political alignments, to reduce the influence of political bias on their analyses.

Professor Entman from Northwestern University described framing as a way to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient. . .”³. By choosing what is seen as “salient,” a media outlet can manipulate the narrative and influence how their audience interprets an event. This immense power of being able to shape opinions and perceptions of reality is one reason why ethical principles such as transparency and objectivity are so essential in the field of professional journalism. Keeping Entman’s definition in mind, this study examined how perpetrator identity, legitimacy

in sources, and perceived future threats effected how the bombing was covered. Overall, once a suspect had been named, both news outlets utilized “othering” techniques to deemphasize the domestic terrorism label, the sources cited became less qualified, and both outlets stopped speculating about the possibility of another attack.

In the days following the bombing, no terrorist group took responsibility for the attack, leaving investigators scrambling to find a potential motive. What makes an attack qualify as terrorism can vary across different circumstances, therefore there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Despite this challenge, the FBI, who investigated the bombing, uses two broad definitions for international and domestic terrorism. Because the 911 call that warned police about the bomb came from a pay phone near the park and the caller did not identify themselves as a member of a terrorist group, it is unlikely the attack could be categorized under the international terrorism definition². Therefore, the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Park bombing fell under the FBI’s definition of domestic terrorism which is defined as “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature”⁴.

The true perpetrator of the bombings, Eric Rudolph, had not yet been identified as a suspect, therefore his anti-abortionist motivations had yet to be revealed. Years later after finally being caught by the FBI, Rudolph admitted, “the purpose of the attack on July 27th was to confound, anger and embarrass the Washington government in the eyes of the world for its abominable sanctioning of abortion on demand”⁵. However, even without this insight, investigators at the time still believed the attack to be domestic terrorism. Security experts quoted in the AJC stated that international terrorist groups would likely have used an explosive such as TNT, which has a bigger blast radius than a pipe bomb, and that easy access to escape routes would make the park setting more attractive for an individual person rather than a group. There was also speculation that the Olympics could have served as a symbolic target of attack for a greater unknown purpose⁶.

Even in 1996, terrorist attacks were not uncommon, however, whether or not an attack received adequate media coverage was dependent on several factors, one of which was perpetrator identity. Perpetrator identity is a common frame that is often utilized to portray the attacker as an outsider to normal society. This form of “othering” can be based on the perpetrator’s religion, ethnicity, mental faculties, or any other factor that can distance them from the average reader. Thus, by framing the perpetrator as an outsider, the reader can distance themselves both from the perpetrator and the act of violence itself⁷.

Within the first day after the attack, neither the AJC nor USA Today had a possible suspect to report on, so their speculations of possible perpetrators remained very general. The AJC quoted several security experts and police officials who thought the bombing was the work of “home-grown terrorists”⁶. The article also speculated that the perpetrator could be “white supremacists” or even an “extreme anti-government movement.” The USA Today article released at the same time, chose to be more vague by quoting an FBI agent who stated, “we are not focused in any one specific direction”⁸.

However, after Jewell was labeled a suspect on July 31, 1996, neither news article used the terms “terrorism” or “terrorist.” Instead, the AJC and USA Today focused on Jewel’s “bumpy road” in policing. Both news outlets emphasized how Jewel “bounced around a number of jobs” in law enforcement and cited several less-than-flattering reviews from his former employers depicting him as “erratic,” “overly aggressive,” and “gung-ho”^{9,8}. This phenomenon is consistent with previous literature that has examined how labeling the attack as terrorism versus crime determines what “othering” characteristic the media will utilize. When an incident is labeled as terrorism, the perpetrator is “othered mainly based on his religious and ethnic background.” On the other hand, when the incident is seen as a crime, “othering occurs through pathologizing the perpetrator”⁷. This is clearly seen in the Atlanta Centennial Park bombing because at first the incident was depicted as domestic terrorism even though there were no suspects. However, when the suspect was revealed to be a white male with a history in law enforcement, the media pathologized him as an attention-seeking police officer that fit the profile of an individual with a “messiah complex.” By othering Jewell based on his previously failed jobs, the attack became framed as a one-time crime by an attention seeking police officer rather than as an act of terrorism.

At this point in time, Jewell had not been charged with any crime and therefore, was still innocent until proven guilty. One of the major problems that occurs when the media does not respect the principle of presumed innocence, is that they can stigmatize the alleged perpetrator in the eyes of their audience. Jewell moved to Atlanta at the age of four after his mother remarried and relocated the family. He grew up in Atlanta, attended school in the area, and went on to establish his career in nearby towns¹⁰. Atlanta was his community, filled with the people who taught and cared for him growing up. But, because terrorist attacks are magnets for media attention, there was a lot of competition to break the story of the bombing first, especially for the AJC as the attack happened in their own backyard. It was while under this pressure, that the media failed to disclose that no charges had been filed and utilized

“othering” language to ostracize Jewell from the very community he grew up in. Following headlines that deemed Richard Jewell as a possible suspect, the former security guard was subjected to intense media attention, constant surveillance, and a slew of bad publicity. After eighty-eight days, Jewell was cleared as a suspect, but the accusations took their toll. Jewell eventually died from a heart attack at the age of forty-four. To this day, his mother still attests that “the media scrutiny and his negative public image played a role in his death”¹⁰.

The AJC and USA Today also shared a similarity in the authority and legitimacy of the sources they quoted in their articles. On July 27, before Jewell’s name became publicized, the AJC cited police officials, a president of a security consultant firm, and several security experts for their professional opinions on the attack. Similarly, only a day later USA Today quoted FBI special agents, an ATF agent, a chief executive officer of the Atlanta Olympic Committee, and several other police officers. Almost every single person quoted or mentioned in the initial articles was a law enforcement officer in some capacity, thus lending legitimacy to their speculations^{6,8}.

However, once Jewell was named a suspect, there was a noticeable drop in the qualifications of the sources being quoted. There was a major shift from “security experts” to people close to Jewell such as his neighbor, his former employers, his cousin, and even the maintenance man of his apartment complex. With this devolution in the quality of the sources, came a decrease in the credibility of the articles. The quotations used by both news outlets were no longer expert opinions, but very subject speculations by biased individuals. What is also interesting is that the quotes almost all centered around Jewell and his character rather than speculations about the bombing. There was also a significant decrease in mentioning titles, instead simply referring to sources vaguely as “officials” when regarding why Jewell was even under suspicion^{9,8}.

Cultivating credible sources is an essential role of ethical reporting, as to provide the most accurate information to the public. Utilizing quotes from high-quality, experts adds to the ethos of the piece and builds the outlet’s reputation as a trustworthy source of information to the public. When media outlets do not respect the principle of presumed innocence and use biased or irrelevant sources to support their claims, they abandon their role as simply reporting the news and take on the role of judge, jury, and executioner. This does not mean that journalists should not provide detailed accounts or descriptions of incriminating evidence, but rather they must still treat the people accused of a crime as innocent until they are proven guilty by a court of law. Only implementing sources to fit one’s own narrative may increase audience size, especially when paraphrasing especially incriminating quotes, but the practice has severe consequences. In the case of Jewell, the decrease

in source quality after his pronouncement as a suspect was detrimental to his future career prospects and sullied his reputation without offering him any way to defend himself.

While perpetrator identity and source legitimacy are two powerful framing techniques, the most impactful frame is the possibility of future attacks. Previous literature shows that audiences are more attuned to attacks that pose an immediate, violent threat. This is because “humans are predisposed to attend to negative and threatening information”¹. Therefore, by mentioning the possibility of a future attack, audiences develop a sense of fear which requires them to pay more attention to the media and what it reports.

While the tone of the July 27 AJC article began as informational, it ended on a note of fear by quoting a New Orleans security consultant saying that “there’s no reason for him [the unknown bomber] not to consider doing it again...”⁶. Similarly, the USA Today article ended on an ominous note with the chief executive officer of the Atlanta Olympic committee stating, “we all need some time to re-evaluate security at the park and decide where we go from here”⁸. Both articles used ambiguous quotes from credible sources to make the reader question whether or not there will be another bombing. By quoting experts who are weary, the media created the narrative that another attack was a real and imminent possibility.

However, once Richard Jewell was identified as a suspect, neither news outlet discussed the possibility of another attack. There is no mention of a need for increased security measures, ambiguous quotes, or other forms of fear mongering. Instead, both articles made the case for why Richard Jewell was a rightful suspect. This, in turn, lulled the public into a false sense of security by making them believe that the bomber had been caught and there would be no future attacks^{9,8}.

The danger in this is that we now know that Richard Jewell was not the bomber. In fact, the real perpetrator, Eric Rudolph, was not caught until years later after orchestrating three more bombings, bombings for which the public was unprepared. When the media begins to tailor their coverage to what they believe their audience wants to hear, the cost is not just keeping information from the public. The cost could be in human lives. Terrorist events are media magnets because high casualties equate more viewers. However as previous literature suggests, more coverage of terrorist attacks may encourage an increase in terrorist activity because terrorists want to be seen¹. The media thus has a responsibility to cover terrorist attacks in a fair way regardless of whether there is an individual suspected of being responsible for the attack.

Overall, both the AJC and USA Today shifted how they framed perpetrator identity, legitimacy in sources, and perceived future threats once Richard Jewell was

labeled as a possible suspect. Rather than staying objective and recognizing that Jewell had never been officially charged by any law enforcement agency, both news outlets attempted to frame the bombings into a narrative that fit what they wanted. Both news outlets othered Jewell through disparaging quotes to distance him from their viewing audience. Both news outlets used less-qualified sources to villainize Jewell rather than continue quoting the experts they previously worked beside. Both news outlets stopped speculating about the possibility of another attack. Therefore, both news outlets are responsible for diverting the public attention to an innocent man while the real terrorist got away with three more bombings.

It is clear that the media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion and therefore should be held to strict ethical standards. Standards that include recognizing and using language that acknowledges the legal significance of presumed innocence. Jewell's life was upended by the media as he endured the stress of having his reputation tarnished across the very country he hoped to serve as a security officer. Ostracized by his own community, Jewell's perspective job opportunities were severely affected and his personal relationships were impacted by over eager reporters, desperate to break a story without first having all the facts. The Centennial Olympic Park bombing is just one case study that exemplifies the responsibility that journalists face in balancing the pursuit of a story with ethical obligations concerning presumed innocence. After all, by respecting that people are innocent until proven guilty, we show our respect for the cardinal principles of our legal system as well as prioritize justice over sensationalism.

1 EDITOR'S NOTES

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