Media Bias and Representation of Law Enforcement

By Cole Kellison

Introduction

The topic of this study is media bias in the news outlets of Fox News and CNN and the representation of law enforcement. In today's American society, it is common to believe that these two outlets sort of oppose one another. They are said to lay on opposite sides of the political spectrum on a number of issues. Law enforcement and law enforcement officials are constantly under scrutiny for the actions taken by a few officers. This study explores if Fox News and CNN exhibit biases towards law enforcement, whether it be positive or negative, in the stories that they publish.

Theory: Labeling Theory

The idea of breaking norms and how a society responds to this breaking are known as deviance and stigma. A major concern of the labeling theory are those individuals who society would view in a more negative way. These individuals who would be looked upon negatively by society would be considered deviant. This means that they have gone against the norms set forth by their society. These norms could be minor ones or even more major norms like laws. This social role of being a deviant shapes how those around the individual perceive him or her. This deviant label causes a social stigma towards the individual. This is easily shown in how the news effects the public's perception of law enforcement. How news corporations report on certain situations affect how the people law enforcement officials feel about them. People treat them differently based on how the news outlets report on them.

Discussion and Reflection

The impact of a study like this could have an impact on a smaller, micro scale from individual to individual. As humans, people are curious beings. We like to know what is happening, why things happen, and to be able to obtain an explanation for occurrences. We like to be kept up to date on what is going on in our own countries and even what is happening around the world. Where do people get their information for current events in their country and around the world? They turn to the news. People trust the news to give them reliable and trustworthy information with what is happening with current events. This study provided information and examples of how, even though these corporations report on the same occurrences and current events, they do not do it without some sort of bias that is shown through in their words. This comes to the question of why this matters to the individual. Why does biased reporting on events matter to people? This matters because biased reporting does not always give the true information or give all of the facts surrounding said occurrences information. There could be details given or left out that affect the whole story. A study like this brings a question to mind: why does bias exist in America when it is considered to be a leader and world-wide superpower? The idea of stratification could give some insight to why biases occur in the news, media, and other aspects of American culture. Image is something that is important to many Americans. This goes along with the obsession with social media and wanting to be viewed as everyone as "popular" and "important". There are not any formal rankings or classifications of people in America, but people are informally put into classes based on one's wealth. The more wealth that a particular person or persons family has, the higher class that will be grouped in. The higher class that someone is grouped in, the more prestigious they are considered. This is where the bias is embedded. It is bias to consider someone with great wealth is more important or "better" than someone who has less money. Depending what class a person is in, they develop biases on things they are used to or what they prefer. A person's class shapes their reactions to events and viewpoints of certain people. It could be argued that the stratification of Americans is at the root at why there is biases in American people and news reporting.

Question

How do biases in news outlets effect the image of law enforcement?

Analysis

Article Titles: There was one major, over-arching theme that I identified in these article titles. The articles that were from Fox News seemed to have titles that were more favorable towards the officer who was in the center of the story than CNN's articles did. Fox News used words like "shooting" and "ex-cop". These words have meanings that are less harsh than words like "murder" and "fired officer". Fox also added details that made the officer seem more humane, like the brother of Botham Jean hugging his brother's killer. CNN also had no mention of Michael Brown possibly being a criminal, making it seem like the officer had killed an innocent man. All of these titles, and the phrases in them, effect how the reader/viewer will understand the article. As a general statement of the themes of these six article titles, Fox News was more favorable to law enforcement officers than CNN was.

Description of Actions: Both CNN and Fox News used slightly different verbs in slightly different ways. Even though these were just slight differences, there were big differences in the portrayal of the law enforcement officers and the emotions evoked from these descriptions. Like previously stated in the Article Titles section, CNN used words like "murder" to describe the actions that the officers in their stories took. Compared to that, Fox News used the term "shooting". Again, the action of murder is much more negative than the term shooting. Murder carries a life sentence whereas just a homicide has the possibility of getting out of jail. So, murder is much more negative than the term just a shooting. This was the overall theme of how the description of the actions taken by the law enforcement. Fox News use descriptive terms and phrases that made the actions of the officers seem less harsh or added in details to make the officer seem more humane. CNN used details and phrases that gave an in depth description of the actions of the officers. This in depth description, many times, made the actions of the officers seem disgusting and inhumane.

Race: Race is an important factor in all of these articles. In all of the articles, the law enforcement officer was white, and the person who the officer was encountering was an African American. Two out of three articles the officer was a man, but one of the articles the officer was a woman. . Race was a peculiar thing to analyze in these articles. Short of leaving out the race of a few key people in these stories. Each outlet seemed to report on the race in the same way.

Overall: The over-arching theme that I identified through all of these articles was that Fox News tried to provide the information in a way that helped improve the law enforcement officers image or repair one that might have been damaged. Their article titles and descriptions of the events were done in a way to justify the law enforcement officer's actions and paint them in a positive light. The article titles and description of events of CNN's articles seemed to focus more on the negative aspects of what the officer had done and provide details that were negative to their image.

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Methods

The sample that was chosen for this project consisted of 6 news articles coming from the news outlets CNN and Fox news, that can be analyzed for some variance and bias present in them. CNN and Fox News were chosen because of their popularity. These articles are about three different news stories, that are relatively new and controversial. They all have to do with law enforcement officials or crime or the outcomes of police and suspect interactions. There is one article from each Fox News and CNN about the same story. The stories from CNN and Fox news are on the same stories were published the same days as one another. The main analysis method that is going to be used to analyze the data in this project is narrative analysis. The articles from CNN and Fox that are on the same stories will be read and analyzed side-by-side. What is to be looked for are aspects like discrepancies in the reporting. This could be seen in things like differences in description of people in the stories or how the actual story itself is described. Nonnarrative analysis will also be used. "Race" words are prevalent in these stories, so counting these types of words in each of the articles would be useful. Manifest meanings will also be analyzed. Examining the actual length of the articles is a manifest meaning that is going to be used. The last analysis method to be used is latent meanings. To do this, the articles are going to be analyzed to see if either CNN or Fox News use specific words or phrases that are meant to evoke emotions. This means that if one of these news outlets uses more positive or negative words and phrases to describe the people in the actual stories.

Conclusion

One of the limitations that made it incredibly difficult to do this study was the time constraints. When one takes a step back and looks at the length of time that this study was done in, it was a relatively a short period of time. It was done in the amount of time, or a little less, that it takes to complete a semester of school. A major part of a study is the data itself. Finding data, analyzing it, and assigning codes to this data is a process that can take a long time to do. Because of the time constraints of this study finding data, analyzing it, and assigning codes to it was done in about a month or a little less. Plus, this was not the only section of work that this study required. There were other things that could have taken a while to do, like a review of literature, that itself could have been worked on for a month. Looking at the study now, there are a few things that should have been done differently, if everything would go perfectly. One thing that would have been done differently is the amount of data collected. The data that was used was sufficient in every way possible, but sufficient does not always mean the best. This study could have been made slightly better with a few more stories from CNN and Fox News. This would have allowed different codes to be made and other differences among stories to be seen. More data is something that is never bad for studies to have, every study could use more data. The findings of this study show how there is bias in the way that Fox News and CNN report on situations dealing with law enforcement and law enforcement officials. Because these biases have to do with political backings, meaning they either favor a democratic or republican viewpoint, it implicates which party is trying to favor a positive or negative view of law enforcement officials. This means that republicans and republican backed corporations, generally, have a greater support and positive view of law enforcement officials than democrats and democratic backed corporations. Like stated this is a generalization, so it is not necessarily true for all cases. There are going to be some republicans that view law enforcement negatively and democrats who view it positively. This study points to the fact that further research and studies could be done on the same topics and topics alike. It would be intriguing to focus on just the element of race pertaining to news stories about law enforcement. Race is usually a key factor in big stories pertaining to law enforcement. It would be a useful study to just focus on race and racial terms in these articles and articles alike. Another fascinating study could deal with the change of police image over years. One could analyze older articles and compare them to newer ones, seeing if the is any change in the ways the stories are described.

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