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Differences in Media Framing of Otto Warmbier

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INTRODUCTION

Tensions between North Korea and the United States are certainly not uncommon nor surprising. The United States has frequently been unsettled by their perception of North Korea's government. This impression may be most closely linked to the Korean War, during which media portrayal of North Korea characterized the country as Communist and barbaric. Most notably, media perpetuated the idea that American prisoners of war were treated ruthlessly by North Korea's government.[1] During a war in which America suffered many casualties (seemingly needlessly), the negative portrayal of North Korea offered a way for Americans to place blame somewhere and make sense of the war. Americans still occasionally find themselves imprisoned in North Korea today, and each instance further heightens distrust and disapproval in the North Korean government.

Recent history features many instances of North Korea taking American prisoners. One such example is Matthew Todd Miller, who was accused of purposely attempting to be arrested in order to spy on the North Korean prison system and report firsthand information.[2] Another instance was a man named Kenneth Bae, who was arrested for leading tour groups in North Korea with the ulterior motive of Christian missionary work (strictly forbidden in North Korea).[3] However, one case that particularly caught the eye of American media this year was that of Otto Warmbier. Warmbier was a twenty-two year old college student on a group trip to North Korea when he was accused of committing what the North Korean government considered a terrible crime against the regime. Warmbier had allegedly stolen a poster featuring North Korean government propaganda from the hotel in which he was staying during his trip. The act had been caught on security camera. As a continuing theme in conflicts between North Korea and the United States, media framing might encourage us to think of this story in alternative ways. For example, we might either analyze whether or not Warmbier behaved inappropriately or put more attention on blaming North Korea and acknowledging this event as an injustice.

After his arrest, the regime sentenced Otto to fifteen years in a North Korean prison as well as hard labor. This is not an uncommon punishment for American prisoners to receive. Both Matthew Todd Miller and Kenneth Bae also received sentences of hard labor (however, each of these men interestingly

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[1] Gauthier, B. K. (2015). A Tortured Relic. *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 22(4), 343-367. doi:10.1163/18765610-02204002

[2] Sang-Hun, C. (2014, September 14). Matthew Todd Miller Sentenced to 6 Years of Hard Labor in North Korea. *The New York Times.* Retrieved March 24, 2018.

[3] Gladstone, R. (2016, May 2). Kenneth Bae, Longest-Held U.S. Prisoner of North Korea, Reveals Details of Ordeal. *The New York Times.* Retrieved March 24, 2018.

claimed that they were treated decently during their time in prison).[4] However, Otto experienced severe medical issues only a month into the time he was required to serve. The North Korean government revealed to America that Warmbier was in a coma and claimed the reason for his sudden critical state was a combination of botulism and a sleeping pill. This revelation came as a shock and would spark further tensions between the United States and North Korea's already strained relationship. After negotiations with the United States, North Korea agreed to release Warmbier from imprisonment, and he was sent home to Cincinnati, Ohio where he died six days later. The United States government blamed North Korea for his death. Many opinions and speculations began floating around, as well as accusations that North Korea had tortured Warmbier during his time in captivity. However, both doctors and a coroner were unable to find the cause of death with reports indicating neither evidence of botulism nor of torture.[5]

Cases like these raise important issues in the area of international relations. It is important to analyze many factors in the case and death of Warmbier. Although the United States as a country may not find North Korea's government to be fair or their punishments to be appropriate, American citizens are still required to follow their laws when visiting. Furthermore, any visitor, American citizens included, is also subject to another country's punishments should he/she break the law in that country.

This study will analyze the frames used by two major media outlets. CNN will be used as the traditionally liberal news source and FOX News will be used as the traditionally conservative news source. I will examine which frames are used most frequently in each outlet and will also take into account the lack of use of certain frames. The five reference perspectives will be: the tragedy frame, the life story frame, the reasoning frame, the suffering frame, and the North Korea frame. These frames are explained further and in more detail in the methods and data section. This study will examine how liberal or conservative news sources frame a sensitive story that also raises important international relations issues.

HYPOTHESES

The main questions that are being asked in this study are: What kinds of frames are used most frequently in the coverage of Warmbier's death? In other words, how does the media tend to frame this issue in order to fulfill its role and responsibility to both report the news in an informative way and gain readers?

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[4] James, M. (2017, June 19). North Korean treatment of Western prisoners is bizarre, not always physically brutal. *USA Today*. Retrieved March 24, 2018.
[5] Newman, C. (2017, June 20). University Gathers For Emotional Vigil Remembering Otto Warmbier. *UVA Today - University of Virginia*.

Furthermore, another question is whether or not conservative and liberal media outlets covered Warmbier's imprisonment and death differently, and if so, to what extent?

In response to the first research question that is asked, I hypothesize that the tragedy and life story frames will be used the most often in the coverage of Warmbier. Although articles about this type of event do not include an "entertainment" aspect, the media still needs to attract readers, and therefore will be more likely to appeal to emotions and cover stories in a way that allows any ordinary person to relate.[6]

In response to the second research question, I hypothesize that conservative and liberal media outlets will show significant differences in their coverage of Warmbier. I predict that FOX news will show more instances of the reasoning frame than CNN. It seems likely that a conservative news source would be more likely to focus on Warmbier's behaviors that led to his arrest (the reasoning frame). I also hypothesize that the North Korea frame will be found in FOX News more frequently than CNN. On the other hand, I hypothesize that CNN, the liberal news source, will likely show more instances of the tragedy and the suffering frames in order to elicit an emotional response from their readers. Along with these predictions, I also hypothesize that FOX News will show more instances of the North Korea frame.

METHODS AND DATA

In this study, a total of fifty news articles involving Otto Warmbier's imprisonment and death were analyzed. The articles were taken from two different news sources: CNN and Fox News. CNN is typically perceived as a more "liberal" leaning news source, while Fox News tends to be perceived as "conservative" leaning. For example, a study from Pew Research Center found notable differences in the tone used in each of these sources, claiming that CNN tended to speak for the liberal perspective and Fox News tended to speak towards the conservative side.[7] However, perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence for this argument is each news source's audience. An additional study by Pew Research Center showed that CNN was more widely enjoyed by liberal viewers while Fox News had more conservative viewers.[8]

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[6] Iyengar, S. (2016). *Media Politics: A Citizen's* Guide (3rd ed.). Norton. 21-22

[7] Pew Research Center - Journalism and Media Staff (2002, January 28). CNN vs. Fox. Retrieved March 24, 2018.

[8] Blake, A. (2014, October 21). Ranking the media from liberal to conservative, based on their audiences. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 24, 2018.

The articles from CNN were found using LexisNexis Academic, using the keyword "Otto Warmbier" in only articles from CNN. Since this event was being heavily covered in the media for a relatively short period of time (the height of attention this story received in the media was from his release from North Korea (June 13th, 2017) to his death (June 19, 2017) and then notable coverage continued approximately a week after that), the search was not limited to only articles from a certain time period. The articles analyzed were the first twenty-five that appeared in order of relevance, in order to obtain the stories with the most useful information. Since FOX News is not listed as a search option in LexisNexis Academic, articles from that source were found directly on foxnews.com, using the search option and the keyword "Otto Warmbier". The articles selected from FOX News were also the first twenty-five that appeared in order of relevance in an attempt to maintain continuity with the articles found from CNN.

A total of five frames were used in the content analysis of the articles from CNN and FOX News. These frames were chosen using background knowledge of the event and previous observation of news coverage of Otto Warmbier both before and after his death.

The first of these frames is the tragedy frame. News articles will focus on the sadness of the loss (referring to not only his death but his imprisonment as well) of Otto Warmbier. These stories will use strong language to elicit an emotional response from the readers and are less concerned with placing blame on North Korea and do not heavily analyze the background of either the story or of Warmbier's life. Instead, they simply take the stance that this event is sad, unfair, or at worst, a tragedy. The main clue that will be used in identifying whether or not an article falls under this frame is the language used.

The next frame is the life story frame. Articles that use this frame are heavily focused on Warmbier's life before his trip to North Korea, and may also mention his potential as a meaningful contributor to society. Similar to the tragedy frame, the life story frame also uses strong emotional appeals to affect the reader. However, a key difference is that the life story frame focuses on Warmbier's personal life, and in some cases draws in quotes from his distraught family and friends. Articles that fall under the life story frame provide insight to a more "human" side of Warmbier's story, including details about his personality, strengths, and ambitions.

Another frame is the reasoning frame. Articles that use this frame concentrate on why Warmbier was imprisoned. They spend much time discussing his trip to North Korea and the incident that led to him being placed into prison. Some of these articles also provide the evidence for the event in which Warmbier allegedly broke North Korean law. The major clues that signal frame usage are

extensive context on why Warmbier was placed into prison as well as discussion of why Warmbier's alleged behavior was against North Korean law.

The next frame that is analyzed is the suffering frame. This frame focuses on Warmbier's alleged mistreatment while in prison in North Korea. The articles that fall under the suffering frame provide details on the ways in which Warmbier was abused during his imprisonment. Articles that focus on the cause of his death are included in this frame. "Cause of death" might include speculation, information, or opinion on what exact injuries or illnesses may have caused Warmbier to pass away upon returning home to the United States.

Finally, the last frame that is covered in this study is the North Korea frame. This frame centers on blaming North Korean government for Warmbier's fate (referring to either his death or imprisonment). Articles using this frame could highlight a number of issues, such as what is problematic about North Korean government, the US relationship with North Korea, or discussion, details about or quotes from North Korean politicians that provide context for this story.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the number of times each frame occurred in either FOX News or CNN. These results are presented in order of the frame that appeared the most frequently in articles from either news source to the frame that appeared the least. The suffering frame appeared the most frequently, found a total of twenty-six times in all of the articles in this content analysis. Both CNN and Fox utilized the life story frame the least, appearing only a total of twelve times in all of the articles analyzed. This information indicates that my hypothesis that the tragedy and life story frames would appear most frequently was not only incorrect, but the result was the opposite in the case of the life story frame, as it appeared the least frequently out of all of the articles. The tragedy frame fell right in the middle, appearing a total of seventeen times.

Table 1: The total number of times each frame occurred in the articles and percentages of total frames found

	Total Times Frame Occurred	Percentage of All Frames Used
Suffering Frame	26	29%
North Korea Frame	22	24%
Tragedy Frame	17	19%

Reasoning Frame	14	15%
Life Story Frame	12	13%

The results as shown in Table 2 are the number of times each frame was encountered in either FOX News or CNN articles. Most of the fifty articles that were coded featured more than one frame. This held true for both news outlets. The total average number of frames in each article coded in this study was 1.82. Although there were some slight differences in how each outlet covered Warmbier, the results show that the numbers did not differ as significantly as expected. For example, while FOX news used the North Korea frame more frequently than CNN as I predicted, the difference between the number of times each outlet used the frame was only two instances. In addition, CNN employed the tragedy frame less frequently (although only a singular difference) than FOX News, unlike the hypothesis. I was correct in my hypothesis that CNN would use the life story frame more frequently than FOX News, although once again, the difference in numbers between the number of times each source used the frame was slight.

Table 2: The number of times each frame appeared in each media outlet

	FOX News	**CNN**
Suffering Frame	14	12
North Korea Frame	12	10
Tragedy Frame	9	8
Reasoning Frame	9	5
Life Story Frame	5	7

Perhaps the prominent difference between my hypotheses and the actual results was the life story frame. This frame appeared a significantly low amount of times in both news outlets. The tragedy frame was used more frequently, showing that the issue was not the media's lack of desire to portray Warmbier as a victim. Instead, this evidence suggests that the media was less likely to focus a lot of attention on Warmbier's backstory. The reasoning behind this may explain the idea of "framing effects" - the idea that the ways in which an event is framed will affect how important the reader thinks the story is or may influence which

"side" of the story they take.[9] For example, it may be that the suffering frame will create more of an emotional response for readers, which in turn makes the audience believe that the issue is important and necessary to talk about and be informed about. Subsequently, the viewer's emotional investment will prompt them to continue to consume information about the story, helpful for the US's private, bottom-line concerned media system.

Furthermore, these results suggest that (for this particular story) there was no notable difference in reporting between a traditionally liberal and traditionally conservative news source. This might suggest that various news sources are not as biased as some Americans perceive them to be, even if certain sources have more liberal or more conservative viewers. On the other hand, this particular case may be an outlier due to the nature of America's generally negative perception of North Korea, as previously mentioned. This viewpoint is shared by many Americans due to previous media coverage of the Korean War, and is not necessarily dependent on partisan views. This suggests that news sources may be more likely to report the story in similar ways.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing news coverage of the Otto Warmbier story, this study found that coverage of Warmbier's imprisonment and death did not differ greatly between liberal and conservative news sources. The original hypothesis predicted there would be significant differences between the frames used in liberal and conservative outlets, and this proved incorrect. These surprising results may be due to the nature of the event being covered. Since this story is of an American being allegedly mistreated by another country's government, it seems to be appropriate to assume that American media is inclined to simply report the story as the unfair loss of an American citizen, leading them to focus mainly on the suffering and North Korea frames.

The other major finding in this research is that the suffering frame was found most frequently in all of the articles coded. This may be due to the fact that articles that fell under the suffering frame included those that focused on Warmbier's cause of death, which remains unknown. This creates a fascinating storyline for readers, who are likely to be interested in the "mystery" aspect surrounding the death. It also provided news outlets and journalists alike the opportunity to be the first to report new information during the height of the story. This created a chance for the media to draw in more readers with their autonomy and dependable and fast information.[10]

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[9] Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2011). Identifying Frames in Political News.

[10] Iyengar, S. (2016). *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (3rd ed.). Norton. (87)

In the future, these results could be enhanced by analyzing more articles. Although fifty articles provided adequate information, more content to observe may lead to findings of more varied numbers. Further, this study might also yield more definitive results by adding more media outlets to observe.

This study provides an interesting perspective on the coverage of certain events in liberal and conservative media. It is valuable to know that this issue was covered very similarly by either outlet. Although we cannot make any generalizations based on one case alone, this may suggest that media outlets are perceived to be biased when in reality, they are not. As previously stated, CNN has a more liberal audience while Fox News has a more conservative audience. However, since each source covered this story very similarly, this likely means that viewers received most of the same information and perspectives regardless of their partisan views. This could be an area of interest since many issues are expected to be framed quite differently in traditionally liberal versus traditionally conservative sources. Further, the study provides a better understanding of how international issues are covered by the American media (especially ones in which there is an American victim). The media, regardless of being liberal or conservative, tend to blame the other country and point out issues or tensions with that country (for example, the North Korea frame being the second most used in this study).

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