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Saif Shahin

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FRAMING “BAD NEWS”

Culpability and innocence in news coverage of tragedies

Saif Shahin

This study proposes a dichotomous set of frames, the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame, to examine how the news media cover sudden tragic events. The Blame Frame affixes responsibility on human agents and foregrounds the pursuit of punishment and justice. The Explain Frame takes responsibility away from human agents and describes the tragedy in terms of natural or quasi-natural processes. The study argues that social identities of “prospective” agents predict the difference in framing: “deviants” and “aliens” are held culpable while local elites are deemed innocent, although these identities are themselves social and draw on prevalent cultural beliefs. Ultimately, both frames serve to reproduce social boundaries and reinforce the status quo. Empirical evidence comes from the ideological analysis of the coverage of April 2013’s Boston bombings and the West fertilizer plant blast in local and national newspapers.

KEYWORDS Boston bombing; deviance; framing; social control; social identity; terrorism; Tsarnaev; West fertilizer

Introduction

If the “highest manifestation of communication” is the “construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world” (Carey 2009, 15), how does journalism, as an instrument of orderliness, approach events that disrupt the routine of social life and unsettle the cultural assumptions upon which the world rests? Breed (1955, 326) drew attention to “social control in the newsroom” and Tuchman (1973, 110) enunciated the evolution of journalistic work flows for “routinizing the unexpected” news, but they did not tell us much about what form such news takes or how it is weaved seamlessly into a society’s cultural fabric. We also need to understand how the news itself, and not just the process of its production, takes culturally resonant forms.

This study identifies textual practices, or frames which news organizations employ in the coverage of “bad news”—tragic, unexpected events, such as bombings and explosions, that interrupt the flow of social life and can potentially unravel the system of values and beliefs that hold it together. It shows that the coverage of bad news attempts to reestablish predominant values by either (1) locating the blame for such a tragedy in the social identity of “deviants” or “aliens” and portraying “our” society as capable of purging them, or (2) explaining the tragedy as caused by natural or quasi-natural forces over which the society and its elite exert little control. Although the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame differ in how they operate, they spring from the same functionalist logic: that “normal” members of “our” society are decent, peaceful folks and that its various institutions—the police, the firefighters, the regulatory authorities, and so on—perform their duties to constitute a

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social system that operates harmoniously. In doing so, the news media reinforce social structures of power and privilege (Gitlin 1978; Shoemaker and Reese 2013).

The contrasting coverage of two tragedies that occurred almost simultaneously provides the evidence for these frames. Three people were killed and more than 200 injured when bombs went off at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013. Two days later, a blast at West Fertilizer Co.'s storage and distribution facility near Waco, Texas, killed 15 people and injured more than 150. Although they are not identical, there are crucial similarities between these events. Both occurred within 48 hours of each other. Both involved sudden and unexpected explosions. Most importantly, both led to the loss of innocent lives.

The news coverage of the Boston bombings, this study shows, adhered to the Blame Frame—in which affixing responsibility on the perpetrator(s), ascribing them agency for the “act,” and punishing them are the most salient aspects of coverage. In contrast, the coverage of the West blast followed an Explain Frame—in which “acts” become “accidents” that occur as the inevitable consequences of natural or quasi-natural phenomena: such as the mixing of combustible chemicals. There is little concern with affixing responsibility—indeed the coverage positively takes agency, and with it the blame, away from any human actors who might have been responsible (as indeed there were in the West blast, see *CNN.com*, April 24, 2014).

This study also argues that the underlying reason for this discrepancy is the social identity of the *prospective* agent. When “deviants” or “aliens,” such as Muslims, appear to be the perpetrators, as happened in Boston, news media frame them as “outsiders” who have brought misery upon “us” and must therefore be identified and disciplined by incarceration or executed—both means of purging them from “normal” society (Foucault 1979). But when a tragedy occurs on account of the owners or executives of a local business, who are members of “our” local community, it becomes the fallout of inanimate forces or natural processes. No human agent is deemed to be responsible, and thus there is no need to blame or punish. Ultimately, both the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame are textual practices that constitute a naturalizing discourse. They help society remain at peace with how it perceives itself and how it is run, reproducing its political and ideological status quo.

News as Social Control

The roots of research on news media as agents of social control can be traced as far back as Robert Park, “the first scholar to pay serious attention to the press” (Reese and Ballinger 2001, 643). Park (1938, 192) observed that it was through communication that “the continuity of common enterprises and social institutions is maintained, not merely from day to day, but from generation to generation.” But most early studies, including the pioneering works of White (1950) and Breed (1955), had a functionalist orientation (Reese and Ballinger 2001) in which the news media’s “integrative” function was viewed as vital for “system maintenance.”

It is only in recent decades that this field of research has assumed critical overtones (Gitlin 1978; Hallin 1986; Shoemaker and Reese 2013; Sparrow 1999; Tuchman 1978). Critical studies in media sociology, by problematizing the objective of “system maintenance,” draw attention to how news represents as well as reproduces “what is acceptable and not acceptable within the dominant norms and values of the community” (Viswanath and Arora 2000, 41–42). News media, with their ability to construct social definitions (Hall 1997), demarcate the boundaries of a society as well as delineate what is “normal” and what is

"deviant" in terms of its values and beliefs (Hallin 1986). Such studies often conceptualize the news media as instruments wielded by the "power elite" (Mills 1956)—politicians, corporations, and the military—to exert social control and maintain the status quo (see also Herman and Chomsky 1988). Some scholars take a more "culturalist" approach and view news media and journalists as reflexive agents engaged in the process of meaning-making (Cottle 2000; Gans 2012). While ascribing more agency to news organizations and individual journalists than critical scholars, they too focus on how the meaning-making process itself is implicated within the broader relations of power in society (Carey 2009; Berkowitz 2010).

A number of studies have investigated the routines and organizational mechanisms through which journalists, and news media as a whole, become interpellated in the process of constructing, repairing, and maintaining the political and ideological status quo of a society. Breed (1955, 334) studied social control in the newsroom, the socialization process through which rookies internalize unwritten "policies" of editors and publishers that "usually protect property and class interests" and ensure that "the existing system of power relationships is maintained." Routinization of work is crucial for social control, but unexpected news events bring variability and impede routinization. Tuchman (1973, 116) takes the process of socialization outside the newsroom and explains how journalists "typify events-as-news according to the way these happen and according to the requirements of the organizational structure within which news stories are constructed." These typifications "reconstitute the everyday world" and "construct and reconstruct social reality by establishing the context in which social phenomena are perceived and defined" (129).

But for the routinization of unexpected news to reconstitute the everyday world, its typifications must also reflect in the news texts that society consumes. Moreover, news coverage of such unexpected events should be geared toward constraining the variability they bring to the social world; it should perform the repair and maintenance function that is expected of an agent of social control (Handley 2009). This article focuses on identifying textual practices, or frames, that journalists and news organizations employ in the coverage of bad news—practices which routinize the unexpected in service of the status quo.

News and Social Identity

Typification in the human world implies the construction of social identity, or "the multidimensional mapping of a human world that is in perpetual motion, of our place in that world, and of the places of others" (Jenkins 2010, 769). Several scholars have drawn attention to the role of the news media in constructing various forms of social identity. Some scholars emphasize that news media help constitute human collectives. Anderson (1983, 6), for instance, credits the invention of the printing press for the rise of nations as "imagined communities" in eighteenth-century Europe (see also Billig 1995). Others point out that every integration is simultaneously an act of exclusion—identifying who belongs to a collective concurrently identifies who does not belong to it as well (Butler 1990; Hall 1996).

Large collectives, such as nations, are seldom homogeneous, and the process of identifying "in-groups" and "out-groups" within such collectives is an ongoing process, leading to the creation of marginalized minorities. News media, as institutions of collective meaning-making and instruments of social control, help construct and maintain these boundaries by reinforcing social definitions of "normal," on the one hand, and "deviant" or

“alien,” on the other (Campbell 1995; Entman and Rojecki 2001). Definitions of marginalized groups take the form of stereotypes, a set of usually unflattering characteristics that are ascribed to all members of the group and deemed to be different from, and often harmful to, “normal” society. Dyer (2006, 355) notes that “stereotypes, one of the mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, unalterable.” In this way, news media not only reflect but also reproduce structures of power and privilege in a society.

Muslims have long been a marginalized and stereotyped group in American society (GhaneaBassiri 2010) and especially in mainstream American media (Karim 2006). In his path-breaking study, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said argued:

Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered [in the US media], discussed, apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world. (Said 1981, 26)

This has not changed much in the years since and, post-9/11, Muslims’ stereotyping as “potential terrorists” has become much more prevalent (Kumar 2012; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Powell 2011; for a different view, see Weston 2003). The terrorist stereotype has been bolstered by US invasions of Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq under the guise of “War on Terror,” to the extent that US journalists have “internalized” this perspective as “a taken-for-granted common-sense notion” (Reese and Lewis 2009, 777).

News Framing

Frames are textual practices that embody the cultural values and beliefs to which journalism adheres. According to Entman (1993, 52), journalists “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” But those aspects of an event or issue that journalists make salient in news coverage are not selected randomly; rather, they follow a cultural logic. Journalists may not be aware of their reasoning themselves as it derives from assumptions they implicitly make about the social world.

Reese (2001, 11) thus defines frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.” As an organizing principle, a frame “is not the same as the texts through which it manifests itself” (11) but a highly abstract cultural logic that can hold together and provide a structure of meaning to several texts. By proffering such a structure of meaning, a frame guides what is included and excluded in these texts as well as their tone—but is itself not limited to these embodiments. Also, “the significance of frames lies in their durability, their persistent and routine use over time” (11). Frames can, therefore, be discerned in structures of meaning that cohere within a cultural logic and manifest themselves across several reports and analyses of an event or issue as well as across different events and issues.

D’ Angelo (2002) has identified three paradigms of news framing research: cognitive, constructionist, and critical. The cognitive paradigm focuses on explaining the mental processes through which news framing influences individual audience members’ perceptions of reality (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Shah et al. 2010). Constructionists look at news framing as an interpretive process and explore how social structures and journalistic

agency interact to create meaning (e.g. Ettema and Peer 1996; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Finally, critical framing research draws attention to the hegemonic influence of the "power elite" (Mills 1956) over the framing of news (e.g. Carragee and Roefs 2004; Martin and Oshagan 1997).

Not all frames exhibit the same level of abstraction. Issue-specific frames are particular to an issue or event being studied, while generic frames "transcend thematic limitations as they can be identified across different issues" (Matthes 2009, 350). Matthes's (2009) meta-analysis of 131 framing studies published in leading communication journals between 1990 and 2005 found issue-specific frames to be much more common, making up four-fifths of his corpus. Only a few studies have attempted to identify or use generic frames that are distinguishable across several issues and over time. Examples include the dichotomous sets of episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar 1991), and game frame and substance frame (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 1993).

Blame Frame and Explain Frame

This study postulates and proffers empirical support for a dichotomous set of generic frames envisaged at the cusp of constructionist and critical paradigms: the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame (see Table 1).¹ Both frames relate to the coverage of "bad news": tragic events that disrupt the routine of life, such as mass shootings, bombings, explosions, and so on, and often take a human toll.² The two frames differ along four dimensions: label, impact, identification, and response.

When the Blame Frame is employed, the event is labeled "crime" or "terrorism" or both. Next, the coverage focuses on the human impact of the event. Victims are depicted as common members of society who were going about their everyday life when it was rudely interrupted. News reports are replete with stories of broken families, dead children, and so on. The language used for such coverage is descriptive and evocative. But the key dimension of this frame relates to identification. The coverage looks for someone to *blame* for the tragedy. The human actors are identified either as deviants from within or aliens from without, and are vilified as being rejected by their own friends and family. The news suggests that they acted deliberately, with the intention to bring harm to society. Finally,

TABLE 1 Dimensions of the blame frame and explain frame

Dimension	Blame Frame	Explain Frame
Label	Terms such as "crime" and "terrorism" are commonly used to describe the tragedy.	Terms such as "accident" or "incident" are employed to describe the tragedy.
Impact	Focus on human impact, broken families, dead children and so on; evocative language, dramatic descriptions; victims as eyewitnesses.	Very little or no coverage of human impact; prosaic language with little drama; "eyewitnesses" are people who are not affected severely or at all.
Identification	Human agents are identified, held responsible and pronounced "guilty;" portrayed as deviants, aliens or both.	No human actors are deemed responsible; natural or quasi-natural forces and phenomena as identified as the "agents;" coverage provides banal descriptions.
Response	The need to punish the guilty is highlighted; punishment, when it comes, is cheered.	Spotlight on brave policemen, firefighters, first responders, and community coming together.

the coverage of the administration and community's response to the tragedy focuses on the need to punish the human agents in order to bring "justice" and "closure" to the victims. It provides details of the investigation, indicating that the administration is performing its duty. Police and government officials are represented as heroes. But they are not the only ones: common members of the community, the responders who come to the aid of the victims, are also painted as exemplary citizens. Together, all this is taken to reflect the community's spirit of resilience.

In the Explain Frame, the tragedy is labeled an "accident" rather than "crime" or "terror." News coverage draws attention away from the human cost of the tragedy. There is little talk of broken families and dead or orphaned children. The "drama" inherent in a human tragedy is only minimally covered, if at all. No human agents are identified in the coverage as responsible for what happened, even when there are grounds to do so. Instead, the coverage *explains* the event as being caused by natural or quasi-natural forces or processes, over which humans exert little control. As a result, there is no talk of punishment. Rather, the response dimension of the frame focuses on individual heroes and communal resilience.

The Blame Frame and Explain Frame relate as much to what is *not* to be found in the news as they do to what is. But as Entman (1993, 54) notes, "omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations [in news framing] may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience." It therefore becomes necessary to study both types of frames simultaneously, for the omission of certain elements in the coverage of one event becomes obvious only when it can be seen to be present in another.

This study (1) provides empirical evidence for the Blame Frame and Explain Frame, (2) uncovers what prompts the media to employ one or the other frame in their coverage of "bad news," and (3) demonstrates how both frames ultimately constitute a naturalizing discourse that serves to repair and maintain the political and ideological status quo.

Method

The Blame Frame and the Explain Frame need to be studied simultaneously so that their elements, especially their omissions, become apparent in contrast to each other. To do so, this study compares the news coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings and the West blast of April 2013. Both cases involved sudden and unexpected explosions. Both occurred within two days of each other—the Boston bombings on April 15 and the West blast on April 17. Crucially, both explosions led to human casualties—three in Boston and 15 in West.

The corpus was defined as the first week of news coverage of each event in national and local newspapers—when uncertainty about how to frame an unexpected event is the highest. *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Boston Globe* (BG), and *Austin American-Statesman* provided the samples for both events. NYT is a national newspaper while BG and *Statesman* are major newspapers serving the local communities in Boston and West, respectively. A Factiva search for "Boston" AND "Marathon" AND "bombing" for the time period April 16–22 yielded 119 stories from BG, 48 stories from NYT, and 7 stories from *Statesman*. A Factiva search for "Waco" AND "blast" for the time period April 19–25 yielded 6 stories in *Statesman*. For NYT and BG, the search for "Texas" AND "blast" for the same time period in Factiva yielded 6 stories and 1 story, respectively. In all, there were 174 stories for Boston Marathon

bombing and 13 stories for the West explosion, including news reports, analyses, editorials, and commentaries. Photos and photo captions were not studied.

As a key purpose of this study is to understand how the framing of tragedies draws on prevalent cultural beliefs and values, ideological analysis was deemed appropriate for examining the samples. Drawing on Foss (2004), the analysis focused on identifying (1) the dominant interpretation of news articles, (2) the rhetorical strategies used to make one interpretation dominant over others, and (3) whose interests were served by the dominant interpretation (see also Handley 2009). Reading about the Boston bombing and the West blast as part of my daily news consumption, I already had a sense that they were being framed quite differently—the focus appeared to be on ascribing blame in one case and eliding blame in the other. For formal analysis, I first skimmed through the stories in the sample to be more certain about the validity of this working hypothesis. Next, a close reading of the articles yielded a number of low-level coding categories (e.g. "crime," "terrorism," "accident/incident," "impact on families," "dramatic writing style," "eyewitness accounts," "human agents," "chemical agent," "nature-as-agent," "guilt/blame," "no guilt/blame," "need for punishment," "need for justice," "efficient police," "efficient firefighters," and "first responders"). Repeated readings of the two samples led to a number of these categories being merged to provide broader elements of coverage (e.g. "chemical agent" and "nature-as-agent" were merged into "non-human agent"). These elements were finally collapsed into the four common dimensions of both frames discussed earlier—label, impact, identification, and response.

Below, I discuss the framing of the Boston bombings and the West blast before providing a comparative analysis of the two frames and concluding with a discussion of their broader implications.

Boston Bombings: The Blame Frame

Label

All three newspapers immediately started using the term "terror" to describe the Boston bombings, even though little was known in the first couple of days about how or why they had happened. All of them also invoked previous terror attacks in the United States and elsewhere in their coverage of the bombings, especially the 9/11 attacks.

BG reported on April 16, the morning after the blasts,

A city touched 11 years ago by terrorism, when 9/11 hijackers took off from Logan Airport, was touched again, in a plot to inflict untold casualties at the city's annual Marathon celebration, the one day each spring when the attention of the sporting world is on Boston.

NYT noted the same day that "Mr. Obama did not refer to the attacks as an act of terrorism, and he cautioned people from 'jumping to conclusions.'" But it went on to quote an anonymous White House official as saying, "Any event with multiple explosive devices—as this appears to be—is clearly an act of terror, and will be approached as an act of terror." *Statesman* on April 17 headlined a story, "Terror Again Stalks the Vulnerable." It observed, "the word 'terror' has become a code word for Muslim fundamentalist zealots whose perversion of the tenets of their faith inspire them to violence."

BG and NYT also frequently used the term "attacks" to refer to the bombings and "crime scene" to describe the site of the blasts.

Impact

The coverage in all three newspapers focused on the human impact of the bombings. A common narrative running through the stories was that the bombings had interrupted an idyllic afternoon on one of the most important days of the year for the people of Boston—Patriots Day. The newspapers used highly evocative language to describe what had happened, replete with words such as “horror,” “carnage,” “visceral,” and “evil.” Many stories carried poignant descriptions of victims and their families, especially children. BG reported on April 16:

[O]ne of the dead was an 8-year-old boy from Dorchester who had gone out to hug his dad after he crossed the finish line. The dad walked on; the boy went back to the sidewalk to join his mom and his little sister. And then the bomb went off. The boy was killed. His sister’s leg was blown off. His mother was badly injured. That’s just one family, one story.

Statesman spoke with Austin residents who had attended the marathon. Although none of them had been killed or injured, it used their eyewitness accounts to report the human impact of the bombings. For instance, Austinite Amy Berti was quoted as saying in an April 16 story:

We [Berti and a friend] just reeled back and glass shattered and it was so loud, our ears were just ringing ... The woman beside me—her leg from the knee down appeared to have been missing. She lost all the fingers on her left hand—they were sheared completely off. She was in shock.

NYT turned its attention to Lu Lingzi, a 23-year-old Chinese student at Boston University. Lu was reported as having recently “become interested in Christianity” (April 18). The newspaper found her profile on the Chinese social networking site Weibo and described her last message:

It showed a picture of a bowl of Chinese fried bread and said, “My wonderful breakfast.” Ms. Lu, shown on her Weibo page as a petite woman with thick shoulder-length hair, said there that she enjoyed food, music and finance. Other Facebook photos showed her at Toah Nipi, a Christian retreat center in southern New Hampshire.

Identification

The hunt for someone to blame, speculation about who they might be, and the implications of their prospective identity began immediately in the news coverage. On the morning after the blasts, BG observed on April 16:

[W]e are left with this unnerving proposition: If it [the bombing] was home-grown, it was probably an aberration, the work of a lunatic. If it was foreign-inspired or sponsored, we will never feel safe again in our own town. President Obama asked the rest of the country to pray for Boston. But we need more than prayers. We need answers. We need peace of mind, and we’ll never have that again on Patriots Day. Ever. Because somebody came here on our Patriots Day and launched their own revolution.

As this report shows, attempts to portray the “terrorists” as deviants or aliens were evident in news coverage well before anyone had any clue about who they actually might be. This became the dominant theme once the investigation revealed that the Tsarnaev

brothers, Tamerlan and Dzakhar, had planted the bombs. Almost every story in all three newspapers drew attention to their background as Muslims from Chechnya, even though they had spent most of their lives in the United States.

They were reportedly devout Muslims who were born into a family of ethnic Chechens, lived in the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, and studied in Russia's North Caucasus, before coming to the United States as children. Over time, the older brother, Tamerlan, became a more radical figure. (BG, April 20)

The newspapers did not explicitly suggest that the brothers were linked with Chechen terror groups or that their religious faith *per se* was the reason for their actions. In fact, both BG and NYT expressed concern that their identification as Muslims might incite Islamophobia and pointed out that the local Muslim community had little to do with them. Other stories gave details of the brothers' lives in the United States, noting that Tamerlan was a promising boxer and Dzakhar a scholarship student. Nonetheless, the brothers were portrayed as deviant and alienated—and their ethnic and religious backgrounds were identified as the basis for their deviance and alienation. For instance,

On VKontakte, Russia's most popular social media platform, Dzakhar described his worldview as "Islam" and, asked to identify "the main thing in life," answered "career and money." He listed a series of affinity groups relating to Chechnya, where two wars of independence against Russia were fought after the Soviet Union collapsed, and a verse from the Koran: "Do good, because Allah loves those who do good." (NYT, April 20)

But there is no responsibility without agency. The perpetrators were deemed to have carried out the bombings willfully and malevolently. BG noted on April 16, "The location and timing of the bombs was sinister beyond belief, done purposely to maximize death and destruction". The suggestion that they could do something that was hardly believable—to "normal" people, one presumes—reinforced their identification as deviants and outsiders.

Response

The news coverage coupled the need to identify the terrorists with the necessity to find and punish them. The administration was shown as responding quickly to the "attacks." BG reported on April 16: "A massive investigation was underway Monday night under the direction of the FBI, as much of the Back Bay was locked down to protect the sprawling crime scene. Last night, officials called the investigation 'very active and fluid.'" Updates on how the investigation was progressing formed a substantial part of news coverage in the following days.

At the same time, all newspapers noted that police investigation was a difficult and painstaking process, and urged the public to be patient. *Statesman* (April 17), for instance, reported, "Finding and prosecuting the individual or group responsible for the bombings will take time, as most methodical investigations do. There are no real short cuts despite the thousands of witnesses."

News reports on an April 18 chase and shootout between officers and the Tsarnaev brothers, in which a policeman and Tamerlan were killed, were detailed and evocative. So were the reports about next day's manhunt and Dzakhar's arrest—allowing readers to see "justice" in action and feel comforted by the professionalism of officers in charge of keeping them safe. Later reports talked of both the police and the public celebrating the

dispensation of justice. One BG report said that police officers “reveled” as they passed around the photo of a dead Tamerlan and found the experience “cathartic” (April 20). Another report, following the arrest of Dzakhar, noted:

Cheering “Boston Strong” and “USA,” hundreds of jubilant Bostonians gathered on the Common and around the city on Friday night to celebrate the capture of the last Boston Marathon bombing suspect and the first sense of relief in the region in nearly a week. (BG, April 20)

Such reports showed the police, and the “administration” in general, to be on the side of the public against a “common enemy.” It elevated officials to the status of “heroes” in the battle of good against evil. But there were heroes among the public too—the “dozens [who] ran toward the chaos, looking to help however they could” (BG, April 18), the “[p]eople in the Back Bay [who] opened their homes to runners who couldn’t get back to their hotels,” and the “[d]octors and nurses who ... raced to the medical tent and volunteered their services, still sweating, still wearing their running gear” (BG, April 16). These heroes represented a “resilient” community that was “going to get up and live its life” and “not going to let anyone stop us” (BG, April 16).

The news media thus routinized and normalized a potentially disruptive event using the Blame Frame. Bomb blasts at a public gathering of men, women, and children, perpetrated by two local residents, could have led a city to pause and think—perhaps notice that things were not quite as “normal” as they appeared. It could have made citizens question the people in power, whose job it is to keep them safe. More importantly, it could have made them worry about some of their own social practices that produced the sort of alienation necessary for someone to take such an extreme measure. Instead, journalists exteriorized the source of the disruption by locating its agency in the person of “deviants” and “aliens,” and they started doing so well before they knew who really was responsible. They eulogized the society’s ability to deal with this disruption—not by addressing concerns of social marginalization within itself but simply by purging the “blameworthy” from its midst. Finally, journalists extolled “going on” as before—rather than pausing and thinking about what might be wrong—as a virtue and society’s normative goal.

West Blast: The Explain Frame

Label

Most stories in both *Statesman* and NYT, as well as the lone story in BG, referred to the blast at the West fertilizer plant simply as an “explosion.” Some stories also described it as “accidental” and noted explicitly that no crime was involved. *Statesman* reported on April 21, “The fire that sparked the explosion appears, as of this editorial’s deadline, to be accidental. An FBI spokesman told NYT there were no signs of criminal activity in the explosion.”

Several stories also referred to it as a “disaster.” One *Statesman* story (April 22) cited an official as saying that the blast site resembled “a war zone.”

Impact

Even though 15 people died in the explosion and more than 200 were injured—including scores who remained missing for a long time and were feared dead—the

coverage either ignored or underplayed the human impact of the blast. Unlike the coverage of the Boston bombings, there were almost no reports of people running with blown-off limbs, broken families, or interrupted lives. The newspapers did not even speak with the families of these victims, except for a single quote from the father of a dead firefighter (April 19) and another from the son of a dead local resident (April 21)—both in NYT. Instead, they mostly relied on the “eyewitness” accounts of people who lived far from the blast area and had either seen the explosion from a distance, heard it, or, at worst, just had their windows shattered. For instance, a *Statesman* report said: “What happened here Wednesday night is the kind of thing that’s not supposed to happen here, [Beatrice Nors] said. Nors lives about a mile and a half from the fertilizer plant” (April 19).

Stories often appeared to play down the loss of human lives. They would typically note the number of dead and injured and follow it with quotes of neighbors talking about their property loss. One *Statesman* report (April 20), after noting that 60 people remained unaccounted for, cited officials as saying that they “expected to find most of those people in coming days at hospitals, motels and the homes of relatives and friends.” The report added: “The number of missing ‘is a little deceiving,’ Mayor Tommy Muska said.”

Identification

While stories about Boston bombings had immediately started speculating about whom to blame, the identification of responsible individuals was never an issue in the West blast coverage. As noted above, the coverage clarified at the outset that there was no sign of criminal activity. After that, the newspapers showed little concern with finding out if there was any responsibility to be apportioned—even though it was apparent that someone must have at least made a mistake that was grave enough to cost 15 lives.

Instead, they focused on explaining how the blast took place in banal detail, identifying “fire” and “fertilizer” as the culprits. *Statesman* (April 21) reported, “The cause of the explosion was a fire.” An NYT report on April 23, headlined “Fertilizers Meet Fire, with Disastrous Consequences,” said:

[T]he disaster is a reminder that for all the good that fertilizers do in increasing crop yields, they can also prove lethal under certain conditions ... The plant had large amounts of two commercial fertilizers, anhydrous ammonia and ammonium nitrate. Both chemicals have been linked to explosions in the past.

These stories thus identified fire and fertilizers as the “agents” behind the blast. Indeed, this aspect of the coverage could even be said to resemble that of the Boston bombings in the manner in which these inanimate “agents” were vilified—for instance, by talking to experts about how “dangerous” they could be. NYT reported on April 23:

Anhydrous ammonia is a colorless, corrosive gas that is stored as a liquid under pressure; farmers inject it into the soil. “People mostly think of it as a toxic chemical that can cause breathing problems,” said Sam Mannan, a professor of chemical engineering at Texas A& M University. “But it’s also a flammable and explosive material.”

Should finding human agents to blame be a concern in an “accident” such as this? Indeed, yes. Newspapers overlooked human agency in this case even though they knew that West Fertilizer Co. had violated safety regulations several times in the past, had been fined for “improper storage and handling of anhydrous ammonia and improper respiratory protection for workers,” and had failed to get reauthorization for almost a

decade—since 2004 (NYT, April 19). In addition, it had lied to regulatory authorities, telling “the Environmental Protection Agency it did not handle flammable materials even though anhydrous ammonia is a flammable substance” (*Statesman*, April 21).

But despite clear evidence that human agents—namely the proprietors and managers of the fertilizer plant—may possibly bear responsibility for the blast and the loss of lives, none of the newspapers framed them as accountable or answerable. (The US Chemical Safety Board ruled a year later that the blast was “preventable” and “blamed the company that owned the fertilizer plant, government regulators and other authorities for the incident,” see *CNN.com*, April 24, 2014.) In fact, their agency in the matter was positively downplayed. NYT reported the plant’s foreman, Jerry Sinkale, as saying, “The experts don’t know what happened, and I am going to leave it to the experts” (April 20). *Statesman*, meanwhile, reported company owner Donald Adair’s statement “expressing sympathy to the families of those who died and who lost their homes and other property in the blast. ‘This tragedy will continue to hurt deeply for generations to come,’ the statement said” (April 20).

Response

As no human agents were deemed responsible for the blast and the loss of lives, finding and punishing the guilty was not an issue at all. Instead, the news coverage turned the spotlight on the “brave” and “heroic” response of the police, firefighters, officials, and local residents to the explosion. NYT remembered 9/11—not because the West blast could have had anything to do with terrorism but because it provided yet another illustration of the valiance of firefighters. *Statesman* reported on April 19:

Donation sites for victims sprang up all over town Thursday, as residents from across the area brought anything from ham sandwiches for law enforcement officials to sweatshirts for victims who lost their homes. At their home in Katy, about 180 miles from West, Hannah Mancill, 23, and her mother, Rachel, 51, were watching television when they learned of the explosion. The images prompted them to get on the road before dawn Thursday with a car packed with food, clothes and toiletries. Seeking to give blood and donate supplies.

Just like the Boston bombings, the blast in West had enormous disruptive potential. It could have led to questions about regulatory standards for chemical plants. It could have indicated a possible nexus between business executives and local authorities that placed petty savings from disregarding regulatory directives above human life. It could have even raised concerns about the indirect control that capitalism wields over common citizens’ lives—and their deaths. But by eliding human responsibility and explaining the blast as the inevitable consequence of a chemical reaction caused when fire meets fertilizers, news coverage robbed the event of that potential. The Explain Frame routinized the unexpected and helped reinforce the ideological and political status quo.

Comparing the Frames

The coverage of the two tragedies, if examined *sui generis*, may appear to be an objective representation of reality. It is only when they are juxtaposed that the framing of news becomes evident—in terms of omissions and inclusions (Entman 1993) and as an organizing principle (Reese 2001). The practice of framing begins with the volume of coverage itself. The same three newspapers, in the same amount of time, published 174

TABLE 2 Examples of how blame frame and explain frame were used in news coverage

Dimension	Boston Bombing (Blame Frame)	West Blast (Explain Frame)
Label	Any event with multiple explosive devices—as this appears to be—is clearly an act of terror, and will be approached as an act of terror. (NYT, April 16)	The fire that sparked the explosion appears, as of this editorial's deadline, to be accidental... (Statesman, April 21)
Impact	[O]ne of the dead was an 8-year-old boy from Dorchester who had gone out to hug his dad after he crossed the finish line. The dad walked on; the boy went back to the sidewalk to join his mom and his little sister. And then the bomb went off... (BG, April 16)	What happened here Wednesday night is the kind of thing that's not supposed to happen here, [Beatrice Nors] said. Nors lives about a mile and a half from the fertilizer plant... (Statesman, April 19)
Identification	On VKontakte, Russia's most popular social media platform, Dzhokhar described his worldview as "Islam"... He listed a series of affinity groups relating to Chechnya... (NYT, April 20)	Anhydrous ammonia is a colorless, corrosive gas that is stored as a liquid under pressure; farmers inject it into the soil. 'People mostly think of it as a toxic chemical that can cause breathing problems,' said Sam Mannan, a professor of chemical engineering at Texas A&M University. "But it's also a flammable and explosive material." (NYT, April 23)
Response	Cheering 'Boston Strong' and 'USA,' hundreds of jubilant Bostonians gathered on the Common and around the city on Friday night to celebrate the capture of the last Boston Marathon bombing suspect and the first sense of relief in the region in nearly a week. (BG, April 20)	Donation sites for victims sprang up all over town Thursday, as residents from across the area brought anything from ham sandwiches for law enforcement officials to sweatshirts for victims who lost their homes. (Statesman, April 19)

stories about the Boston Marathon bombings, where three people were killed, and 13 stories about the blast in West, where the toll was 15. These numbers alone indicate that the news media tried to paint Boston as a colossal tragedy even as they played down the explosion in West.

All four dimensions of the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame—label, impact, identification, and response—cohered with this organizing principle (see Table 2). The Boston bombing was labeled an act of "terror" and a "crime" as soon as it happened, while the West blast was called an "accident" or simply an "explosion." News coverage from Boston focused on the human impact of the bombing, splashing up all the blood and gore that journalists could find. But the coverage from West wiped the blood off. All three newspapers made the identification of the guilty a primary concern in their Boston coverage; all three portrayed them as deviants and aliens who willfully destroyed lives. But ascription of blame was not even a passing concern in the news from West. Instead, the coverage was suffused with banal details of fertilizer compositions and chemical reactions. People who may have borne responsibility for the death and destruction in West thus became innocent—indeed, victims themselves. Finally, the Boston response coverage drew attention to the dispensation of justice with details of how authorities executed one terrorist and apprehended the other, bringing "closure" to families. Newspapers cheered

the victory of “good” over “evil” and celebrated the modern “heroes” in this retelling of the age-old narrative. But the absence of human agency in West meant there was no justice to be dispensed.

The framing was not always neat or uncomplicated. The Boston bombing coverage sought to clarify that the Tsarnaev brothers neither had actual links with Chechen terrorist groups nor were their actions condoned by the local Muslim community. In West, a couple of “broken family” stories did manage to find their way into newsprint, as did some details of West Fertilizer Co.’s regulatory violations. There were also a few differences in how each newspaper approached each event. In the Boston coverage, BG was more attentive to dramatic details from the day of the bombing and later from the shootout and arrest, NYT emphasized the need to identify and punish the guilty, and *Statesman* highlighted how much people wanted justice but also that it might take time. In the West coverage, *Statesman* focused on the community members coming together and helping each other while NYT’s reportage provided some details of the actual victims of the blast and West Fertilizer Co.’s violations. But these differences and complications brought the framing of the news in sharper relief—showing that there were grounds for the rest of the coverage to have been considerably different.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, there are obvious differences between the two events. Boston is a major city of nearly 650,000 residents in northeast United States, a hub of education, culture, and politics. West, on the other hand, is a small southern settlement with a population under 3000. The bombing in Boston was intended to kill as many as possible—nobody in West intended to kill anyone, even if the managers of the fertilizer plant were “responsible” for the blast (*CNN.com*, April 24, 2014). But, while intentionality may explain the media’s ascription of culpability and innocence *per se* in the two tragedies, respectively, it does not explain why the coverage of one tragedy was so dramatic and the other so prosaic, why journalists spoke to real victims in one case and not in the other, why they assumed “terrorism” and started looking for someone to blame in Boston even before the details were clear, or indeed why they presented the Tsarnaev brothers as deviants and aliens but avoided even mentioning the owners and managers of the fertilizer plant in their West coverage. These differences in coverage appear particularly astounding when one considers that 15 people died in West, compared with three in Boston. Intentionality is therefore hardly enough to explain the differences.

The other crucial divergence in the two cases relates to the social identities of their prospective agents—prospective because (1) the news framing began even before journalists actually knew who those agents were and (2) in the case of West, the framing constructed non-agents. To a news industry that has long castigated “deviants” as a law and order concern (Hallin 1986; Shoemaker 1984) and internalized the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists (Kumar 2012; Powell 2011; see also Reese and Lewis 2009), it is no surprise that the bombing of a public event in a major US city aroused the “gut feeling” (Schultz 2007) that it was the work of a homegrown “lunatic” or “foreign-inspired or sponsored” (BG, April 16)—in all likelihood a “Muslim terrorist” (*Statesman*, April 17). Journalists thus immediately proceeded to label the event an instance of “terrorism”—a term that has no clear definition and despite President Obama cautioning against its use right from the outset. They began speculating about who the “terrorists” might be, calling them responsible for mass murder

and simultaneously othering them as deviants and aliens—specifically “Muslim” aliens. The substantial volume of the coverage as well as its emphasis on drama, human impact, and, later, the dispensation of “justice” followed the cultural logic of this frame.

On the other hand, the blowing up of a fertilizer plant in a tiny southern town smelled not of terrorist conspiracy but mismanagement by local business executives and/or regulatory authorities. Here, as may be expected from the critical research on news media’s relationship with the power elite (Hallin 1986; Shoemaker and Reese 2013), the coverage effectively blotted out the very idea of responsibility. Calling it an “accident,” avoiding interviews with real victims, reporting on shattered houses rather than shattered lives, referring to fire and fertilizers as the “cause” and thus obviating the need for a serious investigation, were all in line with this organizing principle.

But both frames went beyond blaming and explaining, respectively. What was common to them was the acclamation of the community and administration’s responses to the two tragedies; the glorification of heroes from among the police, the firefighters, and the public; and the hailing of the town or city’s ability to “carry on.” Ultimately, both frames served to produce a naturalizing discourse that sheared these tragic, unexpected events—“bad news”—of their potential to unsettle the assumptions that undergird social life. They reinforced social boundaries in the form of social definitions of who belongs to “us” and who does not, and repaired the political and ideological status quo.

This paper thus proposes and demonstrates how a dichotomous set of generic frames, the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame, can be used to study the routinization of tragic, unexpected events in news discourse—advancing the literature on framing as well as news routines (e.g. Breed 1955; Tuchman 1973). It shows that news organizations employ the Blame or the Explain Frame depending on the social identity of prospective agents. This choice need not be conscious or deliberate; instead, it is simply the actualization of prevalent values and beliefs to which journalism, as a cultural practice, adheres. But in doing so, news discourse reproduces those values and beliefs—thus contributing to the naturalization of social hierarchy and the legitimization of institutions of power and privilege.

The scope of this study, however, remains limited. While focusing on the ideological dimension, it does not evaluate the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame in the contexts of their institutional linkages, everyday production, or audience interpretations. But as Philo (2007, 194) has argued, scholars should approach mass communication research “as a totality.” Future studies can aim to clarify how particular political and economic constraints and routines of production are imbricated in the genesis of these frames, and how they might influence audience reactions to news. They can also use the framework proposed here in other contexts, especially ones that lend themselves to quantitative analysis, to test its broader applicability.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. The idea of blame attribution is not new to framing research (see Holton et al. 2012; Iyengar 1991). But this study offers a more thorough explication of the Blame Frame and

especially differs from previous attempts by conceptualizing it in contrast to the Explain Frame.

2. Previous research under the rubric of "bad news," such as a series of books by Philo and colleagues at the Glasgow Media Group, does not conceptualize such news as sudden, tragic events that disrupt the routine of life in a society. For instance, Philo and Berry (2004) look at news about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on British television, while Philo, Briant, and Donald (2013) examine the coverage of refugees in British media as a long-standing concern. This scholarship is therefore not discussed in detail here.

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Saif Shahin, School of Journalism, The University of Texas at Austin, USA. E-mail: saif.shahin@utexas.edu