



## A Tale of Two Tragedies: Culpability and Innocence in American Journalism

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## A Tale of Two Tragedies: Culpability and Innocence in American Journalism

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[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.

— *Boston Globe* on the Boston marathon bombings, April 16, 2013

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.

— *Austin American-Statesman* on the West fertilizer plant blast, April 19, 2013

Two deadly explosions took place in the United States, two days apart from each other, in the middle of April 2013. The Boston marathon bombings of April 15 killed three people and shook the nation. The blast at a fertilizer plant on the outskirts of West, Texas on April 17 claimed 15 lives but hardly left a mark on the national consciousness.

In this study, I examine the contrasting coverage—or *framing*—of the two tragedies in national and local news media. I argue that journalists, while covering the Boston bombings, adhered to what I call the Blame Frame, focusing on identifying and punishing perpetrators for a vile “act.” The coverage of the West Fertilizer Co. blast, meanwhile, followed the Explain Frame, in which “acts” become “accidents” over which human agents have little control. Indeed, journalists go out of their way to take agency—and with it the culpability—away from perpetrators.

I also contend that this difference in framing stems from who journalists believe, or expect, the perpetrators to be—in terms of their social identities. When “deviants” or “aliens,” such as Muslims, appear to be the perpetrators, as was the case in Boston, the news media *blame* them as “outsiders” who have brought violence upon “us” and must therefore be identified and punished by incarceration or execution—both means of purging them from “normal” society. But when a violent tragedy is likely caused by proprietors or executives of a major local industry, members of “our” community, journalists *explain* it as the natural fallout of inanimate forces—such as the banal mixing of chemicals and fire. No human agent is deemed to be responsible, and thus there is no need to blame or punish.

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Ultimately, both the Blame Frame and the Explain Frame constitute a normalizing discourse. They obscure social and political frailties that directly or indirectly lead to tragedies such as the Boston bombings and the West blast, enabling a society—specifically American society—to remain at peace with how it views itself and how it is run. In doing so, they forestall the possibility of social change that a more critical appraisal of such tragedies could engender. These frames also illustrate that the *watchdog* ideal American journalism aspires to is fundamentally flawed: guarding against “outsiders” who may threaten American society but disregarding fallibilities that are inherent to the society itself.

## Label

To conduct the study, I examined the first week of news coverage of the Boston bombings (April 16–22) and the West blast (April 19–25) in one national (*New York Times*) and two local (*Boston Globe* and *Austin American-Statesman*) newspapers. Together, the three newspapers published 174 news stories on the marathon bombings and only 13 stories on the fertilizer plant explosion—even though the latter claiming a higher number of victims.

Moving beyond volume, the first obvious difference in coverage was the way in which the two tragedies were labeled. All three newspapers immediately started using the term “terror” to describe the Boston bombings, although little was known in the first couple of days about how or why they had happened. As the *Globe* reported on April 16,

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.

In contrast, most stories in both the *Statesman* and *Times*, as well as the lone story in *Globe*, referred to the West blast simply as an “explosion.” Some stories also described it as “accidental” and noted explicitly that no crime had been committed. This was incorrect; a federal investigation later concluded that the blast was, in fact, intentional. But while journalists were eager to label the Boston bombings as an act of terror even prior to investigation, they were simultaneously keen to report the West explosion as *not* an intentionally committed crime.

## Impact

The Boston bombings stories in all three newspapers focused on the *human* impact of the bombings. A common narrative running through the coverage 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. Journalists used highly evocative language to describe what had happened, replete with words such as “horror,” “carnage,” “visceral,” and “evil.” Many stories carried heartbreaking descriptions of victims and their families, especially children—such as the one cited at the beginning. They also employed eyewitness accounts extensively.

None of this poignancy was evident in the coverage from West, even though 15 local residents had been killed there and more than 200 injured in what was the state’s worst industrial disaster. There were almost no reports of people running with blown-off limbs,

or tales of broken families and interrupted lives. Journalists did not even speak with the kin of these victims, except for a single quote from the father of a dead firefighter and another from the son of a dead resident—both in *Times*. Instead, they relied on the “eyewitness” accounts of people who lived more than a mile from the blast and had suffered little or no impact. Stories also often played down the loss of human lives. They would typically note the number of dead and injured in formulaic fashion and follow it with quotes of neighbors talking about their loss of property.

## Identification

Attempts to portray the Boston 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 Dzhokhar, 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. For instance, the *Globe* reported on April 20,

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.

The brothers were deemed to have carried out the bombings willfully and malevolently. Stories also called their plotting of the bombings “beyond belief.” The suggestion that the two brothers could do something that was hardly believable—to “normal” people, one presumes—reinforced their identification as outsiders who didn’t belong to American society.

West Fertilizer Co. had repeatedly violated safety regulations in the past, lied to authorities, been fined for poor storage and worker protection standards, and had failed to earn reauthorization for almost a decade. The coverage of the West blast, however, showed little concern with finding out if anyone was or could be responsible for the loss of 15 lives. Instead, journalists focused on explaining how the blast occurred in banal detail, identifying “fire” and “fertilizer” as the culprits. On April 21, the *Statesman* reported, “The cause of the explosion was a fire.” A *Times* report on April 23 further clarified that “Fertilizers Meet Fire, with Disastrous Consequences.” Such framing thus erased all possibility of human responsibility for the tragedy.

## Response

Stories from Boston coupled the need to identify the terrorists with the necessity to find and punish them. Updates on the progress of the investigation into the bombings formed a substantial part of the coverage. Reports of an April 18 chase and shootout between officers and the Tsarnaev brothers, in which a policeman and Tamerlan were killed, were especially evocative. So were the write-ups about next day’s manhunt and Dzhokhar’s arrest—allowing readers to see “justice” in action and feel comforted by the professionalism of officers in charge of keeping them safe. Subsequent reports talked

of both the police and the public celebrating the dispensation of justice. As the *Globe* noted on April 20,

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.

But as no human agents were deemed responsible for the blast and loss of human lives in West, finding and punishing the guilty was not an issue at all. Instead, news coverage turned the spotlight on the “brave” and “heroic” response of the police, firefighters, officials, and local residents. *Times* remembered 9/11—not because the West blast could have anything to do with terrorism but because it provided another illustration of the valiance of firefighters. *Statesman* reveled in how the tragedy had brought local residents and law enforcement officials together in support of each other and the community at large.

### Blame Frame v. Explain Frame

Each tragedy’s reporting, if viewed on its own, may appear to be an objective representation of reality. It is only when they are juxtaposed that the *framing* of news becomes evident. Coverage of the Boston bombings followed what I call the Blame Frame, in which the tragedy is deemed to be a wanton act, committed by vile human agents who do not—in terms of their social identity—belong to “our” American society. These deviants/outsideers brought violence upon us and, it logically follows, must be identified and punished by incarceration or execution—both means of expelling them from our midst. Moreover, this victory of “good” over “evil” must be celebrated so that, in spite of this interruption in our collective lives, we can rest assured that our system works. There is no need for change: we can calmly return to our normal lives, our faith in our power structure restored.

Taking place simultaneously, on virtually the same news pages, coverage of the West blast adhered to the Explain Frame, in which the tragedy is simply explained away as the natural fallout of the mixing of fire and combustible chemicals. As human beings do not—cannot—have control over such processes, there is no one to blame or punish. We can altogether discount that possibility. Instead, the tragedy becomes an occasion to celebrate the bravery of the police, firefighters, and the local community, an occasion, once again, to repose our faith in the goodness of our society and the efficiency of our system.

Expunged from both these frames are story elements that could imply the reverse. The Boston reports rarely touched upon how social discrimination and cultural alienation of Muslims *within* American society, which has worsened since 9/11, could have contributed to the Tsarnaev brothers’ radicalization and led to the bombings. Nor does the West coverage consider the very obvious possibility that executives of a company prone to violating safety regulations may have at the very least been negligent in their handling of combustible chemicals—thus *causing* them to mix and explode and being responsible for the loss of 15 lives (as indeed they were, as later investigation revealed). It also disregards how the laxity of industrial regulations in the United States, not to mention authorities’ very lax approach to implementing them, may have indirectly caused the tragedy.

Both tragedies thus carried the possibility of being framed in ways that would have indicated our society, with its inherent proclivity to racialize and discriminate (and not just against Muslims), is not all that good after all. And our capitalist system, beholden to industrialists and corporations, doesn't always seem to work. Such a critical appraisal is necessary before a society can address the weaknesses within. Journalism, if conducted in the public interest, can be the vehicle for such social change. But my analysis demonstrates that journalism, as a cultural practice, is susceptible to the same proclivities and power structures as the rest of American society. News frames reflect—and reproduce—the same frailties that lead to such tragedies in the first place.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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