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Media Coverage of The Oklahoma City Bombing

At 9:02 am on the morning of Wednesday, April 19th 1995 a bomb detonated inside of a rental truck parked in front of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. A massive explosion instantly destroyed the entire north facing half of the building, sending glass and debris flying several blocks from the scene. One hundred and sixty eight people lost their lives in the blast, including nineteen children, and more than six hundred and eighty others were injured. At the time of the attack, it was by far the most destructive terrorist act to ever happen on U.S soil, far outreaching the devastation of the car bombing of the World Trade Center two years earlier in 1993. It would hold this title for six years, eventually loosing it to the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

After a massive wave of confusion that was centered around a great deal misplaced blame, knee jerk reactions, and inaccurate finger pointing, Timothy McVeigh, a white militant extremist from Arizona was arrested in connection with the crime. He was eventually convicted following a lengthy trial, and executed by lethal injection in 2001. His main co-conspirator, Terry Nichols, was also arrested and convicted.

In researching the media coverage of the OKC bombing, I have come across several trends and patterns that I will discuss in this paper. I will then proceed to discuss any ethical concerns that I feel are raised by the coverage of this event. For this paper, I have chosen to focus my research primarily on broadcast television media as the immediacy, the format, and the constraints faced by the medium have led to some very interesting findings not found in other forms of media like newspaper.

In the wake of the tragedy, the television media’s coverage of the bombing came under some very harsh criticism. A very prominent framework used to tell this story is that of not only responsibility or blame, but of inaccurate, potentially harmful blame placed unjustly on the Arab race. Throughout the day, several news outlets perpetuated rumors and speculation that middle-eastern Islamic groups were behind the attack. On the primetime CBS special report, *Terror in the Heartland,* Anchor Connie Chung reported, “A US government source has told CBS News that it has Middle East terrorism written all over it. (4/19/95)” Later in the same broadcast, reporter Rita Braver stated, “there is great worry that this may have been planned overseas. (4/19/95)” A few hours after the attack, CBS News’ Jim Stewart said, “The betting here is on Middle East terrorists,” (4/19/95).

Several reports got even more specific, some going as far as to describe specific middle-eastern suspects. On a separate CBS news special report, anchor John Roberts stated, “We hear out of Oklahoma that the federal authorities there have issued an alert for three suspects believed to be driving in a brown pickup truck…two of the three suspects have been described as Middle Eastern men with dark hair and beards” (4/19/95). A couple hours later on CNN, Mark Leff reported, “The FBI is asking for help finding three men described as middle Eastern-looking who had driven away from the building in a brown pickup truck” (4/19/95).

These reports turned out to have some substantiality as witnessed by ABC reporter Brian Ross who told Dian Sawyer the day after the attack, when the speculation was beginning to shift away from Middle Eastern suspects, “They had taken into custody late last night two or three Pakistanis in Oklahoma City and in Dallas who they questioned for some 16 hours and these men, now two of them have been released and, apparently, after being cleared and having been forced to take polygraph tests. (4/20/95)”

Early the following day the reports continued with the speculation. During a CNN interview, security and counter-terrorism expert Jeff Beatty told reporter Kathleen Kennedy, “Up until this point, and this is just speculation, but the M.O. us the same as other middle eastern terrorist groups” (4/20/95).

It was difficult for many journalists to avoid making connections to similar bombing events that were actually perpetrated by Middle Eastern terrorist cells. Attacks like those at the World Trade Center in 1993, and the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, both of which were also instances of car bombs were very similar in nature to this attack, and it could be said that these similarities contributed directly to the misplaced blame.

The PBS Frontline documentary titled *Jihad in America* also received prominent play on television news following the bombing. The documentary, which originally aired in late November of 1994 contains footage of Islamic gatherings in Oklahoma City, and warns of various terrorist cells in America's heartland. The film was originally met with a great deal of controversy from Muslim groups around the country, but the media really took hold of the film after the bombing, and Steven Emerson, the films Executive Producer, became the go-to interview for several stations (Bash 1995).

Even when interviewees downplayed or strived to avoid jumping to conclusions, the reporters often pushed the narrative. In her interview with Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, Connie Chung asked, “Is the a Middle East terrorist connection?” Mr. Keating then replied in short “Who knows?” Chung then followed with, “Earlier there was a report that two men were being sought who appeared to be of Middle Eastern background. They were speeding from the scene. Is that true?” To which Keating replied, “Well, I've heard that rumor. Whether or not that occurred is anybody's guess” (4/19/95). Later in the report, John Roberts took over for Chung and interviewed James Fox, a former FBI agent who was in charge of the New York office during the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Roberts begins the interview by asking, “The governor, as--as you heard just a couple of minutes ago, is going cautiously on attributing a potential source for this explosion. But in your experience--and I know you don't have the advantage of being on the ground there. Does this have the earmarks of a Middle East bombing?”

It didn’t take a very long time for this speculation to take a drastic shift. As soon as federal reports of the white male suspects, the Arab narrative began to die down. On the 8:00 pm ABC news report, *The Bomb*, John McWethy said of the swing,

“Initially, as they looked at that evidence, they said, 'Boy, this has all of the fingerprints,

absolutely all of the fingerprints, with roots from the Middle East, that kind of expertise.'

But as they began to develop leads on these two white males, the so-called 'John Does'

that they are now tracking and seeking, it became clearer and clearer to some of the

investigators, anyway, that perhaps they had been going down the wrong path, that this

looked more and more like some sort of revenge approach. And they- they haven't ruled

out, by the way, any of the Middle East routes, but it looked more and more like these

two men may have done it all by themselves” (4/20/95).

McWethy also defended the speculation saying, “it's not just cultural conditioning. I would say that the evidence has led the journalists to certain preliminary conclusions and then the evidence has led us to additional conclusions that are away from the direction I think the FBI was headed, at least in the first 24 hours” (4/19/95).

Simultaneously to this inaccurate blame framework dominating the broadcast news coverage, another prominent feature of the coverage of the bombing consisted of a combination of consequence and personalization frameworks in regards to a focus on the deaths of several children inside the daycare center that was located on the second floor of the Murrah building. The coverage of the daycare center focused primarily on the potential outcomes or consequences of the event, and also spotlighted several affected individuals in order to bring the massive tragedy to the individual level.

The USA Today article, *Kids' sanctuary turns into a tomb,* begins, “The children were just settling in for another Wednesday together, freshly hugged and kissed by work-bound parents. Joyful noise filled the room. Then came the explosion” (Davis, Wieberg 1995). The article, featured in the April 20th final edition focuses primarily on the consequences and aftermath of the bombing with a focus on the children. The article quotes a nurse who says, “It was awful. Me and the doctor just started to cry. With kids, you always cry” (Davis, Wieberg 1995). It proceeds to spotlight the repercussions faced by both the daycare center inside the Murrah building, and also the one in the YMCA across the street.

While it is horrible whenever any innocent life is lost, it is exceptionally more disturbing to Americans when it is a child, or in this case several small children, who lose their lives for a cause that they couldn’t even begin to comprehend. As we’ve seen very recently in the Sandy Hook Massacre, the death of children is something that we all agree should never happen, so when this truck-bomb detonated just feet away from a daycare center that sat on the second floor of the federal building, this narrative leapt to the forefront of the broadcast coverage.

Reporter Scott Pelley says in his segment of the CBS News Special, *Terror in the Heartland*, “The tragedy has been most keenly felt because of the day-care center on the second floor. The day-care center was just getting into its routine about 9:00 this morning. There were 40 children inside. It is known now that 17 of the children have been killed; about 20 are missing” (4/19/95). In the CNN report *FBI Beefs Up Security Nationwide After Explosion* that aired around 12:30 on the 19th*,* Anchor Lou Waters begins the report saying, “The centerpiece of this tragedy, which we are going to concentrate on now, is the daycare center located on the second floor of the damaged building” (4/19/95). The report then dives immediately into footage “of a reaction from one or more of the children who were in the center when the bomb went off. (4/19/95)” This footage shows a reported interviewing the parents of two children who are clearly traumatized. Footage like this supports the claim of a personalization framework being used. Focusing on these individual parents as opposed to the entirety of the event or the hundreds of other injured victims brings the story to a personal, more relatable level that is potentially more comprehensible for the average viewer.

Further evidence of the personalization come in the form of the CNN report titled, *Survivors of Oklahoma City Blast Face Many Challenges* that aired around 5:30 pm central time on the 19th in which the reporter interviewed a man named Don Cris who was asleep in his apartment just above the YMCA daycare center across the street from the federal building when the bomb went off. In the interview Mr. Cris tells of how he woke up from a nap covered in glass, and then proceeded to make his way downstairs to help take care of the children who’s parents were unable to get to them (4/19/95).

The children in the daycare center were among the first casualties reported after the bombing; therefore they stole the focus for the majority of the coverage. This is particularly true in the realm of photojournalism during the bombing. The most famous photograph to emerge from the coverage of the bombing shows a firefighter holding a blood-covered baby in his arms. Images and video like this became extremely common with this coverage, as cameras at the scene couldn’t easily avoid such graphic images. Chaos and tragedy was ubiquitous and the cameras couldn’t help but capture it.

Another major thematic framework that was heavily used in coverage of the bombing was the pushing of the narrative of “Terror in the Heartland.” Many questions were raised as people began to realize that the events of the day had marked a point of significant change for the country. It was made painfully clear that horrific events like this bombing could happen anywhere in the country. Terrorist acts were no longer restricted to major industrial or economic centers or the war-torn countries of the Middle East. This was a horrific, tragic, large-scale act of terror that had occurred right in the center of the country, thousands of miles from places like New York City or Washington D.C. The fact that it had happened in a relatively small, agriculture-based community seemed to frighten many people as it altered their perceptions of personal safety and security.

In his segment of the aptly titled CBS News special report, *Terror in the Heartland*, reporter Peter Van Sant said, “This is not Chechnya or Sarajevo or Beirut. It's Oklahoma--terrorism laid at America's heartland. If this cowardly bomb was designed to send a message that no one, no place is safe, it sadly succeeded. (9/19/95)” Such attitudes or opinions were present throughout the coverage and it became clear that many of the journalists themselves were coming to the same shocking revelations that the public were. Anchor John Roberts of CBS News asked in an interview with James Fox, a former FBI official, “The fact that this bomb struck at America's heartland, Oklahoma City, a place where it was supposed to be safe--what impact do you think that will have on the American psyche?” Mr. Fox responded, “I'm not sure, if they're trying to send a message, what it is. Perhaps the message is, 'America, you don't only have to worry about New York and Washington, DC, you have to worry about Springfield and Omaha and Minneapolis'--trying to spread fear through the entire country” (4/19/95). Such speculation of the intent of the bombings was present in several stations coverage.

The New York Times article, *Dangers of Day-Care at the Job,* by Ronald Sullivan quotes Dr. Pepper Schwartz, a professor in sociology at the University of Washington, saying, “Before they felt it could not happen in a place as safe as Oklahoma City, but we are now finding out that no one is safe anymore, and they are astoundingly frightened” (Sullivan 1995). Many news sources began to question the extent to which security measures should be ramped up nationally, sparking much debate about the freedoms often taken for granted by the American people.

Additionally, both the statements released by President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno were featured heavily by the television media. Both called for swift and harsh action to be taken against any individual found to be guilty of carrying out this horrendous act, and Reno even suggested that the death penalty would be sought once the perpetrators were in custody. Once the President and Attorney General spoke publicly, the media picked up their statements and committed a significant amount of time to covering them. The CNN 8:00 news segment titled*Clinton Promised Quick Justice in OK City Bombing*, headed by Wolf Blitzer focused on the Clinton address, quoting the president saying, “Whoever did it, we will find out and there will be justice that will be swift and certain and severe, and there is no place to hide. Nobody can hide anyplace in this country. Nobody can hide anyplace in this world from the terrible consequences of what had been done” (4/19/95).

The perpetuation of fear brought on by the perceived relative ease of carrying out such a horrific act was also a major theme of this “Terror in the Heartland” framework. Several broadcasts brought on specialists who would point out how easy it was to buy the materials needed to make the simplistic yet enormously impactful device used to nearly demolish the Murrah building. On the CNN report, *Expert Says Blast Site Remnants May Reveal Bomber,* Kathleen Kennedy asked security and counter-terrorism expert Jeff Beatty, “How easy is it to build this kind of bomb?” Beatty replied, “Unfortunately, it's not that difficult. The materials are fairly basic. The knowledge is out there and things as far back as the anarchist cookbook. So it's, unfortunately, not too difficult to build.” Kennedy followed with, “And the materials are easy to find?” To which Beatty said, “The materials are available. They're often a combination of fertilizer products and diesel fuel. So these are pretty crude materials, but yet pretty effective” (4/20/95).

There were many aspects of the coverage of the attack that were very well done and ethically responsible in nature, as they strived to serve both the public audiences and also the victims of the bombing. Walter Goodman stated in his New York Times article, “At steadier moments, the local stations told viewers where they might give blood and how they could obtain information about relatives and friends who might have been in the building. The addresses and phone numbers on screen bespoke neighborliness, and so did the Oklahoma accents” Goodman, 1995). I found the coverage, which centered its focus on the children of the bombing and the daycare centers to be executed tastefully, and with good intentions. The television media did an effective job of bringing this horrendous tragedy to a personal, relatable level, and I think they should be commended for this.

However, not all of the coverage was as admirable. In considering the ethical implications of the media coverage of the Oklahoma City Bombing, several ethical concerns emerged from my research. The most prevalent of these concerns involves the rampant misplaced blame aimed at Middle-Eastern groups featured by the television broadcasts in the hours and days following the attack. The television broadcast media greatly perpetuated speculation and rumor based on unjustified stereotypes and past incidents unrelated to this event.

I believe this ethical dilemma can be boiled down to the broad conflict of speed verses accuracy in journalism. In the Ney York Times article, *Terror in Oklahoma City: TV Critics’ Notebook; Wary Network Anchors Battle Dubious Scoops,* author Walter Goodman said, “The Treasury and Justice Departments were troubled enough by CNN's apparent choice of speed over checking that they warned Washington reporters against relying on the network for news about suspects or about other explosive devices, another changeable subject” (Goodman, 1995). When Journalists feel the pressures of competition during the breaking stages of news coverage, it is not entirely uncommon for journalistic ethics to take a back seat to the desire to be the first to report something. Speculation and the use of unnamed, unverified sources can run rampant. Even when presented with difficult decisions and pressures, it is imperative for journalists to act ethically in reporting on any issue. The intense competition and stressful nature of the profession are constantly at the forefront of the journalist’s mind; however, this cannot undermine the importance of acting ethically in a journalistic sense. Competition and stress are not valid excuses to act unethically, nor are they acceptable justification for inaccuracies in reporting. The use of excuses like these serve only as a stark example of ethical incoherence, as a journalist who does so is allowing non-ethical needs to circumvent ethical ones. When Journalists allow inaccurate speculation and rumor to dominate their coverage of an event, there is an innate threat of harm posed to the public because of the reliance they have on the news media. In their essay, *School Shootings, The Media, and Public Fear: Ingredients for a Moral Panic,* Ronald Burns and Charles Crawford state that, “Because the public rarely has enough information to form opinions independently on many issues, people are often at the mercy of the media, not only for information, but also for interpretation” (Burns & Crawford, 2000, p. 12). News audiences are often completely reliant on the content the media chooses to display to them. That being said, it is imperative for a journalist to be aware of this influence they have, and to act ethically by doing things like avoiding the delivery of unverified information.

Some may argue that by providing whatever information an outlet may have, regardless of the validity of the information, media outlets are simply doing their journalistic duty to seek the truth and report it; that by delivering the information the public seeks, they are appeasing their audience’s “right to know.” I would argue, however, that while the fist declaration of the journalist’s code of ethics is to “seek the truth and report it”, the caveat that immediately follows this standard urges the journalist to “minimize harm.” Harm is defined by American political and ethical theorist Joel Feinberg as, “an act or state that sets back the interest of someone else” (Plaisance, 2009, p. 111). While I believe the interests of the public were indeed set back by the inaccurate reporting, due to their reliance on the media, another group was set back and disrespected to a significantly greater degree.

Perhaps the most significant recipient of the threat of harm posed by the television media’s coverage of the OKC bombing was the community of Middle Eastern individuals living in The United States. Following the bombing and the coverage of the act, several stories emerged of violence and immoral treatment of Arabs around the country. In the American Journalism Review article, *Jumping to Conclusions in Oklahoma City,* author Penny Bender Fuchs discusses how several Arabs, including Hamzi Moghrabi, chairman of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, “blamed the media for a backlash against the American Muslim community during the first few days after the explosion.” Fuchs goes on to say, “He [Moghrabi] cites dozens of harassment stories: A day care teacher and her students in Richardson, Texas, were menaced by a man who shouted, "Here's a bomb for you lady," and hurled a sack of cans at them. In Brooklyn, Arab American shopkeepers received death threats. Windows in mosques across the country were broken. A Muslim woman who suffered a miscarriage in her Oklahoma City home said she was afraid to seek medical attention because a crowd of people was throwing stones at her house” (Fuchs 1995).

Stories like these were all too common after the bombing, and while the American public is far from free of blame, it would be foolish to believe these acts of discrimination were completely unrelated to the media’s speculation based coverage. Later on in her essay, Fuchs says, “Arab groups are particularly angry at CNN, which identified four innocent Arab Americans in connection with the bombing, and CBS, mostly for interviewing Steven Emerson, a journalist who has studied radical Islamic terrorism for several years and produced the documentary, "Jihad in America," which aired on PBS last November” (Fuchs 1995). Fuchs also quotes James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, saying, “the problem with coverage of his community goes beyond this incident: "There is a deep and pervasive bias in the culture as a whole" against Middle Easterners, who are viewed as "fat oil sheiks trying to buy up America, or as terrorists” (Fuchs 1995).

According to the Kantian framework, it could easily be contended that the media’s coverage treated the entire Arab race as simply means to their own personal ends. In direct contradiction to Kant’s principle of Humanity, the media blatantly neglected to acknowledge these people as ends unto themselves, therefore stealing their innate human rights of free will and a capacity to exercise reason. Kant’s duty-based theology is based primarily around the idea that we, as rational agents of our society have an obligation to respect other humans, as they are ends in themselves, capable of logical reasoning. The only conclusion left to be made is that the journalists responsible for the Middle Eastern blame-heavy content failed in a Kantian ethical sense.

There is no doubt that the lack of avoidance of harm displayed by so many of the country’s most prominent television media outlets is very concerning. The Racial stereotyping and finger-pointing that occurred after the Oklahoma bombing was incredibly harmful to so many, and for that reason alone, I believe this element of the coverage of the bombing was greatly unethical. But I don’t believe the media was intentionally attempting to be unethical. Some have argued that the way the coverage of terrorist acts have tended to lean toward speculative blaming of the “other” happens because it is what Americans want or strive to hear. In his op-ed column in *Newsweek*, Author Jonathan Alter asks,

“Who can deny that it would have been emotionally easier if foreigners had done it? Had

"They" been responsible, as so many suspected, the grief and anger could have been

channeled against a fixed enemy, uniting the country as only an external threat can do.

We might have ended up in war, but what a cathartic war it would have been! Or so it

felt, in brief spasms of outrage, to more Americans than would care to admit it. And if we

couldn't identify a country to bomb, at least we could have the comfort of knowing that

the depravity of the crime - its subhuman quality - was the product of another culture

unfathomably different from our own.”

This raises broader questions regarding whether the American news media too often jumps to conclusions of blaming “Them” whenever a major terrorist act occurs, as well as questions of misplaced blame in general. Of course, the argument against jumping to international terrorist conclusions took a major blow after the 9/11 attacks in which “They” were actually responsible. It is possible that anything we learned from inaccurately blaming international, Middle-Eastern terrorists in the wake of the Oklahoma Bombings was completely erased when Arab terrorists hijacked and crashed two jetliners into the World Trade Center. But I feel that is imperative in an ethical sense that we use care in jumping to conclusions and assigning blame in the wake of a tragedy.

This type of unverified finger-pointing still runs rampant amongst the news media’s coverage of tragedies, and it is quite possibly made even more common as social media and the rise of citizen journalism begin to dominate the early reports of breaking stories. This can be easily witnessed in much more recent events like the media’s inaccurate blaming of the Newtown massacre on Ryan Lanza, the actual perpetrator, Adam’s, older brother; and the inaccurate blaming of Sunil Tripathi, a Brown University student who had been missing for nearly a month, for the Boston Marathon Bombing. Both of these instances of misplaced blame were incredibly harmful to both of these individuals and their families. Both situations were also greatly expedited and emphasized by the use of social media outlets like Reddit and Twitter. Examples like these serve only as evidence that regardless of the technology that dominates the profession, it is and will always be absolutely crucial for journalists to use caution in their reporting. The potential for harm is simply much too great to carelessly toss out names and neglect our Kantian ethical obligation to respect others by treating them as ends in themselves.

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