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Riot vs. Revelry: News Bias Through Visual Media

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Riot vs. Revelry: News Bias Through Visual Media

Overview

During a six-month period in late 2014 to early 2015, two events occurred in the Midwest of the United States that led to mass public disturbances. This teaching exercise examines visual media coverage of two distinct types of public disturbance: disturbances that are sometimes framed as “riots” while similar disturbances are framed as “revelry.”

The disturbances that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri (after the shooting of Michael Brown in late 2014 with primarily black protesters) were labeled “Riots” by the mainstream media such as ABC, NBC and CBS, while the disturbances that occurred in Columbus, Ohio (following the Ohio State football national championship in early 2015 with primarily white participants) were labeled “Revelry.” Both included large numbers of protestors, arson, destruction of property, and gunfire.

The visual record of these two events presented on news sites show photographs that are difficult to distinguish. The focus of this class project is to present visual images from each disturbance to see if students can identify and classify the photos relating to the legal definition of a riot. Based on the news photos published, test subjects generally could not distinguish the two events, yet the media framed the two events very differently.

This exercise challenges students to look at the visual record for these two different disturbances and rate them on items relating to the definition of “riot” (without knowing the context or background prior to the disturbance). After the “reveal” that one disturbance was from Ferguson and one was the aftermath of a sporting event, several possible assignments emerge:

- 1) a class discussion, or
- 2) a paper, or
- 3) a combination of class discussion to provide multiple viewpoints, followed by a paper that requires the student to distill the discussion and formulate an argument, followed (perhaps if time permits) by another discussion to present students’ viewpoints.

Background and Materials for Instruction

Theoretical Background

For this teaching exercise, different theories could be used depending on the nature of the course and previous readings. Framing theory is core to this teaching exercise to discuss the media photos. Hegemony and/or Critical Race Theory could be used to talk about majority power structures:

- **Media Framing:** how do the media, through words, captions and headlines portray or label the disturbance.

- **Hegemony:** explore if the disturbances opposing the majority power structure are labeled as “riots,” while disturbances that support (or at least don’t directly oppose existing power structures) are not labeled as “riots” although they meet the criteria for riot.
- **Critical Race Theory:** studying the relationship among race, racism, and power.

Framing theory is used to see how the news organizations covered the story from both a visual standpoint and how the surrounding text, especially headlines and photo captions, classified the actions portrayed in the photo. This is important for a variety of reasons. The media play an important role in setting the public agenda regarding the salience of contemporary social issues and shaping public opinion about those issues. Since the public relies on the media for information, it is important that the media report stories on all issues fairly, accurately, and without bias.

Numerous studies on textual accounts of protests and social movements show that media tend to marginalize these movements (Corrigall-Brown, 2011). This is primarily because media coverage tends toward a “protest paradigm” (McLeod and Hertog, 1998), which refers to “a system of reporting on protest events whereby reporters use a particular narrative structure, rely on official source and invoke public opinion in particular ways that, taken together, serve to marginalize protests and their issues” (Corrigall-Brown, 2011). The protest paradigm emphasizes the negative and violent nature of the protesters, while giving tacit legitimacy to people in authority positions by asking their opinions and quoting them (Corrigall-Brown, 2011). In general, protesters are labeled and marginalized when they oppose the dominant power structure (hegemony).

Previous research indicates media frames “are particularly relevant when the way an issue is presented has potential social consequences” (Hardin, 2002). That is because photographs are powerful and news photos can become “iconic” or representative of more than what they picture (Perlmutter, 1998). Clawson and Trice (2000) note, “People and events that appear in photographs accompanying news stories are not simply indicative of isolated individuals and occurrences; rather the photographs are symbolic of ‘the whole mosaic.’ They become emblematic representations.”

While framing traditionally has been used to analyze text, visual framing is an equally important, if lesser-studied, area of media research. Gitlin’s definition of media framing (1980) specifically mentions visual framing as part of framing theory. Although words can provide details and context, the visual image is in many ways more powerful. Research has shown that news images leave lasting impressions that may overshadow the text (Zillman, Gibson, Sargent, 1999). Lester and Ross (2003) have used the study of visual framing of minorities to show pictorial stereotypes in media. Scholars have noted that stereotyping and racial ideology is most crucially reproduced by, or with the help of, the mass media (Abraham and Opiah, 2006). Browne, Firestone, and Mickiewicz (1994) noted that, “Majority cultural domination often carries with it the power to stereotype. It is in itself a way to maintain power, in fact, because it underlines the ability of those holding power to determine how to portray those who do not.”

Hegemony looks at who holds power, such as major media outlets, and how those majority power structures shape the way the culture portrays other groups within society. Critical Race Theory looks at the large socio-cultural forces such as literature, media, legal systems, and

politics as evidence of the dominant culture's collective values and beliefs. The mass media are ideal vehicles for stereotyping, "because they extend throughout society, and frequently serve as trend-setters, taste-makers, labelers, and the raw material for daily conversation" (Browne, Firestone, and Mickiewicz, 1994). This teaching exercise shows students how similar situations can be labeled in such a way that condemns a minority disturbance while giving the majority audience a "pass."

Defining Terms

The core of this assignment is a comparison of the media framing of two groups of demonstrators. It is important that students understand the concepts behind the terms. *Webster's Dictionary* defines revelry as "a wild and noisy celebration." *Webster's Dictionary* defines riot as "a situation in which a large group of people behave in a violent and uncontrolled way." At what point does a demonstration or revelry become a "riot"? The term "riot" invokes a much more violent image than "demonstration" or "revelry." Critical Legal Studies (which Critical Race Studies used as a springboard) indicates that not every legal case has one correct outcome. Instead one can decide most cases either way, by emphasizing one line of authority over another, or interpreting one fact differently (Delgado). Although the legal system is part of systemic racism, this exercise relies on comparing two incidents and the legal definition of riot is important to make that comparison. A riot is:

- 1) technically a turbulent and violent disturbance of peace by **three or more people** acting together, and
- 2) an assemblage of people who are out of control, causing injury, or endangering the physical safety of others and/or themselves, causing or threatening damage to property, and often violating various laws both individually and as a group.

The common thread is that the people in a riot have the power through violence to break the public peace and safety, requiring police action. Often, police officers declare a riot after they have informed the crowd that the people constitute an "unlawful assembly" and after the people have been ordered to "disperse" immediately (historically in England this is called "reading the riot act"). If the crowd does not disperse, its members become subject to arrest for the crime of rioting, disturbing the peace, resisting arrest, or other separate crimes ranging from assault to unlawful possession of firearms (<http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/riot>).

One can conclude that a riot includes the following legal characteristics:

- 1) There is level of violence involved
- 2) The crowd is out of control
- 3) There is a large crowd (minimum of 3)
- 4) There is property damage
- 5) Police action is required and crowd is ordered to disperse

Teaching Materials

Instructor should create a SLIDE or HANDOUT for students as shown below. This corresponds to the photos the students will be seeing.

Ten photos were selected from a variety of news sources that visually captured the disturbances. One photo was selected from each disturbance for each of the five variables pertaining to the definition of riots (ten photos total.)

For the images to show the class, go to:

<http://geske.public.iastate.edu/Riot%20vs%20Revelry%20Images.pptx> or use the Tiny URL <http://tinyurl.com/gpbfbdz>

Download the PowerPoint file with the images. A sample coding sheet is included (below) that you may copy for students to do their rankings. Click slowly through each image, allowing a few seconds for students to get a feel for the image and mark the coding sheet. Each of the five defining areas has a scale to go with the photo and the scale is included below the image and is replicated on the coding sheet.

Note to instructors:

In each case the Columbus “revelry” is pictured first and the Ferguson “riot” is shown second (but don’t reveal that to students until after they mark the scale for each disturbance).

Note on image copyright:

Please limit the photos to use for educational and specifically your classroom purposes only. Section 107 of the Copyright Act states: the fair use of a copyrighted work, including such use by reproduction in copies or phonorecords or by any other means specified by that section, for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright. Full credits and sources are given at the end of the images (listing them below the photo could cue students to the source and nature of the disturbance shown).

Riot vs. Revelry Coding Sheet1) There is a **level of violence** involved.

Photo One

Non-violent1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **Violent**
10

Photo Two

Non-violent1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **Violent**
102) The crowd is **out of control**.

Photo Three

Controlled1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **Out-of-control**
9 10

Photo Four

Controlled1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **Out-of-control**
9 103) There is a **large crowd (minimum of 3)**.

Photo Five

Small Gathering (3 or fewer)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **Large Crowd**
9 10

Photo Six

Small Gathering (3 or fewer)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **Large Crowd**
9 104) There is **property damage**.

Photo Seven

No Property Damage1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Property Damage**
8 9 10

Photo Eight

No Property Damage1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Property Damage**
8 9 105) Police action is required and crowd is ordered to disperse.

Photo Nine

No Police Action Required1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Police Action Required**
8 9 10

Photo Ten

No Police Action Required1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Police Action Required**
8 9 10

Timeline and Teaching Instructions

This exercise is most successful with two standard 90-minute class periods but could be modified to one class if necessary.

Two Class Period Option (preferred)

Assign students to read about Framing Theory, Critical Race Theory, and a description of Hegemony for the first class meeting. Then, the first class includes a brief lecture and discussion of the theories taking roughly 30 minutes. The second 30 minutes or so of the class can be used to show the news photos with students filling out their rating sheet and compiling the results. End the class with the final 30 minutes to “reveal” which photos are from the Ferguson disturbance and which are from the Columbus disturbance and go through the slides again so students can compare. With each pair, have a short discussion or question time to allow students to share initial reactions.

Students then are assigned to write a short paper (2-4 pages) to clarify their thoughts for discussion at the next meeting, which would cover the full 90 minutes. The second class period can begin by looking at several of the “useful” links included below to show how the major networks covered the disturbances. This leads to discussion for the remainder of the period. Discussion question prompts are included below.

The two class period option is preferred as it gives students the opportunity to think and clarify their thoughts and arguments. Some students are reluctant to speak up in class and having the time to formulate and write their answer will result in more participation and more thoughtful responses. Since students will have time between classes, they can also look for other examples.

One Class Period Option

Assign students to read about Framing Theory, Critical Race Theory, and a description of Hegemony. The class includes a brief lecture for the first 10 minutes to discuss the concepts and theories. The second 30 minutes or so of the class can be used to show the news photos with students filling out their rating sheet and compiling the results. Use 30 minutes to “reveal” which photos are from the Ferguson disturbance and which are from the Columbus disturbance. Go through the slides again so students can compare with discussion of the theories and how they apply to the photos being compared. It is suggested that students break into small groups for small group discussion before discussing as a class. Doing so allows more timid students to discuss and frame thoughts in a small group before speaking to the larger class. Come back together for the remaining 20 minutes as a larger class to answer discussion questions selected from the discussion questions below.

These useful links can be used to show how the media labeled the Ohio State disturbance as “revelry” and the Ferguson disturbances as “riots.”

Discussion Questions

Do the photos (evidence) suggest that Columbus, Ohio disturbances meet the legal definition of riot? (Review the five factors if necessary.)

Do the photos (evidence) suggest that Ferguson, Missouri disturbances meet the legal definition of riot? (Review the five factors if necessary.)

Once you know the context of the disturbance do you have a tendency to look back at the photos differently and look for other “clues” or in any way look at them differently?

How might people/readers justify the disturbance of college students vs. the protesters in Ferguson?

Do you think demographic markers have an impact on the labeling? (Ohio State students are predominately white and upwardly mobile. Ferguson is predominately black and a relatively poor suburb.)

Discuss hegemony. Is football part of mainstream power structures?

Who controls the media? Which of the public disturbances are a greater threat to the community? Why? Is there a difference?

How are the two disturbances framed? Is this framing justified based on the definition of riot?

Useful Links

CBS News Reporting of Ohio State Football “Revelry”

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/tear-gas-used-on-crowds-at-ohio-state-after-teams-win/>

CBS News Reporting of Ferguson Protest “Riot”

<http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/ferguson-protesters-riot-in-aftermath-of-grand-jury-decision/>

NBC News Reporting of Columbus “Revelry”

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/riot-cops-use-tear-gas-columbus-crowds-after-ohio-state-n284976?hootPostID=87d4c009c99faa542c449f243b2dd7c2>

NOTE: there is some evidence the headline has changed as the initial tweet from NBC News lists the participants as Revelers rather than Crowds

<https://twitter.com/NBCNews/status/554967442062315521>

NBC News Reporting of Ferguson Riots

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/shooting-michael-brown-sparks-riots-ferguson-missouri-n177481>

ABC News and Ferguson Riots

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/tour-destruction-ferguson-riots/story?id=27163962>

It appears ABC National News did not cover the Ohio State disturbance.

One of the world's major news services, Reuters, framed the disturbances as well.

Ohio State "disperses Ohio football fans"

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-ohio-football-idUSKBN0KM0XA20150113>

Ferguson Missouri is described as "riot-torn"

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-ferguson-idUSKCN0QH1QK20150812>

Assignment

Write an x-page paper (the author uses 2-4 pages due to large class size). Based on the evidence discussed in class, do you feel the media fairly or unfairly framed the disturbances in these two situations? Use the concepts of Hegemony, Media Framing, and/or Critical Race Theory in your discussion.

Grading Rubric Sample for 50 points (modify to fit your grading scales)

Riot vs. Revelry Paper Grading Rubric					
Final Project	100%	80%	60%	30%	0%
Theory (Serves as a basis or a lens with which to examine your topic) 10 pts.	10 POINTS Theory is clearly stated and defined. The reader can clearly identify how the argument is in line with the theory throughout the presentation.	8 POINTS The theory is clearly stated and defined. There is an attempt to carry the perspective throughout the paper/presentation.	6 POINTS Theory is stated but not defined. The perspective seems to be in line with the theory, but it may jump at certain points.	3 POINTS The theory is hinted at, but never clearly stated or defined. The presentation/paper is somewhat confusing and scattered.	0 POINTS No traceable theory base is found.
Thesis/Claim (the focus and claim you are presenting and conclusion of your evidence/discussion) 10 pts.	10 POINTS The thesis/main point/central argument is clearly stated and developed, is worth investigating (meaning it has depth and	8 POINTS The thesis is clearly stated but not entirely developed. The topic is relevant and warrants examination.	6 POINTS The thesis is clearly stated, but it is not developed in that the scope of information available for study does not warrant investigation.	3 POINTS The thesis is stated, but it is vague or not inclusive. The topic may or may not be relevant to the class.	0 POINTS The thesis is missing. The topic is irrelevant to the course.

	enough content to study), and fits within the limitation of a class topic.				
Supporting Evidence (Specific examples, added details, scholarly support, and discussion) 20 pts.	20 POINTS The paper uses a substantial amount of evidence to support the claim. The examples provided are relevant to the topic and contribute to an educated understanding of the topic. An effective amount of scholarly sources are utilized.	16 POINTS The paper uses a fair amount of evidence to support the claim. The examples provided are mostly relevant and contribute to an understanding of the topic. Some scholarly/outside sources are utilized.	12 POINTS Evidence is somewhat effective in supporting the claim. Some examples do not fit with the overall topic. Few scholarly/outside sources are cited.	6 POINTS Some evidence is provided, but it is lacking. There is no scholarly support.	0 POINTS No evidence is provided.
GUMPS (Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, Punctuation, Spelling) 10 points	10 points 0-1 GUMPS or formatting errors	8 points 2-3 GUMPS or formatting errors	6 points 4-6 GUMPS or formatting errors	3 points 7-10 GUMPS or formatting errors	0 points More than 10 GUMPS or formatting errors
TOTAL POINTS 50-45 = A 44-40 = B 39-35 = C 34-30 = D Below 30 = F					

Suggested Theory Readings Appropriate for Undergraduate Students

Media Framing:

- http://journalism.uoregon.edu/~tbivins/stratcomweb/readings/Framing_comp_new.pdf
- <http://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/framing-theory/>

Media, Democracy, and Hegemony:

http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/31944_1.pdf

Critical Race Theory:

<http://www.odec.umd.edu/CD/RACE/CRT.PDF>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/14/>

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Biography

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Joel Geske is an Associate Professor and the Associate Director of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University. He teaches courses on Ethnicity, Gender, Class and the Media and a variety of advertising classes. He is also a core member of the Women's and Gender Studies faculty and developed the course "Portrayals of Gender and Sexualities in the Media." He has been at Iowa State since 1988 and has won several teaching and diversity awards for his work.