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## **Framing Police Brutality: An Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of Walter Scott's Murder**

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FRAMING POLICE BRUTALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF WALTER  
SCOTT'S MURDER

by

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## ABSTRACT

This research analyzes news articles about the killing of Walter Scott in 2015 to determine how frames changed over time and across platforms. Previous studies have found that news coverage of police violence against Black men has not always been fair. Instead, the narrative of official sources, like law enforcement, prove dominant. These same research articles typically focus on the way national news outlets frame incidents like Scott's.

But this thesis takes a deeper look at how state newspapers framed Scott's murder. I analyzed the frames and sources found in nearly 200 articles published by The Post and Courier and The State newspapers in South Carolina, plus The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, two of the nation's most-circulated publications. Results were consistent with most prior research and showed that newspapers rely on official sources, and most coverage about police brutality is episodic. Dominant frames vary among individual incidents. There were little differences between local and national coverage.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iii
List of Tables .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	4
Chapter 3: Method .....	11
Chapter 4: Results .....	18
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	27
References .....	32

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Intercoder reliability among frames and sources .....	17
Table 4.1 Publication type by journalistic frame .....	22
Table 4.2 Dominant frames by location.....	23
Table 4.3 Dominant frames (with more than five values) by location .....	24
Table 4.4 Dominant frames by publication week .....	25
Table 4.5 Journalistic frames by publication week.....	26

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It took less than three seconds for Michael Slager, a North Charleston, S.C., policeman, to fire the eight shots that killed Walter Scott, as the Black man fled on foot during a traffic stop. A blown brake light on Scott's Mercedes was the reason for the stop on the morning of April 4, 2015.

The encounter started like a typical traffic stop with Slager asking for the usual documentation: a driver's license, the vehicle registration card and proof of insurance. Shortly after the officer returned to his patrol car to process the information, Scott got out of the Mercedes and started running. Slager yelled after Scott, alerting that he had a taser. But Scott kept running, and the officer trailed behind, according to camera footage. Within seconds, Slager was shooting Scott in the back. Scott died on the scene (Knapp & Bartelme, 2015). A bystander's video emerged a few days later and captured the shooting and the moments afterwards, challenging the narrative initially offered by official sources. Slager was sentenced to 20 years in prison for killing Scott.

Over the past decade, local and national news outlets have been diligent in shedding light on fatal police brutality incidents involving unarmed Black men (Brown et al., 2018; Kilgo, 2021). Scott's case was no different. Local newspaper coverage started as a brief overview of the incident based on information provided by a North Charleston police department spokesperson (MacDougall & Elmore). Many details were still unclear in early reports. But a review of news articles showed that coverage evolved over time

and took on many themes, including the officer's justification for the shooting, community reactions, the victim's criminal history and a statewide push for body cameras.

The Kerner Commission report, released in 1968 encouraged newspapers to treat "ordinary news" about Blacks as they would other groups of people and recognize their existence and activities as part of the community. Now, 55 years after the report was released, research still monitors how media portrays Blacks (Mourão et al., 2018). And some of that research has revealed that news coverage of police violence against Black men is not always fair. Narratives from law enforcement is typically the dominant narrative in the coverage (Kilgo, 2021), and Black people are often portrayed as threatening, while officers remain faceless.

Several studies address the way national news outlets frame incidents like Scott's and Brown's. Few studies, however, have examined differences in coverage between local and national newspapers for such incidents (Holody & Daniel, 2016). Hence, this study seeks to help fill that gap in the literature and provide a better understanding of how newspapers closest to the incidents covered police brutality involving Black men.

This study examines two local newspapers (The Post and Courier and The State) and two national newspapers (The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times) to understand how they represented the shooting and victim in coverage to audiences in South Carolina and beyond.

The Scott shooting initially only garnered attention from local outlets before receiving national attention. Scott's murder was first reported by Charleston's daily newspaper, The Post and Courier, on April 5, 2015, the day after the shooting. The New



York Times didn't report on the incident until two days later. Thus, there was a window for the local newspaper to adopt frames that might have been different from frames used by other media.

A content analysis of more than 200 newspaper articles revealed the news frames, dominant frames and sources used in each publication during the first four weeks after Scott's murder. The goal is to observe and compare coverage, sources and the thematic, episodic and dominant news frames in four newspapers: two national outlets and two local ones close to North Charleston. It will examine how frames evolved over time, including after the release of a bystander's video of the shooting.

Findings will help answer questions about how national and local newspapers cover police brutality differently — if at all — when Black men are the victims.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **2.1 Framing and media effects**

Several definitions of media framing are prevalent in the literature. Scholars like Gamson and Modigliani (1987) say framing is a central organizing idea or storyline that gives meaning to an unfolding strip of events. Entman (1993) described framing as selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text. This is done in a way that promotes a specific problem or definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation.

At their most powerful, frames invite people to think about an issue in a particular way (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008). According to some journalism scholars, whether intentional or not, frames are always present in news, allowing journalists to quickly identify, classify and package information relayed to audiences (Campbell and Wiggins, 2014; Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980). Within a specific text, frames may present themselves through the presence or absence of key words, phrases, images or information sources that reinforce certain facts or judgements. This can have several effects on those who view or read a news story, with one of the most studied effects being attitude formation or change (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008). Studies have also looked at how exposure to frames can influence the receivers' behaviors (Fridkin et al., 2017).

When frames are analyzed as an independent variable, framing studies look at frame-setting, or the concept's effect on audiences. When analyzing frames as a dependent variable, studies are mostly concerned with frame-building, or how frames get established (Scheufele, 1999).

## **2.2 Framing of police brutality cases against African Americans**

Studies examining newspapers' coverage of police brutality involving Black people have mostly focused on protests, frames and gender narratives in national outlets during the last decade. And most of these scholars agree that police tend to control the narrative of related news articles (Brown et al., 2018; Cecil, 2022; Fridkin et al., 2017).

In many cases, police brutality coverage tends to be more episodic and focused on individual events but become more thematic over time, placing issues and events in a more general context (Mourão et al., 2018).

In Mourão et al., (2018) researchers determined whether entire articles were mostly episodic and focused on individual events, or thematic, placing issues and events in a more general context. Several protest and advocacy frames were also identified, including riot, inequality, race relations and police brutality. Mourão et al. (2018) defined race relations using the main principle of the Black Lives Matter movement at that time: “a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society” (Black Lives Matter, 2015). Police brutality refers to individual encounters between citizens and police that often lead to excessive use of force or legally unwarranted deaths (Mourão et al., 2018).

That study — which is similar to this thesis in terms of topic and methodology — found that episodic frames were more prevalent within the sample than thematic frames.

Less than one-third of the articles were predominantly thematic, but both national and local news coverage tended to lean more in the direction of thematic frames over time. And while police brutality was the underlying issue of the protests, which might suggest thematic framing, related coverage was mostly episodic framing (Mourão et al., 2018).

Brown et al. (2018) examined differences in coverage before and after the deaths of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, by a local police officer. Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, was fatally shot in 2012 by a neighborhood watchman in Florida. A jury found the shooter not guilty of second-degree murder, and he was acquitted of manslaughter (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). Brown et al. analyzed frames, sources and other elements of articles selected from The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and the Washington Post. Selected articles were published the last month of court proceedings and the month after judicial decisions were made. Among the identified frames were rights and protest. To identify protest frames, coders evaluated whether articles explained protesters' motives or demands or discussed the Black Lives Matter movement's ideology within the context of the murders. Rights frames were considered present in articles that discussed criminal injustices and the over police or mass incarceration of Blacks, among other things (Brown et al., 2018). It was possible for an article to have multiple frames.

In that same study, researchers identified sources used in the articles. These included family members, sources from the accused, officials, experts and protesters. Political, public policy and protest news has traditionally depended on official sources, which gives law enforcement, elected officials and government representatives control of

defining public problems and suppressing opposing voices (Bennet, 2011; Brown et. al, 2018). Lawrence (1996) said journalists routinely handle police use of force in ways that will protect their relationships with the institutions they cover. Officers' versions of alleged police brutality acts typically reign supreme in news accounts (Lawrence, 1996). But nonofficial voices can be just as important, as the Breonna Taylor case suggests.

Taylor was killed in 2020 when Kentucky police officers conducted a “botched raid” on her apartment (Oppel et al., 2022). It took more than two months before Taylor’s case entered the national news cycle, and nonofficial voices — including family, friends, activists and experts — were found in more than 80 percent of the articles (Cecil, 2022). Research from Brown et. al (2018) concluded that official sources, especially state police, dominated coverage of the Brown and Martin cases. The protest frame was present in most of the sampled articles, but the rights frames was only identified in about 30 percent of the stories. The authors said verdicts play a role in journalistic framing and can shift the focus on stories from tactics to ideas (Brown et. al, 2018).

Previous studies have also examined the use of victim blaming and law and order as frames in news reports about police brutality (Cecil, 2022; Fridkin et al., 2017). Smiley and Fakunle (2016) found that Black men killed by law enforcement officers between July 2014 and April 2015 were portrayed as thugs and criminals to justify their deaths and keep blame the off officers. The authors said microinsults and microinvalidations like criminal records, physical appearance or misunderstood attributes, were often used in the media to blame the victims for their own deaths. Microinsults are rude or insensitive communications that demean a person’s racial heritage or identity (Sue et al., 2007). Microinvalidations “exclude, negate, or nullify the

psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007).

Smiley and Fakunle (2016) examined the deaths of six unarmed Black men, including Brown, who were killed by police in 2014 and 2015. Autoethnography was used to analyze 10 newspaper articles published about each incident no more than 30 days after the victim’s death. Portrayals of each victim fell under four recurring themes: behavior, appearance, location and lifestyle (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Later research from Kilgo (2021) supports this finding. Her analysis of the shooting death of Stephon Clark in California showed that his criminal history and “deviant behavior” were discussed enough in articles to challenge the dominant victim narratives. Police chased and shot Clark at least seven times in his grandmother’s backyard after receiving reports of vandalism (Martinez, 2022). Clark was unarmed, only holding a cell phone. But the police said he approached them with a gun.

Fridkin et al., (2017) found law and order to be a dominant frame used in media reports about the 2014 incident in Arizona where a White university policeman body slammed a Black female professor for jaywalking. Race and police brutality frames were also analyzed in the study. News articles that used the dominant law-and-order frame explained that the officer was simply trying to ensure public safety (Fridkin et al., 2017).

An experiment revealed that people who viewed media reports containing the law-and-order frame before watching the dash cam video of the confrontation, rated the police officer’s actions positively. But those who viewed the police brutality frame first, rated the officer’s actions more negatively. Support for the professor was lower when

video reports were framed in terms of law and order, and higher when the police brutality frame was introduced.

### **2.3 Local news versus national news**

A study from the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates (1998) found that local newspapers tend to have more explanatory coverage and straight news accounts, while national papers produce more interpretative pieces with larger perspectives. Explanatory frames were described as ones that show how something works and fits into ongoing trends or historical contexts. They are often underused, the authors said.

There is very little difference in coverage surrounding conflict and wrongdoing, according to this study. But Elmasry and el-Nawawy (2016) concluded that local coverage is more sympathetic than national reports during peak times of conflict.

Local journalists tend to have better access to community sources and closer relationships with officials than reporters from national outlets. This can influence differences in newspaper coverage and is likely the reason local outlets tend to have more detailed reports on high-profile shootings like Scott's. Holody and Daniel (2016) suggested that differences in newspaper reporting might also reflect audiences' psychological distance from a news event.

A prior analysis of coverage surrounding Brown's murder saw small differences between local coverage and that of elite newspapers (Mourão et al., 2018). But most framing literature has focused on identifying common frames in individual articles instead of comparing frames used by different media types (Holody & Daniel, 2016). Based on this review of the relevant literature, the present study will identify thematic

and episodic overall journalistic frames, and dominant content frames in four weeks of coverage of the shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston, S.C. Stories will be taken from two national and two local newspapers. This approach will allow for an examination of the difference in types of coverage in the use of overall frames and the dominant content frames. The thesis will be guided by three research questions and two hypotheses.

RQ 1: Are there differences between newspaper location (local vs national) and coverage of the Walter Scott shooting?

RQ 2: What are the dominant frames used in coverage of the Walter Scott shooting by the local newspapers and by the national newspapers?

RQ 3: Did the dominant frames used in coverage of the Walter Scott shooting by the local newspapers and by the national newspapers change over the course of the month following the shooting during which a bystander video was released?

H 1: Coverage of the Walter Scott shooting will be mostly episodic but will become more thematic over time.

H 2: Newspapers will rely on official sources more than any other type of sources when covering the Walter Scott shooting.

To answer RQ 1, the study will compare multiple variables, including frames, sources and dates of coverage. Several of these variables will be addressed individually through the remaining research questions.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

#### **3.1 Method**

This study was conducted using a content analysis, a research technique for making replicable and valid references from data to their context (Krippendorff, 1989). Two local and two national newspapers were sampled. For the sake of this study, “local” refers to newspapers published in South Carolina.

To capture potential local and national variations in news coverage of the officer-involved shooting of Scott, the researcher selected The Post and Courier and The State newspapers based in Charleston and Columbia, respectively. These are two of South Carolina’s largest metropolitan areas (US Census Bureau, 2022). The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times were selected for the national sample and are both ranked on Cision’s list of the top 10 most-circulated daily newspapers in the United States (*Top 10 U.S. Daily Newspapers*, 2019). Each of the four publications tout journalistic credibility with broad digital and international reach.

More than 100 local newsrooms have closed in America because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hare, 2021). But despite this trend, The Post and Courier (independently owned) and The State’s (McClatchy-owned) newsrooms have grown in their base cities and expanded to other South Carolina markets, including to the Upstate region. These

newspapers have the two largest news website readerships in the state and remain the monopoly daily newspaper in each city (Frear et al., 2019). Each publication has full-time reporters on the ground in the Charleston area.

Scott's death drew attention from each of the selected publications. This framing study includes all articles published about the shooting over 26 days, beginning the day after the incident (April 5) to the end of the month (April 30). By April 30, Slager had been charged with Scott's murder and the state Senate had given final approval to a bill that would require police officers to wear body cameras.

Neither publication produced articles about the shooting on April 4, the day it happened. Coverage on the case began to dwindle after the first four weeks and was not as consistent.

A Newsbank archive search returned a total of 229 local articles — 139 in The Post and Courier and 39 in The State. Factiva returned 51 local articles — 32 in The New York Times and 19 in The Wall Street Journal. All newspapers weren't available solely in Newsbank or Factiva which is why both databases were used. Several keyword combinations were tested; searches for "North Charleston officer shooting," "North Charleston," and "Walter Scott" returned the most relevant and inclusive set of articles for the selected timeframe. Twenty-eight duplicate articles and 77 unrelated ones were removed from the sample. Duplicate articles are those essentially identical to another one in the sample but may have slightly different headlines and/or include a sub headline. Articles could have been considered unrelated to the topic for several reasons including if they merely mentioned Walter Scott but primarily focused on other events or topics. Death notices, obituaries, sports briefs, standalone lists, timelines, polls and syndicated

columns titled “Walter Scott Asks” and “Walter Scott’s Parade” were considered unrelated to the topic.

After the removal of duplicate and unrelated articles, the sampled totaled 124 articles: The Post and Courier, 80; The State, 18; The Wall Street Journal, 7; and The New York Times, 19.

Two graduate students trained in quantitative content analysis conducted the data collection and coding. Each article in the sample served as a single unit of analysis (Frear, et al., 2019; Kilgo, 2021). A protocol was established to address each research question and hypothesis and identify the journalistic frames, overall dominant frames and sources in each article related to Walter Scott’s murder and the events that followed.

To prepare, coders examined other studies conducted during the last decade on news framing of police brutality incidents involving people of color (Brown, et al., 2018; Cecil, 2022; Culhane, et al., 2016; Fridkin, et al., 2017; Kilgo, 2021). The coding sheet was revised several times during coder trainings. Some variables were combined, removed or added to the study after several coder trainings and tests for intercoder reliability. The study began with five options for sources and six dominant overall frames. Final lists included only five dominant overall frames but maintained the same number of options for sources.

Two coders were used for this study, including the author. Intercoder reliability tests were performed by double coding a random sub-sample of news articles (n=50, 28.1%). To comport with the best practices of content analysis, both Krippendorff’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and percent (%) agreement was calculated for all variables. Krippendorff’s alpha ( $\alpha$ )

was ranged from .34 to 1, and percent (%) agreement ranged from 80% to 100% (see table 3.1).

Each article served as a separate coding unit. After determining whether an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was established, the remaining content was divided and coded independently and then analyzed to answer the research questions.

### **3.2 Unit of Analysis**

Researchers analyzed the full length of each article as the unit of analysis. They were instructed to make all evaluations using only the instructions provided in the coding manual; all prior background knowledge of the murder was ignored.

### **3.3 Episodic versus thematic frames**

Researchers identified whether the full article was mostly episodic or thematic in nature. Episodic articles focus on specific events. These are articles that are typically a news story, immediately reporting on an event. They typically focus on the who, what, when, where and maybe how or why in the first paragraph or first few paragraphs. Thematic articles are more issue oriented; they typically illustrate or explain/discuss a social issue. Thematic articles may use an episode/episodic event as the jumping off point for a broader discussion of an issue, but the focus is clearly on the issue and not the event (Gearhart & Dinkel, 2016).

Paragraphs were counted to establish the journalistic frame of each article. For example, if two-thirds of an article was thematic, it was coded as thematic (Famulari, 2020).

### **3.4 Dominant frames**

Researchers read the entire article and determined the dominant frame, or central idea. It was possible for articles to include more than one frame, but researchers were instructed to code only the dominant frame in each article. Other researchers have noted how it could be problematic to count both primary and minor topics equally because of the difference in their prominence in the articles. This could have also created an issue in terms of reliability (Kim et al., 2021). Articles that did not have one of the following frames as dominant were coded as “other”:

1. Police brutality – Stories focusing on encounters between citizens and police that lead to excessive use of force or legally unwarranted deaths.
2. Victim blaming – Stories focusing on microinsults and microinvalidations like criminal records, physical appearance, race or misunderstood attributes, used in the media to blame the victim for their own deaths.
3. Protest and rights – Stories focusing on protesters’ motives and demands, including civil rights, or the Black Lives Matter movement’s ideology within the context of the murders.
4. Law and order – Stories that focus on the idea that officer Michael Slager was following procedure, trying to ensure public safety.
5. Other- Discussions that do not fit any of the above categories.

### **3.5 Sources**

Researchers identified the absence or presence of six types of sources: 1. family sources (family members or legal representatives of Scott or his family); 2. sources from the accused (Slager, legal representatives, family members); 3. officials (law

enforcement, elected officials, government representatives and government documents or videos); 4. experts (legal professionals, crime analysts, scholars, researchers, doctors); 5. protesters (individuals who publicly demonstrate objection or opposition and do not fit any previous category); and 6. other (individuals who do not fit any of the categories listed previously). An article could contain more than one type of source, but a specific type of sources was counted only once per article.

### **3.6 Analysis Plan**

Several non-parametric statistical tests were performed to answer RQ1-RQ3 and the hypotheses. Specifically, these included running  $z$ -tests for proportion differences and cross-tabulations with Pearson's chi-square tests ( $\chi^2$ ).

Table 3.1 Intercoder reliability among frames and sources

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percent agreement</b>	<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>	<b>Krippendorff's Alpha</b>
<b><i>Journalistic frames</i></b>			
Episodic	80%	.608	.601
Thematic	82%	.602	.597
<b><i>Dominant frames</i></b>			
Police brutality	78%	.486	.491
Victim blaming	88%	.359	.34
Protests and rights	92%	.702	.705
Law and order	98%	.658	.66
Other	82%	.549	.548
<b><i>Sources</i></b>			
Family	82%	.696	.698
Sources from the accused	82%	.672	.672
Officials	92%	.852	.852
Experts	90%	.814	.815
Protesters	84%	.673	.673
Other	84%	.736	.738

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Because the focus is on frames in local versus national newspapers, the results of the two local papers were combined to create the local variable and the results of the two national papers were combined to create the national variable. There are no individual paper results presented.

The first research question, **RQ 1**, is: Are there differences between newspaper location (local vs national) and coverage of the Walter Scott shooting?

There was essentially no major difference in coverage in terms of episodic and thematic journalistic frames. The coverage was mostly episodic frames in both the local and national newspapers. About 55 percent of the articles in local newspapers and 54 percent in the national newspapers used episodic frames. Thus, close to 44 percent of the articles in local newspapers and 46 percent in the national newspapers were thematic. The relationship between journalistic frames and newspaper location was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1) = .013, p = .909$ . See Table 4.1.

The second research question, **RQ 2**, is: What are the dominant frames used in coverage of the Walter Scott shooting by the local newspapers and by the national newspapers?

The study coded for four frames traditionally studied by media scholars addressing social justice issues: police brutality, victim blaming, protest and rights, and law and order, as shown in Table 4.2. The protest and rights dominant frame was most



frequently found in the coverage; it was present in 33.1 percent of the sampled articles, when local and national newspapers were combined. When looking at the locations separately, the protest and rights frame was still the most frequent, accounting for 34.7 percent in local coverage and 26.9 percent in national coverage.

Police brutality was the second-most frequent dominant frame used by newspapers and accounted for 21.8 percent of the total coverage. A total of **20.4** percent of the local coverage and **26.9** percent of the national coverage used this frame.

One dominant frame appeared less than five times: victim blaming (national publications, 1, or 3.8 percent, and local publications, 3, or 3.1 percent). Law and order had one cell that appeared less than five times (national publications, 2, or 7.7 percent and local publications, 6, or 6.1percent). These frames did not meet the necessary criteria for analysis using Chi Square tests. A catchall category called “other” was included in the study for articles that did not use one of the dominant frames coded for. The relationship between newspaper location and dominant frames (police brutality, protests and rights and “other”) were not proven to be statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = .782$ ,  $p = .676$ . Proportions among dominant frames across the two news locations did not differ from what would be expected by chance, as shown in Table 4.3.

The third research question, **RQ 3**, is: Did the dominant frames used in coverage of the Walter Scott shooting by the local newspapers and by the national newspapers change over the course of the month following the shooting during which a bystander video was released?

For the first three weeks, protest and rights and “other” alternated each week as the most dominant framing category. Most local (47 percent) and national (33 percent)

articles during Week 1 used the “other” framing category. In Week 2, the protest and rights frame was most dominant in local (44 percent) and national (44 percent) coverage. “Other” frames were most dominant in local (57 percent) coverage during Week 3. But in the national publications, coverage was equally split between the protest and rights (50 percent) and “other” (50 percent) framing categories that week. No national articles were published in Week 4, but half of the local articles used the protest and rights dominant frame, while the other half took on “other” frames.

When grouped by week, there were no significant differences between dominant frames,  $\chi^2(6) = 10.906$ ,  $p = .091$ , as shown in Table 4.4. As mentioned above, frames that appeared less than five times did not meet the necessary criteria for analysis using Chi Square tests.

**Hypothesis 1** predicted that coverage of the Walter Scott shooting would be mostly episodic but would become more thematic over time. That hypothesis was partially supported. Specifically, 54.8 percent of all articles were episodic, and 45.2 percent of articles were thematic. Week 3 was the only week when articles were mostly thematic (62.5 percent). This supports the hypothesis.

When grouped by week, there were no significant differences,  $\chi^2(3) = 2.774$ ,  $p = .428$ . However, the trend was that on average, each week there were fewer thematic articles. For example, Week 1 there were 26 thematic articles (42.6 percent), followed by 19 (44.2 percent) in Week 2, 10 (63.5 percent) in Week 3, and the fewest count, 1 (25 percent) in Week 4. See Table 4.5.

**Hypothesis 2** predicted that newspapers would rely on official sources more frequently than any other types of sources when covering the shooting. This hypothesis was supported.

To examine the differences between proportions, multiple z-tests were performed with an adjusted p-value to correct for multiple comparisons. This was done instead of chi-square tests because the way the coding protocol was developed, more than one source could be present within a given article. So chi-square analysis would not be appropriate.

Based on this analysis, the largest proportion of sources cited were the official sources, which were cited significantly more than all other sources in the data set. The second-largest proportion of sources were the “other” sources ( $z = 3.54, p < .001$ ), followed by expert sources ( $z = 5.84, p < .001$ ), protesters ( $z = 5.06, p < .001$ ), family sources ( $z = 5.34, p < .001$ ) and sources from the accused ( $z = 5.67, p < .001$ ). These large proportion differences are all statistically significant. Using a Bonferroni adjustment to correct for family-wise error, all p-values would have to be smaller than .0083 to be considered significant. All are smaller than .001.

When looking at the proportion of sources as percentages, official sources were present in 74.4 percent of articles, “other” sources in 45.6 percent, expert sources in 37.6 percent, protesters in 29.6 percent, family sources in 26.4 percent and sources from the accused in 22.4 percent of the articles.

Table 4.1 Publication type by journalistic frame

<b>Publication Type</b>	<b>Thematic Frame</b>		<b>Episodic Frame</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Local</b>	44	44.9%	53	54.6%	98	100%
<b>National</b>	12	46.2%	14	53.8%	26	100%
<b>Total</b>	56	45.2%	67	54.8%	124	100%

$\chi^2(1) = .013, p = .909$

Table 4.2 Dominant frames by location

Dominant frame		Type of publication				Total	
		Local		National		N	%
		N	%	N	%		
Police brutality		20	20.4%	7	26.9%	27	21.8%
Victim blaming		3	3.1%	1	3.8%	4	3.2%
Protest and rights		34	34.7%	7	26.9%	41	33.1%
Law and order		6	6.1%	2	7.7%	8	6.5%
Other		35	35.7%	9	34.6%	44	35.5%
Total		98	100%	26	100%	124	100%

$\chi^2(2) = .782, p = .676.$

Table 4.3 Dominant frames (with more than five values) by location

		Dominant frames							
		Police Brutality		Protest and Rights		Other		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Type of publication	Local	20 <sub>a</sub>	74.1%	34 <sub>a</sub>	82.9%	35 <sub>a</sub>	79.5%	89	79.5%
	National	7 <sub>a</sub>	25.9%	7 <sub>a</sub>	17.1%	9 <sub>a</sub>	20.5%	23	20.5%
Total		27	100%	41	100%	44	100%	112	100%

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of dominant frames categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.  $\chi^2(2) = .782, p = .676$

Table 4.4. Dominant frames by publication week

Week of Publication	Week	Dominant frames							
		Police Brutality		Protest and Rights		Other		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	1	18 <sub>a</sub>	66.7%	15 <sub>b</sub>	36.6%	22 <sub>a, b</sub>	50.0%	55	49.1%
	2	8 <sub>a, b</sub>	29.6%	19 <sub>b</sub>	46.3%	11 <sub>a</sub>	25.0%	38	33.9%
	3	1 <sub>a</sub>	3.7%	5 <sub>a, b</sub>	12.2%	9 <sub>b</sub>	20.5%	15	13.4%
	4	0 <sub>a</sub>	0.0%	2 <sub>a</sub>	4.9%	2 <sub>a</sub>	4.5%	4	3.6%
Total		27	100%	41	100%	44	100%	112	100%

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Dominant frames 2 categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.  $\chi^2(6) = 10.906$ ,  $p = .091$

Table 4.5 Journalistic frames by publication week

	Week of Publication								Total	
	Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Episodic	35 <sub>a</sub>	57.4%	24 <sub>a</sub>	55.8%	6 <sub>a</sub>	37.5%	3 <sub>a</sub>	75.0%	68	54.8%
Thematic	26 <sub>a</sub>	42.6%	19 <sub>a</sub>	44.2%	10 <sub>a</sub>	62.5%	1 <sub>a</sub>	25.0%	56	45.2%
Total	61	100%	43	100%	16	100%	4	100%	124	100%

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Week of Publication categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.  $\chi^2(3) = 2.774$ ,  $p = .428$



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This study asked three research questions focusing on the dominant and journalistic frames found in news articles published the first month after Walter Scott's murder in North Charleston, South Carolina. The researcher predicted newspapers would rely on official sources in articles and coverage would be mostly episodic but would become more thematic over time.

What was found with relation to most-frequently used dominant frames was not consistent with prior research on newspaper coverage of similar police brutality incidents. But predictions and findings regarding source reliance and most-frequently used journalistic frames were consistent with other studies.

Coverage was mostly episodic in both the local and national newspapers examined in this study, as revealed in the results of **RQ 1** and predicted in **Hypothesis 1**. This confirmed the conclusions of similar studies about newspaper coverage of murders of Black men by police. For example, a study by Mourão et al. (2018) showed that local and national newspaper articles published the first four weeks after Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri was mostly episodic.

The local and national newspapers in this study used journalistic frames nearly the same; 55 percent of the local and 54 percent of the national newspaper articles were episodic. These small differences are inconsistent with studies that indicate local newspapers tend to have more explanatory coverage and straight news accounts, or

episodic framing, than national papers (Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates, 1998).

The second part of **Hypothesis 1** – which predicted coverage would become more thematic over time – was not supported by the data nor consistent with prior research that backed the prediction (Mourão et al., 2018; Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media Staff & Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media Staff, 2020). Instead, there were fewer thematic articles each week. This means that within the first four weeks after Scott’s murder, local and national newspapers consistently provided straight news accounts and focused on the individual events that occurred afterwards.

There were several developments that month that may help explain the frequency of episodic stories. Initial coverage included the minimal details released by the North Charleston Police Department. But a dash camera video was released a short time later and provided more details and a new storyline. Soon after that, a cell phone video recorded by a man who watched the incident occur was given to Scott’s family and then released to the media. That added a new perspective to the story and contradicted officer Michael Slager’s narrative of his encounter with Scott. All these developments led to the officer’s arrest less than a week after he murdered Scott. Each of these developments was reported as an episodic story. While it was important for journalists to include each of these developments in their coverage of the shooting, other smaller events that month were part of the episodic coverage, too, like community meetings with civil rights leaders, protests, a body camera debate at the South Carolina Statehouse and even Scott’s funeral.

Scholars have noted drawbacks to exposure to episodically framed news, such as responsibility being attributed to people instead of society and increased persuasion (Gross, 2008). In this situation, that could mean responsibility of the shooting being placed on Scott or Slager, instead of on the deeply-rooted racism in the South and in the Charleston region where nearly half of enslaved Africans entered America (Magazine, 2022), or on police tactics and poor training. This tends to happen when the “bigger picture” or thematic frames aren’t a significant part of news coverage (Boukes, 2022).

There was strong support for **Hypothesis 2** which predicted coverage of Scott’s murder would rely on official sources. These sources, which includes government officials and law enforcement, were present in 74 percent of the articles. This finding is consistent with the vast literature. Relying on official sources gives agencies like the North Charleston Police Department the ability to control narratives about police brutality. And coverage of Scott’s murder helped show that the voice of officials isn’t always a reliable or honest one. Slager said he shot Scott because Scott took his taser and was about to deploy it on the officer. The narrative of police officer self-defense dominated the early stories. But the police car dash cam and bystander video released a few days later did not support these claims.

Nonofficial voices are just as important as official sources. This is especially true in terms of narratives from individuals who are affected by an act of violence, such as a loved one. Expert sources were present in 37.6 percent of the articles, protesters in 29.6 percent, family sources in 26.4 percent, sources from the accused in 22.4 percent and other” sources in 45.6 percent of the stories.

Narratives shift public perception; being able to empathize or see someone else in pain or understanding suffering in others, can impact oneself. The lack of that in news coverage could be one thing that is limiting the emotional outcry from civilizations at large. Strictly sticking to fact reporting might not necessarily be best in terms of practical and theoretical social implications when it comes to police brutality news coverage.

It is important to remember that access to sources affects narratives, too. In some cases, official sources are easier to get in contact with, especially by local newspapers. Local reporters tend to already have relationships with police departments, city hall and other groups long before they are put in the national spotlight for situations like police-involved murders. Public information from these groups must be made available, even if a Freedom of Information Act request is needed to retrieve it. Lowery (2016), who covered Scott's murder for the Washington Post, said it is tough for a national reporter without local ties to secure an interview with people like police chiefs through official channels and talking with the family immediately after the incident is a "longshot," too, since they are likely still grieving. This could explain why Scott's family and people representing Slager were the least used sources in coverage of the murder.

This study also shows that dominant news frames are not consistent across police brutality incidents involving Black people. In coverage of Scott's murder, the protest and rights frames was most frequently used by the local and national newspapers and was present in 33.1 percent of the sampled articles. When considered separately, the protest and rights frame was still the most frequent, accounting for 34.7 percent in local coverage and 26.9 percent in national coverage. Since the sample was so small, this percentage difference between local and national use of the frame is not significant.

Race was incorporated into the “protest and rights” definition used by researchers of this study. When considering the frame is also about race, the fact that it was most dominant in this study is consistent with other studies like ones by Mourão et al. (2018) that found race relations to consistently be the most important frame in coverage of Michael Brown’s murder by police in Missouri. But a different study by Fridkin et al. (2017) found the law-and-order frame to be most-used in coverage of police brutality incident involving a Black female professor in Arizona. These are just two examples, but it is important to remember that several factors help determine dominant frames of a news articles: details of the case, reporter biases, editorial control and access to sources, among other things. That would justify why coverage of other police brutality incident could differ from this one.

This study has one flaw that might affect how the results should be used. A catchall category called “other” that was used for dominant news frames that did not fit into any of the designated categories of frames. More local articles fit into the “other” category (79.5 percent) than in the remaining framing categories. An exhaustive list of frames would likely be more appropriate for future studies as it would force researchers to develop clear definitions for frames and eliminate the chance for coders to lump all articles into a catchall category when unsure how the story should be labeled.

Overall, there were no statistically significant differences in the way local and national newspapers covered Scott’s murder. Small differences in frame usage were present between newspaper location but none significant enough to say the findings in this study are inconsistent with the vast research that highlights small differences between local and national newspaper perspectives (Mourão et al., 2018).

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