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FRAMING THEORY: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NEWS COVERAGE OF THE BREONNA TAYLOR KILLING

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ABSTRACT

During a series of life-changing events within the African American community, Breonna Taylor, who identified as a Black woman, was fatally shot in her home on March 13, 2020, by a Louisville, Kentucky police officer. Coverage from major media outlets reported that the actions taken by the police department were unorganized and reckless, leading to an international uproar. This study uses Framing Theory to examine more than 100 headlines from CNN, ABC News, MSNBC News, and Fox News related to Taylor's killing. The headlines were analyzed through the frames of *situations*, *choice*, *action*, *issues*, and *responsibility* in an attempt to understand this tragedy from a communication perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Al Sharpton, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer spoke about Breonna Taylor's open case in July 2020 (Sharpton, 2020). Fischer stated that "there were four search warrants being served contemporaneously" (Sharpton, 2020, 1:18-1:21), and the deadly shooting at Taylor's home "was executed by some undercover narcotics agents who don't wear body cameras" (Sharpton, 2020, 1:23-1:29). Prior to executing the search, law enforcement "suspected a man involved in a drug ring was receiving packages of drugs at her home" (Willingham, 2020, para. 3). Jamarcus Glover, Taylor's former boyfriend, was that man. According to the police, Glover was a well-known drug trafficker whose whereabouts were unknown. News reports stated that he had been under surveillance by the Place-Based Investigations (PBI) unit since January 2020 (Diaz & Yamada, 2020). Law enforcement documents indicated that "Detective Joshua Jaynes...believed Glover could be 'keeping narcotics and/or proceeds from the sale of narcotics' at Taylor's home" (Diaz & Yamada, 2020, para. 15). A "no-knock" search warrant was filed on March 12 by Lou-

isville Metro Police Detective Jaynes (Carrega & Ghebremedia, 2020). A “no-knock” warrant “allow[ed] the police to forcibly enter people’s homes to search them without warning” in the hope of discovering valuable evidence (Oppel Jr. et al., 2021, para. 5).

Louisville Metropolitan Police Officers Myles Cosgrove, Brett Hankison, and Sergeant Jonathan Mattingly were among seven officers assigned to execute the search warrant (Carrega & Ghebremedia, 2020). On March 13, 2020, the officers drove to Taylor’s home at St. Anthony Gardens, arriving shortly after midnight. According to their statement, they knocked on her front door (McLaughlin, 2020). Receiving no response from Taylor or her current boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, a battering ram was used by the police to gain access to her apartment. Upon entry, a shot was fired by Walker, a licensed gun owner, who had called 9-1-1. The shot hit detective Mattingly, leaving him injured, and in return, multiple shots were fired, according to Carrega and Ghebremedia (2020). Some of the bullets fired by police entered another apartment, and the Kentucky Attorney General reported that “of the 22 shots fired by the two that night, six struck Taylor” (Waldrop, 2020, para. 12). In the hours that followed, evidence surrounding the events of that night was collected, statements were made by the Chief of Police and the Mayor, and interviews were conducted with Taylor’s family, Kenneth Walker, Sergeant Mattingly, and a number of attorneys.

In an ABC News face-to-face interview with Micheal Strahan, Jonathan Mattingly stated that “after the first [knock], nothing happened, I banged again. I yelled ‘police search warrant’... probably three times each with each bang” (Good Morning America, 2020, 1:10-1:20). He claimed the police officers believed Taylor was likely alone and did not pose a threat. In an interview with co-host Gayle King, Kenneth Walker offered a different version of events, stating: “there was a loud banging at the door. You know, nobody was responding, and we was saying ‘who is it’” (CBS This Morning, 2020, 1:16-1:21). Immediately after the banging, shots were fired. Though Walker was trying to protect his home from invasion by unknown individuals, he was taken into custody for the attempted murder of a police officer. The police report stated that no drugs were found in Taylor’s apartment (Oppel Jr. et al., 2021), and as the investigation into her killing continued, it was revealed that Glover, the object of the arrest warrant, was already in police custody (Diaz & Yamada, 2020).

There were multiple versions of what occurred on March 13, 2020, leaving worldwide speculation about the actual circumstances of Breon-

na Taylor's killing. This paper will examine how the news outlets CNN, ABC News, MSNBC News, and Fox News framed Taylor's death through coverage that, in many cases, included biased content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing, as defined by Gamson (1989), is a way of examining news stories to gain a greater understanding of how the reporting affects the public's perception of events. Framing theory posits that frames affect every aspect of reporting, from the practices of the particular news organization to cultural attitudes about the subject of the news report. Frames both shape public perception and are shaped by common values; the concept of framing is thus complicated and interconnected (Kuypers, 2009). Aspects of framing in news reporting include "defining the problem, identifying the cause, assembling moral judgment, and suggesting solutions" (Kuypers, 2009, p. 182). Releasing media content continues to be the primary concern of news organizations, and framing the story is second in importance. Figure 1 shows the process news outlets take when framing current events:

Figure 1. An integrated process model of framing (De Vreese, 2005).

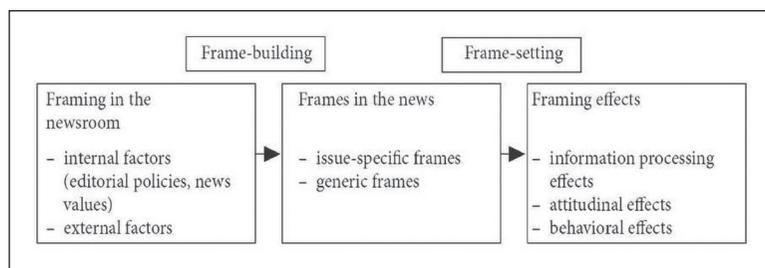


Figure 1 shows that *frame-building* incorporates contributing elements as the foundation for frames, while *frame-setting* combines information people have stored in their memory and common attitudes toward ongoing situations. The articles, spokespeople, recipients, and society-at-large frame the content that forms what we think. According to Kuypers (2009), "frames... induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways, essentially making some aspects of our multidimensional reality more noticeable than other aspects" (p. 181). This explains the manner in which media outlets influence what society thinks about current world events. For example, an article published by Fridkin et al.

(2017) studied a 2014 incident involving the disputed arrest of an African American professor by a white police officer at Southeastern University. Fridkin et al. (2017) wrote:

The results of our original content analysis examining news coverage of the altercation between the professor and the police officer demonstrate that the news media usually emphasized the theme of police brutality in covering the event, but other themes were sometimes used (e.g., a law and order frame). When we manipulate the framing of the event experimentally, we find that exposure to the law and order frame and the police brutality frame significantly affects evaluations of the police officer and the professor. We also discover that the framing of the event has political consequences, influencing people's perceptions of racism in policing as a problem in the community. (pp. 2-3)

This study found that news outlets frame stories to the public, granting the outlets the ability to alter the public's perspectives of events. In this case, the altercation was framed both as a case of police brutality and as an example of justified "law and order" before the public gained an awareness of the incident. Rather than allowing the evidence to speak for itself, news coverage during this time led the public to conclusions the news outlets felt best fit the situation (Fridkin et al., 2017).

To better understand the theory of framing, it is important to acknowledge *agenda-setting theory*. Logically, agenda-setting takes place when news outlets release information about an issue or event. The coverage of the event reveals its particular details with timeframes that may fluctuate. This occurs when the reporting omits selected information and deliberately focuses on other aspects of the event (Kuypers, 2009). Kuypers (2009) states:

Following the logic of agenda-setting theory, we can say that the press shape what the public "perceives" as "political reality"...In a sense, a relationship develops between the press, its sources, and the public audience that determines "what is *accepted* as the public agenda." (p. 183)

Since news reports are published daily, the possibility of an issue completely disappearing from the public eye is unlikely. The information publicly provided in newspapers, news clips, and documentaries influences what society thinks and how we should think concerning events

across the world. Additionally, the public's interest in a news story will encourage news outlets to meet the consumers' demands, both in the frequency and content of the news reports.

A *comparative framing analysis* grants researchers the opportunity to investigate the content of the information contained in news reports (Kuypers, 2009). Media outlets have traditionally been the first sources of information on local and worldwide events, giving the media vast power over how news stories are framed. Vallaste (2009) writes that "comparative frame analysis should do justice to the relational and contextual nature of descriptors attached to the phenomenon being studied" (p. 6), suggesting that the manner in which news stories are written should be carefully analyzed. Depending on the issue being discussed, the process of conducting a comparative framing analysis can be broken into three multidimensional steps: choosing a quantitative or qualitative approach, comparing coverage, and analyzing the content quantitatively or qualitatively.

Framing theory may also include a rhetorical analysis of the effects of public relations on a news story. Kirk Hallahan's article, "Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations" (2009) asserts that "framing affects cognitive processing by selectively influencing which memory nodes, or sets of memory traces organized as schemas, are activated to interpret a particular message" (p. 209). Hallahan (2009) finds seven models of framing applicable to public relations: *situations*, *attributes*, *choices*, *actions*, *issues*, *responsibility*, and *new*, stating that "by examining these alternative conceptualizations, it is possible for researchers and practitioners to understand the usefulness of the framing concept, to apply it in practice, and to pursue a systematic research agenda about framing as it might be applied to public relations" (p. 209).

While all of the framing models applicable to public relations are important to society, this paper will focus on *situations*, *choice*, *action*, *issues*, and *responsibility*, as they contribute significantly to my textual analysis of news coverage of Breonna Taylor.

Situation Framing

Situation framing occurs between two sets of participants or organizations that have a desire to change a situation. This offers the opportunity for a thorough examination of the actions that occurred. Participants traditionally use metacommunication in relaying messages effectively. During verbal exchanges, secondary information, such as the speakers' tone of voice, nonverbal cues, type of language, and location

factors should also be considered. Such factors may provide insight into either party's desired outcome. Both parties may have different hopes for the outcomes of the interaction, which is why most interactions involve some form of negotiation (Hallahan, 2009).

Choice Framing

Choice framing represents the risk associated with individuals and organizations when they are forced to take risks or make improvements. According to Hallahan (2009), "prospect theory suggests people will take greater risks to avoid losses than to obtain gains" (p. 210). All outcomes begin and end with different objectives and goals, but what most have in common are how the outcomes affect society in general. Factors such as public levels of recognition and community involvement can influence the outcomes of the interactions and may leave a segment of the population dissatisfied. Since the chance of information being published to local or worldwide websites is possible, the organization's main goal is to receive sympathy. Releasing news content with a negative or positive approach exposes the parties involved to a range of public reactions. This further adds to why framing theory influences people's perspectives.

Action Framing

Action framing relates closely to choice framing, but the number of individuals affected is significantly smaller. The selection of an appropriate frame can only be determined after an investigation of some kind is conducted by authorities. When a situation involves a small number of people, the chance for participants to communicate their opinions is increased. This frame observes the outcome of previous and recurring events and seeks to directly influence the public's perspectives on the current situation. A determinative factor for the decision is how the information was interpreted. A positive presentation of facts related to a case may allow the participants to receive little or no disciplinary action while a negative presentation may result in the individuals suffering great loss (Hallahan, 2009).

Issue Framing

Issue framing suggests there are multiple organizations involved in the decision-making process (Hallahan, 2009). A multi-step process occurs when resolving how the issue will be reported, which influences the outcome of the reporting. This offers individuals with public recognition and power to communicate their beliefs on current social disputes. The

information they provide influences subsequent reporting and public responses to developing events. The ultimate goal for organizations is to prove their point on contentious issues and receive little to no backlash for their responses. The reporting should permit all parties to experience positive outcomes while improving the factors surrounding the disputed issue. This may also benefit organizations that had not sought to profit from the reporting (Hallahan, 2009).

Responsibility Framing

Responsibility framing focuses on the source of the situation and who may be responsible for it (Hallahan, 2009). A level of control has to be established to direct the focus and purpose of the organization's activities. Previous reporting may exert an influence on the way similar stories are framed and may also affect both the public's perception and the framing of current news events. Since some occasions can result in intense emotional outcomes, internal and external factors are considered. While most situations may identify responsible individuals or groups, some incidents do not. Hallahan (2009) explains that "responsibility framing acceptance—or denial of being responsible for events—has particular implications for public relations" (p. 227).

Two additional frames, *attributes* and *news*, have significance to framing theory but do not contribute to my research. *Attributes framing* discusses a broad range of connections, including a number of activities, individuals, and items. A common marketing strategy involves promoting positive acts in support of a party's defense; drawing attention to a party's "good" behavior may influence the public to ignore their "bad" behavior. *News framing* provides evidence about how media outlets structure articles and adds additional factors to the analysis (Hallahan, 2009).

Hallahan (2009) writes that "exchanges between sources and journalists are essentially *frame negotiations* in which adroit sources play on journalists' schematically organized knowledge about news to propose stories that follow conventions of storytelling" (p. 228). My goal is to analyze how news outlets framed their articles to fit the facts surrounding Breonna Taylor's death through the use of *situation*, *choice*, *action*, *issue* and *responsibility framing*. While bias is found to be commonly connected with each of the framing theories provided here, my research does not attempt to encourage judgments for or against any party's case.

METHODOLOGY

Choosing a quantitative or qualitative method of analysis depends on whether the reported data includes numbers and statistics or words and meaning. This research employed a qualitative approach to news reports surrounding Breonna Taylor’s killing by American news organizations CNN, ABC News, MSNBC News, and Fox News. The data collection began with a Google search of media outlets that covered Taylor’s killing and its aftermath. The search results provided a substantial number of articles that were subsequently organized by title, content, and date. As citizens around the world became aware of Taylor’s killing, coverage of the case grew. A sample of 104 articles was selected, representing reporting by prominent television news organizations offering a spectrum of political views ranging from conservative (Fox News) to progressive (MSNBC News). The articles were categorized by content and analyzed through the use of five frames: *situation*, *choice*, *action*, *issue* and *responsibility framing*. The earliest published article included in the sample dated from May 13, 2020, by CNN. The last article included in the sample was dated April 26, 2021.

DATA ANALYSIS

The frame selected for use in this study included: *situation*, *choice*, *action*, *issue*, and *responsibility*. Each article in the sample was analyzed through the use of one or more of these frames, depending on the article’s headline and content.

Situation Framing

Highlighting Breonna Taylor

The articles in Figure 2 reflect the importance of Breonna Taylor as an African American woman who was unjustly killed by police. The titles in this section leave readers with questions that may lead them to question how and why this event occurred.

Figure 2. *Headlines that highlight Breonna Taylor.*

<i>Headline</i>	<i>News Source</i>
“Why no charges in Breonna Taylor’s killing after five months?”	MSNBC (Melber, 2020a)

<i>Headline</i>	<i>News Source</i>
“Into Injustice for Breonna Taylor”	MSNBC (Cameron & Lee, 2020)
“A Kentucky EMT was shot and killed during a police raid of her home. The family is suing for wrongful death”	CNN (Jones et al., 2020)
“Louisville agrees to \$12M settlement with Breonna Taylor family, pledges police reform”	Fox News (Chakraborty, 2020)

Breonna Taylor is the primary subject of the articles shown in Figure 2. The articles focus on Taylor by using specific wording, such as “injustice,” “shot and killed,” “wrongful death,” and “why no charges...” The persuasive wording of the headlines suggests she was an innocent woman shot by police. How did her death reflect poor policing? How does Louisville’s \$12M settlement act as an admission of guilt? What kind of police reform will occur? Reporting for Fox News, Chakraborty’s (2020) article discussed legal actions that were underway in response to Taylor’s death. ABC News (2020) reported that on June 11, 2020, three months after her death, the Louisville Kentucky Metro Council banned “no-knock” search warrants and named the bill “Breonna’s Law.”

The articles in this section illustrate *situation framing* because they focus on the events related to a specific event—Taylor’s killing—and the responses of the police, her family, and the city of Louisville. According to ABC News, “three different law enforcement agencies in the state launched parallel investigations into Taylor’s death” (Carrega & Ghebremedia, 2020, para. 2), resulting in the Louisville police initiating internal reform and granting Breonna Taylor’s family a settlement of \$12 million.

Choice Framing

State Responsibility

The articles in Figure 3 focus on the occurrence and aftermath of a decision-making process made by law enforcement organizations in response to Taylor’s killing. This particular situation brings wide public recognition to those involved.

Figure 3. Headlines that highlight state responsibility.

Headline	News Source
“1 of 3 Louisville police officers in Breonna Taylor case to be fired, mayor says”	MSNBC (Todd, 2020)
“Louisville Metro Police Department fires two detectives involved in Breonna Taylor raid”	CNN (Setty & Vera, 2021)
“Kentucky AG office and officers in Breonna Taylor raid argue to keep investigative materials from public”	CNN (Moghe, 2020)

A communication perspective would suggest that the first two articles reflect choices made by authorities in response to the Taylor killing, while the third reflects important discussions about the release of information to the public. Moghe’s (2020) article for CNN explains why officers sought to prevent the sharing of details about that night but quotes the attorney representing the Louisville Courier-Journal, who stated that “the public has a right and need to see, not only the evidence in this case, but how the attorney general and the commonwealth have handled this case” (para. 5).

The articles reflect the gravity of the *choices* made by authorities in response to the *situation* of Taylor’s killing. In this particular case, the Louisville police department, the attorney general, and the three officers involved in the killing experienced extreme consequences for their choices. Protesters walked the streets of Kentucky, New York, and many other states throughout the summer. Hundreds of people were victims of police violence during national demonstrations, and the events were covered by international media for months (Gabbatt et al., 2020).

Action Framing

Highlighting Police

The articles analyzed in Figure 4 debate the Louisville grand jury decision against the police and the police actions during the raid at Taylor’s home.

Figure 4. Headlines highlighting the police.

<i>Headline</i>	<i>News Source</i>
“Breaking: No officers charged for Breonna Taylor’s killing”	MSNBC (Melber, 2020c)
“Wanton endangerment charge: What it means in the Breonna Taylor case”	CNN (Waldrop, 2020)
“Officer involved in Breonna Taylor shooting sues Taylor’s boyfriend, Kenneth Walker”	ABC News (Wash, 2020)

After an investigation, two former detectives facing charges in the killing of Breonna Taylor, Myles Cosgrove and Joshua Jaynes, were cleared. A judge announced the decision on September 23, 2020, and, as a result, the Louisville governor set a curfew to prevent residents from protesting the decision. Attorney General Daniel Cameron publicly reported that the police action that took place on March 13, 2020, was justified (Cameron & Lee, 2020).

In addressing the decision made by officials, Waldrop’s (2020) article explains the finding in Taylor’s case concerning the additional wanton endangerment charge against officer Brett Hankison, who fired ten shots “wantonly and blindly” into her apartment (para. 3). The potential prison sentence was one to five years (Waldrop, 2020); Hankison was fired for his role in the killing and later accused of sexual assault in an unrelated lawsuit (Peiser, 2020).

In writing for ABC News, Wash (2020) specifically details the exchange of gunfire between Taylor’s boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, who was not charged, and officer Jonathan Mattingly, who filed a subsequent lawsuit against Walker alleging battery, assault, and emotional distress. The preceding articles demonstrate *action framing* because the actions happened through witness interviews and court proceedings. During the course of court hearings, Mattingly granted an on-air interview with ABC News, presenting himself as a haunted, innocent victim of the raid. He received a book deal from a major publisher in late 2020, purporting to tell the “truth” behind Taylor’s killing (Vigdor, 2021).

Issue Framing

Corrupt System

While each organization comes with those in charge, there are people who appear to abuse their power. This section will focus on arti-

cles discussing what Breonna Taylor’s case illuminated about leadership in Louisville’s law enforcement system. The relevant headlines are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *Headlines proposing a corrupt system.*

<i>Headline</i>	<i>News Source</i>
“Did the Feds offer a plea deal to Breonna Taylor’s ex to call her a criminal”	MSNBC (Melber, 2020b)
“Breonna Taylor’s ex-boyfriend offered plea deal requiring him to say she was part of his ‘organized crime syndicate,’ lawyer claims”	Fox News (Wallace, 2020b)
“New evidence raises questions about Breonna Taylor case”	MSNBC (Reid, 2020)
“Breonna Taylor incident report virtually blank; Louisville detective who applied for ‘no-knock’ warrant reassigned”	Fox News (Wallace, 2020a)

These articles highlight information omitted from the public record in Taylor’s case. The city’s prosecution team allegedly offered Jamarcus Glover, Taylor’s ex-boyfriend, a plea deal in his charge of drug trafficking if he would claim that Taylor had been involved in his drug deals. According to NBC News, “Louisville’s top prosecutor said that the offer was part of early draft negotiations with Glover and his lawyer, [the offer] was removed by prosecutors and never part of the court record” (Griffith & Strickler, 2020, para. 2). The other articles raise questions about fabricated evidence leading up to the March 13, 2020, raid, the lack of proper documentation after the event, and the sudden removal of personnel related to the incident.

Focusing on the issue of Taylor’s killing shows the evolution of response by Louisville’s law enforcement officials from the night of the incident to a scandal involving multiple organizations. Formal communication surrounding the events came from official authorities, such as lead prosecutors and attorneys speaking on behalf of Glover, Walker, and Taylor’s family. Statements made by Louisville’s authorities were intended to prevent negative responses by the public and international press, including eventual plea deals, court dismissals, and settlements that found no fault with the city.

Responsibility Framing

Seeking Truth

The headlines included in Figure 6 do not identify by name who might have ultimately been responsible for the events that took place on March 13, 2020. Instead, the headlines simply highlight facts related to the case. Other content, such as the images selected and the details emphasized, betray an attempt to frame the events beyond simple reporting of the facts.

Figure 6. *Headlines seeking truth.*

<i>Headline</i>	<i>News Source</i>
“Louisville police officer involved in Breonna Taylor’s death fired 3 months later”	ABC News (Sanchez, 2020)
“Breonna Taylor death: Louisville police documents shine light into investigation details”	Fox News (Pagones, 2020)

While including the details concerning Taylor’s case, Sanchez (2020) also discussed Brett Hankison’s history in the police department, and why officials decided to fire him. According to Chief of Police Robert J. Schroeder, “Hankison was previously disciplined, on January 9, 2019, for ‘reckless conduct that injured an innocent person’” (Sanchez, 2020, para. 9).

In the article, “Breonna Taylor death: Louisville police documents shine light into investigation details” (Pagones, 2020), the author included an interview with the Kentucky attorney general answering questions about the decision to not indict Myles Cosgrove and Sergeant Jonathan Mattingly. The article offered a synopsis of the details surrounding the case, but included cellphone images of Breonna Taylor and Kenneth Walker holding weapons, while Cosgrove and Mattingly were professionally photographed, the officers shown in a suit and tie. The juxtaposition of such images perhaps suggests an attempt to reframe the tragedy of that night in March.

Applying responsibility framing to these articles shows how news reporting might steer readers toward certain ideas about who was ultimately responsible for Taylor’s death. Punishing a single individual, often a scapegoat, during this process is not uncommon, and Brett Hankison may be considered collateral damage. In this particular case, as of January, 2021, no one was held responsible for Taylor’s death.

DISCUSSION

This study contributed insight into how frames may provide insight into the methods used to influence public opinion through news reporting. There are multiple perspectives on how complex events should be resolved; the content in news reports, from the wording of headlines to the choice of material reported in the story, has a unique and immediate effect on the consumer. The subcategorization of articles regarding Breonna Taylor's case was critical to this analysis. News reporting may both expose important evidence and determine its presentation to the public. Examining news reports through frames allows consumers to better understand the powerful role the media plays in determining public reaction to the news. The section on *Situation* framing showed articles examining Taylor's death and evidence against the perpetrators while the section on *Issue* framing showed how responsible actors were forced to effectuate productive changes within the system. *Responsibility* framing discussed the causes and effects of the decisions the state of Kentucky made regarding Taylor's death and ultimate police reform. *Choice* framing allowed an examination of the actions of individuals involved in Taylor's death. Framing is a useful method in the analysis of the news and the people it covers.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that consumers' perception of a situation can be influenced in multiple ways. Media outlets hold immense power in controlling a situation's narrative. Examining headlines and articles from different websites demonstrated how a news source can "frame" information to create a specific response, both from those involved and from the consumer. While this analysis focused on articles and headlines from major media outlets, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram play a growing role in information sharing. Future research should consider how framing can be applied to social media sites.

Future research should also incorporate sources with a specific focus on understanding the intersections of race and police shootings. This particular case is 1 in over 100 police shootings in 2020-2021. The Washington Post (2020) reports that "the rate at which black Americans are killed by police is more than twice as high as the rate for white Americans" (para. 5). Applying framing to various news organizations across their political positions should also be a fruitful and revealing exercise.

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