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“Catastrophic Failure”: How COVID-19 Was Relayed from the Media to the Public

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### Abstract

This research utilizes content analysis and mixed methods as a way of understanding how COVID-19 related information was relayed from the media to the public during crucial times in U.S. history. The information analyzed entails news media broadcasts that occurred from June 26 to October 2, 2020, when the pandemic was on the rise in terms of cases and deaths. In addition to analyzing specific broadcasts, a comparative analysis was conducted between MSNBC vs. Fox News, in an effort to highlight key events that took place during the battle against COVID-19. This research utilizes agenda setting and framing principles to foster a deeper understanding of what was said by each news broadcast. Results shows that there was a strong divergence of coverage between the two networks. This divergence also highlights how each network chose to talk about cases and deaths in vastly different ways. Supplemental evidence points to Fox News dismissing its COVID-19 mentions, or in some cases ignoring the cases and deaths all together, as the pandemic climbed passed the 200 thousand death count nationally.

*Keywords:* [Agenda-setting Theory, Framing Theory, Real World Indicators, Journalism Ethics, Content Analysis, COVID-19]

The purpose of this study is to highlight mass communication and media theories in multiple ways, to come to a richer understanding of what was said to viewers during the spread of COVID-19. The ability for the news media to influence our decisions by way of communicating certain messages will always be a topic for research (Jasperson et al., 1998; Hazzan & Azmi, 2018; Bursztyn et al., 2020). Indeed, viewing the news as the drivers of content can be an influential argument to make. After all, shows such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson, by June 30 (2020), were reaching more than 4.3 million viewers nightly (Forbes, 2020). At the time, Carlson was rated as the highest nightly news broadcast in cable news history. This powerhouse of a show, in terms of news media broadcasts, was followed by his counterpart, Sean Hannity, whose viewership during the same time period was reaching just above 4 million (Forbes, 2020). The death count at the time was 126.7 thousand, according to reports from Johns Hopkins (2020). During the same months, from June to October 2020, MSNBC also had some of its highest ratings. The primetime lineup of Rachel Maddow was reaching about 2 million, while her counterpart Chris Hayes managed a top ten spot in news broadcasts (2020).

The ability for these broadcasts to reach millions is of primary concern for this research from the outset. From this perspective, a primary objective will be to highlight how COVID-19 related information was relayed to the public, during crucial times in our nation's history. Taking this position necessarily puts this research among COVID-19 literature that will be discussed in the sections to follow. Additionally, a secondary objective consisted of a guiding question—how can communication and media research contribute?

With an understanding of these guiding principles, this research will proceed in a way that highlights communication and media theories, as well as an approach that incorporates different methodological practices. The decision to display the data in multiple ways is to come

to a deeper understanding of what was said by the news media (McCombs,1993) and how it was said (Entman, 1993). Because this study will be highlighting aired broadcasts specifically, content analysis will be our window to infer meaning, and to draw on some ethical concerns that took place during a pivotal time frame in COVID-19 history. As such, the summer to the fall of 2020 will be analyzed. This study will compare the rising COVID-19 cases and deaths that reached 125.8 thousand on June 26, 200.1 thousand by September 26, and 208.9 thousand by October 2, 2020 (Johns Hopkins, 2020). With an overall review of this study's intentions and objectives, the work will begin by first highlighting coronavirus research that has led the way to unique discoveries about U.S. experiences during COVID-19.

### **COVID-19**

The purpose of this section is to situate the issue of COVID-19. This section will break up into two parts to accomplish this. The first of two parts discusses a country divided—a population that mirrored two parties, one conservative, one liberal. The second part will discuss ways in which communication and media studies can help us understand the world of COVID-19. This will be done through an examination of some current communication research that has been created since the pandemic started. There is no doubt, there is a plethora of information out there to analyze in this regard. From this perspective, this specific part of the research will focus on key findings that were found early on in the battle against COVID-19. The analysis will then look to the role communication and media studies can have in our understanding of pandemic information. In this way, the purpose here is to highlight pieces of media, and to analyze how specific COVID-19 content was relayed from the media to the public. Taking this paradigm is in an effort to scrutinize the words that were actually said by specific news outlets. This stance then naturally assumes that journalists have a basic responsibility to the public. This basic

responsibility involves relaying accurate information. Consequently, this research looks to the choices each journalist must take regarding serious issues that are a matter of public safety, or life and death in nature.

### **COVID-19: A Nation Divided**

The first day of tracking the COVID-19 death toll was March 22, 2020. According to the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, the recorded deaths for that day was 596. Not long after the death and case rate went on the rise, economic researchers began compiling a list of Fox News coverage from Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity (Bursztyn et al., 2020). The working paper developed consisted of survey data. Within this context, the researchers' primary concern was to track the types of news shows people were watching. They then compared this data with where the outbreak was spreading. Their findings pointed to positive correlations between individuals who watched Fox News, and the rise of cases and deaths for regions in which the show was broadcast.

Also, in the same month, researchers Jamieson and Albarracin (2020) published a similar study. Their approach consisted of three distinct angles, print media, liberal news watchers (e.g., NBC News), and conservative news watchers (e.g., Fox News). Their findings first looked at people who were registered with the Democratic party and found that they tended to watch MSNBC or other liberal broadcasts (e.g., CNN) for news information (Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020). These findings were then compared against individuals who tended to be more conservative politically. Further conclusions then revealed that more conservative news watchers observe Fox News coverage for their news information. The study then finished with an inquiry on what each news show (e.g., CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) was saying to the public—in terms of COVID-19 comprehension and prevention information. The overall findings of this mixed

methods study found that liberal news shows were relaying more accurate and true information to the public, as opposed to those networks that catered to a conservative base of people. In addition, they discovered a positive correlation between Fox News watchers and the likeliness that someone believes in conspiracy theories; including those conspiracy theories that dealt with the pandemic being exaggerated by the CDC itself.

Finally, in June of 2020, Bursztyn et al. (2020) continued making progress on their research. Their later findings of Fox News held up a strong correlation between consumer behavior and the time in which Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson began telling their audience about the seriousness of the pandemic (Bursztyn et al. 2020). An important note to mark here is that the research found, as Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson began speaking to the seriousness of the pandemic, the health reports related to COVID-19 began to decrease in those areas where the virus had spread.

To summarize, there was a strong suggestion towards media effects from all these researchers' findings. These findings also include research that highlights the role each broadcast may have had on the overall well beings of its viewers. To add, the misinformation or "downplaying" of the virus by the news media, at least in part, had a positive relationship with where the virus spreading.

In addition to the role broadcast journalism may have played, public health experts also revealed some information from polling conducted on the availability of vaccinations. The polling took place in late September 2020 and was performed by a public opinion research company called IPSOS. This effort from IPSOS was to gauge overall public perception, should a vaccine become available in the later months of 2020. The information found drew a nation divided among political affiliation. According to IPSOS (2020), it was revealed that 64 percent

of registered Democrats felt like the deaths reported by health organizations were too low. By contrast, 70 percent of registered Republicans believed the numbers reported for cases and deaths to be exaggerated. So, while economists were interested in their work to gauge virus spread nationwide, public research in other areas were trying to assess misinformation by way of public perception nationally. Among all the studies, misinformation seems to be the interest of the time in 2020. Where then does communication research contribute? The next section will lead us to an understanding of communication and media studies that attempted to follow bits of information about COVID-19, as it was released to the public in various formats. After, the section will coalesce around media perception and misinformation studies as a whole. In this regard, the studies come from a variety of sources, including health experts, clinicians, economists, communication researchers, as well as behavior analysts. In this light, the study of the media during COVID-19 expands beyond one social science, as news and public information about the pandemic began to unfold in real time.

### **COVID-19: Communication and Media Studies**

Some earlier research conducted by Gabore (2020), revealed differences in news information about COVID-19 prevention. This study looked at communication from an international lens, as China and the U.S. were compared for their prevention information on the virus. This specific study found that Chinese news coverage held a high positive tone about the virus, while the U.S. news media took a more neutral approach. Communication researchers from Romania took a different approach than the framing mechanisms found in the Gabore (2020) study, as they combined news articles with social media posts. The key word used for this study was dubbed “fake news” (Balaban & Palade, 2020). A definition that emerged for Balaban and Palade (2020) was tracking bits of digital media that were deceptive, misleading, or false. A



troubling re-occurrence, as they found from analyzing media posts, was the problem of verifiable sources. Meaning, as the pandemic began to climb out of control, there was evidence to suggest individuals were posing as health experts (e.g., doctors), and relaying false information about COVID-19 to the public.

Other communication studies utilized mixed methods. Bratu (2020) analyzed news information and compared it to a survey. Their results indicated that misinformation creates a higher level of anxiety, which is also accompanied with the need to consume more media coverage. This points to a viscous cycle that engulfed the lives of many here in the US. The idea that the need to learn more about COVID-19 was inherent, yet we as consumers became more anxious as the outbreak continued to spread. While the efforts to track misinformation seems to be the overall trend for communication, Malecki, Keating, and Safdar (2020) took an angle of public perception and crisis communication. Their findings suggest that there were two key factors affecting perception early on in the pandemic. The first being hazard, the second being outrage. Outrage during the release of pandemic information was gauged through analyzing responses via social media, while hazards were the original messages that relayed COVID-19 information to the public. Their findings point to more of an ideological approach, whereby people's adherence to COVID-19 guidelines came from a variety of factors, including familial, social, and cultural understandings. Misinformation and the rapid changes in COVID-19 content also played factors (Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2020).

To add to this variety of analyzing messages, more recent research points to a less than insidious plot by the media. This implication was found to be the case in a study involving retractions in news media content (Arbitis et al., 2020). Per their findings, as the pandemic moved into July 2020, there was an unreasonably high number of redactions about COVID-19

related information. Abris and colleagues also noted the relatively short time frame in which some stories were redacted and mentioned that the true extent of overall news redactions of COVID-19 content will have to be examined in the years to come. This avenue of thought points to some affirmation found in interviews of journalists themselves. Perreault and Perreault (2021) conducted a study whereby they asked journalists to comment on how they would have to write about and publish stories on the pandemic. These interviews revealed, through a discourse analysis methodology, a world in which journalists felt pressure from environmental conditions that existed before the spread of COVID. In this way, journalists exist as part of a larger ecological system. Additionally, the study found that journalists placed themselves within the coverage itself. They saw themselves as responsible yet vulnerable advocates. Advocates that had to relay to the public information during a crucial time in our history (Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

As all these studies suggest, the way in which we can analyze communication about the pandemic is out there, within reach, but scattered widely. As such, we may never fully understand the scope of COVID-19's effects. The litany of information there is to examine may also never point to a single cause. The results of misinformation, and the intentions of those communicating to us through a gatekeeper lens may also never be fully unmasked. This is not saying that the consequences for relaying misleading or false information is without real world results. One such result of misinformation, at the very least, manifested here in the U.S. The nature of the information was about possible antibodies, or cures for the coronavirus. Misinformation in this regard proved costly to two Arizona residents, who listened to news coverage of President Trump, as he touted the now defunct COVID drug hydroxychloroquine. According to reports of the incident, which happened in March 2020, a man and his wife took

chloroquine, a chemical known for its use in cleaning fish tanks (Edwards & Hillyard, 2020).

This was, as the wife later admitted, a mistake. She thought they were taking hydroxychloroquine. While the couple were both admitted to the hospital, the result ended in the husband's death. When the wife was interviewed as to why she and her husband ingested the chemical, she responded to the news coverage of then President Trump. The coverage in which she was referring to took place during a White House briefing, where the president claimed hydroxychloroquine could be a way to prevent COVID-19 (Edwards & Hillyard, 2020). Clinical trials have since concluded that hydroxychloroquine has no benefit in relation to COVID-19 prevention (NIH, 2020). Now that an overview of recent research has been established, this research will clarify its intentions.

This study's intentions are to contribute to the ever-growing literature on COVID-19. As many of the other's studies performed on this issue by way of analyzing media coverage, this is where we will start. The overall mechanisms used for this study will be looking at several news shows across two networks—MSNBC, and Fox News. The purpose then will be to highlight the disparity of coverage in COVID-19 related information. This study will do this by utilizing distinct theories that have been used in mass communication studies over the years. The theories involved are agenda setting, and framing theory, as well as an analysis of real-world indicators. Together, the use of these theories will help us understand the disparity in coverage across conservative news shows (Fox News), and more liberal news shows (MSNBC). These comparisons are an effort to truly measure from a statistical standpoint, the difference in coverage during a distinct period of time. This period of time includes the end of June 2020, as the first so-called resurgence was making its way through the heart of the U.S. (Johns Hopkins, 2020). The research will then turn its attention towards the beginning of the fall, at the precise

day that former President Trump was hospitalized with COVID-19. Because this study was specific with its selection of certain dates, real-world indicators, along with journalism ethics, will be our way into understanding the data from both a quantitative and qualitative approach. With this in mind, a review of the literature will start with the first theory in this study, also known in the mass communication field as Agenda setting theory.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

This section will break into two parts—the history of agenda setting theory, and its more recent application of use. This section includes its development over the past 50 years since it was conceptualized by its founders; before looking at more recent studies. The purpose of dividing into two sections stems from the founders' call for orientation within the theoretical domain of the agenda-setting process. In this light, providing a history gives this study steady feet. It creates a space for this research to find its place.

#### **A Brief History**

Agenda-setting theory was first introduced formally by a study published in 1972 (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The original founders of this line of research were Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Shaw. In a communication study by McCombs and Shaw (1972), it was found that there was a strong correlation in what participants thought were important topics in the news media, and what was actually being published in terms of news stories. That is to say, the topics, or news agenda, is precisely the issues that were mentioned by participants, when asked about political issues during an election year. The key findings, then, were situated around the election process, and the ability for news organizations to “set the agenda.” This discovery led to the shaping of a new theory, known to us now as Agenda Setting (Littlejohn & Foss,

2009). While the initial theory was first proposed almost 50 years ago McCombs has extended his conceptualizations to include other facets or dimensions.

According to McCombs (1993), there was, at the time, more than 200 published studies that utilized agenda-setting theory. To add, he believed that the field had evolved into four distinct phases. These areas include a replication of the original work, pursuing new objectives (contingent conditions), orientation, and sources of the media agenda (McCombs, 1993). In regard to sources, an important question to ask in the agenda setting process became—who sets the agenda? While much of the work in the 90s seemed to be heading towards this fourth phase approach, McCombs believed that agenda-setting as a theory would continue to develop into two parts, surveyors, and explorers (McCombs, 1993). Explorers were those individuals who continued to utilize agenda-setting theory in news ways. Some of these new areas of exploration encompassed news diffusion—an area of inquiry that extended to public relations research. While others focused on utilizing the theory for media criticism purposes (McCombs, 1993). Surveyors were those who would map out the newly discovered areas of communication research. This was usually done by finding the links within the new areas and conceptualizing the boundaries of the new knowledge that started to proliferate (McCombs, 1993). From the perspective of McCombs, these evolutions were positive contributions to the expansion of his original agenda-setting work. And, at the time of his research, he believed that the agenda setting theory could be expanded further (McCombs, 1993). His argument stemmed from looking at the communication process as a whole. In this way, the “agenda” is a metaphor. A metaphor that helps to “explain objects,” or “sets of objects,” (McCombs, 1993, p. 62) all of which are in competition with one another for our time.

Looking at Agenda-Setting in this fashion, we can see the evolution of the theory over time. Additionally, the theoretical evolution of McCombs' framework creates the ability to extend his theory in new directions. This is what McCombs and colleagues did in 2014, as they proposed seven facets of agenda-setting within the field of mass communication. These seven facets include the basic agenda-setting model, which is comprised of the importance that issues are given in the news—including but not limited to political figures and other objects that are given space and time in news coverage (McCombs et al., 2014). The second is attribute agenda setting, which focuses primarily on the characteristics that are given to such objects of attention. The third is networked agenda setting, this facet looks at an overall network of topics that are given more prominence and more defining characteristics on a networked scale (McCombs et al., 2014). Here we can see the first three facets as three distinct levels, the prominence or time given to an issue, the characteristics of those issues, and the network or multiple entities that shape a topic. The four other facets deal in some form with the other side of the agenda-setting process, or what is commonly called media effects. The fourth facet pertains to a psychological lens that seeks to understand how audience members confront media coverage. In other words, the effects of the media are of chief concern. In this way, the link between how long a person is exposed to certain types of media content is analyzed. The purpose of the analyzation is to link exposure of coverage with the behavior of a viewing member. This in turn leads to the fifth facet of consequences. The consequences in this sense lead to an inquiry of the first three levels (McCombs et al. 2014). In other words, the consequences' facet attempts to analyze results to see how setting an agenda may impact "behavior, attitudes, or the opinions" of the viewer. Taking a slight turn in facet six, the origins of the agenda setting process is of primary concern. The origins then seek to answer: who is shaping our news stories? The last facet here is agenda

melding, which touches on “civic agendas” and juxtaposes how we come to understand what we are watching (McCombs et al., 2014). In this context, the authors argue that we may mesh our community values, experiences, and personal views that, as logic dictates, impact the agenda-setting publication process (McCombs et al. 2014). To summarize, the overall facets move from publication, or the sending of messages, to a psychological shaping of salient topics, and also a possible feedback point on which the media is shaped by actors inside, and outside the agenda bubble. From this perspective, the entirety of these seven facets can indeed be viewed as parts of the basic communication process—sender, receiver, feedback loop.

With the facets in mind, the next part of this section will focus on studies that have been published over a more recent period. This effort is to find a place where this study not only contributes to the agenda-setting theoretical processes but expands its use in a unique way.

### **Agenda-Setting Studies in the Field**

In Valenzuela et al. (2017), an approach to agenda setting took on a reinforcing perspective. Much like McCombs et al. (2014) had proposed in its sixth facet, the purpose of the Venezuela et al. (2017) study focused on who is setting the agenda. This was performed by looking at a specific case of the Chilean earthquake that happened in 2010. The context of this study compared television news with the social media platform Twitter. What became a central discovery for Venezuela et al. (2017) was the idea of reinforcement in news media stories. Which is to say—Twitter had some influence in shaping the news coverage. This points to a central component of the agenda-setting process, a need for orientation, or direction, in how the news of a particular time is shaped. Who sets the agenda? The media gatekeepers? Or is it induced by the audience’s ability to provide feedback during a crucial moment in a novel story?

For Venezuela et al. (2017), the answer seems to point towards Twitter's ability, at least in part, to shape the news world.

Another study in the field can be found in van der Pas et al. (2017). This study was conducted by analyzing Dutch newspapers, and the political party associated to the newspaper. Through content analysis, they examined parliamentary discussions and compared it to story publications. A central theme in their study consisted of a term called "political parallelism"(van der Pas et al., 2017, p. 493). According to the term, if organizations that disseminate the news can be linked by affiliation or a political parties' goals, then it can be said the two entities parallel one another (Van der Pas et al., 2017). This idea became the central focus for van der Pas et al. (2017), as they found evidence to suggest issues raised in parliamentary discussions reflected the kinds of newspapers their voters read. Furthermore, the newspapers themselves only wrote content for the readers based on party and voter preference (van der Pas et al., 2017). In other words, media publications paralleled certain agendas based on what was discussed by a certain party, and the discussions were ultimately paralleled with who voted for them. This raises the question once again—who is driving the agenda?

The question of driving the agenda took on a more concrete form for communication researchers in Munoz and Ripolles (2018). Their study dealt with the populist movement that was being shaped via Twitter. Unlike the previous Twitter study mentioned, Munoz and Ripolles (2018) focused on the idea of how European political leaders set their agendas. Their results found evidence to suggest thematic elements, and proposals (as opposed to the idea of campaigning for voters). They also found a strong negative correlation between the publication of twitter stories by the leaders, and the interest shown by those who interacted with the digital content (Munoz & Ripolles, 2018). In other words, as user interest went up about a particular



story, the tweets that were setting the agenda went down. This article is unique from the other two already mentioned, in that it doesn't seek to answer the sixth facet proposed by McCombs et al. (2014), but the second—the attributes assigned to a particular media agenda. In this way, Munoz & Ripolles (2018) categorized frames, or how a story is told, and compared them with the agenda. They went from level one (agenda setting) to level two—framing. Before this study continues, it is important to note that the framing process for McCombs is one of integration. Meaning, McCombs (2014) advocates for framing as a natural process that is within the domain of the overall agenda-setting facets. However, this view is not shared by all researchers (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).

In summary, all these studies mentioned fall under the facets set by McCombs et al. (2014), but what ultimately links them is the way in which they create their knowledge. Which is to say, they took on quantitative perspectives to analyze the data, and statistical analysis to draw their conclusions. While this methodology is rooted more in the science of communication, qualitative methods have also been utilized recently in the agenda-setting community. This was the case for Hassan and Azmi (2018), as they conducted research using a comparative content analysis model that utilized a qualitative approach (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This qualitative approach synthesizes three core principles to qualitative methods of content. These three principles include the ability to interpret texts from a subjective space, a step-by step model that does not ask for a rash quantification of coverage, and lastly, a logical process to find collective meanings or regularities. As Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) explain, this synthesis “allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” (p. 318). In the case of Hazan and Azmi's research, they used this application to look for representations of violence in photos and videos. This was performed by looking at Nigerian and Malaysian media content

(Hassan & Azmi, 2018). In this way, they viewed the media as drivers or influencers of media content. They focused on the first facet of the agenda setting process—the objects that are given space and time. The results for Hassan and Azmi’s fieldwork found some violence in the newspaper content, and none in its video analysis. However, as reported by Hassan and Azmi (2018), they believed the visual representations of violence could be highly influential.

Particularly because this study also used the lens of religion to find that the violence published in the media was violence towards those of the Muslim faith.

All of these studies mentioned help to highlight a process of this study moving forward, a process rooted in agenda setting principles, and at least two facets: The media as drivers of the content, and the way in which they give the content characteristics. The purpose of highlighting these particular studies also shows the two major sides of agenda setting theory—the senders of media, and the ways in which media content is shaped by a receiver. From this perspective, this study can find its place in a more grounded fashion. It can also contribute to what McCombs (1993) described in his research, when he mentioned the idea of explorers and surveyors. From this purview, the approach attempted by this study is by way of surveying. With this in mind, the research will now turn to the second theory utilized in this study—framing. As previously mentioned, framing is advocated as part of the agenda-setting process by some (McCombs et al., 2014), while other researchers view it as a distinct process (Scheufele, 1999).

### **Framing Theory**

Littlejohn and Foss (2009) refer to framing theory as the stereotyping of information, a scheme on which topics are given a certain description. The idea of framing also entails the way people perceive the world (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). While framing theory has been used most often in the news media world, its original founder came from the background of sociology

(Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In Goffman (1974), he separates frames into two areas of inquiry. The first is that of the natural frame. The natural frames are those things that exist in our world as determinants, they are found in the natural environment and share meaning based on fundamental properties (Goffman, 1974). One such example of this might be to point out the nature of gravity. Logically, we know gravity to be a natural phenomenon found in our space and time. Therefore, our perceptions of it, or how we come to know it, may have a universally shared meaning. In other words, natural frameworks entail those things found in our “biological or physical sciences” (Goffman, 1974, p. 22). After all, it would be very hard to characterize gravity as a “crisis of our age,” or a “catastrophic failure of political leadership.” Thus, the second type of framework allows us this space. These are known as social frames (Goffman, 1974).

According to Goffman (1974), the key to social frameworks lies in agency. While natural frameworks exist without the need for further doing, the social frame can be manipulated to “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence” (Goffman, 1974, p. 22).

When thinking of frames in the way Goffman proposes, it becomes evident that the news media’s ability to give space and time to a topic lies in the way information is described. Additionally, societal factors may give agency in new ways, pushing a topic closer, or further away from our lives. Consequently, the links between framing and the agenda-setting processes start to take shape. We can begin to see, at least on the surface, social frameworks have some level of necessity in how we come to know the world. And, if our ability to know certain things is through certain pieces of information that come from some agent or actor, the possibility of misconception, or misguided actions could take place. An example of this logical process has already been mentioned previously in this research: in the case of the couple who misperceived

the difference between hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine. However, just because social frameworks may originate from an agency, this does not mean we as bystanders are wholly incapable of escaping the effects of a frame. This in fact, is one of the seven facets McCombs et al. (2014) mentions—consequences.

The idea of consequences versus those entities that frame our content lends to the two ends of the spectrum for framing theory, frame building, and its effects (Scheufele, 1999). As McCombs (1993) explained, the idea of researching attributes given to those things found in our news coverage are continually expanding and being explored. One such exploration toward a definition was the focus for Entman (1993), “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). With this definition in mind, the next two parts of framing theory will discuss two framing types. This effort will be to highlight the two areas of inquiry that are a part of this study and its results. They are issue specific and generic framing.

### **Issue Specific Frames**

In de Vreese (2005), framing is broken up into two distinct categories. They are issue specific and generic frames. Issue specific frames stem from the idea that certain issues have inherent frames from within them (de Vreese, 2005). This was the case for Jasperson et al. (1998), as they focused their efforts on finding frames based on the 1996 federal budget. During their research, Jasperson et al. (1998) found four types of frames: talk, fight, impasse, and crisis. The investigation of these four frames came by way of analyzing both agenda setting processes, as well as framing issues. In this way, they provided the first and second facet of McCombs (2014). This notion of the first and second facet is what Scheufele (1999) refers to as the frame

building process. This is also part of the first three levels of agenda setting: salience of the issue, the attributes assigned, and the networks that disseminate an issue (McCombs, 2014). A more recent study of the issue specific typology was utilized in Dekavalla (2018), as the frame building process was once again a central component. In this study, research combined the idea of generic and issue frames to gauge the media's role in delivering news content. The issue at hand was the 2014 Scottish referendum. It also sought to answer how the news is shaped prior to production (Dekavalla, 2018). In other words, who is manipulating the news coverage? The study then utilized mixed methodology by way of interviews to “establish which frame building factors were connected to this framing” (p. 1594). So, here we see the idea of frame building, issue specific, and generic frames, coupled with a mixed methods approach that creates a space for a deeper understanding of framing analysis. To add, the framing analysis as a whole also contains certain framing groups. As de Vreese (2005) explains, there is a group within generic frames that focuses on the “structural and inherent conventions of journalism” (p. 55). This idea of a larger journalism structure will be discussed next.

### **Generic Frames**

In Iyengar (1991), the idea of larger structures manifested into two distinct frames—thematic and episodic framing. Thematic framing, as described by Iyengar (1991), refers to a story's ability to point to some “collective outcome, public policy debate, or historical trend.” (pp. 190-191<sup>1</sup>). Episodic framing, then, “consisted of stories that depicted issues predominantly as concrete instances or events” (Iyengar, 1991, pp. 190-191<sup>1</sup>). So, on the one hand, we have thematic framing, this idea of telling stories that point to a social framework that is larger than

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<sup>1</sup> Page number refers to electronic kindle location.

ourselves individually. While on the other hand we have episodic storytelling, which is comprised of shaping an issue into one instance, or a single place in time. In other words, episodic storytelling doesn't need any prior information or knowledge of a given situation to understand what the sender is communicating to us, while thematic storytelling shares a place with historical outcomes, or collective meanings. Iyengar's (1991) research results also point to a larger structure of journalism that is shaped by featuring more episodic frames than thematic. These two types of framing, according to Iyengar (1991), are important in understanding the media's responsibility to its viewers. In this light, when news stories are told to us thematically, viewers attribute responsibility at a higher level of frequency than when an issue is presented to us in an episodic fashion. The notion of responsibility will be discussed in the next and last subsection on framing theory. It consists of more recent studies in the field and the attribution of responsibility across different paradigms.

### ***Framing Studies in the Field***

In Perez (2017), the idea of legitimacy became a central focus for discovery. This specific bit of research looked to apply moral typologies and cross apply the idea of legitimacy. This was performed by looking at the way news media presented coverage (thematically or episodically). The issue of examination was the refugee crisis that took place in 2015-2016 in the European Union (Perez, 2017). In Xu (2018), the cultural theory of risk was analyzed. The examination utilized thematic and episodic framing to view how coverage impacted individualistic vs. collectivist people. Their findings indicated that thematic framing effected the perceived seriousness of a risk (Xu, 2018). More specifically, thematic frames were linked with the perception of a more serious risk when presented to collectivists. In essence, collectivists felt the risks in a more heightened state when they were described thematically, while individualists

felt the issue was not as significant or serious in terms of risk (Xu, 2018). Powell (2018) utilized thematic and episodic frames to investigate how thematic storytelling was being used to represent Muslim terrorists as different in a specific way. This specific way was focusing on the dimensions of good and evil, innocence of victim, and terrorists as evil (Powell, 2018). While it is hard to image anyone admitting the goodness of terrorism itself, this study touches on cultural perceptions of how Muslims are displayed in news media coverage by way of thematic storytelling. Consequently, the conclusions touched on the way news media coverage of Muslim terrorists leads to a stereotypical fear of Muslims as a people (Powell, 2018).

Two more recent studies focus their efforts primarily on media effects (Feezell et al., 2019; Boukes, 2021). In Feezell (2019) the study of examination was centered around the notion of religion and radicalism (Feezell et al., 2019). In this context, the study utilized thematic and episodic storytelling to analyze how the media may affect perceptions regarding Muslim Americans. Although the context of this enquiry deals with survey methodology, their reports further an understanding of what Powell (2018) uncovered: the media does play a role in shaping our views of Muslims as radicals by way of thematical elements. When other issues, such as poverty are introduced, the effects of episodic and thematic framing lose sustenance (Feezell et al., 2019). The most recent study on thematic vs. episodic framing comes from Boukes (2021). Their efforts revealed mixed results; whereby thematic storytelling only had an effect when dealing with the right-wing political ideology. In other words, their research showed thematic elements did result in a higher level of attributing responsibility, only if one had a more right-wing political ideology. In essence, right wing or conservative ideologies were impacted, and these individuals attributed responsibility more often to a specific political person (Boukes, 2021).

What we can see from all these recent studies, is the ability to utilize thematic vs. episodic framing in unique ways. These unique ways come from the central facets of McCombs et al. (2014) and are comprised of the basic fundamental forms of communication—sender, and receiver. This is accomplished by focusing on the news media broadcast (sender) by way of content analysis, or by way of the viewer who receives the information. In addition, some of these specific studies inform one another as is the case between Powell (2018) and Feezell (2019). Both of these studies deal with the issue of Muslim American perception. While one study focuses on the news broadcast (Powell, 2018), the other focuses on the effects this has on an audience (Feezell, 2019). With an overall understanding of generic and issue specific framing, and the way in which framing can be viewed into one of two major sides of investigation, the final element present in the study will be discussed—real world indicators.

### **Real World Indicators**

Another avenue to explore across the framing paradigm can be called real world indicators. These indicators can be described as key events that are happening on a societal scale, in real time, as the news is preparing for an upcoming broadcast. From this space, real world indicators are the factors that can determine the intensity of the news (Vliegenthart et al., 2007). In the case of immigration and news information, real-world events surrounding Dutch newspapers had a three-tiered effect (Vliegenthart et al., 2007). The first level dealt with a heightened attention given to news information once key events took place. Secondly, communication research through content analysis revealed a considerable long-term impact when institutional or policy changes occurred. Lastly, this specific study involving real-world indicators showed a temporary change in news coverage messages when certain international events took place. (Vliegenthart et al., 2007). In other words, what happens locally (or nationally



here in America) could have a greater effect on the way news frames content, and how the public may perceive issues. In another real-world indicator study, the examination of public expectations and perception had a relationship with the tone of the news (Lischka, 2015). The results of this analysis took large Germany news outlets and compared them with audience feedback on the state of the economic times. What was found? Public expectations on the state of the economy were partly influenced by the tone of the news. Public expectations were also a predictor of the future wellness of the real-world economy (Lischka, 2015). One other study to note for real world indicators took place during the earlier invasions of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Aday, 2010). This bit of research was important in highlighting journalist bias in real-world events. From an analysis of Fox News and NBC, Aday (2010) noted that both networks downplayed specific events that were happening during these wars. However, Fox news framed news coverage of the Bush administration in a more sympathetic manner (the current administration during the invasions).

What these studies point to are influences or relationships to real-world events and the framing paradigm. They show that the shaping of the news is influenced by what is happening in the real-world (Vliegenthart et al., 2007; Lischka, 2015). Aday (2010) also shows us the way in which news media relay information to the public. These studies indicate the major sides of framing and the agenda-setting process—what the news is telling its viewers, and what effect it has once the information is relayed.

### **Hypotheses**

While the two individual theories discussed in the literature review can be ways of viewing certain aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, real world indicators will be a way of approaching the content in a more inductive manner. Because this research was first conceived

through the elucidation of prior research surrounding COVID-19 effects, the focus of this inquiry will lend itself to the frame building process. This will be the deductive approach. And, as such, two hypotheses were formed.

*Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference between Fox News coverage of the coronavirus, and MSNBC's news coverage.*

*Hypothesis 2: MSNBC will frame the issue of the coronavirus as a crisis more so than Fox News.*

The premise for hypothesis 1 was based off this initial research's discovery of Bursztyn and colleagues (2020) working paper that updated its findings from March to September 2020. The working paper and research consisted of looking specifically at the divergence in news show coverage by way of a selections-on-observations method. This method is comprised of a textual analysis to look for themes in coverage. Their observations were then compiled and compared across a variety of different news media outlets, including news shows such as MSNBC and Fox News. During their months of research, an "alternative fact" reality was established in news show coverage, and the portrayal of COVID-19 existed in a "post truth world" (p. 1). In this way, effects of misinformation were gleaned from survey data and it pointed to Fox News exposure as a link to where the virus was spreading. Furthermore, hypothesis 2 was informed by uncovering evidence that linked the seriousness, or lack thereof, to party affiliation (IPSOS, 2020; Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020). The first premise for this comes to us by way of the IPSOS poll taken in the fall of 2020. This pole gauged public perception of the virus and revealed that registered republicans were more likely to admit that COVID-19 was being exaggerated. By contrast, registered democrats believed COVID-19 to be underreported. Additionally, Jamieson and Albarracin's research linked the media to party affiliation by analyzing registered party voters (e.g., Democrat, Republican). Their findings corroborated results found by IPSOS 2020.

Which is to say, conservative individuals who were exposed to Fox News believed the pandemic was being overblown. Moreover, this perception that came from Fox News watchers also encompassed the idea that the numbers were being overreported by the CDC. In contrast to Fox News viewers, MSNBC viewers reported feeling more anxious about the coronavirus in general, and also felt like the numbers were inaccurate. However, the inaccuracy stemmed from the belief that the cases and deaths reported were being underestimated by health officials.

In addition to these distinct hypotheses, after the results are discussed and interpreted, a secondary methodological approach will analyze the data by way of focusing on two real world indicators that are still being traced to this day—coronavirus cases and deaths. In this way, we can envision that the start of this research began with a deductive inquiry of relevant COVID-19 information, before reaching some precise conclusions. These conclusions will then be re-analyzed using a qualitative approach that dives deeper into an understanding of agenda-setting and frame building processes. From this perspective, the research can contribute in multiple ways and can survey a path towards a primary objective—contributing to the understanding of how the coronavirus was communicated from the media to the public during crucial points in COVID-19 history.

### **Quantitative Analysis and Results**

As previously discussed in the literature, the aim of this study is to highlight agenda setting and framing. To this extent, the division of this section seeks to illuminate each concept separately, before synthesizing each portion in the interpretation segment. With this in mind, the first set of results highlight *agenda-setting* components. The data were collected from June 26, 2020, to October 15, 2020. The news coverage consisted of Fox News' primetime lineup of Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson. A comparative content analysis was performed against

MSNBC's primetime lineup of Chris Hayes and Rachel Maddow. The transcription of the data was performed with assistance from Microsoft dictation and editing software. Additionally, once the basic transcriptions were completed, the six episodes used for this study were manually edited for clarity and integrity. The justification for using distinct episodes stems first and foremost from the notion that communication and media studies can contribute to COVID-19 in unique ways (secondary objective). From this paradigm, communication theories were utilized, and a media study was conducted with the use of real-world indicators. Because real world indicators are integrated into this study, the approach for this study builds on the work of Bursztyn and colleagues (2020), as well as Jamieson and Albarracin (2020). Neither of these studies looked exclusively at the news show data and compared it with key events that could have been shaping the news landscape. In this regard, the specific choice of using certain data points allows us to further a richer understanding of how COVID-19 was relayed from the media to the public. Furthermore, specificity allows a space to qualitatively re-introduce the data and ask more profound social questions of our society by way of ethics. In this way, the specific episodes were chosen for the overall functionality, presentation, and social purposes that this study seeks to uncover.

A typology for this content analysis was based in part on Iyengar's (1991) method of compiling a list of key words. Additionally, mechanisms synthesized by de Vreese (2005) were used to establish a boundary of context. The agenda was then operationalized in the same manner as Jasperson et al. (1998). From this purview, the average length of a paragraph (200 words, 100 in each direction) was highlighted. All keywords were searched for and found via the Microsoft search application assistance tool.

The categories for the COVID-19 agenda are as follows: *guidelines, names, cases and deaths*. These specific categories were developed by way of Johns Hopkins (2020) use of the words when presenting COVID-19 comprehension, prevention, and results information. The first category is guidelines; it consists of those words that were mentioned in relation to COVID-19 prevention information. The second is names, which refers to the various names that have been assigned to COVID-19. The third is cases and deaths, which is the results portion that quantifies the overall confirmed cases and deaths related to COVID-19. It is worth mentioning here that these specific categories were taken in conjunction with clinical research published through the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Research Center. Because of this, this study naturally assumes the position that these are not a part of the frames used to describe COVID-19. In this way, they are objective terminologies that provide accurate (to the best of our ability) portrayals of COVID-19 comprehension, prevention, and results information. Performing an analysis that seeks to use these categories as framing mechanisms is then outside the scope of this specific study. The keyword or phrases search for *guidelines* include “mask,” “wash hands,” “testing,” “tracing,” and “quarantine.” The keyword search for *names* include, “coronavirus,” “pandemic,” “COVID-19,” “outbreak.” Lastly, *cases and deaths* were searched for by including, “case,” and “death.” Other derivatives of death included in the search were “die,” “dead,” and “dying.” It is also important to note that derivatives of other words were also searched (e.g., “trac” was used to capture “tracing” and “traced”). The effort to search by way of keyword and derivatives was to ensure that variations of a word were captured in the data. Table 1 below shows an overall view of the operationalization process for the agenda.

**Table 1.**

*The COVID Agenda*

Agenda	Questions
Guidelines/Names	Are the keywords used in reference to COVID-19?
Cases	Is the keyword used to refer to a COVID case?
Deaths	Is the keyword a death caused by COVID-19?

After the keywords were collected, the divergence was calculated by way of a statistical analysis. In this way, the set agenda of the coronavirus issue can be quantified and measured by a distinct formula. The most appropriate mathematical formula for categorical representations of difference is known as the chi-square test of association.

A chi-square test of significance was performed to examine the relation between the COVID-19 agenda and the news show coverage (MSNBC vs. FOX News). The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(2, N=336) = 17.21, p \leq .01$ . The results indicate a strong divergence among the set agenda for coronavirus coverage across news show networks. Table 2, as shown below, represents this significance in greater detail.

**Table 2.**

*Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.212 <sup>a</sup>	2*	.000**
Likelihood Ratio	18.132	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.627	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	336		

\*degrees of freedom; \*\*p-value.

In addition to the chi-square test of association, Table 3 shows the overall quantity of references collected and examined. Within Table 3, the overall count for each category is

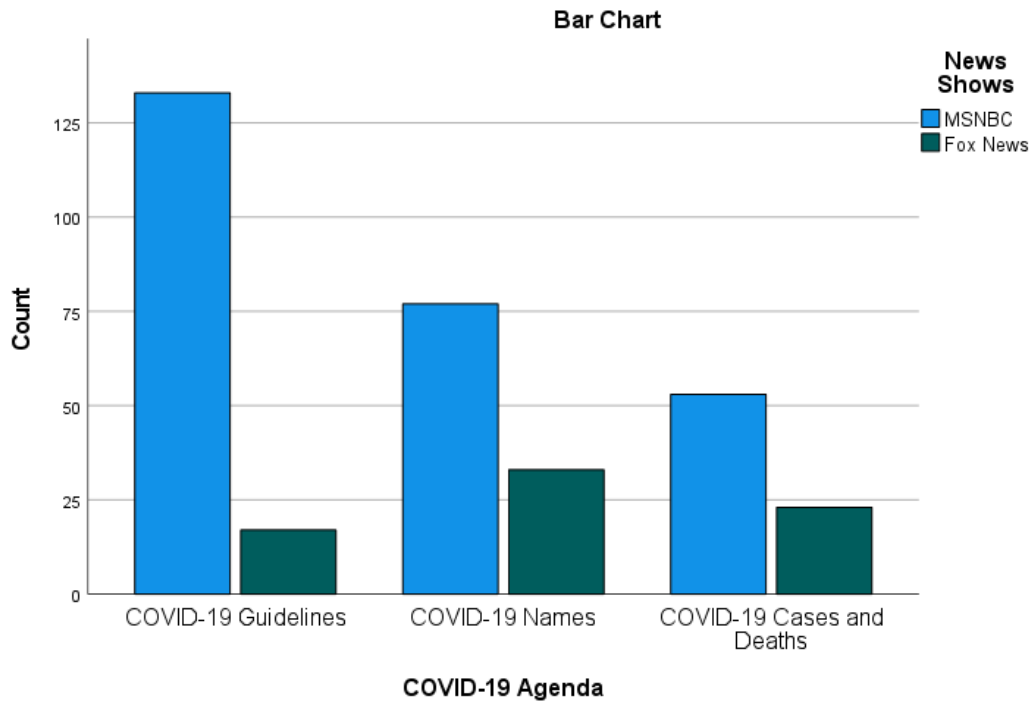
analyzed and measured. As the table shows, a large quantifiable difference is found in each of the three categories. The largest of which is found in the coronavirus guidelines category. While the representation in Table 3 shows the overall frequency count, the percentage difference in each categories are 155, 80, and 79 percent respectively (rounded to the nearest percent).

**Table 3.**

*COVID-19 Agenda \* News Shows Crosstabulation*

			News Shows		
			MSNBC	Fox News	Total
COVID-19 Agenda	COVID-19 Guidelines	Count	133	17	150
		Expected Count	117.4	32.6	150.0
		Residual	15.6	-15.6	
	COVID-19 Names	Count	77	33	110
		Expected Count	86.1	23.9	110.0
		Residual	-9.1	9.1	
	COVID-19 Cases and Deaths	Count	53	23	76
		Expected Count	59.5	16.5	76.0
		Residual	-6.5	6.5	
Total		Count	263	73	336
		Expected Count	263.0	73.0	336.0

As Figure 1 shows in order of category, COVID-19 guidelines received the least amount of time by Fox News. And, when compared to the overall prominence of the other two categories, guidelines has the greatest disparity in representation. In terms of hypothesis 1: *There will be a significant difference between Fox News coverage of the coronavirus, and MSNBC's news coverage*, the data supports this claim. With an understanding of the mathematical process and overall agenda time that was given to COVID-19 issue specific coverage, the attention now turns to the second part of the results.

**Figure 1.**

Following Figure 1 and the COVID-19 agenda are the categories for framing. The categories for framing were compiled using the same methodology previously discussed (Iyengar, 1991; de Vreese, 2005). In addition, the issue specific frames highlighted were found in the same manner as Jasperson and colleagues (1998). Before proceeding into the issue-specific frames, a clarification on the difference between the agenda-setting and framing process is warranted. Up until this point, this study has touched on agenda-setting and framing as two linked but separate theories. This reasoning can be ascertained in three ways. The first reasoning utilizes Entman's (1993) use of framing as a selection and salient process. In Entman's (1993) analysis of framing as a distinct theory, selection and salience as catalysts seems to coincide with what McCombs and colleagues (2014) mention in agenda-setting facets. However, what makes framing different is its ability to prescribe regardless of the agenda. In this way, one can characterize something in such a way that time and space are not a well-suited domain for a



given topic. An example of this might be to call the president of the United States a racist. Saying this takes very little time or effort and could be said without seeking a larger agenda. Furthermore, this statement could be perceived as highly inflammatory because of the weight or heaviness of the term racist in modern U.S. society. In this way, attributes and the agenda-setting process does not necessarily take into consideration the weight of the prescription in more social terms. In addition to this perspective, Scheufele (1999) explains that framing can be used as an independent variable. An example of this is found in the generic framing process, whereby certain frames can be used as a constant force applied to any given news broadcast. Lastly, the use of framing can be applied in a way that opines on mass media and society at large. Using framing in this way allows for a cultural perspective that is vastly different from agenda-setting. (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). An example of this might be to analyze the use of the word “race” for its heaviness and compare that with certain demographics who are more likely to prescribe a topic or person this way. In so doing, framing is being utilized as an independent variable and a cultural theory that can examine a piece of society. These distinctions are important to make, and to the best ability of this research, these distinctions are present in this study, regardless of the agenda-setting facets that were set forth.

As was previously stated, the development of issue specific frames, can be found by analyzing certain political issues. Once the issue is established, a systematic process is developed around distinct themes. These themes follow the natural progression of an issue at hand. In this way, Jasperson and colleagues' (1998) primary concern was to uncover frames in stages. They followed the natural development of a specific issue and found issue specific frames. The issue for Jasperson and colleagues (1998) was the federal budget deficit of 1996. The overall argument for Jasperson and colleagues (1998) was then to contribute a typology of frames that are inherent

to political issues, and to point out how a framing argument develops over time. This study here then uses the precise methodology that Jasperson and colleagues (1998) used to incorporate another frame, labeled in this study as the turning point frame. This frame was found and marked as an additional stage that could be found in coronavirus specific coverage. It stems from the use of the word crises as a turning point for a diseases. It is important to note here that the turning point in this sense is a lexicon term that defines turning point as an additional stage of a disease. To ascertain whether or not this frame can be found in other issue-specific topics is not denied or assumed in this research and it is outside the scope of this particular study. The three categories that were tested for the chi-square test of association were “fight,” “crisis,” and the “turning point” frame. The fight frame was captured through keywords “fight,” “battle,” “skirmish,” “war,” “contest,” “struggle,” “conflict,” and “clash.” This also includes derivatives of the keywords (e.g., “battl” for battling or battled). Furthermore, context was established by seeking a reference “to the intensity and immediate concern of the issue” (Jasperson et al., 1998, p. 212). The crisis frame was captured by “crisis,” “chaos,” “emergency,” “fire,” “failure,” “leader,” “catastrophe,” “problem.” Derivatives of the words were also searched (e.g., “chao” to find “chaotic”). Context for the crisis frame was found by seeking the construction of “the meaning of the issue by focusing on the inability of political leadership to take action to resolve the problem” (Jasperson et al., 1998, p. 212). Lastly, the “turning point” frame was a newly discovered frame found by utilizing the same typology Jasperson et al. (1998) From this perspective, “turning point” was uncovered by way of utilizing the derivative technique performed by Jasperson et al. (1998). This frame was then created as an extension of the crisis frame, in conjunction with the Oxford English Dictionary (2021) use of the word crisis as a turning point for a disease. “Crisis: The turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery

or death” (OED, 2021). This frame was captured by, “turning point,” “crossroads,” “immunity,” “critical point,” “vaccine,” “antibodies.” The representation of the operationalization process is shown in Table 4. As noted, these were derived by utilizing the issue-specific framing typology found in Jasperson et al. (1998), with each question pointing to the context in which each frame was captured.

**Table 4.**

*Framing COVID-19*

Frames	Questions
Fight Frame	Is the keyword referencing COVID-19? Is there an immediate concern to act against COVID-19?
Crisis Frame	Is the keyword referencing COVID-19? Is the keyword pointing to COVID-19 spread as a failure of political leadership? Is the keyword referring to COVID-19?
Turning Point Frame	Is the keyword referring to an important change, indicating recovery or death?

The chi-square test of significance was performed to examine the relation between COVID-19 framing and news show coverage (MSNBC vs. FOX News). The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(2, N=82) = 23.01, p \leq .01$ . The results indicate a prominent difference in COVID-19 Framing coverage among news show networks.

**Table 5.**

*Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.012 <sup>a</sup>	2*	.000**
Likelihood Ratio	23.624	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.911	1	.167
N of Valid Cases	82		

\*degrees of freedom; \*\*p-value

Table 6 shows the frequency rate. Percentage difference is 100, 178, and 71 percent respectively.

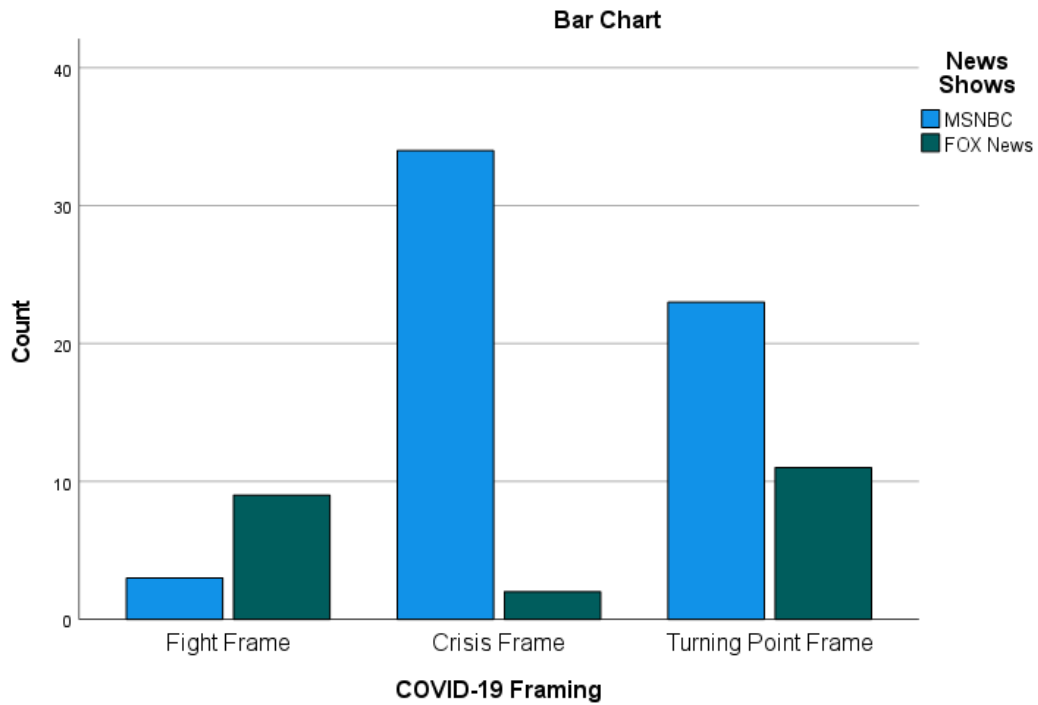
**Table 6.**

*COVID-19 Framing \* News Shows Crosstabulation*

		News Shows			
		MSNBC	FOX News	Total	
COVID-19 Framing	Fight Frame	Count	3	9	12
		Expected Count	8.8	3.2	12.0
		Residual	-5.8	5.8	
Crisis Frame	Count	34	2	36	
	Expected Count	26.3	9.7	36.0	
	Residual	7.7	-7.7		
Turning Point Frame	Count	23	11	34	
	Expected Count	24.9	9.1	34.0	
	Residual	-1.9	1.9		
Total	Count	60	22	82	
	Expected Count	60.0	22.0	82.0	

Figure 2 also shows this visually, with the crisis frame as the most divergent of the three.

**Figure 2.**



While Figure 2 illustrates the disparity across networks in a more visual light, the figure also highlights the fight frame as the closest in relation. And as the results show, the “turning point” frame finds representation across both networks. As indicated by the frames, hypothesis 2 is also supported by this data. The overall results not only show a significant divergence in coverage across MSNBC and Fox News, the way in which they described the coronavirus varied widely. In summary of the statistical analysis, the discovery of the additional frame seems to suit the data well, however, we can glean more information if we apply a historical context. The historical context for this study will be results through real world indicators. With an understanding of the agenda-setting and framing results, this next section will seek real-world indicators to foster a deeper context of the communication process, before conducting a more inductive qualitative approach to some of the results captured. These results include the cases and deaths reported.

### **Real World Indicators**

The purpose of providing this section is to lend an opportunity to discuss the results by connecting them to real events that were happening the day of each broadcast. The happenings, in this case, are cases and deaths reported. The data will be broken up into a linear outline by individual episode. This will start with the date of each broadcast. The overall cases and deaths will then be compared with specific data points already tabulated in the methodology section. As Vliegenthart et al. (2007) pointed out in their research, real world indicators may be influenced with key events that are happening around us. And, in the same manner as Aday (2010), framing will be the tool used to examine these real-world events.

The first set of data were collected from the Sean Hannity Fox News show and then compared with Chris Hayes from MSNBC. The data in question is Friday, June 26, 2020.

According to reports from the Coronavirus Resource Center, the number of confirmed cases in the U.S. were 2.5 million. The number of deaths were 125.8 thousand. At this point in time, we were on a steady increase by percentage in both categories (Johns Hopkins, 2020). What makes this Friday of particular importance is the overall death count for the day. It had eclipsed 40 thousand. This marked the first time that so many lost their lives because of COVID-19.

Meaning, it was the single highest death count of any day prior to it. Unfortunately, according to data from Johns Hopkins (2020), this was only the beginning of a sharp increase in both cases and deaths.

While the day's numbers had crossed over into a larger number than the day prior, the agenda for the news shows was markedly different. Fox News had only mentioned COVID-19 guidelines twice throughout the entirety of their broadcast, while MSNBC had referenced some form of COVID-19 guidelines 61 times in their coverage. This represents a 187 percent difference in coverage. On the day we saw the most people die ever, right here in the U.S., ways to stop the spread were almost ignored entirely by Fox News. That same night, COVID-19 by name only received one mention from Fox News. MSNBC by contrast mentioned it 36 times throughout the broadcast. Cases and deaths were mentioned 27 times by MSNBC that night, while Fox News referred one time. This represents a 189 percent, and 186 percent (rounded to the nearest percent) point differential, respectively. As the data reveals, despite the significance of the day's overall death count, it was not a significant factor for the agenda on Fox News.

The second data point that was used for this study falls on Monday, September 21, 2020. According to reports from the Johns Hopkins (2021) Coronavirus Resource Center, the total number of cases were 6.9 million cases nationally. The death reports released indicate that the date in question also marked the day we as a country crossed the 200 thousand threshold. The

coverage for that night revealed no mention of guidelines from Fox News, as MSNBC mentioned COVID-19 specific guidelines nine times throughout the show. COVID-19 by name received 11 mentions from MSNBC, while Fox News referred to it a total of five times, this indicates a 75 percent difference in coverage for that day. Lastly, cases and deaths were mentioned 15 times by MSNBC, and a total of nine times by Fox News, indicating a 50 percent difference in overall agenda coverage for cases and deaths.

The third and final data point reflects the closest relationship in terms of episode specific data. The day was Friday, October 2, 2020. On this day, the total number of cases reported showed 7.3 million people had contracted the coronavirus (Johns Hopkins, 2020). The total number of deaths nationally were 208.9 thousand deaths (Johns Hopkins, 2020). Fox News mentioned COV-19 guidelines 12 times throughout the coverage, MSNBC 63 times, indicating a 136 percent difference in coverage. COVID-19 by name received a total of 27 references by Fox News, while MSNBC mentioned it 30 times, indicating an 11 percent difference (rounded to nearest percent) in coverage. Cases and deaths references were 11 to 13 in favor of FOX news, indicating a 17 percent difference in COVID-19 related coverage. This day marks the only point at which Fox News mentions cases and deaths at a higher frequency than MSNBC. It also is significant in a way related to cases. More specifically, October 2, 2020 was the day that President Trump was hospitalized for COVID-19.

This method to quantify the agenda by way of episode and compare it to real-world indicators can also be done with framing. Such as revealing that the data showed the date of June 26, 2020 to be the most times that COVID-19 was portrayed as a crisis. To add, the “turning point” frame was found more often on October 2, 2020 than at the other two data points. All of these numbers, through the juxtaposition of cases and deaths, can infer new meanings or interpretations.

The section that follows will continue on this micro trend, as journalism ethics will be used as a guide to interpreting the data in terms of Entman's (1993) definition of framing as a moral evaluation.

### **Discussion of Quantitative Analysis**

From a statistical analysis, the results found for the agenda are in corroboration with Bursztyl et al. (2020). In other words, the news shows coverage of the virus found significantly less coverage overall on Fox News and MSNBC framed the coronavirus more so as a crisis than Fox News. These findings also point to one of the issues with the framing process, which is to say the power of omission (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). The power of omission or the ability for the news to ignore issues is most prevalent in the results. The starkness bears itself out most prominently in the difference between the COVID-19 guidelines agenda. The percentage difference between these two networks in this category was 155 percent (133 to 17). According to this finding, how to mitigate the spread of the virus (or protect yourself from the virus) was mentioned very little throughout Fox News coverage. So, while Jamieson & Albarracín (2020) found individuals were getting inaccurate information from conservative news outlets, these results point to a more powerful tool in the arsenal of the news shows, the ability to ignore. As the results show, the lack of coverage about the virus was happening at the same time when people in America were dying by the tens of thousands. Who is driving our news?

The question of who is driving our news can be seen in multiple fashions. On the one hand, the data shows a lack of attention given to COVID-19 from one network, while the other network framed it more so as a crisis. Looking at the data in this way points to earlier research found from van der Pas et al. (2017), which noted that the news only delivers the stories that their party and voters want to hear. In essence, conservative news watchers were not as interested



on the coronavirus as a story than liberal news watchers. However, this is not the only interpretation. If we look at the data in terms of framing, we can see that utilizing issue-specific frames allows a space to view the coronavirus as a political topic.

In Jasperson et al. (1998), they posited the notion that certain political issues in the news have distinct frames. But what is the coronavirus? The coronavirus falls in line with what Johns Hopkins (2021) calls a SARS virus. The clinical term for this disease is SARS-COV-2. The definition for a virus is “a living thing that causes infectious disease” (OED, 2021). From this perspective of COVID-19 as a living organism, a natural part of our world, the virus itself would fall into the framework of a natural frame (Goffman, 1974). However, it also fell into political news frames that were characterizing COVID-19 in different ways. Essentially, COVID-19, through the power of media and storytelling, crossed over to exist in two planes—natural and social frames. From this perspective, the ability for COVID-19 to exist in both contexts necessitated the ability to apply the “turning point” frame. The “turning point” frame also shows that the frame can be found across two completely different networks.

### **Journalism Ethics**

In regard to ethics, Ward (2019) explains that it can be viewed as a “normative activity that looks to solve problems” (p. 295). When faced with a limited amount of available options, ethics seeks a path by way of virtue and character (Ward, 2019). When applied to a journalism context, Ward (2019) explains that any question about journalism is always a question about ethics. From this perspective, the question this study asks here is about journalism. Or, more specifically, when faced with the ever-growing death count, what did the news coverage tell its audience? What did the news say about the spread of confirmed cases as the count went on the rise by the millions?

Indeed, these questions, although applied to a journalism context, are in fact questions of virtue (Ward, 2019). What then does the data tell us?

Through both an episode-by-episode account, as well as the overall trends in the reported coverage, the data reveals that Fox News only had COVID-19 guidelines as an agenda the day President Trump was in the hospital. The truth behind this is shown in the number of times COVID-19 prevention tools (guidelines) were mentioned. As previously stated, the day the U.S. saw 40 thousand dead, was the same day that Fox News made only two references to COVID-19 guidelines. Furthermore, zero guideline mentions were given the night we as a nation eclipsed the 200 thousand death toll mark. That same night, deaths were only mentioned once. By comparison MSNBC framed COVID-19 as a crisis and mentioned guidelines more than 60 times the day we saw 40 thousand dead. This is what the data reveals, and this is what the data allows us to uncover in terms of what the news was saying to the audience, as the cases and deaths were climbing out of control. Ethics can give us this space to demand a certain amount of responsibility from the reporting of serious issues. The serious issue that, by the end of 2020, had killed more than 350 thousand people nationally (Johns Hopkins, 2020).

### **Qualitative Analysis and Results**

With ethics in mind, this study will finish by utilizing a more in-depth analysis of responsibility. This will take place by using two distinct episodes. These episodes are from Monday, September 21, 2020. The decision to highlight two episodes will be in an effort to apply generic frames to the news show's broadcast. The frames that will be applied are thematic and episodic news frames. As Iyengar (1991) revealed, news shows tend to be more episodic in nature, and attribution of responsibility occurs more often in thematic storytelling (Boukes, 2021; Feezell, 2019; Xu, 2018; Powell, 2018). With only two shows highlighted here, this study's

intentions are still to keep in line with utilizing communication tools to contribute to what the news was saying during critical points in the battle against COVID-19. The sections that follow will be labeled case study 1 and case study 2, and will follow MSNBC, and Fox News primetime coverage respectively. With an understanding of ethics, and framing typologies, qualitative content analysis from Hassan & Azmi, (2018) will be synthesized with Iyengar's (1991) frames to get more to the heart of attribution of responsibility, as the context will be studied from a more in-depth and intensive framework. For the purpose of the case studies, deaths and cases by COVID-19 will be highlighted in context throughout. Specific mentions of deaths will also be extracted to highlight the method more intently, and to pick apart the specific instances in which the virtue of the network may be called into question. Lastly, to attribute responsibility, the excerpts highlighted will place the issue in a thematic or episodic frame. In this way, we can utilize content analysis framing techniques to infer the meaning of an issue (Hassan & Azmi, 2018).

### **Case Study 1**

The excerpts selected for this topic were pulled from the original transcribed files and inserted. All excerpts for this section are in italics. This decision is to provide more context and are in keeping with a central objective of this project, the need to highlight how the coronavirus was relayed to the public during crucial periods in our history. The first episode highlighted is from MSNBC's Rachel Maddow. The episode aired on September 21, 2020. As discussed by way of real-world indicators, the number of dead Americans had just eclipsed the 200 thousand threshold mark (Johns Hopkins, 2021).

*“And thanks to you at home for joining us this hour. As the number of Americans who have died from Coronavirus hit 200,000 this weekend. Americans did what we could to mark that landmark number.”*

This excerpt was the opening line of the broadcast for September 21, 2020. As the paragraph shows, the first topic of interest for MSNBC was indeed the coronavirus. Consequently, Rachel Maddow took the time to acknowledge the history of that moment. She did this by placing the context of the 200 thousand dead with the larger context of us. As is noted by the use of the word “we.” In addition to placing herself within the context of her own broadcast, Maddow also pointed to the larger historical trend of the times by referencing “we did what we could to mark that landmark number.” Here, the use of the word landmark provides a space for describing COVID-19 in terms of its larger historical significance. Because of this connection to history, we can find a place for this information relayed to the public—thematic element (Iyengar, 1991).

*“I mean, 200,000 of us dead. More dead than in any other country, and the government is just not even really taking notice.”*

The context of this excerpt is established in multiple ways. First, the reference to we once again places Maddow within the realm of her own coverage. Furthermore, she takes this a step further by referencing the death toll on an international level. With a reference to historical trends, we once again find ourselves adding another thematic frame to coronavirus deaths.

*“You know, pay no attention to the 200,000 coffins with Americans in them. As we hit that milestone in terms of Americans dead.”*

As the excerpt shows the use of the word milestone, coupled with the mentioning of all the lives lost as Americans, we can begin to see that the reference to historical trends will place Maddow's reference, logically, into thematic framing.

*“These folks went to the White House to stand outside the big fence they've got there now, to spell it out, trump lied 200,000 died.”*

This reference points to historical trends and can be placed into the thematic element.

*“People just are finding their own way to mark 200,000 of us dead in six months.”*

Another reference to historical trends can help us begin to see the pattern Maddow has taken on at the start of her broadcast. There were 12 total references that night, in honor of those lives lost by the pandemic nationally:

*“At the national cathedral in Washington yesterday, they tolled what they call their morning Bell. It's a Bell that they toll when they hold a funeral at the national cathedral. It is huge, it makes a huge resonant sound. That Bell weighs 12 tons. Yesterday starting at 5:00 PM eastern they tolled that Bell. They Rang it 200 times, one time for each 1000 Americans who have died so far with covid.”*

The number of deaths paint one picture for us to follow in terms of thematic frames. However, the cases can also be analyzed for collective meanings:

*“The data from the covid tracking project in Johns Hopkins now, are not good in terms of where we are heading, that data shows that in 33 states the number of new cases this week is higher than the number of new cases last week.”*

In the same manner that deaths can point to larger historical trends, the case data can also be analyzed for the way it presented COVID-19 cases to the public. As the above excerpt in italics shows, Maddow follows the same pattern and places the cases in terms of a historical

trend. We can mark this COVID-19 case in favor of the thematic frame. Table 7 shows a representation of the thematic vs. episodic frames as they were found throughout this broadcast.

**Table 7.**

*Thematic Vs. Episodic frames for Rachel Maddow*

Frame Type	Total Number of Frames
Thematic Frame	15
Episodic frame	0

With an understanding of how Rachel Maddow utilized her platform in a way that highlights ethical journalism practices, we will now turn to the Fox News show that aired that same night. Once the show is highlighted with specific excerpts for framing purposes, a cross-comparison of the two networks will follow.

**Case Study 2**

The excerpts pulled for this section were included to highlight a central objective of this research—the need to highlight how COVID-19 related information was relayed to the public. The methodology follows the same path set forth and described for case study 1. With an understanding of how cases and deaths were highlighted, we turn to the broadcast that aired on Fox News, Monday, September 21, 2020.

*“We told you last week about a story from a local news station in Nashville, Fox 17, about a series of emails between the mayor's office there, and the city health Department. In those emails, the officials appeared to discuss whether to release to the public, the very low number of coronavirus cases connected to bars and restaurants.”*

The excerpt above is the only reference given the entire night for COVID-19 cases. In this reference we can see several different elements that constitute an episodic frame. As is noted in

the reference to overall COVID-19 cases, it makes no mention of a number, other than to say there are low numbers of the coronavirus, so there are no historical trends to follow in this regard. In addition to this, the first half of the talk segment starts out with references to the Nashville mayor's office and the city health department. We don't know if this is a trend, in terms of bars and restaurants in other cities. And we also cannot ascertain to know what was said in the emails. What we can know is that no other mention of cases follows this one. So, we can come to understand that the reference was about Nashville as a single instance or event that took place. This idea of focusing on a single instance is what Iyengar (1991) refers to as episodic framing.

In terms of deaths, this episode had a total of 6 death mentions that fell into the realm of COVID-19 related information.

*“You might not even hear this; you may be dead. You may have died during Joe Biden's speech. Check yourself. The message from Joe Biden's handlers couldn't be clearer. The more you force Joe Biden to speak, the more people will die. And keep in mind every one of those deaths was Donald Trump's fault.”*

Here we can see multiple layers of the death count in an episodic fashion. Here we have references to dying from COVID-19 mixed in with hyperbole. We see no mention of any historical trends or collective meanings to be ascertained by this statement. In short, this statement of death falls into the episodic framing category. However, more context may be needed to find out if these specific instances of death are COVID-19 related. In this regard, the need for further context to establish more of an understanding exists. As previously discussed, the data were collected by utilizing the length of 100 words in each direction from the keyword (the average length of a paragraph). In this way, we can uncover more relevant information to

find what this episodic frame may be in reference to. In this specific instance, this statement reflects a video that had just aired prior, where Joe Biden had actually misstated the number of coronavirus deaths as 200 million. The decision for the broadcast to focus on a specific instance, once again, allows us the space to place this frame as episodic.

**Table 8.**

*Thematic vs. Episodic Framing for Tucker Carlson*

Frame Types	Total Number of Frames
Thematic Frame	0
Episodic Frame	7

Table 8 represents the overall number of episodic vs. thematic frames found in the broadcast. As the data shows, Fox News relied heavily on episodic frames to talk about the cases and deaths. It would also seem that satire or sarcasm was utilized in some way to downplay the spread and rising death count that was occurring in real time. With an understanding of what was said to the public at a crucial time in the spread of COVID-19, this study will attempt a richer qualitative approach by synthesizing these two cases studies. This will be done by bringing in the idea of real-world indicators, thematic vs. episodic framing, and journalism ethics to critique the coverage more systematically. The research will then draw some conclusions on where this research can be placed, where it could go next, and also the limitations of this study.

**Discussion of Case Studies**

The decision to include a sample case study section was in keeping with the primary objective—how COVID-19 related information was relayed from the media to the public during crucial times in U.S. history. However, another way this study can bear fruit is to focus on how framing can be utilized as a way of understanding our culture. Showing this process in this study



then keeps in line with the distinctions of framing theory. In this way, framing can be utilized to gauge the heaviness or weight of the situation, regardless of the overall links to agenda-setting theory. While a working definition for framing in this study draws on Entman's view of framing as a moral evaluation, attributes are being investigated by way of content analysis. Because of this, Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) noted in their research, framing has the ability to view things from a cultural perspective. In this fashion, we can use real world indicators and journalism ethics to critique these frames to come to a closer understanding of what the data ultimately reveals. We can also have a better understanding of the framing processes. Furthermore, we can get to the heart of one of the questions that has followed this research since the outset—who is driving the coverage?

As Ward (2019) points out, a question about journalism is a question about ethics. In this sense, applying ethics to how COVID-19 information was relayed to the public then becomes a question of virtue (Ward, 2019). Virtue may be defined as “behavior showing high moral standards.” (OED, 2021). With this in mind, let us re-analyze the second case study more intently through cases and deaths. As noted, Fox News, the night that our country crossed the 200 thousand death mark, spoke only to the coronavirus cases being low in one city. What's more is that they didn't even bother with any sort of further explanation on the matter. From an ethics standpoint, was this statement misleading? The answer to this question lies in the tracking data already compiled. At the time, millions had already contracted this virus, and the death toll had been on a steady incline for nearly a month and a half (Johns Hopkins, 2021) From this perspective, it would seem that this statement could be categorized not only as episodic, but what Bursztyn et al. (2020) placed as misinformation. In addition to being misinformation, this specific bit of information regarding the case count corroborates with what the media studies

literature on effects versus coverage reveal (Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020). In other words, the statement on cases accurately reflects other study's findings more broadly, in terms of the coronavirus being downplayed entirely by the Fox News network (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

While coronavirus cases are one source of information to track, COVID-19 deaths also show a similar trend in terms of how the deaths were portrayed or given attributes. In other words, the deaths were also downplayed in a significant way. This was done by showing only one sentence of Joe Biden misstating the virus numbers as 200 million. Tucker Carlson repeats 200 million so often that if you did not catch the first part of the reference, you may walk away with a huge amount of misinformation or come to understand that his message was hyperbole. Hyperbole can be referred to as "exaggerated statements or claims not to be taken literally" (OED, 2021). When viewing his messages in this light, we can ask ourselves the same question, are the statements misleading? In terms of categorizing, this statement would also be viewed not only episodic, but misleading, placing it also within the realm of misinformation.

So, what we can glean totally from the night that 200 thousand Americans died from COVID-19 is a network who did nothing but provide inaccurate information about the pandemic whenever it chose to include it as a topic for the agenda discussion. With an understanding of how Fox News relayed its coverage of the pandemic, this study will now focus on the first case study presented.

The coverage of the Rachel Maddow show featured, for approximately the first 15 minutes of airtime, the cases and death toll count. Was her coverage misleading? As the data indicates, Rachel Maddow mentioned the death count 11 times throughout her coverage, and each time it was an accurate account of the coronavirus death toll numbers. What's more, the

cases were mentioned three times through her coverage, and each time the COVID-19 reference information was accurate when compared to where the infection was spreading. What we can see from their coverage is a difference not only in terms of ethics, but what Ward (2019) refers to as virtue in the decision-making process. If one is talking about journalism ethics, the discussion is then centered around the idea of how to present coverage to the audience with the options given. While it is not clear how many options there were, at the very least, we can know that true and accurate information was the option taken for one broadcast, while hyperbole or misleading statements were the route taken for the other.

What then makes this interpretation that much more real is the ability to incorporate this idea of real-world indicators into the fold. Whether it's synthesizing's Aday's (2010) work, to fit real world events in with frames, or acknowledging that real world indicators can have an impact on how we behave. This information highlights what was driving the attribution of COVID-19 related information (Vliegenthart et al., 2007). What should the public expect? Viewing real world indicators and this critique through public expectations (Lischka, 2015) allows us to realize that the possibility to be influenced by what we watch in the news exists, and it can also have an effect on our behaviors regarding an issue (Lischka, 2015). So, what happens, then, when the issue at hand is a deadly virus? The results would indicate that it makes no difference in terms of fitting into framing categories. In essence, through further data analysis we are more assured of the idea that the coronavirus can be viewed with the two types of sociological frames discussed by Goffman (1974)—natural frames, and social frames. In this way, we can interpret that the U.S. culture, thorough the power of news storytelling, can transform and characterize natural elements of our world into socially dynamic relationships with its viewers.

Following this thread, if we then ask how frames can help us to analyze our culture, we can see that U.S. politics, for all its capability, does have the ultimate ability in some form or fashion of choice. One choice is to describe the coronavirus as a thematic element, a piece of history that will undoubtedly linger in the minds of many for the years to come. Another choice is to point to conspiracy theories from Nashville that downplay the threat of the virus. Because networks ultimately can choose to attribute certain aspects of reality to its viewers, Fox News decided to relay COVID-19 information more often through omission of key characteristics (e. g. “low virus numbers”). Is omitting the truth just as bad? This question deserves more exploration in terms of framing and the ability to ignore an issue outright. Additionally, we can view the responsibility to lie with the senders of key information. This idea of responsibility is a key pillar for thematic and episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991), and ultimately points to the network’s ability, at least in part, to have a choice to represent the coronavirus one way or another. Furthermore, through this supplemental analysis of the individual case studies, we utilized real world indicators, journalism ethics, and framing to draw upon more fundamental questions and answers surrounding U.S. politics and the news media. In this way, this study can contribute to the growing literature of political communication and framing theory as a whole. This analysis does not answer the question of causation in who is driving the news, however. With this in mind, the next section will attempt to draw distinctions between the frames used in this work before reaching some final theoretical conclusions on who could be driving the news feed.

### **Theoretical Links between Framing and Agenda Setting**

As discussed by McCombs et al. (2014) framing can exist as a second facet of agenda-setting. While we can come to know the agenda first, the attribution of the topic at hand necessitates the need to describe the issue. This is what the data, so far, has shown. Surveying the

distinction between the two a little further, the nature of cases and deaths only partly told the story in terms of initial analysis. In the original results of the study, when the divergence in news coverage was first established, we were able to see a large quantifiable difference in cases and deaths, but this did not tell us individual counts of the episodes in question. This was then established by way of real-world indicators and a breakdown of each individual show. While this furthered the time given to a “set of objects” (McCombs et al., 2014), it did not reveal if the way in which the coverage was given time was ethical or misleading. Thus, we can see a boundary of the agenda-setting process clearly and without question. This boundary is found in the agenda building process, and its function of examining sets of objects. Although we can glean some information of how the coronavirus was relayed to the public by way of prominence or salience of the issue (McCombs, 1993), we cannot know anything beyond this. It would take other facets that dive into the effects of the salience of the topic or portraying certain attributes when talking about a specific issue at hand. In this way, framing necessarily follows agenda-setting. After all, if no time is given to an issue, the number of times attributions can be assigned to a particular subject will be impacted. This is a logical follow-through of both the first and second facets. What differentiates frames can then be located in what Goffman (1974) recalls—natural and social frameworks. Because social frameworks require the intelligence of an actor (Goffman, 1974), the way a frame develops will also be influenced by the overall capacity to describe the issue by the agency involved. In essence, frames can be limited not only by the time and space of an issue, but also by the nature of intelligence from the sender. This draws a boundary for the framing theory as whole. As the data reveals, when looking at cases and deaths, the numbers of how many times the death toll was announced by the broadcasts only told part of the story, the other part of the story was flushed out through the framing process. And, once the mechanisms

were identified, we could see the way each intelligence (in the case studies of the news shows) relegated characteristics about COVID-19. In this way, the third facet can begin to be established by way of analyzing two actors from each network (Chris Hayes, and Rachel Maddow vs. Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson). In this way, the ability to move toward McCombs' (2014) third facet was realized, to a degree. The other aspects, of who is driving the news media, are not found in this study's results. However, theoretical links can also be a way to understand why studying the effects are not a fool proof way toward causation.

Thinking in terms of theoretical application more acutely, we can look back to the idea of political parallelism that was found early on in the framing literature (van der Pas et al., 2017). In van der Pas et al. (2017) it was noted that there was some correlations between politically debated topics in European parliament and what the news was covering. Additionally, the news paralleled voter preference. So, in essence, the research uncovered a cycle of the news process. This cycle is not one of a linear relationship but representative of a feedback process whereby the agenda can be shaped by actors in and outside the newsroom. Furthermore, Venezuela et al. (2017) found other effects data to suggest that what is published as news correlates with what interested participants are responding via Twitter. So, in both these studies, we have multiple ways to view who could be driving the news. Is it the twitter participants? Or is it the parliament discussions of the issue? Furthermore, at what point does the broadcaster choice come into play? While it seems logical to recognize the broadcaster as making the final choice, this may not be necessarily so. And, if the communication frames are representative not of a linear continuum but a cyclical one, then we could propose that framing effects and the decision to include certain attributes about a topic may be more situational than at first glance. This is precisely what the

social study of media effects revealed from survey data that was included in the literature (Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2020).

Thinking about the decision to give a certain issues space and time in this sense, as well as the attributes that one assigns from a more personalized approach, we can give credence to the entire news driving force question. In other words, who is driving the news may be contingent on a variety of factors that shift in real time. Therefore, the continuous application of real-world indicators, along with other avenues to compile more distinct timelines of information released, could be a way of furthering the news driving question. This idea is also raised in the seven facets McCombs (2014) describes as orientation, or the direction in which the news is manipulated to fit a certain paradigm.

With a deeper understanding of the theoretical links between agenda setting and framing, we can begin to see the boundaries clearly. And, because the framing theory was utilized to draw on cultural distinctions, we can answer the call Scheufele and Tewksbury's (2007) made in terms of drawing distinctions between the two theoretical frameworks. In this light, what was said can also validate a primary objective of this research—understanding how COVID-19 related information was relayed to the public during crucial moments in its history. With the primary objective met, and the integration of culture and framing, this research will discuss conclusions that can be drawn from this research as whole.

### **Conclusion**

This section will break up into three parts. The first will touch on the overall conclusions before limitations of the research and results. The study will then look to future directions to take this work. The primary objective of this research project was to highlight how COVID-19 related information was relayed to the public, during crucial times in our nation's history. In this regard,

the study's decision to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods seemed necessary. This seemed necessary not only to highlight in more detail the data and how it was said, but also from a communication and media standpoint. As stated in the introduction, a guiding question became, how can communication and media studies contribute? This question stems from Deuze's (2020) research into the role that mass media and communication can have amidst the pandemic world that we have come to know. According to Deuze (2020), one of the major themes in studying mass communication research is to look at content and explain how it comes about. In this way, this study can fit itself within the realm of communication and media studies because it utilized content analysis and case studies of media frames. And while much of what was uncovered through the data has been explained in previous sections, looking at this work as a whole allows a space to reflect how the perception or understanding of an issue can change within the context of one study. It also shows meaning can fluctuate in scope. This meaning could be inferred by the design included. In other words, as the research developed, we saw the whole of what was by the agenda making process, before seeing the whole of how it was said. This was done first by analyzing the data together, before analyzing the data by individual episode. The last segment of data then focused primarily on one night in time. In this way, we saw the shrinking of the data in real time and were able to essentially tighten our communication lenses with each step. And, while each new step used the same data points, new meanings could be drawn from each level of this research's presentation. Because of this, this study used a multi-perspectival approach to studying mass media. In some way, then, we can see the totality of what McCombs (2014) and Entman (1993) refer to in the framing process. Which is to say, this study represented part of the frame building and agenda-setting operations. This study also utilized the links between the two, while also drawing the distinctions to come to a richer understanding of



the communication process. While all research designs may have some bias on a researcher's part, this study is unique in the way it draws on the same method and same information to find different ways of seeing. This also points to the power communication can have as a whole.

From this ultimate perspective of how communication and media studies can contribute to the world around us, this research also highlights the basic communication process more fully through agenda setting and framing. This was done by highlighting the networks as senders of content. The study then drew a line from sender to the possibility of multiple receivers. These multiple receivers include, journalists reporting content during real-world events, as well as social media users, and audience viewers more generally. In this way, the secondary objective (how can communication and media studies contribute?) is realized.

Lastly, this research also touched on the way the news is driven. The data does point to some evidence that the rising death toll from COVID-19 influenced coverage. However, through a review of the effect's literature, this study also points to the inclusiveness that any one study may have in trying to figure out the ultimate driver, or the effects on an audience. This is because exposure to the content would be necessary, as well as correlations between behavior and what was said by the mass media. In this regard, the decision to focus solely on what was said can find some justification. This justification can be realized by asking different questions. Instead of a concern of effects, which may ask the question: how did this influence people? This study asks, who is responsible? When the public needed critical information about a deadly virus, who chose accuracy and collective meanings over hyperbole? The nature of these questions can be just as profound as the ones sought by effects researchers. And, in some way, they can be just as necessary to understand. In this way, holding power to account and assigning responsibility is of paramount importance for this type of research. With this in mind, the question of choice and

responsibility may never find an ultimate person to blame. This is not saying that society should not expect honest coverage from its broadcasters, especially in terms of those broadcasters with the ability to reach millions of people.

In summary, whether or not the question of the driver can be found, we can see the driver as the final link to this communication process. This process consists of the most fundamental properties found within the research of communication studies as a whole. They are the sender, the receiver, and the feedback loop. In this way, this research can find its place not only within the scope of framing and the news agenda, but more broadly, it can find its place within the realm of communication. This research then contributes to McCombs (1993) premise of communication and media research as a marketplace of ideas, ideas that can be explored. As communication scholar Robert Entman (1993) once wrote, “by bringing ideas together in one location, communication can aspire to become a master discipline” (p. 51). In some way, this study can then aspire to be, the work of something greater than itself.

### **Limitations**

While this research did highlight both quantitative and qualitative methods, a need to further a more robust account of the statistical analysis could be done. From a quantifiable standpoint, Krippendorff's alpha could have been utilized to calculate inter-codability. In this way, an agreement among multiple researchers could provide a higher level of assurance in the numbers represented. While this drawback was mitigated by way of qualitative methods, another limitation is inherent in the sample size. Because the nature of this work was to highlight COVID-19, a study that incorporated a larger sample size could include comparing multiple networks. This choice could have uncovered more variability than what was mentioned here. Additionally, the focus of this research was on the building processes of framing and agenda

setting theory. This realization points to the limitation inherent in this process, which is to say effects could not be linked. This was mitigated in some fashion by way of connecting the two theories to a broader scope of McCombs' (1993) facets, but nevertheless, incorporating some survey research, or personalized interview accounts, could have led to more discovery on the nature of audience perception and responsibility. With an overview of some limitations to this study, the next section will review where future directions could take research designs such as this one.

### **Future Directions**

This study utilized content analysis as part of its methodology to look for keywords within the transcripts of several news broadcasts. While framing and agenda setting became primary communication tools, this study could also be done in other formats. One such format could touch on the nature of certain words as part of our culture. While this was briefly performed in terms of a cultural ethical critique, a cultural discourse analysis allows a space to view, more visibly, cultural communication practices (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). Some preliminary findings from this research point to this possibility in two ways. The first occurred during the examination of the broadcasts. The use of the word death appeared more than 76 times across both networks, however, the way in which Fox News used it as a talking point was to point to, on several occasions, the understanding that we somehow are all going to die. In this light, the notion of our lives as finite points to some shared meaning of what death is, a universal inevitability that connects all of us, no matter the age. Preliminary research in regard to cultural practices of death note that death as a ritual concept dates back more than 5,000 years historically (Alex, 2020). And archeologists that study the rituals surrounding death practices found the first peoples actually adopted some of their behaviors (e. g. funerals) from other

animal species (Alex, 2020). This preliminary research helps us to place death, then, not as a universal meaning, but one that may vary from culture to culture as a learned trait.

In addition to finding the word death appearing a number of times throughout this research, another word came to the forefront the night the president was hospitalized with COVID-19. This word was used to describe him as a fighter. The mention of Trump as a fighter appeared 15 times on Fox, throughout the aired broadcast. It was used to talk not only of his capability to fight off the virus, but also his ability “to fight for the American people.” A preliminary review of this word shows its roots stem from the Old English word *feohte* (Harper, 2021). Additionally, this word dates back as far as the year 1200 and was used to describe a resistance or struggle (Harper, 2021). So, as these two examples point out, seeking new understandings of culture could be an avenue to explore. Furthermore, cultural discourse analysis would allow a space to bring about a social justice concept more fluidly. As was mentioned by Carbaugh and Cerulli (2017), one of the implications to studying discourse culturally can be that of social justice initiatives. From this perspective, combining culture and what was said can be a social justice initiative. This social justice angle can be achieved by looking at culture more explicitly and combining it with real-world events. The last step of this process could then rigorously seek to what the mass media is disseminating as accurate and true information. This pursuit then allows us to ask those profound societal questions. The social questions that seek to answer what kind of culture we want to be. What should we as a society expect from our news coverage and who is responsible? Adding another cultural element to this method design would then only boost our cultural understandings of possible social influences and it could also allow us to hold those speaking to account.

A final note in regard to future directions can also be found using more quantitative resources. Specifically, in terms of other topics not covered in the framing issue discussed. While the point of this research was to highlight COVID-19 information, framing can also call into question what was not said. In this way, a similar study could utilize this concept to evaluate the question: If the topic at hand was not discussed, then what was? Some preliminary research found in the data pointed to topics such as lawlessness, confederate statues, the supreme court justice seat, as well as the protests that engulfed the nation after the George Floyd murder. In this regard, all these topics mentioned received more daily coverage from Fox News during crucial points of the pandemic. In this way, using the same quantitative typology, we can get to the heart of what was really being broadcast, while tens of thousands of people were dying daily from COVID-19.

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