

Massacre vs. shooting: Exploring CNN and FOX's coverage of the Uvalde Robb Elementary School attack

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Abstract

This study dissects FOX News Media (FOX News) and Cable News Network's (CNN) media coverage differences of the Uvalde, Texas Robb Elementary School terror attack (Uvalde shooting). On March 24, 2022, Salvador Ramos perpetrated a mass shooting, killing 19 children and two teachers and injuring 17 others. This paper showcases that the incident qualifies as terrorism and explores how two major U.S. news outlets framed and covered the incident differently in their headlines, images, captions, sources, and tone. While CNN emphasized police culpability, victim perspectives, and presented a somber tone, FOX News downplayed the severity of the attack, highlighted police preparedness, and maintained a more positive tone regarding law enforcement actions. Through analysis of these framing techniques, this study underscores the importance of media literacy, urging news consumers to critically evaluate the biases of their chosen news sources and understand the impact of political ideologies on framing terrorism incidents.

Keywords: terrorism, Uvalde shooting, media coverage, media framing, CNN, FOX News, Robb Elementary School shooting, media perspectives

1 INTRODUCTION

On March 24, 2022, Salvador Ramos shot his grandmother, crashed his vehicle into a ravine near Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, killed 19 children and two teachers, and wounded 17 others with an AR-15-style rifle. Critical to this incident was the 77-minute time gap by responding officers from when Ramos walked into Robb Elementary School until he was stopped¹. While not commonly regarded as such, under Schmid and Jongman's definition, which states that "terrorism is a method of combat in which random or symbolic victims serve as an instrumental target of violence," the Robb Elementary shooting was a terrorist attack². The primary motive of the attack was an attempt to gain notoriety and fame from the incident³. The shooter leveraged his social media accounts to try to gain fame, sharing disturbing videos of himself holding a clear plastic bag with a dead cat inside and firing BB guns at people, alongside livestreaming a heated argument with his mother on Instagram⁴. This alarming pattern of online behavior and the fact that he was known jokingly as a "school shooter" by some of his classmates, emphasizes how the shooter sought to cultivate a violent persona, ultimately treating his victims as mere tools to achieve his desired infamy⁴. Thus, those

murdered were utilized as "instrumental targets of violence."

News framing of terrorism incidents differs from one source to another. Framing, in this sense, is defined as "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text"⁵. For U.S. news sources, factors such as the use of bioweapons, higher death tolls, attacks conducted in locations friendly to the U.S., and ISIS-linked attacks increase the probability of terror incident coverage⁶. News reporting on terrorism has also been shown to be a "tactic to influence politics," and thus comports with the dominant political ideology of the news sources that cover the event⁷. For the news coverage outlets covered in this paper, FOX News typically leans conservative and promotes ideals important to the Republican party, while CNN tends to produce more liberal content while promoting values of the Democratic party. These ideological contrasts shape how each outlet reports on news events, particularly on terrorism, aligning with their broader political perspectives.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employs content analysis to gauge the framing of the Uvalde terror incident by both CNN and FOX News. The two CNN articles analyzed were titled "Gunman in Texas school massacre emerged from closet as Border Patrol agents moved in, source says" and "Uvalde school massacre could have been stopped sooner, DOJ report finds"^{1,8}. The articles examined from FOX News were entitled "Uvalde school shooting: DOJ review faults police for big delays in confronting gunman" and "Uvalde, Texas police hosted 'active shooter scenario training' in March, had session called 'Stop the Dying'"⁹. The five framing variables compared in these four articles are (1) headlines, (2) images embedded within the article, (3) the associated image captions, (4) sources cited within the article, and (5) tone. The first two articles compared were published on May 28, 2022, four days after the attack. The second set of articles compared were from January 18, 2024, containing information on the follow-up court hearings conducted by the Department of Justice (DOJ) against the responding officers. This exploratory study reveals that different political ideologies of the news sources contributed to the differential reporting of the Uvalde terror attack. Presenting the incident as a tragedy for the victims, CNN was more likely to highlight the perspective of victims' families and emphasize that the police were complicit in what had occurred. In contrast, FOX News focused more on absolving law enforcement of responsibility and protecting police credibility by highlighting others' culpability or positively portraying the Uvalde Police Department.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Headlines

Headline titles reveal the story's significance to the reader and are essential in how the audience interprets the news stories. This showcases how the media presents their news stories to the public, utilizing techniques such as simple messaging, which is effective because it is quickly remembered, or using charged words with more exaggerated meaning to grab the reader's attention¹⁰.

CNN and FOX News' headlines subtly imposed distinct political ideologies. The CNN article published four days after the attack began with the headline "Gunman in Texas school massacre emerged from closet as Border Patrol agents moved in, source says"⁸. This headline alluded to the events that unfolded on the day of the attack and emphasized the police officers' absence at the scene. US Border Patrol agents were the eventual force to end the shooting incident as Uvalde Police Department officers were described to be standing in the hallway taking "no action," waiting for equipment and

room keys⁸. The headline of the January 2024 article by CNN is "Uvalde school massacre could have been stopped sooner, DOJ report finds"¹. In both titles by CNN, the terror incident was labeled as a "massacre," depicting the gravity of the killings and the event as a whole. The second headline also holds the police accountable, citing the DOJ report, indicating that more action could have been taken by responding officers to prevent or minimize the resulting deaths. In other words, CNN approached the attack that presents the police as culpable.

In contrast, FOX News acknowledged law enforcement blame, yet also preserved the image of the police organization and downplayed the severity of the incident. The 2024 FOX News headline reads, "Uvalde school shooting: DOJ review faults police for big delays in confronting gunman"⁹. While placing the blame on the officers for their slow response, the terrorist attack was labeled as a "school shooting." This labeling crucially highlights how the event has been lessened in severity in comparison to CNN's "massacre" label. As showcased by an article written by Helen Taylor in the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism*, comparing two well-known mass shootings, Dylan Roof's attack in Charleston and Omar Mateen's Orlando shooting, media commentators can "symbolically label" offenses with what aligns with their dominant ideology¹¹. Taylor's article illustrates that despite both attacks meeting the definition of terrorism, Roof's attack was predominantly labeled in the media as a "hate crime" rather than terrorism. In contrast Mateen's shooting was almost always identified as terrorism, with many media reports even linking him to the ISIS terrorist organization¹¹.

The primary FOX News article four days after the attack was headlined: "Uvalde, Texas police hosted 'active shooter scenario training' in March, had session called 'Stop the Dying'"¹². This headline underscored how the police had been preparing for such incidents instead of highlighting their lack of preparedness and their inaction. FOX News thus took a milder approach that still depicted the incident as a tragedy, while also portraying the police as well-equipped to prevent similar occurrences.

3.2 Images and Associated Captions

Many viewers believe they can look at images and read their captions to get the full picture of the story being covered¹³. The media aim to provide graphic videos and images when reporting on terrorist activities to emphasize the high-level threat these groups or individuals pose. However, by continuously broadcasting graphic images, new outlets perpetuate terrorists' messages and goals⁶. Thus, the selection of images within a news story can yield variant interpretations of the same

article by different individuals, leading to a distorted understanding of the covered event.

This concept has been explored in a study conducted in Finland where researchers presented newspaper article images from the COVID-19 pandemic to individuals in different age groups to examine how these individuals would position the context of the pandemic based on the images presented. The study concluded that in varying age groups, media images during the pandemic aligned with specified social representations and identities of the individuals viewing the images. This study proves how newspaper article images and other visual forms of media reinforce viewers' pre-existing values and social identities¹⁴. News sources and outlets utilize this information to shape how their messages are perceived by audiences, strategically selecting images to reinforce specific narratives and emotional responses.

CNN personalized the victims and families of the Robb Elementary attack, opting for an emotional appeal in its visual reporting. Out of the 45 images depicted in the May 28, 2022, article, 60% portrayed the victims' families, memorials, and community mourning (Figures 1-2). Even the images that showed law enforcement officers typically also displayed children who were fleeing the school or victims' families with them (Figure 3), bringing the percentage of these types of images up to 75.5%. Captions for images contained quotes from community members condemning the violence, saying, "We cannot forget what happened, and it needs to stop"⁸.



Figure 1. Choir members who sang in Uvalde on May 27 to support families impacted by the shooting¹⁵.

The follow-up 2024 article from CNN on the Uvalde attack only had two images of people, neither displaying Uvalde police officer presence, alongside six expandable images of highlighted quotes from the DOJ report. The first photo in the CNN article depicted family members of the murdered victims in the Uvalde shooting crying while listening to the testimony given at the DOJ hearing (Figure 4). The caption named the individual in the photo, humanizing her. The second image was of Attorney General Merrick Garland along-



Figure 2. Families gathering in the main plaza in Uvalde to grieve the lives lost on May 28¹⁵.



Figure 3. Students fleeing Robb Elementary School with the aid of law enforcement officers¹⁵.

side other government figures speaking at the news conference in Uvalde directly following the shooting. Garland is quoted within the article, alongside family members of those whose lives were lost in the attack, mentioning no statements of the police department feeling remorse, grief, or taking accountability for their role in the hurt they caused, expressing how "no one wants to take responsibility"¹. In essence, CNN's visual narrative of the Robb Elementary terror attack gave a human face to the tragedy that had unfolded.

FOX News also took an empathetic approach with its images but focused on different actors, such as the Uvalde Police Department. The 2022 article had eight images, 87.5% of which displayed police officers. The one image not including an officer was of the one-pager, created and provided by the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District Police Department (Figure 5), which outlined the contents of the police training, including how to register and who should attend.. The caption for this image detailed that the training encouraged "Peace Officers, School Resource Officers, and campus security officers" to attend¹². The article con-



Figure 4. “Kimberly Mata-Rubio, center, and other family members of the Uvalde shooting victims listen to US Justice Department officials during Thursday’s news conference”¹⁶.

tained no images of the victims or their families. At the end of the article, there was an image of a man placing an object at the memorial site in front of Robb Elementary School (Figure 6). The caption read, “A law enforcement personnel lights a candle outside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, Wednesday, May 25, 2022”¹². Rather than displaying those directly impacted by the loss of life of their child or sibling, the person lighting the candle at the memorial is a member of law enforcement, more specifically, a Uvalde Police Department officer. This image and caption further the narrative the audience receives from FOX News that the police officers were well-trained and prepared for the attack and grieving in its aftermath.



Figure 5. “‘Active Shooter for School-Based Law Enforcement’ was the training hosted by the school district’s police department on March 21, and ‘Peace Officers, School Resource Officers, and campus security officers’ were encouraged to attend.”¹⁷.



Figure 6. “A law enforcement personnel lights a candle outside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, Wednesday, May 25, 2022”¹⁸.

The 2024 FOX News follow-up still did not depict facial photos of victims and family members directly involved in the attack; however, it showcased two memorial photos (Figure 7). The other stand-alone image was of the former Uvalde Police Chief giving his testimony (Figure 8). Both CNN and FOX News identify and depict through images and captions what the DOJ report stated in terms of police faults in the Uvalde terrorist attack. However, CNN utilized emotional images of those directly impacted by the incident, while FOX News foregrounded the police, which potentially alleviates the blame for slow intervention in readers’ minds.



Figure 7. Memorial photo included in FOX News 2024 article¹⁹.

3.3 Sources

Sources quoted within articles give credibility to the details of events and highlight evidence presented within the article, revealing the dominant framing of terrorism events within news coverage. In the Umpqua Community College shooting, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, and the 1991 Royal Oak shooting, researchers examined whether sources were cited or quoted and categorized sources as politicians, journalists, and informal, helping identify how sources contrastingly frame incidents²¹. This type of framing through source choices was evident in Fox News and CNN’s reporting on the Uvalde attack.



Figure 8. Former Uvalde Police Chief Pete Arredondo giving testimony on the Uvalde attack²⁰.

The varying visual approaches by CNN and FOX carried over to their use of sources. Both the 2024 CNN article and each FOX News article directly quoted some number of official government or law enforcement actors. While the 2024 CNN article did provide statements from Attorney General Garland, both CNN articles prioritized the voices of parents whose children lost their lives to the terror attack alongside other children who were in the school while the attack was occurring. They opted for more citations from these individuals than from government officials and utilized direct quotations instead of paraphrasing their words. In contrast, FOX News utilized lengthy quotes from the Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steven McCraw, the Uvalde Police Department, and Attorney General Merrick Garland, purely government and police figures. The absence of first-person account victim or bystander quotes and the excess of police and governmental citations proved that police were not culpable in perpetuating the attack and helped to preserve these figures' reputations. In sum, CNN favored directly quoting affected parents and individuals on the scene, employing a more personal and emotional narrative. In contrast, FOX News incorporated extensive quotes from government and police officials, which authenticated police actions and safeguarded the reputations of the authoritative figures involved in the incident.

3.4 Tone

The holistic tone of a news article factors into the perceived gravity of a particular terrorist incident and varies based on different factors. Comparing the otherwise similar Ft. Hood and Navy Yard shootings, for example, researchers observed tonality framing differences throughout a variety of news articles on the same topic concerning the perpetrator's background, the incident, and other subsequent discourses²². Covering the Uvalde terror attack, the tone varied between CNN and FOX News in terms of sympathy toward victims on the one hand and upholding police reputation on the other.

CNN's articles emphasized the severity of the attack and its devastating impact due to the lack of police presence and highlighted the deaths that affected the lives of victims and their families and friends. The 2022 CNN article described the story of a school student named Miah, who was watching a movie with her classmates when the teachers heard about the shooter. When the teachers went to lock the door to prevent intrusion, the shooter was already there waiting⁸. With no mention of a police presence at this moment, this story suggested police negligence in correlation with the violence that had ensued. The fear was compounded by the quote from a student, Jayden Perez, who stated, "[the shooting] was very terrifying because I never thought that was going to happen"⁸. Perez then stated that he does not want to return to school again telling CNN reporters, "No, because after what happened. I don't want to. I don't want anything to do with another shooting or me in the school. . . And I know it might happen again, probably"⁸. This quote further implied the police's incompetence in protecting students. The article also gave a timestamp guideline of the events that unfolded at Robb Elementary, including when police officers waited to intervene at multiple stages of the attack. Similar patterns were present in the 2024 CNN article, which underscored how the DOJ blamed the police department for the attack.

The FOX News articles presented an opposite tone, maintaining police involvement in the incident and underscoring that protocol was followed. As previously discussed, the initial May 28, 2022, FOX News article focused on describing how the Uvalde Police Department participated in an active shooter scenario training two months prior to the terror incident taking place. More than once, the article stated that many departments were encouraged to attend the training, which frames the police in a positive light and learning preventative techniques. It also aimed to blame other types of officers rather than those in the police department who may have chosen not to attend the training despite being encouraged to go¹². The article also emphasized why there was no police intervention sooner in the attack, stating the officers believed that there were no children at risk and the subject was considered to be a "barricaded subject", something the officers covered in their active shooter training¹². The 2024 article maintained a blameless tone for the police department, making it appear as though it is the fault of one officer (the police chief) instead. Also, before mentioning the pain and tragedy endured by the victims, they noted that the police officers suffered bullet graze wounds. FOX News, in addition to the DOJ report, mentioned a separate private Texas investigation since that report also placed blame on the school administrators for the lack of intervention⁹. FOX News' tone consistently upheld police involvement while placing the responsibility with other

entities and emphasizing the police's training as a positive preventative measure.

4 LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this exploratory study can help inform future research comparing media coverage of mass shootings, terror attacks, and/or hate crimes. While four articles were sufficient to draw the above conclusions, the findings cannot be generalized to the two outlets' reporting. Future research can examine CNN, FOX News, and other outlets' coverage of a range of attacks to better understand their editorial approaches over time. Additionally, researchers can compare how reporting patterns align or differ when the attack is local vis-à-vis international. Another limitation of this research is that there is no simple or all-encompassing definition of terrorism, and terrorism is defined differently for varying attacks²³. For the purpose of this paper, Schmid & Jongman's definition was utilized as its criteria aligned with the details about the perpetrator and the shooting.

5 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

The dominant political positioning of CNN and FOX News most probably influenced their framing of the Robb Elementary School mass shooting. CNN, a left-leaning news source, incorporated headlines that called attention to the severity of the incident, images and captions that displayed the heartbreak and trauma of victim and their families, direct quotes from more varied perspectives (while prioritizing quotes from firsthand witnesses and those closely connected to the event), and a tone that reflects the sorrow of this terrorist event in conjunction with evidence supporting police's fault. On the other hand, FOX News, a right-leaning news source, admitted police culpability while still conserving and protecting the credibility of most of the police officers involved in the attack. To do so, they used headlines, images, and captions displaying police involvement in preparations for active shooter incidents as well as police testifying and making an attempt at reparations by placing candles at the memorial sites. FOX News further featured quotes mainly from governmental or police-related organizations, and utilized a tone of coverage that reflects positively on what actions were taken by police while employing words and quotes with less intensity and harshness when related to police blame for the terror attack.

The evidence presented demonstrates a bias among news sources holding different political ideologies when reporting on the same incident on the same day. This evidence implies that media consumers should be more critical of the evidence and words they take in and

pay attention to the biases of their go-to sources when reading online news. Depending on where a person gets their news, their understanding and interpretation of an event could differ dramatically. In addition, understanding the distinctions between varying news sources on incidents of terrorism can help us understand why terrorism is so difficult to define. Gathering a wide range of perspectives on terrorist incidents and news, in general, can make for a more well-rounded approach to understanding the everyday stories reported and why these stories receive the coverage they do.

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7 EDITOR'S NOTES

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