

Differing Local Political News Media's Framing of Austin Homelessness in 2021: A Retrospective Media Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, the Austin homeless frequented the local newspaper headlines due to the wide controversy they faced throughout the year, specifically with the renewal of the camping ban that discriminated against the population. Additionally, much of the Austin public significantly relied on the news reports provided by the Austin leading news media to stay up to date on the controversy taking place. However, despite major social and political action in that calendar year, little research has been conducted on Austin news media's representation of the homeless during this year and its effect on the public. In this paper, the author reviews literature exploring news media depictions of homelessness through the construction of media framing, media influence on the public, and the differing political views on the topic of homelessness. A retrospective quantitative content analysis was conducted to measure the different media frames included within four politically differing Austin news stations' 2021 homeless news reports. The research design pursues to identify (a) the overall coverage of mainstream news media on Austin homelessness in 2021; (b) the different types of thematic and episodic frames frequently used when presenting the homeless population of Austin; and (c) how the utilization of these frames varied between differing political biases. Together, the research findings concluded that within the local Austin news reporting on homelessness in 2021, key events drew out more coverage from larger news stations and left-leaning news stations saw more episodic framing, while right-leaning news stations saw more thematic framing.

Introduction

The homeless population of Austin faced unremitting adversity and controversy in 2021. To begin, a brutal succession of winter storms in February that caused severe neglect of this vulnerable population (as the state rushed to save their power grid) suspended life-saving resources for the homeless that were already scarce to begin with. Following in April, a series of encampment fires engulfed a state homeless camp and more, the historic downtown Austin Buford Tower. Angering Austinites, this event sparked the renewal of the debate over a camping ban that the city had ended three years prior to decriminalizing homelessness after 23 years in use (Bova). The camping ban, included in Proposition B on Austin's May Ballot made lying down, sitting, sleeping, or camping on public property a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500: a cost no person experiencing homelessness could possibly afford. Then as Prop B passed and began to be reinstated, it was clear that the camping ban was far from a productive solution. More specifically, to avoid fines, the homeless population was forced to crawl farther away from city limits, resources, and any possibility of reintegrating back into the community.

Cooperatively, due to the advancement of the digital age and the amplification of the news media, prevalence of reporting by local Austin news stations surrounding the homeless controversy in 2021 heightened in tandem. However, one important thing to note is how the discrepancy in the media influenced by many external factors, especially political bias, can consequently create controversy within the views of the population that tune into these news reports. Through a retrospective media analysis of Austin news sources reporting on Austin homelessness in 2021, this study

aims to identify what exactly was being presented to the Austin area public within a range of politically leaning news stations. By exploring the narrative being sold to the greater community, specifically through the technique of media framing, a deeper understanding of social construction, media biases, and public response can be achieved.

Literature Review

Homelessness and the Media

Homelessness in the media is a relatively newer concept. According to UC Berkeley's Senior Health Economics and Outcomes Researcher, Phillip Buck, North American news media didn't start paying attention to the homeless until the mid-1980s. It experienced a steady decline throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s before finally plateauing again in the mid-1990s. Their absence in the news media up until then was largely due to the fact that the homeless were deemed irrelevant unless they started to become a problem to the mainstream community (Gans 1979). It can also be attributed to the criteria which Western media constituted as newsworthy. Oftentimes, due to a drive for exciting stories to flip for profit, Western news only report on large-scale events that are relevant, negative, have a clearly defined set of knowledge, a short time scale, drama, and especially action. (McQuail 2005). However, even once the homeless were newsworthy on their own, the rare stories about them often dealt with their victimization or "the welfare mess," with their exploitation by or uselessness to the economy. (Gans 1979). Additionally, while harping on the tough conditions the homeless face, these news reports failed to include coverage on any larger themes, such as the social determinants of health or possible solutions, perhaps because the general public reacts more sympathetically to the topic of homelessness on its own (Kendall 2005).

Media Framing

According to Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, two distinguished sociologists who have published many prestigious works on the framing process, "frames are a schema of interpretation that bound reality, direct attention, organize experience, and suggest underlying logics with which to make sense of the world." Due to this nature of framing, it is most commonly used in social movement activity and political communication because these topics usually pertain to an opinion or a bias that is being argued for. However, the news, something that was intended to simply be a utility of information, is now one of the biggest culprits of framing. It is to be noted that framing by definition is different from opinion because a frame is simply an organizational device that is used to distill the issue into interpretable packages. Yet, with that being said, framing is often skewed by the opinion of the author, involving selecting certain aspects of the issue and making them more salient, while leaving out other aspects (Entman). Consequently, this creates bias in their respective news reports which is not always favorable, especially when the purpose of the news is to provide the necessary information needed for the public to form their own opinions over the subject at hand.

Media and Public Opinion

In terms of its effects on the public, the media possesses a power of heavy influence due to the fact that readers not only learn about a given issue through it, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs and Shaw). This not only represents the phenomenon that the news media functions as the main window to the outside world for many people, but by showing only a tiny and representative portion of the world through that window, it can also dangerously control how people perceive it. For example, the prevalence of violent acts has been linked to increased aggression and escalating impressions of a dangerous world, and the overrepresentation of youth and beauty may be a causal factor for many body dysmorphia and eating disorders (Stephens). In other words, the more violent the news media reports an issue to be, the more dangerous

and hostile one's expectations become. While the flip side can be true, that reporting more encouragingly can also influence one's perception of an issue to be more positive, this is often not the case, since the news media leans towards reports that draw attention, emotional response, and a profit, as mentioned earlier.

Political Ideology on Homelessness

While one's political affiliation cannot truly speak to each individual party member's values, the general party stance on homelessness can be deduced from their known tendencies and ideologies. To begin, researchers have found that traditionally conservatives tend to tolerate social inequality, because of their reluctance to create change by moving away from the status quo that would "inherently disrupt the current order and tradition" (Hirsh, et al.). They also have a much stronger belief that the world is inherently hierarchical (Clifton and Kerry). On the other hand, liberals are observed to be major supporters of social equality, especially in favor of government action to achieve equal opportunity within a community. Applying these studied generalizations to the political attitudes towards homelessness, conservatives would be expected to care less for the wellbeing of those facing homelessness, while liberals would be expected to hold greater concern for the social adversity homeless populations face, advocating for policy change on their behalf in addition.

Gap in Knowledge

The basis of this study is built around two keystone studies. The first is the leading piece of literature on media framing, *Framing Responsibility of Political Issues*, by Shanto Iyengar, Director of Political Communication at Stanford University. In this pioneering study, Iyengar defines thematic framing as depicting issues more broadly by "placing them in some appropriate context- historical, geographical, or otherwise," while episodic framing, by contrast, "depicts issues in terms of specific instances" (Iyengar). Moreover, Iyengar claims that the deliberate choice of either of these frames elicits distinct social responses:

By reducing complex issues to the level of anecdotal cases, episodic framing leads to individualistic attributions that shield society and government from responsibility. While core values such as individualism and work ethic encourage citizens to hold individuals rather than society responsible for social issues, exposure to thematic framing of issues can and does override these dispositions. (p. 69-70)

This is important to grasp, because it means that the intentional choice of thematic versus episodic framing not only skews the way in which individuals are force fed new information, but then how they interpret other aspects of it, such as responsibility for the issue.

The second study I worked to replicate was conducted by Katrien Cokely, from the sociology department at Portland State University, in which she explored the media framing techniques used by local media reports on the topic of Portland's tent cities. To complete her study, she sampled a number of newspapers and examined them for the thematic and episodic frame criteria suggested by Shanto Iyengar to conclude the overall narrative the Portland newspapers were expressing to the Portland citizens regarding their homeless encampments. Utilizing Iyengar's concepts of thematic framing versus episodic framing and the construction of Cokely's study in Portland media reports, I worked to fill the gap in knowledge of framing homelessness by Austin news sources in 2021.

Methodology

Data Source

In order to explore the several binary media frames that are taken advantage of by the various news stations local to Austin in context of their 2021 homeless news reports, I conducted a retrospective media frame analysis. The news stations chosen for analysis included KVUE (Austin ABC affiliate), KXAN (Austin NBC affiliate), CBS Austin, and FOX 7 Austin. These sources were selected due to the fact that they make up Austin’s leading news media and consistently published news reports regarding homelessness throughout the calendar year of 2021. Additionally, according to Ad Fontes Media, a media watchdog organization known for its renowned media bias chart, these four stations cover a range of political bias with KXAN skewing left, KVUE and CBS centered with an occasional left-leaning affinity, and FOX 7 skewing most right (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Media Bias Chart

Sampling Method

Before beginning the content analysis, I conducted a simple random sample of 30 online articles from the chosen news sources collectively in order to ensure a represented unbiased data set. To collect my 30 news sources I utilized each news report’s online database to first locate every news article from the respective news media published between the dates of January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021. I then filtered these articles for those containing the words “Austin” and “Homeless” as this was the best way to achieve the broadest data set possible while still maintaining the theme of the study. Then I assigned a number to each of these sources and randomly selected the 30 using the random number generator by random.org. See the appendix for additional data on the randomly selected data set.

The news reports from the selected news sources were analyzed for their media framing techniques only. Graphics were not included in the analysis. The semantics of the words themselves used in the news report were also

not included in the analysis because the positive or negative connotation of the words did not always align with the positive or negative connotation of the point being made. Again, due to this common contradicting linguistic pattern, it was clear that the best approach would be to just focus on the media framing to best reduce the complexity of this research. Additionally, by anchoring this analysis around the framing techniques, I could still capture the positive and negative atmosphere of the source through a broader context.

Criteria for Framing

Each news report’s framing could most broadly be distinguished through the thematic frame versus an episodic frame suggested by Shanto Iyengar. I borrowed framing categories used in Cokely’s Portland study on homeless framing in the media, however I added a couple notable categories that I observed were prevalent in the sampled data set. Additionally, the lack of resources thematic frame was further divided because of its broad nature, to help specify both the results and understanding. The finalized frames used in analysis are included in Figure 2. Examples of each of these frames and examples from Austin’s local news media are included in Table 1.

Because many news reports contained multiple of the frames recognized, I decided against just selecting one frame per category as that may ultimately result in an incomplete analysis. Instead, I analyzed each frame for the frequency in which it is mentioned, tallying as I collected data. As a result, at the end of the analysis, each frame had a number of tally marks out of 30, representing the proportion of articles that frame was referenced in.

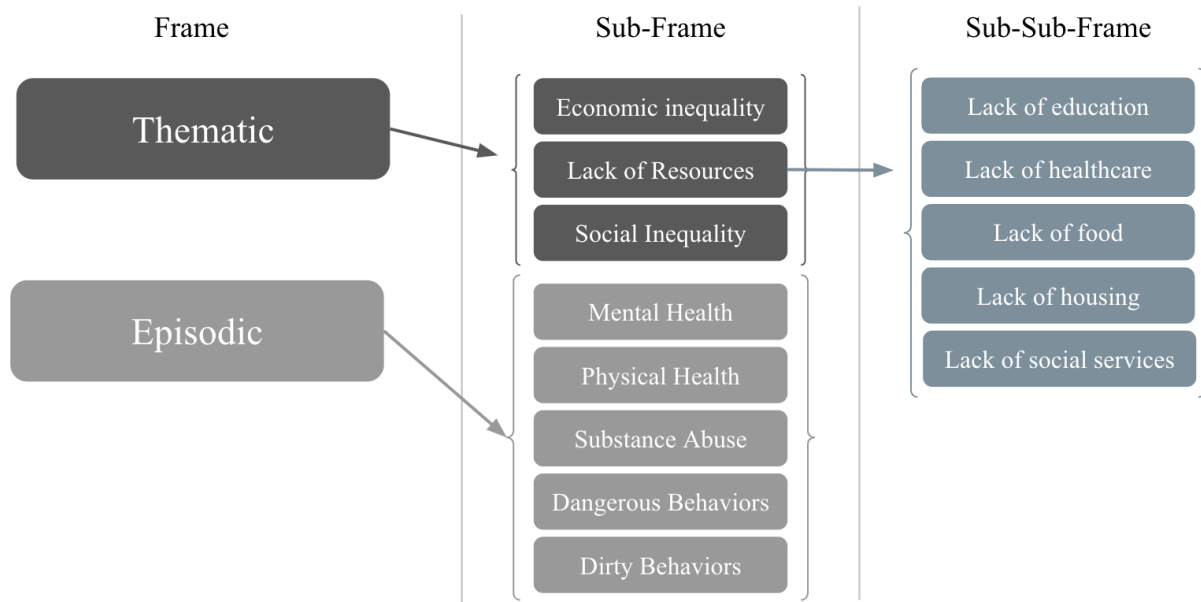


Figure 2. Thematic Versus Episodic Framing Categories

Table 1. Examples of Thematic and Episodic Frames

Thematic Frame	Example
Economic Inequality	“Housing costs are skyrocketing.”
Lack of Resources	“Others lack access to basic utility infrastructure.”
Social inequality	“We have to have a lens of equity and we have to build out a more robust homeless response system.”
Episodic Frame	Example
Mental Health	“The report states these encampments need behavioral health crisis intervention.”
Physical Health (Disability)	There were no physical health episodic frames present in Austin’s local news reporting.
Substance Abuse (Drugs and alcohol)	“[The homeless] were hiding from individuals ‘looking for them as a result of a drug/illicit narcotics.’”
Dangerous Behavior	“Recently we had to escort a homeless person, basically who attacked someone in the Academy.”
Dirty Behaviors/ Characteristics	“Contrary to what Austin leaders think no one has a right to urinate & defecate wherever they want”

Analysis

Coverage Results

The number of news reports that contain the flagged keywords “austin,” “homelessness,” and “2021” within each source can be found below in Table 2. KXAN and FOX 7 reported on the topic of homelessness significantly more with 108 and 94 news reports respectively, while KVUE and CBS Austin offered significantly less coverage with both sources reporting under 30 times on the topic of homelessness during the chosen year. Examining the number or reports randomly sampled for each station in proportion to their total number of homeless news reports in 2021, they all come out to a proportion of 10% or above, so the results for this study are representative of that station. However, CBS Austin was just below the 10% condition, at 9.1%, so we proceed with caution when analyzing those results.

Table 2. Number of 2021 Homeless News Reports by Source

	KVUE	KXAN	CBS Austin	FOX 7
Total Number of News Reports	29	108	22	94
Number of Randomly Sampled News Reports	3	12	2	13
Proportion of Reports Randomly Sampled	0.103	0.111	0.091	0.138

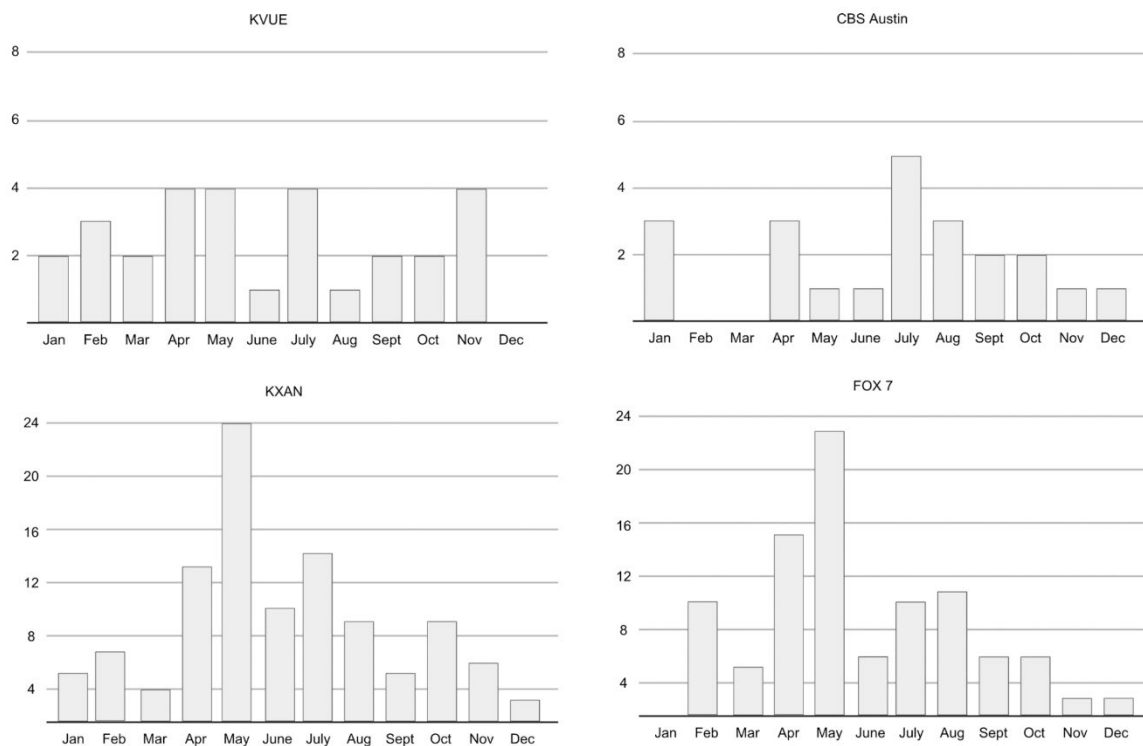


Figure 3. Number of Homeless News Reports per Month by News Station

First, to address the two smaller news sources, KVUE’s coverage on the homeless throughout 2021 was relatively uniform, publishing between two and four news reports in the majority of months. On the other hand, CBS appears to report rather randomly on the homeless with a very subtle decline towards the end of the year. (Figure 3). Both KXAN and FOX 7, the news stations with a significantly greater number of reports overall, are noted for their noticeable climb in quantity in April before surging to May with nearly double the number of reports compared to the previous month. They both then tapered off in number towards the end of the year, dwindling to just two or three reports in the month of December. However, both of these stations can still be acknowledged for maintaining coverage throughout the entire year.

Framing Results

The overall results from the data collected, specifically the frequency of occurrence for each frame is shown in Figure 4. Within the 30 news reports analyzed, the thematic frame: lack of resources, was most often utilized when discussing the homeless populations of Austin, appearing in 56.7% of the news reports. More specifically, within the lack of resources frame, the lack of housing was the most prevalent subframe with 53.3% of news sources reporting on it, followed closely by the lack of social services subframe at 30% and the lack of healthcare subframe at 20%. Overall, thematic frames were included a total of 34 times, much more ubiquitous than the episodic frames that were only mentioned a total of 19 times.

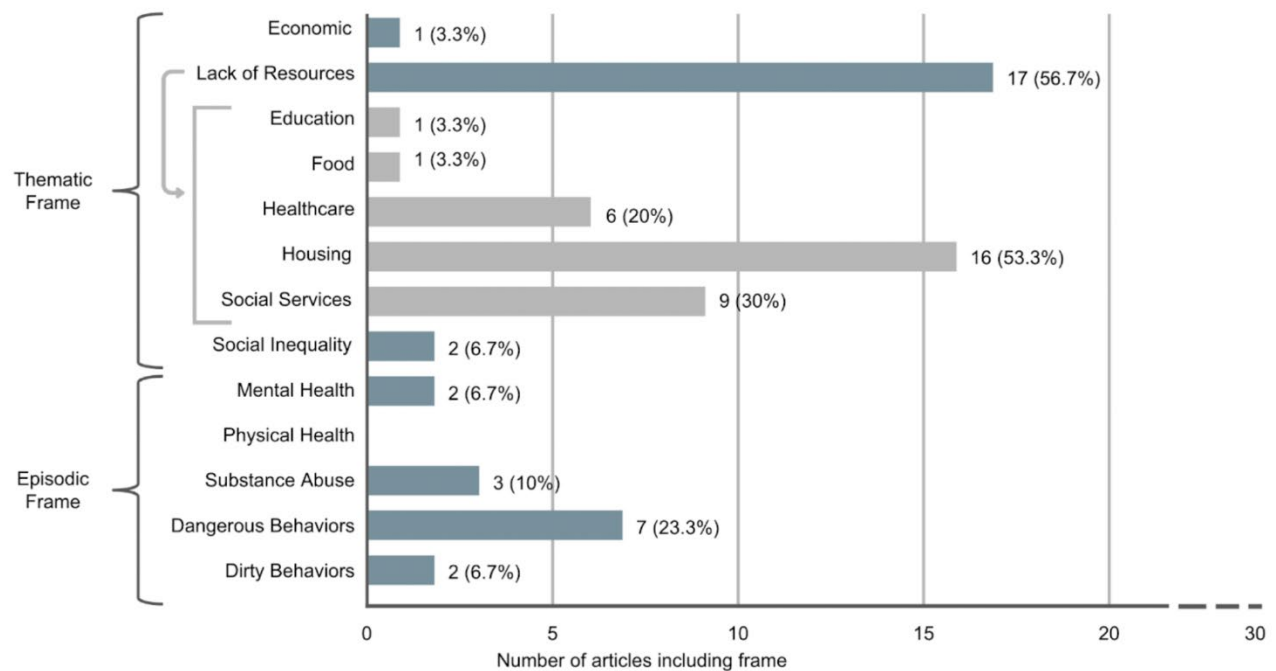


Figure 4. Thematic vs. Episodic Frame Frequency

Looking at the framing choices of the specific news stations below in Table 3, the two less influential stations, KVUE and CBS Austin maintained their balanced bias when reporting on the homeless populations of Austin in 2021. Specifically, KVUE referenced thematic frames in 66% of news reports, and matched that proportion with 66% mentions of episodic frames. Likewise, CBS Austin included thematic framing in 50% of their news reports, and equally included episodic framing in 50% as well.

The most striking aspect of the results was the strong emphasis on all three thematic frames that appeared in FOX 7 compared to the other news stations as seen in Table 3. In the randomly sampled articles from FOX 7, even if the news report was centered around an episodic event, more than half of the reports would tie back to the bigger, thematic issues that contributed to the event and mentioned resources and solutions being implemented to help combat them. Additionally, out of the four different news stations, FOX 7 was the only one to include both the economic thematic frame in the quote “housing costs are skyrocketing” as well as the social inequality thematic frame in the quote “the homeless response system is racially inequitable.”

In a similar manner, there was a large proportion of episodic frames that ran throughout KXAN’s coverage of homelessness in Austin. Specifically, KXAN was the only news source to mention substance abuse with a proportion of 0.25 of news reports including the frame, and dominate the dangerous behavior episodic frame with a distinct proportion of 0.42 compared to a proportion of 0, 0, and 0.15 in the other news stations’ reports.

Table 3. Proportion of Each News Stations Reports with Frames

KVUE Frames	Proportion of KVUE Reports with Specific Frame	KXAN Frames	Proportion of KXAN Reports with Specific Frame
Economic	0	Economic	0
Lack of Resources	0.66	Lack of Resources	0.58
Social Inequality	0	Social Inequality	0
Mental Health	0.33	Mental Health	0.08
Physical Health	0	Physical Health	0
Substance Abuse	0	Substance Abuse	0.25
Dangerous Behaviors	0	Dangerous Behaviors	0.42
Dirty Behaviors	0.33	Dirty Behaviors	0
CBS Austin Frames	Proportion of CBS Austin Reports with Specific Frame	FOX 7 Frames	Proportion of FOX 7 Reports with Specific Frame
Economic	0	Economic	0.08
Lack of Resources	0.5	Lack of Resources	0.54
Social Inequality	0	Social Inequality	0.15
Mental Health	0	Mental Health	0
Physical Health	0	Physical Health	0
Substance Abuse	0	Substance Abuse	0
Dangerous Behaviors	0	Dangerous Behaviors	0.15
Dirty Behaviors	0.5	Dirty Behaviors	0

Discussion

In this section, I will compare my results to the type of findings found in the literature about the media and homelessness. My study has implications for policymakers and those involved with servicing the homeless and the task of changing the perception of these issues on a wide scale.

Homeless Report Coverage Within 2021

The analysis of the coverage of the selected news reports exhibited a similar curve in the distribution over the months for KXAN and FOX 7. Though this is likely due to their larger size in comparison to the other news sources analyzed, both KXAN and FOX 7 had a greater quantity of news coverage during the heat of the camping ban controversy reaching up to 23 and 24 reports for the month of May alone, the month in which the camping ban was passed. This indicates that while coverage over the homeless population existed throughout the other substantial events that inconvenienced the homeless population such as the February freeze and April fires, the camping ban received a significantly greater amount of attention.

When looking more closely at each of these events, it is evident that they can be distinguished by the degree to which they affected the mainstream public. For example, the February freeze greatly harmed Austin's homeless, however, this decline in their wellbeing had no effect on the greater public, and therefore garnered no support from the news media. The later increase in reports in April can transitively be explained by the fact that the fires in this month burned down a historic Austin relic, and for that reason provoked the collective Austin population which in turn provided the mainstream news with stories in which they could capitalize on the homeless population's now hated image. Lastly, as the camping ban starred on Austin's May ballot, and the mainstream public were now fully involved with decisions and conversations regarding the homeless population, the news media covered the homeless in an all time high. In short, these results support what was explored in the literature review: that the homeless are deemed less relevant to the news media until they begin to disrupt the mainstream community and can be victimized for newsworthy content.

Lack of Resources Frame

As seen in the reports analyzed, the thematic frame: lack of resources was overwhelmingly the most utilized frame when discussing the homeless populations of Austin, included in 17 out of the 30 news reports analyzed compared to all other frames that settled at 7 or under out of 30. Explicitly, the lack of housing frame and social services were the most prevalent. This means that the coverage of the Austin news network extensively focused on the failure of the cities to provide adequate services to the homeless more than anything else, reinforcing that Austin is much more liberal and in favor of systematic solutions. However, though this is at odds with the passing of proposition b, which inherently negated the needs of the homeless, especially in areas of housing and services, it can be explained by the state's much more conservative influence and power over local legislation.

Political Bias and Unexpected Framing Patterns

FOX 7 is noted for its tendency to lean towards conservative points of view, however in this analysis, it surprisingly referenced a lot of the more consistently right-leaning ideals when framing the homeless. More specifically, as seen in figure 2.5, FOX 7 had a significantly higher proportion of thematic frames, pointing to the structural issues that negatively impact the wellbeing of the homeless population of Austin. These results contradict the initial hypothesis that FOX 7 would focus more on the episodic frames, because of the source's right-leaning bias and the consensus within the right-leaning population of Austin that the homeless were a detriment to the environment of the city.

In a similar manner, KXAN is more left-leaning, however it consistently referenced more right-leaning themes, when discussing Austin's homeless population as well, with the greatest proportion of episodic framing, especially in the mention of dangerous behaviors. These results also contradict the initial hypothesis that the left-leaning news stations include more thematic frames. Though a slight stray from the hypothesis could be understood, the idea that the results would completely contradict the hypothesis was dumbfounding to say the least. However, upon reinvestigation of the sources, an explanation can be given.

As it turns out, both FOX 7 and KXAN often reiterate the opposite framing presented by the opposing political media to anchor their own argument. For example, one KXAN news report claimed they are perpetually being fed lies by the republican party and continued by listing several episodic frames they claim the republican party uses when discussing homelessness. While these frames ended up having to be coded as episodic because fundamentally KXAN referenced these episodic frames within their news report which eventually reach the ears and eyes of the mainstream public, in this case, KXAN is not supporting the episodic framing but rather naming it in order to argue against it. In essence, the framing used doesn't directly indicate the news outlets' true opinion, but rather being utilized as a tactic to counter opposing opinions. Moreover, this attests to the sheer complexity of human communication, and how sophisticated uses of framing can arise as a byproduct of that process.

Limitations

In response to the process, larger samples would have been helpful to get a more representative sample and eliminate potential bias, however, due to time constraints, doing so was not possible. There may also have been human error throughout the process in which news reports were combed through for the presence of frames, such as labeling frames incorrectly, although all labels and counts were double-checked to minimize these errors. Furthermore, human bias may have been present when labeling comments. However, this should not greatly affect the data.

Additionally, a considerable limitation to the design of the content analysis is the nature of the framing process. First, framing doesn't necessarily give way to the opinion of the news piece itself but rather what was covered. So even though the choice of media frames leads to some indication of the values of the news station to be reporting on that theme, no assumptions can be made that that is the message they are trying to convey to the public, since the frame could very well be used to undermine other political group's thoughts and actions.

Secondly, Austin's political environment is very conflicted on account of its geographical location in the traditionally very right-leaning state of Texas while hosting one of the largest left-leaning populations in the country. Because of this, the conclusions drawn about Austin's framing of the homeless are skewed due to the fact that the larger Texas government, specifically Governor Abbott, influences a lot of the decisions that Austin makes and therefore reports on.

Future Research

An abundance of future research can be conducted within this discipline. Some of these research opportunities include examining if and how the frames are retained by the public from reading certain news reports and help the public understand how they might be subconsciously steered towards one view because of these framing techniques. This would help news reports and the public understand how they might be subconsciously steered towards one narrow perspective because of these intricate framing techniques. Additionally, a framing analysis can be conducted on the news shared within social media, since many populations are starting to rely more heavily on platforms such as Instagram or Tiktok for their news coverage. This would aid in building the body of knowledge on the devices utilized by these less traditional forms of media that will completely transform the way future generations interact with the news. Finally, since media framing and political polarization are becoming increasingly prevalent as we advance towards a more digital and divided future, this study can be useful for any topic of interest, not just homelessness.

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